Original Article

Against Teleology in the Study of Race: Toward the Abolition of the Progress Paradigm

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Abstract

We argue that claims of racial progress rest upon untenable teleological assumptions founded in Enlightenment discourse. We examine the theoretical and methodological focus on progress and its historical roots. We argue research should examine the concrete mechanisms that produce racial stability and change, and we offer three alternative frameworks for interpreting longitudinal racial data and phenomena. The first sees racism as a "fundamental cause," arguing that race remains a "master category" of social differentiation. The second builds on Glenn's "settler colonialism as structure" framework to describe race relations as a mutually constituted and place-based system of resource allocation. The third framework draws attention to racialized agency.

> Racism is like a Cadillac; they bring out a new model every year.
>
> —Malcolm X (quoted in Lipsitz 1998:183)

> We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it.
>
> —Alexander (2012:2)

> Many sociologists marvel at the ways in which the world changes. I marvel at how it stays the same.
>
> —Bourdieu (cited in Khan 2012:81)

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What is racial progress? From American sociology's inception, racial progress has been a master frame for race scholars. Questions about individual intelligence, the nature of prejudice, and structural inequality have been influenced by assumptions about racial progress. Debates about progress in general have a teleological bent, presuming that society is meliorative—gradually moving toward perfection—through incremental reforms or social action.

The progress paradigm exerts force on contemporary scholarship: studies of "modern" or "new" racism implicitly assume racial progress in examining the hidden nature of contemporary racial phenomena (Bobo and Smith 1998; Bonilla-Silva [2004] 2013; Sanders and Kinder 1996). Bobo and Smith (1998) hold that the current era is marked by a profound decrease in overtly expressed racial attitudes, although material inequalities linger. Bonilla-Silva ([2004] 2013) is less sanguine, arguing that expressed changes in racial attitudes are relatively superficial artifacts of measures developed to describe Jim Crow racism. But Bonilla-Silva still portrays color-blind racism as a kinder, gentler form (Henricks 2016).

Nearly every debate in the sociology of race and ethnicity is oriented around a notion of racial progress. Yet despite its ubiquity in racial theory, progress itself, as an analytic category and political project, is rarely theorized. Progress is most frequently conceptualized as linear (Wimmer 2015) or as a near structural impossibility (Feagin and Elias 2013). By assuming racial progress is self-evident, rather than a theoretical object to be interrogated, scholars adopt incommensurate analytic frames and thus disagree on the role of race in U.S. life. Should scholars focus on economic relations or the various backlashes to legislative changes?[1] Are narrowing empirical gaps in a social domain indicative of overall movement toward equity, or should the focus be on relative group position (Blumer 1958; Lewis 2004)? Failing to clearly delineate what scholars mean by progress complicates collective understandings of racial inequality.

We cut through this conceptual muddle by explicitly theorizing racial progress. We begin with a brief survey of the philosophical genesis of Western ideas of progress, arguing that claims of racial progress are based on untenable teleological assumptions central to Enlightenment thought. Progress narratives are inextricably tied to the colonial encounter (Glenn 2015; Go 2013a) shaping sociology's foundations (Connell 1997). We then show how assumptions about racial progress have been rather uncritically adopted in the field of race and ethnicity, and sociology more generally, with implicit assumptions about racial progress built into sociological methodology (Abbott 2005; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008).

Once we have established the centrality of progress as an organizing frame, we show how stability and change operate in a political dialectic of contestation and incorporation. We hope to replace debates about relative levels of racial progress with the more tenable (and historically accurate) assumptions that (1) racial change is not necessarily linear and (2) research should examine the concrete mechanisms that produce racial stability and change, without imposing untenable assumptions of improvement. In place of teleological assumptions about racial progress, we offer three alternative frameworks, each of which is grounded in relational thinking (Emirbayer 1997). The first sees racism as a "fundamental cause," arguing that although the historical mechanisms reproducing racial inequality have changed, race remains a "master category" (Omi and Winant [1994] 2015) of social differentiation. The second places the racial hierarchy in a colonial framework that makes power and inequality the center of inquiry. Again, continuity of resource distributions and exploitation belie claims of racial progress. The third draws attention to racialized agency. At its root, racism constrains the agency of subjugated groups.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT ROOTS OF PROGRESS NARRATIVES

> At least since the eighteenth century, the dominating strain of the Western world has condemned the past to death as the tomb of irrationality and celebrated the future as the promise of perfectibility. (Fuentes 1982:63)

Western histories of the idea of progress begin with the Greeks, whose conception of time was less explicitly teleological (Nisbet 1980; Sklair 1970). However, Enlightenment philosophers—fixated on progress—saw social improvement as inevitable. This teleological idea of progress marks the modern age (Harvey 1989), rationalizes capitalist expansion (Harvey 1989; Smith [1776] 2011), and, we will show, is fundamentally racialized.

The Enlightenment notion of progress broke with earlier conceptions of time as circular or recursive. Adopted from Judeo-Christian notions of original sin, the fall from grace, and eventual redemption, the idea of progress is so ingrained in Western cultural traditions as to transcend political differences. On the left, orthodox Marxists claim that internal contradictions birthed from "the womb of capitalism" (Burawoy and Wright 2002:466) will inevitably lead to revolution, after which workers will control the means of production and the fruits of their labor under socialism. Although the left and right disagree on the precise stage of development, the secular right has a similar faith in the "end of history" (Fukuyama [1992] 2006)—that market economies provide the most just distribution of resources, and technological innovations will yield peace and prosperity.

Teleological assumptions about linear progress impose a false logic on history and visions of the future. This logic retroactively explains history as a series of necessary steps to arrive at the present. Three options represent the epistemological contours of the debate over progress: slow cumulative progress in knowledge and morality; cataclysmic social change attained through upheavals, violence, or innovational leaps; and regression (anxiety about society moving backward, coupled with the normative assumption society *should* move forward). These options map onto the three potential outcomes of racial progress historically debated by scholars, advocates, and politicians: racial assimilation, extinction, and regression. In the United States, the most hopeful argued that black people, Native Americans, and Chinese immigrants (among others) would assimilate (and disappear) into society through miscegenation and adoption of "mainstream" culture; others foresaw racial conflict that would lead to one group's eradication, although extinction could be held at bay through extreme social control; and yet others held that "inferior" races were incapable of civilization and, at worst, would erode white superiority. Such Enlightenment notions of teleological, progressive time, along with the above frames for racial progress, have become central to the discipline of sociology.

Measurement, Racism, Colonialism

The standard Enlightenment telling details the confluence of scientific discovery, religious upheaval, the development of the rights of man, and antimonarchic revolutions. Many thinkers distinguish between technological and moral progress, often arguing the latter trails the former (e.g., Marcuse [1964] 2002; Rousseau [1754] 1992; Weber [1905] 2002). These scientific and philosophical developments were central to producing new forms of racial domination, which underwrote technological change. The Enlightenment saw the development and refinement of colonialism and brutal systems of racial exploitation. The scientific and philosophical innovations of the Enlightenment—racialized scientific classification, precise time measurement, colonialism, and "progress"—coproduced the modern world.

The idea of progress developed with the cultivation of time discipline, which facilitated Western dominance (Landes 2000). The domination of space and time were mutually reinforcing. The "horological revolution" (Macey 1980) of increasingly precise measurement facilitated navigation, territorial expansion, and colonialism, thus producing the colonial distinctions that would be essential to the Enlightenment idea of progress. As Mumford (1962:14) claims, "the clock, not the steam-engine, is the key machine of the modern industrial age." Standardized time was necessary for the success of railroads (Barak 2013), culminating in the establishment of the first global time standard, Greenwich Standard Time, in 1884. Universalized time and related technologies, Barak argues, *created* both European and Egyptian time, naturalizing colonial differences and hierarchal access to technology while facilitating imperialist expansion.

