Toward a Comprehensive Theory of Racial Oppression

… we here suggest a comprehensive power-conflict theory, one we call a theory of racial oppression. As our concrete example, we use the case of white Americans and African Americans. We accent six major themes in the development of racial oppression:

1. Initiation of Oppression: At an early point in time, the European colonialists established hierarchical group relations with the peoples they oppressed and exploited for their land and labor. Soon this hierarchy of oppression was explained in racial terms. The subordinated groups were viewed as biologically and culturally inferior races. This racialized oppression has never been eradicated and remains central to U.S. society to the present day.

2. Mechanisms of Oppression: In the past and in the present, racial hierarchies are supported by a range of dominant-group feelings and attitudes, including hostility, contempt, and fear. Although these feelings and prejudices are important, racial hierarchies are perpetuated primarily by the discriminatory practices carried out by many members of the dominant racial group (in this case, white Americans) against those in subordinate racial groups.

3. Privileges of Oppression: Great material and symbolic privileges benefit those in the dominant racial group. Much misery and serious social and economic burdens come to those in subordinate racial groups.

4. Elite Maintenance of Oppression: The actions of the white elite have created and maintained organizations, institutions, and ideologies that reflect its vested interest in racial and class hierarchies. Most non-elite whites have accepted the society's racial hierarchy, along with fewer material resources than the elite, because of their access to certain privileges and advantages generally associated with whiteness.

5. Rationalization of Oppression: Once a system of racial oppression and privilege is put in place, it is thoroughly defended and rationalized by a set of racist ideas. An ideology accenting superior and inferior racial groups is created and circulated by those whites in power and is taken for granted and further circulated by many rank-and-file whites.

6. Resistance to Oppression: Opposition to this racial oppression is a constant in North American history. African Americans and other Americans of color have a long history of individual and group protest against the reality and burdens of racial oppression.

William E. B. Du Bois, in The World and Africa (1946), showed how the great misery and poverty then evident in Europe's African colonies were a main cause of wealth and luxury in Europe. The results of this poverty were disease, ignorance, and crime. Yet these had to be represented as natural characteristics of backward peoples. Du Bois argued that the history of African colonization has been omitted from mainstream histories of European development, wealth, and affluence. He further argued that any serious understanding of European wealth must center on the history of African colonialism, for the economic resources of Africans were taken to help create that wealth.

Similarly, the first step in developing a comprehensive theory of racial oppression in the United States is to put the four-centuries-long white domination of people of color at the
center of the analysis. From the beginning, colonialism in North America involved racialized oppression and exploitation: The European colonists built up wealth by taking for themselves the human and other resources of Africans and Native Americans. It has been said that a major task for the residents of the former Communist states of Eastern Europe is to forget the falsified past once taught them and to learn about their actual past. In this process, old heroes become villains and old villains become heroes. This is true for Americans as well. The exclusion or distortion of the full history of racial oppression in the United States in many mainstream accounts and textbooks must be replaced by accurate accounts.

Together with Du Bois, Oliver C. Cox was one of the first to examine the colonial origins of oppression in North America. He showed how capitalism, which was involved in the movement of Europeans overseas, created a situation favorable for the development of white race prejudice. Modern racial prejudice and racial ideology developed as these colonizers moved from viewing colonized populations as heathens to seeing them as racially inferior. Thus colonialism, with its theft of land and labor, created modern racial relations. As Cox views it, modern racial oppression did not arise out of some abstract, natural, immemorial feeling of mutual antipathy between groups but rather grew out of a practical exploitative relationship that was combined with a rudimentary form of racial prejudice.

The origins of racial hierarchies in the actual experiences of colonialism and exploitation in a particular historical period rather than in innate intergroup hostilities is a second major theme in a comprehensive theory of oppression. Race is not an inborn human trait but rather a way of relating between individuals and groups. A comprehensive theory of oppression must begin with the real world of everyday experience and the historical relationships between groups of human beings.

