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Thinking About Racial Paradigms:
Consequenses for Analyzing the Race
Relations between African-Americans
and Latinos

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**Thinking About Racial Paradigms:
Consequences for Analyzing the Relations
between African-Americans and Latinos in the U.S.**

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The United States is in the midst of rapid demographic change. Just over 70 percent of Americans are non-Hispanic white, down from well over 80 percent in 1970. If trends and the existing racial and ethnic categories hold, by the year 2050, the United States will be nearly a “majority-minority” country. While Asians boast the fastest growth rates of any group, Latinos are now virtually tied in number with African Americans and, well before 2050, the Latino population will exceed all other minority populations combined (see Figure 1).²

<insert Figure 1; all figures at end of document>

One take on this rapid change is that it will force us to go past the Black-white paradigm traditionally used to understand U.S. racial relations. The dominance of that

¹ This essay draws largely on my contributions to “Structural Racism and Community Building” with John Powell of Ohio State and Michael Omi of UC Berkeley; I also draw on “Somewhere Over the Rainbow? African Americans, Immigration, and Coalition-Building” with Enrico Marcelli of Harvard.

² While immigration from Latin America and Asia is a main factor in the long-term trends, the higher birth rates of Latinos and Asians also play a role. In general, the minority population is much younger than the white population, so that even if the United States were somehow able to stem the flow of immigrants, the demographic shift would continue into the future. For details, see Blackwell, Kwoh, and Pastor (2002).

paradigm is reflected even in the very Census materials that often guide our studies: until the early 1970s, data was not collected separately on Latinos and many of the available statistical series based on Census tabulations were broken up into white and “black or other.”³

As new groups take their place and as rates of intermarriage and cultural interrelation increase, some have suggested that we in the U.S. will go from the “color line” W.E.B. DuBois suggested was the frame for the 20th Century – the one that produced a binary mentality so strong that the population itself was bent into Census categories that fit it – to a 21st Century “color blur” more typical of Latin American racial categorizations with their various shades of blackness and indigeneity. The rise of a Latino middle class and the ascendancy of Asians as a “model minority” in the U.S. are seen as further evidence of the breakdown of the Black-white paradigm and of the erosion of rigid racial relations.

There is good reason to go beyond a simple bipolar view. Consider, for example, one of the most significant defining moments in recent racial relations in the U.S.: the Los Angeles civil unrest of April 29-May 2, 1992. Some have showed how the media’s preexisting ideological frames around race led the press to portrayed the events as a largely Black-white or perhaps Black-Korean affair; in fact, 51 percent of those arrested were Latino, the majority of the looting and property damage occurred in neighborhoods that were majority Latino, and the driving factors seems to have economic deprivation.⁴ In short, we would miss the very face of one of the most important and defining events in the emerging U.S. racial hierarchy had we seen the events simply through the older black-white prism – and we would also have prescribed inappropriate strategies needed to tackle poverty if were to be locked into a model of the Black urban underclass a la Wilson (1996) rather than the frame of working poverty that pertains to many Latinos.

Certainly, any analysis that purports to have racial justice at its center cannot start with unreflectively using a framework that has been challenged as silencing so many non-Black people of color. Yet a wholesale rejection of the Black-white paradigm is also not in

³ This is the case, for example, with many of the long-term series on unemployment and poverty. For a dissection of the meaning of race in the Census collection process, see Rodríguez (2000).

⁴ For a review of the gap between the media’s portrayal of the L.A. civil unrest as a largely Black-white affair and the underlying multiracial character of the unrest, see Smith (1994); for the demographics and impact of the unrest itself, see Pastor (1995).

order. While the traditional binary may be increasingly limited in its descriptive capacity and political salience, the risk entailed by rejection is simple: rooted as it is in the experience of slavery, Jim Crow, and other practices of racial exclusion, the Black-white paradigm tends to have the virtue of shining the spotlight on power. By contrast, the “multi-cultural” paradigm that borrows from Latin American conceptualizations sometimes exudes a worrisome fascination with “borrowings,” “crossings,” and other fluidities in current categories; as such, this paradigm, similarly to the treatment of race within, say, Brazil or Cuba, can lead to the exploration of difference and uniqueness but often fail to highlight the power of color that, in fact, exists.

Indeed, while there have been significant differences in the composition of the U.S. population, the economic, political and status differences remain sharp for Blacks and Latinos in the U.S.. Figures 2 and 3 show just how little progress has been made in relative family income levels over the post-war period. Even poverty rates for Asians, the supposed model minority, exceed those of non-Latino Whites; in fact, the higher family incomes for Asians shown in Figure 2 are partly driven by family size. And child poverty rates are dramatically higher for African-Americans and Latinos, suggesting that a new sort of color line may project its way long into the future (see Figure 4).