Race, as an increasingly important and carefully classified category during the Enlightenment (Eze 1997; Hesse 2007), was tied to temporal and geographic understandings of the world. The development of racial taxonomies was part of a larger movement to classify and rationally order time and space to control it (Go 2013a), exercising what Bourdieu calls "the privilege of totalization" (quoted in Harvey 1989:253). The history of Enlightenment ideas of progress is simultaneously a history of race. Formalizing the association of civilization and savagery with race, Enlightenment philosophers explicitly tied human difference to varying possibilities of progress. Societies were ranked in relation to their likelihood of achieving (European) civilization. The master frame of progress provides a conceptual link between arguments justifying racial hierarchy, domestic racism, imperialist rationalization, and international logics of colonization. Because this link between progress and race is sometimes implicit, even astute racial analysts may miss the centrality of the trope. For instance, Charles Mills, whose career was launched by showing how philosophers had neglected race as a foundational category (arguing "it is more that issues of race do not even arise" [republished in Mills 1998:3]), later revised this view, noting that the categories of "wild man" and savage central to contract theory were themselves racialized (Mills 1998).

Race and the Cultural Timeline

Capitalist modernity was built on a philosophical edifice contrasting European progress with racialized stagnation (Mills 1997). Post- and decolonial scholars show how Enlightenment knowledge constructed both the West and the East, savagery and civilization (Go 2017; Mignolo 2009; Prakash 1990; Said 1978). In *Time and the Other* (1983), Fabian describes a vision of history in which "civilized" humankind is linearly progressing along a path toward perfection. Within this Enlightenment-based "cultural-timeline" framework, passing years are conflated with cultural progress.

The colonial encounter and its logic produce inequality (Glenn 2015), whether by labeling complex civilizations "savage" or through the violent creation of suffering subsequently reported as natural fact. Race arose to explain inequality produced by racism, not differences of humankind (Fields and Fields 2012). Exclusion of racial others from the social present justified slavery and exploitation, dispossession, "re-education" and missionary projects, and even extermination, in the interest of achieving progress. The mere terms "savagery" and "barbarity" rhetorically place these crimes onto their victims. We lack a comparable word that describes the crimes of "civilized" peoples.

If not condemned to the past, non-Christian or non-European groups were presumed to operate outside of "time's arrow" altogether. Race was mapped onto these prior religious distinctions (Husain 2017), mirroring theological understandings of progressive salvation or eternal damnation. In this cultural narrative, only some people "have" history (Wolf 1982),

from Rousseau's ([1754] 1992) notion of Native Americans as premodern noble savages, to Hegel's ([1857] 1900) claim that Africans had no history,[2] and Marx's (1976) similar description of India.[3] These caricatures shape basic elements of Western political theory, from the state of nature to the social contract (Mills 1997).

Cultural versus Biological Models of Race

As the eighteenth-century Enlightenment passed into nineteenth-century modernity, debates over racial classification revolved around biology and culture. Both sides relied on evidence from the emerging disciplines of anthropology, ethnology, sociology, and biology, what Wolfe (1999:3) calls "Western discourse talking to itself." These foundational debates were framed within shared assumptions about the superiority of European civilizations and the necessity of progress, and they still shape contemporary scholarship.

On one side of this debate, biological racial classifications, whether through physiognomy, anthropometry, phrenology, ethnology, or eugenics, advanced a scientific teleology attempting to prove nonwhite racial inferiority (Horsman 1981; Nisbet 1980; Painter 2010; Sklair 1970). Scholars argued about the precise number of races, their characteristics, and their potential futures—but all placed whites at the top. A notion of racial progress drove eugenic thinking: a misreading of evolutionary theory as teleological allowed eugenicists to argue that the eradication of so-called "lesser races" constituted progress (Kendi 2016). The contemporary tendency to dismiss these racial engagements as "pseudo-science" obscures their wide historical popularity and contemporary disciplinary resonance. As Ngai (1999:78) writes, "Scientific racism's power lay, in large part, in its adherence to scientific methodology and disciplinary standards. If race science had been merely pseudo-science, it would have had far less currency." Because they practiced the scientific method, eugenic scientists could claim authority through the process's supposedly self-correcting functions. Categorizing eugenics and related disciplines as pseudo-science is itself teleological, hampering our ability to analyze equally dubious truth claims embedded in contemporary racial discourse.

On the other side of the debate, scholars argued for the "cultural-timeline" model critiqued by Fabian—that racial others occupied Europe's past, but they could be civilized. Importantly, the cultural-timeline argument was the progressive position relative to biological racism. For instance, Nisbet (1980:146) cites Lafitau's (1724) *Customs of Primitive Americans Compared with Customs of Early Times* as "a remarkable instance of the tolerance, understanding and high respect" of another culture, a high-water mark in Christian tolerance in the New World. But as the title suggests, Lafitau's study connects "New World" inhabitants' present to Europe's past. Others on the "progressive" side of this debate, like J. S. Mill ([1857] 1966), deployed a cultural frame, arguing for universal humanity through shared *capacity* for progress (i.e., assimilation to Western society), but under conditions of benevolent colonial domination, if not actual slavery (see also Mill's debate with Carlyle, analyzed in Goldberg 2000).

Theological debates about human origins also fell within normative progress frames. Around 1800, proponents of polygenesis endorsed Linnaeus's ([1735] 1964) taxonomy of four human races, invoking biblical authority (Kidd 2006). Intellectual opponents in the school of "monogenesis," arguing for a single human origin, located societies on the cultural timeline, as Lafitau had done, rather than in a strict biological taxonomy. In other words, races were separated either biologically, by species, or culturally, by time. If separated by species, racially biological others were condemned to an eternal past. If separated by culture, progressives held that the wretched of the earth could perhaps, with great effort, be moved

into the Western present. As scientific classification developed, physiognomic rankings of racial groups served as a biological parallel to the debates over non-Western cultures' potential for progress, or what Hesse (2007:655) calls a "cultural racialization" fundamentally opposing Europe to "non-Europe."

Over this period, ideas of progress took on a more explicitly racial cast. The U.S. expansionist idea of Manifest Destiny was not officially an Anglo-Saxon destiny until 1850, when debates over slavery and conflict with Native Americans necessitated new racial ideology (Horsman 1981). The potential transformation of Native Americans would be a proof of concept for Enlightenment thinkers like Jefferson, but southern colonists were more dubious, concluding that Native Americans would be "either moralized or exterminated" (Horsman 1981:108).

Horsman notes this period was marked by a cross-fertilization between European Enlightenment thinkers and southern slave owners. The French physician Virey's 1,682-page study, *Natural History of the Human Race* (1824), held that black people were more closely related to monkeys than a white peasant was to blacks, and it included claims that black people had black blood in their brains, larger and darker lice, and a myriad of other scientifically derived observations.[4] In Charleston, South Carolina, J. H. Guenebault published translated excerpts of Virey's work under the title *Natural History of the Negro Race* (1837) as fuel for antiabolitionists.

The pre–Civil War period was instructive for its anxieties about emancipated blacks' potential regression following slavery (McKee 1993), ideas later folded into eugenic thought and practice. "Extermination," the third possible outcome for racial progress, was not metaphorical. For instance, in *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville argued that racial intermixing and assimilation might bring progress—but he had little faith in this possibility. Tocqueville ([1835] 1966:328) thought the U.S. black population seemed more "destined to succumb" in the coming racial struggle, deferring to Thomas Jefferson's ([1787] 1999) superior authority on race matters and U.S. demographics compared to the Caribbean (see also Kendi 2016:168).