Our conceptual framework recognizes the centrality of the history of economic exploitation in North America, which began with the seizure of Native American lands (see Chapter 7) and the enslavement of Africans (see Chapter 8) by violent means. Land and labor obtained by theft formed the economic and social foundation of what became the United States. Most Native Americans were killed or driven out of white areas, while enslaved Africans were forced to become a central part of the economy of new white communities. This genocidal action against Native Americans and the importation, subordination, and exploitation of enslaved Africans set in place the foundation for nearly 400 years of oppression in North America.

By the mid-1600s, the liberty and lives of all Americans of African heritage were controlled by a system of racial oppression. For most, this took the form of legalized slavery. Transplanted and enslaved Africans became a major point of reference for the construction of the colonial economy, polity, legal system, and values, and even white selves. Their subjugation became the model for the treatment of other Americans of color in later periods. The white-male elite among the colonizers reinforced this economy of oppression by legalizing it in the founding laws of the new republic. As we have seen, slavery was upheld in key provisions of the original U.S. Constitution. Wealthy slaveholders such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson led in the creation of the legal system of the new nation; Americans of color had no representation whatsoever in the process. From the beginning, government was used to create and enforce racial oppression.
A third theme in this comprehensive theory is the importance of the power and privilege of those called whites and the related misery and burdens of those termed the racial others. Racial oppression operates from a socially organized set of ideas and practices that deny African Americans and other people of color the privileges, power, opportunities, and rewards that U.S. society offers white Americans. The racial hierarchy stipulates different resources and life chances for the dominant and subordinate groups. As the dominant group, whites enjoy economic, political, and symbolic advantages. At some level of their consciousness, most whites seem aware of these privileges.

White Americans and black Americans have different group interests because they have had unequal access to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and to the material and other resources that shape the quality of everyday life. Whites discriminate against black men, women, and children in order to protect white interests and privileges. For example, many whites' frequent discriminatory actions that restrict the access of African Americans and other Americans of color to better-paying jobs or to certain residential areas outweigh their commitment to the values of racial equality. Today, the majority of low-wage service and unskilled menial jobs in numerous employment sectors are held by African Americans and other people of color; workers in these jobs often service better-off whites, such as employers, managers, and skilled workers. As a result, these jobs entail a transfer of energies whereby the servers enhance the status of those served.

The other side of white privilege is the set of material and psychological burdens that bear down on African Americans and other people of color. In its everyday operation the racial system dehumanizes those in a subordinated group. The most precious asset of the racial other, the control over life and liberty, is that which is most taken away. Institutionalized discrimination and inequality constitute the social structure of racial oppression, and its psychological dynamic is individual dehumanization. Our conceptual framework recognizes some degree of variation in these discriminatory burdens depending on the social position and gender of the oppressed individual. For example, black women often face gendered racism - the double burden of suffering discrimination because they are black and because they are female. Historically and in the present, institutionalized oppression has prevented most Americans of color from developing to their full potential.

A fourth aspect of our theory of oppression recognizes the differential role of different class and gender groups among white Americans. The actions of the white elite - originally composed of slaveholders and merchants but later of industrialists and other entrepreneurs - are critical in the creation and maintenance of the racist system at the foundation of U.S. society. As Du Bois and Cox made clear early on, in the process of protecting its top position, this mostly white male elite has worked to create organizations, institutions, and ideologies that substantially incorporate its interests. The elite holds disproportionate power and wealth. When its interests conflict with those of other racial or class groups, the elite works hard to deflect challenges to its dominance.

Racial domination has affected a number of subordinated racial groups because early on the white elite made such domination a central organizing principle of intergroup life in the United States. The discriminatory treatment of non-black subordinated groups has varied, but in every case it is the dominant white group - and within it the ruling elite - that has set the basic terms for this treatment and thus for group development.
In the economic arena, the ruling class has been substantially interested in the exploitation of the land and labor of Americans of color, while the white working and middle classes have been more concerned about job and housing competition with Americans of color. Ordinary whites are important in enforcing racial discrimination in everyday life, since they constitute the majority of whites. Middle-class and working-class whites are responsible for much of the everyday discrimination against African Americans and other people of color, as recent studies of employment and housing discrimination show ….