Defenders of the idea of progress typically treat the historical systematization of biological racial hierarchies as unfortunate deviations from an otherwise noble Western paradigm. For instance, Nisbet (1980:8) claims that the scientific racism in notions of progress were mere "corruptions of the idea of progress." As an example of this corruption, Nisbet defends Joseph Arthur De Gobineau, a founder of scientific racism and author of "The Inequality of Human Races" ([1853] 2000), whom Nisbet (1980:288) calls a "key figure in the uniting of race and progress." Nisbet (1980:288–89) laments Gobineau "had a humane mind. . . . But, alas, race was Gobineau's obsession." Nisbet thus renders eugenics and the advocacy of racial inferiority as progress' "ugly side." He writes off scientific racism as a deviation from otherwise neutral claims of progress with understatements like "the record is not always a clean one" (1980:8). Nisbet's claim misreads the historical record, sanitizing white violence. Notions of progress and racism were deeply entwined, with racial assumptions implicit in all sides of the debate.[5]

The teleological view holds that racism gradually diminished as Western society modernized, coming to understand its prior errors. But as Enlightenment universalism made way for post-Enlightenment or modern fragmentation (Harvey 1989), forms of measurement, administration, and justification of oppression consolidated. These rationalized fruits of technological progress were used in the service of growth and civilization, but they also facilitated the scaling up of brutality and the refinement of practices of scientific racism, dispossession, and attempted extermination (Bauman [1989] 2001; Hochschild 1998).

Through this period, the cultural-timeline and biological models cross-fertilized. Wolfe (1999:45) argues that by 1900, evolutionist anthropologists were again mapping groups of

people onto time, but with a sinister message: "The doctrine took hold that subordinate modes of life were not lesser coexistences. . . . But *residues*, with all the ominous redundancy that this entailed." The corollary to the cultural-timeline's potential for development was that some people who occupied the West's "past" were condemned to *become* the past.

The cultural-timeline model, eclipsed in the early 1900s' intellectual ferment around eugenics, was revived after the Nazis discredited biological theories (Malik 1996), and it still frames research. In the post–World War II period, beliefs "in linear progress, absolute truths, and rational planning of ideal social orders" were consolidated, purporting to bring "a benevolent and progressive 'modernization process' to a backward third world" (Harvey 1989:33). Social progress and modernity are now measured against the standard of extreme privilege, while the exceptions—suffering racialized violence and inequality—are rhetorically condemned to the past (Bauman 1998). The belief in social progress justifies present atrocities: "they need our help."

The teleological mythology of social perfectibility also requires abstraction from the past. Linear conceptions of time provide distance from the "bad old days" of imperialism and racial ignorance (Bauman [1989] 2001). As Fanon ([1961] 2005:51) wrote, the settler's perspective "makes history. . . . He is the absolute beginning: 'This land was created by us'; he is the unceasing cause: 'if we leave, all is lost, and the country will go back to the Middle Ages.'" "Back to the Middle Ages" is the threat of society's return to a brutal past if we abandon our present brutalities. Claims of progress thus serve a political function, delegitimizing the claims of racially subordinate populations.

THE PROGRESS FRAME IN SOCIOLOGY

Thus far, we have established that Enlightenment thought about social progress was racialized through comparisons to the colonial periphery. Sociology, adopting Enlightenment tools, used progress as a similarly racialized master category of analysis. Nisbet (1980:4), for example, argues progress underlies ideas of "liberty, justice, equality, community, and so forth." Similarly, Sklair (1970) claims that ideas of progress and sociology are mutually reinforcing, and all theories of history rely on progress. Not only did early sociologists definitively state that sociology should study and advance progress, progress was explicitly a white enterprise. Comte's (1855) outline of the infant discipline advocated for the deployment of "positive philosophy" to achieve social progress. Comte (1855:544) defined "the most important social inquiry" as "the question of the scene and agent of the chief progression of the race. Why is Europe the scene, and why is the white race the agent, of the highest civilization?"[6] Ward, considered a "father" of U.S. sociology, advocated the use of sociology for "telesis" (1903) or "the conscious improvement of society" (1906). He held that white Americans' racial domination of "the native races" through war was essential to achieve progress, holding it as the "cosmic fact" that the "highest type of man shall gain dominion over all the lower types of man," and insulting peace advocates for hindering societal advancement with their weak protests (Ward 1903:239).

Many classical sociological theorists, not typically classified as race scholars, nonetheless wrote extensively about race under the guise of "civilization" and "savagery" (McKee 1993) in discussing the potential of progress. Marx's (1976:297) early analysis of capitalism presumed that society developed through certain "stages," following an "economic law of motion of modern society." Like his Enlightenment predecessors, Marx (1976:296) assumed Europe's present represented the future of backward societies: "the country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future."[7] Both Durkheim ([1893] 2014) and Weber ([1922] 1978) focused on the causes and consequences

of progress in industrial society, with Durkheim comparing "savages" to "advanced" or "civilized" societies, and Weber's "engine" of society producing relentless progress through the growth of rationality. Weber's ([1905] 2002) notion of progress, however, was not utopian; he feared that increased technology would create an "iron cage" of rationality.

Hewing closely to the cultural-timeline frame, these scholars based their claims of development on non-Western societies (Go 2013a). Although McKee (1993) cites W. I. Thomas as a singular sociological hero for refusing the idea of racial inferiority, Thomas wrote a whole book examining "savage society" as Western "social origins" (1909b). The first chapter, which was published in the *American Journal of Sociology* that year, claimed that "tribal society is virtually delayed civilization, and the savages are a sort of contemporaneous ancestry" (1909a:153). Giddings and Ward similarly orient their methodological and theoretical contributions to sociology around assumptions that the "least developed races" (Ward 1896:746) represent the West's past (Go 2013b), although Giddings (1896:239) at least believed the "negro and the yellow races" were "capable of progress."

Contemporary sociologists still tie progress to the West. Sklair (1970:112) claims that even progress doubters must acknowledge "the obvious occurrence of progress in . . . man's control of his natural environment," yet acknowledges in a footnote, "I am speaking, of course, about the Western world." Similarly, Nisbet (1980:296) argues that besides its "flaws and corruptions," progress has been a "noble idea" for its impact on "those who have made up the human substance of Western civilization." He holds as a self-evident premise of progress, under attack by unnamed doubters, "the nobility, even superiority, of Western civilization" (Nisbet 1980:319). Alexander and Sztompka's (1990:3) book also aims to rehabilitate progress narratives for the Western world, placing progress as key to the "emancipating potential of western sociological theory." They worry that the "growing disparagement of progress as a belief system" endangers "sociological theories based on the premise of automatic development" (Alexander and Sztompka 1990:3). It not clear, however, why development should be considered "automatic" or self-evident in the first place.

Moreover, Alexander and Sztompka's description of "progress as a belief system" replaces analysis with a deeply value-laden view of the world that favors a narrative of progress (Abbott 2005:420). In his critique of the unreflexively adopted idea of "outcome" in American sociology, Abbott (2005:405) argues that sociology's normative meliorative bent often implies improvement or "steady movement in some direction." Abbott sees this as an artifact of the discipline's methodological commitment to regression methods, whose arbitrary start and endpoints are often reified as the real beginning and end of a given social process.

Sociology of Race and the Idea of Progress

The sociology of race is also framed in teleological terms, and the idea of progress is still embedded in contemporary methods and frames for studying race. Questions of racial progress have been a fundamental component of the study of race (Henricks 2016; Steinberg 2007). Improvement, progress, assimilation, and movement forward in time are often conflated. Such scholarship carries an implicit political message, counseling patience among marginalized populations because "things are getting better." Yet teleological framing limits sociology's explanatory power. For instance, critiquing the sociology of "race relations" that failed to predict the 1960s' racial upheaval, some scholars argue that liberal sociologists held a deeply conservative view of society, assuming its direction was "meliorative," and therefore they could not see the coming Civil Rights Movement (McKee 1993). We now briefly

turn to leading theories of race that provide explanatory templates for contemporary under-standings, and we show how they were structured by a progress frame.