A fifth theme in our theory is that once racial oppression is in place, it is thoroughly defended and rationalized. The taking of the land and labor of Americans of color is rooted not only in the laws and founding documents of the larger society but also in a strong ideology accenting the alleged inferiority of those at the bottom of the racial ladder. This ideology is structured by intellectuals and other elite leaders and communicated to the general public in both overt and subtle forms. One way to maintain whites' position in a social hierarchy is to cover the underlying reality with an ideology that defines the subordinated as inferior groups who deserve their place in society.

Since the 1700s, white intellectuals and other leaders have tried to hide the actual sources of racial and class inequalities. The dominant group created images of itself as racially superior and explained inequality in racist terms. A comprehensive theory of racial oppression must include the role of this rationalization. From the beginning, religious, economic, political, intellectual, and media elites perpetuated negative images of racial outgroups in order to legitimate racial oppression. The often unseen power of the white elite still works through the racist beliefs and images (for example, the black woman as a lazy welfare queen) perpetuated in the media, schools, workplaces, and churches of the nation.

Racist ideas and their societal underpinning vary somewhat over time, but certain elements have persisted since the seventeenth century. William E. B. Du Bois wrote of the psychological wage that white workers receive in a system of oppression. Whites with fewer resources than the white elite accept less because of their access to the privileges of whiteness. For example, when white working people, openly or half-consciously viewing themselves as racially superior, have refused to organize with workers of color against stubborn employers in order to secure better wages, they have received fewer economic resources. They may accept this situation because they have come to prize the privileges of whiteness, although they may only be dimly aware of these privileges because of their commonplace character. Ordinary white Americans suffer in this racialized, class-stratified society, and the dominant ideology, with its stereotypes of Americans of color, makes it harder for most of these whites to understand not only the situation of the racial others but also their own societal situation. Most whites do not feel powerful or privileged, especially relative to the white elite, and they are unable to see the real sources of class and racial inequality in the society. Indeed, many whites target Americans of color as bearing primary responsibility for their own or the nation's economic difficulties. And some of these join white supremacist groups, which may engage in terrorism against Americans of color. Whites, too, pay a price for their privilege, for this privilege prevents them from realizing in the society the full meaning of concepts that most of them consider important: fairness, equality, competition, freedom, and justice.
A sixth aspect of a complete theory of racial oppression emphasizes the many countering and resistance strategies developed by members of racially oppressed groups, both individually and collectively. Protest against racial oppression includes not only overt confrontation with members of the dominant group but also the development of an alternative perspective on the everyday world one must live in, a perspective generated over a long period of time by those fighting discrimination and domination. African Americans and other people of color are theorists of their own everyday experience, as they have made clear in a long history of antidiscrimination protest and civil rights movements. Out of their everyday experiences with racism, Americans of color have created countercultures of resistance that are the foundation for individual and group strategies to counter or destroy oppression.

Evidence of a counterculture of resistance can be seen in the black civil rights movement that was so powerful in the 1950s and 1960s. Organized protest against discrimination during this period included economic and bus boycotts, sit-ins, and demonstrations. This black resistance to segregation spurred the creation of civil rights organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which was led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Most demonstrations included large-scale participation by African Americans from all class backgrounds. This organized activism was rooted in a strong local base of churches, clubs, and other organizations that provided money and mobilized people to enable organizations such as the SCLC to achieve success in fighting racism and segregation. During the 1960s this powerful civil rights movement played an important role in persuading the U.S. Congress to pass major civil rights laws.

In summary, then, a racially oppressive society must be comprehended in its totality. All of these dimensions are important to a fully developed framework for understanding modern racial oppression.