Early sociological debates around race were largely framed around the distinction between biology and culture. In the pages of the *American Journal of Sociology* and the *Annals of the American Academy*, eugenicists (Galton 1904) and their critics (Cooley 1897) debated the relative inborn intellectual capacity of racial groups, with intelligence serving as a proxy for the possibility of racial progress. Galton's social Darwinism promoted the idea of inborn, immutable racial difference. Cooley (1897), a relative liberal, challenged Galton, claiming that social factors determined racial group "genius." Cooley did not fully discount the possibility of a biologically based racial hierarchy and the utility of racial subordination, but nonetheless, he held that all racial groups were *in principle* capable of advancing "the social achievement of mankind" (quoted in McKee 1993:60).

W. E. B. Du Bois was at the center of debates about racial progress. Rejecting Hoffman's (1896) influential thesis that innate racial *inferiority* would lead to extinction (Du Bois 1897a), Du Bois (1904) believed that racial *oppression* could, indeed, lead to the eradication of black Americans (see Darity 1994:54). Du Bois also rejected the industrial-education model laid out in Booker T. Washington's 1895 speech delivered at the Atlanta Exposition, where Washington proclaimed Reconstruction had been a mistake for lifting freed people too quickly into politics: "It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top" (Harlan 1972:74). This was also the occasion of Washington's famed description of the races as forming separate fingers, "yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress" (Harlan 1972:75).[8] Du Bois rejected the racial inferiority argument in favor of a cultural argument, which, as we have shown, also ranked people hierarchically: Du Bois still believed black people could improve (Morris 2015). In "The Conservation of Races," Du Bois (1897b) built on Hegel's "ideal" to argue for the "universal prevalence of the . . . race ideal, and as to its efficiency as the vastest and most ingenious invention of human progress." Although Du Bois rejected biological foundations of race in this essay, his project of racial improvement was teleological (Miles 2003).

Progressive scholars also endorsed a frame that eschewed biological in favor of cultural inferiority. Franz Boas, whose work undermined biological models of race, thought black people could achieve at least the level of an average white person (Baker 1998; McKee 1993). Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1909:80) asked, "How can we best promote the civilization of the negro? He is here; we can't get rid of him; it is all our fault: he does not suit us as he is; what can we do to improve him?" Gilman (1909:80) suggests the enlistment "of all negroes below a certain grade of citizenship," including children, into southern labor camps. She clarifies that this uncompensated, coerced labor is "not enslavement;" rather, this effort aims at the "development of the backward race" and is "not a question of 'equality' in any sense" (Gilman 1909:79–81). Jane Addams (1901) worked to end lynching while simultaneously viewing black people as underdeveloped, primitive, and childlike.[9] More recently, Moynihan's (1965) infamous report and Wilson's (1996:51) thesis on black underemployment blamed what Wilson called "ghetto-related behaviors" for the lack of racial progress, leading to these authors' association with cultural explanations of racism.

The progress frame has also been imposed on white racism, with prejudice seen as anachronistic. Myrdal's (1944) magisterial study saw racial inequality as an aberration on an otherwise-sound American creed, holding that moral transformation among white people would eventually eradicate racial domination (Steinberg 2007).[10] Psychological theories held that contact and education would erode racist attitudes (Allport [1954] 1979), eventually erasing prejudice.

Assimilation theory, the dominant conceptualization of race and ethnicity in the early twentieth century, adopted both a notion of progress and a self-evident understanding of whiteness as a cultural default. Park's race relations cycle drew on biological metaphors, with racial competition creating a supposedly natural progression from hostility to integration (Park, Burgess, and McKenzie 1925). Park posited "tendencies to the assimilation and eventual amalgamation of races" (1950:151), arguing that "all our so-called racial problems grow out of situations in which assimilation and amalgamation do not take place at all, or take place very slowly" (1925:890).[11] In *Assimilation in American Life*, Gordon (1964:72) formulated a "straight-line" model of assimilation, whose "reference point" is "the middle-class cultural patterns" of white, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon society. Scholars such as Alba and Nee (2003) have attempted to rescue assimilation theory from notions of white cultural superiority, but they admit their theory fails to explain the position of blacks and Native Americans. Thus, the illusion of progress depends on the erasure of groups who are typically the worst off. Moreover, as Jung (2009) points out, assimilation theory cannot account for the external forces, most notably social movements, that have ameliorated conditions for racial groups. Paradoxically, Jung (2009:384) notes, "'institutional mechanisms' that ostensibly facilitate assimilation—state enforcement of antidiscrimination policies and a steep decline in racism's 'public legitimacy'—were brought about by the Black-led Civil Rights Movement but have been least effective for Blacks." Despite these limitations, assimilation is still a central organizing concept for mainstream research on race (see, e.g., Waters et al. 2010).

This brief historical survey of teleological thought in the sociology of race shows the colonial skeleton supporting the contemporary color-blind flesh. In the next section, we show how progress structures the measures and methodological practices of much sociological scholarship on race.

Progress Framing in Sociological Methods

Progress frames also affect sociological methods. Ethnography began as a colonial project. Anthropologists helped colonial bureaucracies better manage colonized populations (Wolfe 1999), producing stereotypes about each group's supposedly static "nature" that administrators then sought to maintain (Steinmetz 2008).[12] Through their work, anthropologists helped construct the opposing concepts of savagery and civilization, rank races, and justify expulsion, exploitation, or even extermination. Sociology has adapted ethnography with scant reflexivity, assuming ethnographic methodology can be separated from its racialized origins.

Urban ethnography frequently focuses on black and brown people and spaces as the research "problem." The field often employs a classificatory typology maintaining distinctions of savagery and civilization. Comparing "decent" versus "street" (Anderson 1999) or "clean" versus "dirty" people (Goffman 2014) maps onto existing racial frameworks of ranked morality (Ralph 2015). The pressure to describe U.S. race relations as "nearly there" can also produce studies like Elijah Anderson's (2010) recent book on changing patterns of racial interaction, which describes much of Philadelphia's downtown as a "cosmopolitan canopy" where civility and harmony are now the norm. Although Anderson acknowledges the canopy can perform as a "gloss" (154) for people to hide their true feelings, he speculates these spaces can lead to racial progress, as "a model of civility is planted" that "may well have a chance to sprout elsewhere in the city" (277).

Comparative historical methodology is similarly structured to reproduce teleological thinking by focusing on Western phenomena while excluding their non-Western components. Julian Go (2013b) notes that historical sociology focuses on European revolutions, capitalism, and

state formation—not anti- or postcolonial revolutions, colonialism, or imperialism. Go (2013b:36) critiques scholars for contributing to the Enlightenment's "*artificial bifurcation* of social problems" (italics original). He calls for an indigenized and relational sociology to show the unnamed processes of accumulation and dispossession underlying Weber's Protestant ethic, Skocpol's revolutions, and Durkheim's organic solidarity.

Like ethnography's colonial origins, statistical methodologies regarding race were pioneered by eugenic theorists who aimed to show the biological inferiority of supposedly lesser races (Gould 2006; Zuberi 2001). Social norms are embedded in our measures. Regression methods, prioritizing change over time, require a socially constructed "reference category." White normativity is the standard against which people of color are measured. This formulates racial differences in terms of a "gap," rendering one group as the problem needing to "catch up" to whites. Gaps between observed variables are attributed to "race effects"—no longer immutable genetic factors, but essentialized socially constructed inequalities.

Much of this work assumes the engine of progress will yield slow improvement—even as racial gaps in income (Wilson and Rodgers 2016) and wealth (Shapiro, Meschede, and Osoro 2013) have increased. Across these domains, time is assumed to be the necessary ingredient, not the redistribution of existing resources (McFarlane 2013). The implicit assumption of white normativity has long been critiqued by qualitative scholars of whiteness (Lewis 2004; McDermott and Samson 2005), encouraging reflexivity about one's subject position and the construction of the analytic object. However, quantitative work rarely adopts a reflexive stance, and it thereby reinforces these assumptions.

The rule of white normativity is made visible when phenomena are described as unusual because people of color are *not* performing worse than whites. Although they provide important data, studies based on frames of an "immigrant paradox" (e.g., first-generation Latinos are healthier than whites) (Abraído-Lanza et al. 1999; Hernandez et al. 2012) or a "race paradox" (e.g., blacks report better mental health than whites) (Mouzon 2013, 2014) embed normative expectations in analytic description. The assumption that whites *ought* to have better physical and mental health reflects the larger cultural field in which people of color's existence is rendered a "problem" (Du Bois [1903] 2013). Nonwhite superiority in any social domain is an enigma.

Twentieth-century prohibitions on legal discrimination did not alter the fundamentally hierarchal nature of the racial system. Standard methodological treatments of "race effects" commit the error of assuming the ontological possibility of a nonhierarchical concept of race. They proceed as if group differences grounded in racism, or "group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (Gilmore 2005:28), are neutral labels describing cultural differences, with the "gaps" a perpetually surprising outcome. Analysts of class relations rarely make the same error, as class can only be understood as a relational concept. The "working class" is defined by its relationship to differing work, status, and life chances. Similarly, race is an inherently hierarchal concept that maintains coherence only in relation to other groups.[13]

Moreover, the very enterprise of "minding the gap," yielding over a century of diligent statistics showing racial inequality across a wealth of domains, has not in itself served to ameliorate those inequalities. The predictable findings of racial gaps in health, wealth, work, education, housing, and punishment may serve as an unconscious "all is well" in the minds of whites. A recent experiment found, for instance, that whites were more likely to support the death penalty once they learned it disproportionately affects blacks (Bobo 2004; Peffley and Hurwitz 2007). Late in his career, Du Bois alleged that whites took pleasure in black people's suffering. His past careful documentation of such suffering, he now argued, far from turning whites away from racism, perversely fed this pleasure:

> To the millions of my people no misfortune could happen,—of death and pestilence, failure and
> defeat—that would not make the hearts of millions of their fellows beat with fierce, vindictive
> joy. . . . Ask your own soul what it would say if the next census were to report that half of black
> America was dead and the other half dying. ([1920] 2012:24)

STABILITY AND CHANGE

For decades, scholars have used racial progress as a barometer for U.S. social progress more generally (Myrdal 1944; Wilson 1978). What is remarkable about the U.S. racial order is not the brief flurries of racial change surrounding the Civil Rights Movement or Reconstruction, but its persistence despite centuries of antiracist struggle. From the period of white Redemption following Reconstruction, to the policy retrenchment from Civil Rights promises in the 1980s to today, the nearly intractable sedimentation of racial inequality bookending periods of change is more characteristic of U.S. race relations, what Patterson (1989) calls "racial homeostasis." Each racially progressive era erases past iterations of social struggle to argue that progress is being made. After all, as Steinberg (2007:226) points out, Civil Rights legislation in the 1950s and 1960s "only restored rights that had been guaranteed by the reconstruction amendments a century earlier." This erasure is not limited to racial justice: Faludi (1991:46) decries the mythical vector of progress that has similarly wiped out the history of the U.S. women's rights movements, isolating the most recent movement as an aberration while charting "the history of women's rights . . . as a flat dead line that, only twenty years ago, began a sharp and unprecedented incline."

Evolving Meaning of Policies

How can racism be variable if racial hierarchy is enduring? Scholarship on race often includes a ritualistic caveat that "things are getting better" or "we have come so far." Progress framing in the field of race is at odds with nonteleological understandings of social reproduction more generally. For instance, Bourdieu ([1994] 2012) and Sewell (1992) see structural stability and change as part of a broader process of social conflict and temporary reconciliation or stalemate. Race theorists such as Bonilla-Silva (1997) and Omi and Winant ([1994] 2015) point to such continuity in their work. Yet many empirical studies drop this structural framing in favor of a "feel good" (Stanfield 2008) sociology of racial progress.

One problem, as Faludi showed above, lies in the erasure of prior struggles. Another problem lies in the incrementalism of reformist perspectives, which see slow improvement through expert intervention in a single domain. While well intentioned, individual policies are vulnerable to distortion or outright appropriation, or the simple reassertion of the status quo. Rather than incremental improvement, social change has generally been hard-wrought through social movements, cataclysmic events, and outside pressure (Cloward and Piven 1974). As we will explore, the most effective tactic against demands for equality is often incorporation, not opposition. This outcome would also be predicted by general systems theory, a process of "deviation-correcting feedback" (Von Bertalanffy 1968) to restore racial equilibrium. Such dynamics help explain the persistence of racial inequality despite decades of policy interventions.

A focus on specific mechanisms of contemporary racism helps illustrate how "racial inequality is not a historical residue of a racist past but a complex weave of historical and contemporary social practices" (Hughey, Embrick, and Doane 2015:1348). Here, we focus on two overlapping mechanisms, *interest convergence* and *appropriation*, both of which

obfuscate racial inequality. Next, we introduce three alternative frameworks that better reveal stability and change in the racial order.

Interest Convergence

The notion of "interest convergence" comes from Derrick Bell (1980:523), intellectual father of Critical Race Theory, whose interpretation of *Brown v. Board* held that "the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites." In its strict form, Bell's interest convergence thesis is focused on case law explicitly aimed at lessening racial inequality. But we join Bracey (2015) in arguing that the interest convergence thesis has broad implications for thinking about racial progress. De facto white control of the levers of state power (Bracey 2015), and white dominance in most institutions (Moore 2008) and organizations (Ray, forthcoming; Ray et al. 2017), ensures that the extension and enforcement of minority rights will not pose a threat to whites' favored status. Racial reconciliation is seen as a "zero-sum game" (Norton and Sommers 2011) in which any minority advancement potentially harms whites.

As a result, racial conflicts resulting in negotiated social changes, from Reconstruction to the Civil Rights Movement, typically benefit whites. Because whites retain control during policy transitions (including control of property, law, taxes, corporations, philanthropy, and educational institutions), they have not (as a group) typically been disadvantaged by changing racial policies. The uneven enforcement of "universal" legislation advances white group interests. As Ibram Kendi (2016) notes, black people hardly benefitted from economic policy during Black Reconstruction—but corporations, particularly railroad companies who received millions in incentives to expand southward in the name of "development," profited tidily. Similarly, slave owners were compensated for their loss of property, whereas the proverbial "40 acres and a mule" was offered, then reclaimed, by state representatives worried about black advancement (Nelson 2016). The New Deal, G.I. Bill, and Great Society programs were deeply racialized, with whites' control of distribution channels allowing systematic resource hoarding (Katznelson 2005). The history of "black advancement" is rife with parallel developments providing equal, or greater, benefits to whites.

This historical inequality is represented even in basic cognitive orientations toward progress that differ between blacks and whites. Whites assess progress compared to the racial past, whereas blacks tend to assess progress in terms of an imagined future of racial equality (Eibach and Ehrlinger 2006). Whites experience potential moves toward equity as a loss (Eibach and Keegan 2006), so corrective legislation must be framed to ensure whites are not disadvantaged. As a result, "victories" taken to show racial progress may mean whites simply compound their advantage. Interventions that are supposedly universal (e.g., efforts to improve schools) allow whites to strengthen, or at least maintain, their lead. Despite this control over the process, whites now feel they are doing worse, claiming antiwhite discrimination exceeds discrimination against blacks (Norton and Sommers 2011). Moreover, it is not absolute, but relative, group position that inspires countermovements against racial gains (Blumer 1958). Although whites have gained in absolute terms with programs like affirmative action (which, contrary to the mainstream narrative, provides greater benefits to white women than to people of color), even a small narrowing of the gap between blacks and whites has provoked extreme retrenchment and a series of political attacks. The large body of research on racial "group threat" (beginning with Blalock 1967) and racial "backlashes" (Seamster and Henricks 2015) shows the perception of racial progress can provoke whites to reinforce their socially dominant position.

Restitution and special protections are hard to establish through universal programs. The rise of ideological "abstract liberalism" invoked ideals of equality and fairness to oppose Civil Rights–era programs perceived as racial favoritism (Bonilla-Silva 2013). Kendi (2016:264–65) relays Justice Joseph Bradley's 1883 opinion on the limits of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth amendments:

> "When a man has emerged from slavery and with the aid of beneficent legislation has shaken off the inseparable concomitants of that state," Bradley concluded, "there must be some stage in the progress of his elevation when he takes the rank of a mere citizen, and ceases to be a special favorite of the laws, and when his rights . . . are to be protected in the ordinary modes by which other men's rights are protected."

Here, Bradley invokes a teleological view of freedpeople's "stages," with remedial action considered favoritism. Recent Supreme Court cases use this same logic, arguing that discrimination has been remedied and the Voting Rights Act and *Brown v. Board* need not be permanent; rather, a brief structural intervention should suffice to remedy discrimination in perpetuity. However, as we have repeatedly seen, once these protections are removed, new forms of disenfranchisement and resegregation emerge.

Remedial policies are also cited as "proof" that racial disparities are natural. As all available remedial measures have supposedly been exhausted, persisting disparities are said to measure ability or differing goals. For example, once state-sanctioned desegregation was outlawed, opponents of racial equality framed school inequality in resources, outcomes, and access as either unproblematic, the result of "fair" market demand or property value differences, or else as enduring and unsolvable (Lewis and Diamond 2015; Ravitch 2013). With the end of legal discrimination and segregation, addressing enduring inequality is viewed as difficult at best, and unnecessary at worst.

Appropriation

If bureaucratic rules institutionalize a racial order, internal rule changes are unlikely to alter the racial hierarchy. Shifting temporal contexts mean policies lack a single eternal meaning. Rather, bureaucratic rules can be reapplied to achieve the precise opposite outcome of their original intent, as critical race scholars have observed for Civil Rights–era legislation (Seamster and Henricks 2015). As Paula Ioanide (2015:220) notes, "Every campaign win can later become appropriated to produce injustice. That justice is not a static thing we achieve once and for all. It is something that has to be persistently struggled for on the basis of shared principles as conditions change."

Appropriation is sometimes easier to observe in cultural objects. As Stuart Hall (1997:3) explains, "things 'in themselves' rarely have any one, single, fixed and unchanging meaning": cultural objects are context-dependent and always vulnerable to appropriation. Shifting policy contexts ensure no single policy is inherently liberatory, nor is any one song, cultural marker, or name (recall Lyndon Johnson joining the chorus singing "We Shall Overcome," as discussed by Floyd McKissick in Fergus 2009:217). Omi and Winant ([1994] 2015:88) similarly reflect that "there was, it turned out, nothing inherently radical about dashikis, Kemet, or the concept of 'soul,' or for that matter about the Aztec heritage, pupusas, Menudo, or fry bread." Over time, neutral or affirming categories can take on new meanings. Take the debate over whether "diversity," "equity," or "inclusion" is the correct goal: neither these words nor the policies they represent will survive their journey through racialized organizations unscathed, once they are embraced by corporate or university bureaucracy.

Evolving racial practices may undermine the effectiveness of policies attempting to intervene in racial inequality. For instance, states that adopted "Ban the Box" laws preventing discrimination against former felons saw an unexpected result: more discrimination against applicants with black-sounding names (Agan and Starr 2016). Similarly, body cameras were offered as a solution to police brutality in 2014 after officer Darren Wilson shot Michael Brown. In response, officers started conveniently turning their cameras off before violent interactions. Furthermore, in many cases, video evidence has been insufficient to convict officers for killing black people. In an act of institutional appropriation, North Carolina governor Pat McCrory passed a law in October 2016 preventing the public from gaining access to police body and camera recordings, declaring the footage is neither public nor part of personnel records. Police agencies wishing to release footage must obtain an order from a Superior Court judge (Binker 2016).

Scholars and policymakers assume that negative outcomes indicate the correct policy has not been found. Each rediscovery of continuing racial inequality is treated as a surprise. Contemporary actors are absolved of responsibility when we attribute disparities to past racism without looking for emerging mechanisms by which discrimination can occur, from "punitive empathy" in institutional programs designed to remediate harm (Ray 2013) to "predatory inclusion" in higher education (Seamster and Charron-Chénier 2017). To return to the racial gap for a moment, calculations of the date parity will be achieved in domains like school achievement or wealth are useful to show the magnitude and persistence of inequality. But these projections can be misleading by implying slow progress (rather than, e.g., the catastrophic doubling of the racial wealth gap over the recession [Shapiro, Meschede, and Osoro 2013]) due, in part, to contemporary exploitative mechanisms (Seamster and Charron-Chénier 2017).

Appropriation extends not only to shifting policy effectiveness, but to the material resources devoted to restitution of past harms. Whites have been remarkably successful in capturing resources intended to address racial inequality (Henricks and Seamster 2015). For instance, whites frequently garner education funds explicitly intended to remedy the effect of segregation (Freidus and Noguera 2015; Quiroz and Lindsay 2015; Russakoff 2015). The same appropriation occurs when government funding is devoted to urban problems like blight and affordable housing (Seamster 2016), or when funding hinges on innovations like participatory politics, which were designed as egalitarian interventions but can be appropriated to represent elite white interests in the context of unequal power relations (Tissot 2015).

ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTIONS OF STABILITY AND CHANGE

Having critiqued contemporary approaches to racial progress, we now offer three alternative perspectives of social stability and change. We propose that the present and its potential futures should be assessed in a thorough understanding of the past, without engaging in the historiological fallacy of presentism. Each alternative framework is relational (Emirbayer 1997). We see each framework forming a distinct language to understand similar underlying processes, and each may appeal to different empirical foci, theoretical traditions, and scales of analysis. The first focuses on *mechanisms*: seeing racism as a fundamental cause of inequality allows us to examine structural stability and changing mechanisms in a single framework. The second is *spatial*: the settler-colonial framework draws attention to material conditions across time and space and sees racial domination as an ongoing process of distribution of land and labor. The third framework is *agentic*: the notion of racialized agency examines individual relations of mobility—and the crucial ability to structure one's time—within a larger racialized structure.

All our reconceptualizations offer empirical applications without assuming teleological outcomes. Each framework sees time as *neutral* while examining racial stability and change under various historical conditions and structural contexts.

Fundamental Cause

The first alternative is drawn from medical sociology, where scholars have long argued that socioeconomic status (SES) is a "fundamental cause" (Link and Phelan 1995) of health inequality. Applying the concept of fundamental cause to health disparities, Link and Phelan claim that high SES protects one from multiple forms of disease. High SES allows one to acquire the education necessary to understand and implement cutting-edge health technologies; it allows one to live in a neighborhood with clean air and water; and most obviously, it allows one to pay for medical care. Thus, regardless of disease vector, there is a long-standing historical continuity between high SES and good health. Changes in the proximate causes of disease do little to undermine the fundamental protections provided by high SES: the relationship holds because when one disease is cured (e.g., polio), another proximate mechanism reestablishes the link. Building on this reasoning, Link and Phelan (1995) argue that medical interventions focusing solely on proximate causes cannot eliminate the relationship between economic inequality and poorer health for those at the bottom of the hierarchy.

The racial order presents a similar fundamental resilience in the face of changing proximate causes. Hierarchy is central to all racialized social systems (Bonilla-Silva 1997). Racial hierarchies respond to changes (threats from below) by altering the mechanisms through which they are reproduced. For instance, in response to desegregation orders, many white families moved to private all-white or nearly all-white schools; schools themselves implemented tracking programs that replicated external patterns of segregation internally; and regimes of differential policing or application of rules arose such that even ostensibly desegregated schools produced patterns of racial inequality (Lewis and Diamond 2015).

A fundamental cause approach moves beyond linear notions of racial progress, as it conceptually encompasses both stability and change in one empirically testable model. Aspects of racial domination are cumulative and may hold similarities across time, but scholars should also be attentive to historically specific articulations of racism (Hall 1986). We argue that racism—as a structurally mediated form of ideology and action—is a fundamental cause of structural inequality (Ray and Seamster 2016). This approach sees the racial hierarchy as relatively stable and bound (at least in the United States) by a black/white binary (with local variations). Once this binary emerged, changes in the proximate causes of racial inequality (types of discrimination—state-sanctioned or de facto) have not fundamentally altered the racial hierarchy. Methodological approaches that narrowly define progress in one empirical domain are likely to miss how the overall system of racial inequality is reproduced through new mechanisms.

Seeing racism as a fundamental cause of racial inequality is superior to assimilation theories that focus on the "blurring" of racial boundaries (Alba and Nee 2003). Assimilation theories can show the changing contours of racial inclusion, but their normative assumption that racial and ethnic differences are disappearing into the "mainstream" of whiteness is based on the explicit exclusion of African Americans and Native Americans from their model, as we mentioned earlier. The inclusion of new groups into whiteness, or a given group's movement up the racial hierarchy (as measured by educational attainment or income), is itself a mechanism of continued racial domination. That is, the basic relations of racial sub- and superordination remain intact despite a slightly different distribution of resources.

Settler-Colonial Framework

Our second paradigm draws on colonial framing to argue for a place-based, historicized, and power-focused analysis of race relations. Given that our own analysis foregrounds the role of colonial constructions in establishing both race and possibilities of progress, this framework draws out, rather than obscuring, the ongoing process of colonialism. Moreover, recent scholarship has argued that racial policy depends on each group's colonial relationship to land and labor—meaning that racial analysis will be incomplete without taking colonial structures into account (Wolfe 2001). Analyzing race through a settler-colonial framework prioritizes several crucial dimensions (Glenn 2015), including labor exploitation, such as the maintenance of reserve labor, resource accumulation/extraction and hoarding, racialized violence, political control of racialized groups (Fanon [1961] 2005; Reed 1999), political and legal apparatus to support the dominant group's claims to property and status (Harris 1995), and the mapping of Manichean religious/ideological imagery onto racial groups (Jordan 2013).

Race scholars debating the precise application of colonialism to the U.S. context have sought to differentiate between settler or classic colonialism (Glenn 2015), between colonialism and colonization (Blauner 1969), and between internal and external forms of colonialism (for a reflection on the swift decline of scholarship on internal colonialism, see Jung 2015). This conflict is understandable, as the United States simultaneously exhibits characteristics of both colony and empire. However, a smaller geographic unit of analysis may alleviate some of these problems. As with most other major theories of race, from racialized social systems to racial formation, the scale for theorizing about colonialism and race is usually implicitly or explicitly national, limiting potential insights. Without the imperative to make one type of colonialism representative, scholars can freely select the aspects that apply to their case. The application to a place need not always invoke a literal history of colonialism, although the approach should be historical. Colonial dynamics have become part of our schema for organizing bodies in space, in ways that draw on local historical patterns but are not necessarily directly caused by them.

Glenn's (2015) notion of "settler colonialism as ongoing structure" is instructive here, as it foregrounds colonialism as a process, not a historical artifact (as per McClintock's [1992] critique of the notion of "post-coloniality"). Such an approach foregrounds historical and contemporary patterns of resource flows, incorporating historical context to understand continuity and change. Focusing on power flows and distributions of resources, a colonial approach combines attention to material conditions on the ground with rhetorical analysis.

Granting priority to historical and spatial contexts means a shift in the variables of interest. Control of politics and land have largely remained in the hands of whites through hoarding and extraction processes, from urban renewal, gentrification, and eminent domain to gerrymandering and disenfranchisement. Spatial power analysis, for instance, shows white wealth and black/brown poverty as not only proximate but related: white wealth is produced through exploitation and extraction, not by abstract forces (Seamster 2015). Outcomes are as diverse as white flight; racial disparities in neighborhood values and absentee ownership; industrial pollution and the local role of corporations; tax rules, county governance, and municipal competition; and reservation treaties. (However, a focus on white "settlers" should be cautious not to re-erase indigenous communities [Veracini 2013].)

A colonialism-as-structure analysis can explain how white dominance persists in majority-minority spaces like the District of Columbia. In the DC metropolitan area, white households' net worth is 81 times that of black households, on average—still higher when the median is calculated (Kijakazi et al. 2016). This inequality is tied to present and historical factors involving power, land, money, and resources, such as the city's continued near-colonial

administration by Congress (constituting the most powerful of the city's white inhabitants) (Jaffe and Sherwood 1994); the pull of resources to surrounding suburbs (and the historical retrocession of Alexandria to Virginia in 1846, which provided a slave market for the nation's capital [Finkelman and Kennon 2011]); and historical housing segregation patterns in which black residences lay in the alleys between white residents' street-facing houses (Grigoryeva and Ruef 2015), not to mention present-day gentrification with colonial overtones (Smith 1996). These processes should be highlighted as producing the 81-fold wealth difference.

From this perspective, questions about the "declining significance" (Wilson 1978) of race or lessening animus in measured racial attitudes (Schuman 1997) become secondary to an analysis of ongoing colonial processes of dispossession, resource extraction, and cultural destruction. Viewed from within a colonial paradigm, the question of racial progress from an individualist or pragmatist approach is less relevant. Liberation from colonial structures comes not from gradual assimilation (which is a form of colonial violence), but from self-determination and resource equity. In contrast to the progress narrative, which conveniently implies blacks must "pass through" each stage of whites' past before reaching parity, a framework focusing on resources would prioritize redistribution.

Agency and Race/Racism

The relationship between structure and agency is sociologists' most fundamental inquiry, yet few scholars of race examine agency as an explicit concern of their research. Contra this trend, Emirbayer and Desmond (2015) make agency a central component of their theory of racial fields: they see agency as purposive, temporally and structurally situated action that can potentially transform racialized relations. Yet because Emirbayer and Desmond are attempting to avoid the structural determinism they claim is central to race scholarship, their work only touches on how racial structures enforce radically different agentic regimes.

We agree with Emirbayer and Desmond that the ability to chart future paths of action relative to one's conception of the present and past is, in many ways, the essence of agency. However, we argue that agency itself is deeply racialized, as social structures essentially foreclose certain paths of future action. For instance, segregated schools—through the provision of an unequal education—create a situation in which black children, on average, are less able to act upon their world. One is reminded here of a poignant scene in Lewis's (2003) *Race in the Schoolyard*, in which she recounts an interaction with an elementary-age black boy. She asks if he hopes to attend college; he replies that he wants to go to college, but he must go to prison first. His orientation to the future is deeply embedded in a social system that reproduces the idea of an inherent black criminality—such that this has become an expected life-course transition for those without high school education (Pettit and Western 2004). Interlocking racial structures—in this case, the school and the prison—shape one's ability to envision the horizon of possibility.

Similarly, in *The New Jim Crow*, Alexander (2012) argues it is by no means clear that integration into the criminal justice system is better than Jim Crow from a perspective of an absolute increase in agency. Racialized interactions with the criminal justice system profoundly alter the agency of formerly incarcerated individuals. As Sewell (1992) points out in his classic work on structure and agency, one's position in organizations enhances or detracts from personal agency. The ability to work, attend school, and experience a "normal" life course is profoundly curtailed by the same mainstream organizations that expand the agency of whites.

Agency is also a relative concept. Scholars currently tend to identify a white "norm" toward which, they hope, racial minorities are gradually trending, yet whites' well-being is the manifestation of a hierarchal system. Whites are doing better because the structural relations of race benefit, reward, and empower them. One could test for racialized agency through research examining how different racial groups see their opportunities for the future—and connecting this data to objective prospects. This latter provision is especially important, given that objective and subjective measures of opportunity are often at odds— for instance, when highly segregated black men display a greater commitment to mainstream values (Duneier 1999; Liebow 1967; Young 2004). For equally matched people of color and whites, are there differences in how they see their future opportunities? For instance, we know that blacks often overestimate returns to education. Matthew (2011) finds that black students have equal or greater expectations of educational returns, despite differences in outlook for their future opportunities, which he attributes to their understanding of structural effects on their lives. How does knowledge of a lower life expectancy or a greater likelihood of state-sanctioned violence influence one's future orientation?

CONCLUSION: FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. understood the temporal fallacy around racial progress. His 1964 "Letter from Birmingham Jail" critiqued the white moderate precisely for "liv[ing] by the myth of time and . . . constantly advis[ing] the Negro to wait until a 'more convenient season.'" King ([1964] 2000:74) continued by blaming the white moderate's frustrating timetable on "a tragic misconception of time, from the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time is neutral; it can be used either destructively or constructively. More and more I feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than the people of good will. . . . Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability." Interestingly, this observation of King's is much less quoted than his deployment of Theodore Parker's 1853 observation that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice" (Branch 1989). When the latter quote is invoked, it is often to suggest precisely that progress *will* inevitably roll through. The quote's popularity, and its consistent misattribution to King as its originator, indicate the power of the racial-progress narrative.

We have traced the frame of racial progress, from its instantiation during the Enlightenment to the present, to argue against seeing "wheels of inevitability" as an implicit conceptual frame in contemporary race scholarship. In place of this view, we have forwarded three alternatives—racism as a fundamental cause, the ongoing process of settler colonialism, and expanded agency—to move away from the notion that racism is inevitably improving.

Rejecting teleology entails rethinking research agendas beyond the perpetual rediscovery of discrimination. Keeping in mind Du Bois's realization that racism was not undone through decades of its careful documentation, scholars should examine the role of progress framing in reproducing or justifying the racial hierarchy. Contesting the teleological narrative of race scholarship requires seeing racial discrimination not as a surprising aberration, but as an expected outcome in a racialized social system. Expecting racial inequality may help scholars move beyond the "epistemic exploitation" (Berenstain 2016) embedded in race scholarship's perpetual chronicle of inequality. As Toni Morrison (1975; cited in Berenstain 2016:569) notes,

> The function, the very serious function, of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language, so you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head

isn't shaped properly, so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms and so you dredge that up. None of that is necessary. There will always be one more thing.

What would we spend our time on if not cataloging racism? The structural frameworks outlined above move us toward models that better capture stability and change in the racial order. Seeing race as a fundamental cause draws scholarly attention to the changing mechanisms reproducing racial inequality without losing sight of the continuation of racial hierarchy. Seeing settler colonialism as an ongoing process allows us to identify current racial practices, not as divorced from racial domination, but as an extension of historical extraction. Finally, seeing race as shaping agency allows for a broader understanding of how interactions with organizations profoundly shape racialized life chances.

Our skepticism of racial progress narratives appears pessimistic. Yet it is founded in a clear-eyed assessment of this historical trope, and a hope that, if we abandon the assumption that improvement will come gradually and naturally, we may abolish the racial hierarchy itself.

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NOTES

1. Indeed, the term "backlash" and its semantic colleagues, "reverse racism" or "reverse discrimination," imply there is a correct or unproblematic direction for race relations to flow in.
2. "At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit" (Hegel [1857] 1900:99).
3. "Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history. What we call its history, is but the history of the successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society" (Marx 1976:659).
4. To take just one example, in a chapter titled "On Orangutans" (Virey 1824:462; authors' translation), There will always be an immense difference between a Hottentot Bushman and a simple European peasant (not to mention a Voltaire or a Newton). . . . Everywhere the Negro is inferior and subservient. . . . Without presuming too much of the white species, one may believe that it has left the rank of the beast, while the same cannot be said of the Maccois tribes and Hottentots who roam the African wastes in nomadic hordes.
5. Richard H. Pratt's famous dictum "kill the Indian and save the man" is instructive here. Pratt was a proponent of American Indian residential schools, which helped facilitate cultural genocide. In nineteenth-century debates surrounding the so-called "Indian problem," Pratt was liberal relative to antagonists advocating outright extermination (Smith 2005).
6. Comte (1855:498) defined sociology's main purpose thus: "Every sociological analysis supposes three classes of considerations, each more complex than the preceding: viz., the conditions of social existence of the individual, the family, and society; the last comprehending, in a scientific sense, the whole of the human species, and chiefly, the whole of the white race."
7. Kevin Anderson (2010) argues that although early Marx, especially in the *Manifesto*, displays an ethnocentric orientation toward non-European groups, his later writings against the U.S. Civil War, Irish and Indian colonialism, and Russia's revolutionary potential show a more nuanced understanding of multiple models of development. However, Marx's work in these areas maintains a basic premise that movement toward revolution and eventual communitarian forms of governments constitutes progress.

8. The organizers of the 1895 exposition invited Washington to give his speech, but they were cautious about the optics, because it would make a statement about the country's progress (Harlan 1972). His speech served as an implicit answer to prominent black intellectuals' critique of Chicago's 1893 Columbian Exposition, which excluded black organizers, exhibits, and even security guards. The pamphlet making this case, coauthored by Frederick Douglass and published by Ida B. Wells, lamented that the exposition would have been the perfect site to demonstrate blacks' capacity for swift progress in the thirty years since emancipation (Harris 1991). Washington's speech, despite its racial conservatism, makes virtually the same claim, showing the pervasiveness of the progress narrative.

9. Addams (1901) critiqued lynching as ineffective disciplinary strategy: "Brutality begets brutality; and proceeding on the theory that the negro is undeveloped, and therefore must be treated in this primitive fashion, is to forget that the immature pay little attention to statements, but quickly imitate what they see."

10. The power of considering racial inequality as a morality tale can be seen in Myrdal's (1944:4) work, where he writes in the face of his own evidence that the U.S. racial situation was grounded in more than just attitudes: "The American Negro problem is a problem in the heart of the American. It is there that the interracial tension has its focus. It is there that the decisive struggle goes on. This is the central point of this treatise. Though our study includes economic, social, and political race relations, at bottom our problem is the moral dilemma of the American—the conflict between his moral valuations on various levels of consciousness and generality."

11. In "Human Migration and the Marginal Man" (note that Aldon Morris claims the "marginal man" concept was stolen from Du Bois's "double consciousness"), Park (1925:893) proposed that the "minds" of culturally or racially mixed people were the best site to "study the processes of civilization and of progress."

12. Sometimes they worked together directly: Spencer, an anthropologist, served as Australia's "Chief Protector of Aborigines" (Wolfe 1999).

13. Hughey (2015) and Sewell (2016) simplify the complexity of defining race by focusing on the point of structural reification—when race as an abstraction becomes a consequential "thing" affecting people's lives. Structural reification connects the rules of race to the social, material, and political resources structuring life changes. Building on the work of these scholars, we define race as a fundamental element of the social structure that becomes "real in its consequences" (Thomas and Thomas 1926) at the moment of structural reification.

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