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In a recent piece, John Powell, Michael Omi, and I attempt to resolve the analytical challenge posed by these twin forces of increasing diversity and persistent difference in opportunity. While concurring with Blackwell, Kwok, and Pastor (2002) that the black-white paradigm is “fundamental, defining, and persistent,” we suggest that we cannot simply placing “newer” minority groups in the binary continuum defined by white privilege and Black oppression. At the same time, we reject the potential vagueness of multiculturalism and instead argue for an “orthogonal” view that sees racial and ethnic groups standing to one side in the power continuum, with their own lines of causation and contours of experience.

We thus suggest that the U.S.’s various racial and ethnic groups find themselves strung out on a new racial hierarchy that reflects both stability and fluidity. It is stable because whites are consistently at the top, and Whiteness is the norm used to measure all other groups. It is fluid because other populations shift in their relative position with whites

and with each other, and because these other populations have their own independent sources of power which derive only partly from their relations with whites. African-Americans, for example, may be relatively powerless in the society but citizenship affords a certain set of privileges, including voice in the political process, that are lacking for many immigrants. Latino immigrants may feel excluded by Black politicians, particularly in places of closely nestled population and rapid demographic transition, but they are often the preferred choice of employers, affording them a certain entrée into the labor market, albeit at low wages (see Moss and Tilly 2001).

These dynamics of Black-Latino relations are increasing important given the tendency of some immigrant groups to locate in inner cities where rents are low and the spatial proximity to employment is, despite the usual analysis, actually high. The existence of this phenomena is itself often bypassed in the traditional black-white story: since many analysts continue to calculate residential dissimilarity indices which look at the degree to which whites live apart from Blacks, they miss the increasingly likelihood that Black and Latinos, often immigrants, will occupy exactly the same geographic space in urban areas.

For example, Ethnigton, Frey, and Myers (2001) use an alternative Exposure Index to consider changes in Los Angeles County. They show that the probability that Blacks would have white neighbors in their census tract was 15% in 1970 and has stayed steady since, drifting slightly upward to 17% in 2000. By this measure, little would seem to have changed in the way of residential segregation. But Blacks saw the probability of having a Latino neighbor rise from 11% in 1970 to 41% in 2000, even as the probability of Blacks having Black neighbors fell from 72% to 34% over the same period. This was not because of Black move-in to traditionally Latino areas – the probability that Latinos would have Black neighbors rose only slightly from 6% to 9% -- but rather because of a Latino influx into traditionally Black areas.

This has given rise to what Zhou (2001: 221) terms the “shrunk territory of Blacks” and a new sort of defensive politics. This new political terrain was reflected in the recent mayoral campaign in Los Angeles in which older African Americans backed a more mainstream white candidate – the son of a County supervisor who had indeed had a pioneering record in civil right in Southern California – against a progressive Latino

candidate whose agenda was closer to that usually endorsed by the Black community.⁵ As it now well-known, the white candidate won, quickly dumped a popular Black police chief, and African Americans felt abandoned.

But we should also note, as do Waldinger and Lichter (2003: 191), that the very proximity of living points out that “there is far more black/Latino contact than black/Latino conflict.” The ongoing negotiation between ethnic groups in many communities on a day-to-day basis is not usually covered in the sociological literature; like the media, we prefer the instances of exciting flare-ups and dust-ups. Similarly uncovered are more positive examples like Inglewood in Southern California and East Palo Alto in Northern California where African Americans have been able to forge alliances with growing Latino population, albeit sometimes with growing pains along the way. There are also those who have squarely faced the difficulties of building sustained alliances within the new and more complex racial hierarchy, and have generated the basis for new progressive movements; consider, for example, the Metropolitan Alliance in Los Angeles, the Social Equity Caucus in the Bay Area, and numerous other efforts.

These positive examples should be explored and lifted up. After all, there are clear risks to ignoring Black-Latino competition: my own research has indicated that communities that are undergoing rapid demographic change and have a Black-Brown mix may be weak in social capital and more vulnerable to the siting of environmental hazards (Pastor, Sadd, and Hipp 2001). In Los Angeles County, the peak vulnerability during the 1970s for receiving a transfer, storage, and disposal facility occurred when communities were 44% African American and 48% Latino—exactly the “tipping point” when inter-ethnic communication might be most difficult.

There are, of course, many reasons besides environmental protection for “rainbow coalitions” to form and hold. But new collaborative frames – in which the interests of ethnic groups can be aligned even as specific needs are acknowledged – will only occur if we go beyond the simple notion that we should unite because we need to react to the consequences

⁵ It is important to note that a younger generation of African American activists (such as City Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas, and community leaders Anthony Thigpenn and Karen Bass), more accustomed to building power through rainbow politics, backed the Latino candidate, often to the chagrin of older African American leaders.

of “divide and conquer.” This simply moves the Black/White binary to another level, one in which the divergence between group interests is simply a function of strategies on the part of a White majority. In keeping with our view of orthogonal framing – in which groups may be strewn along and alongside an existing set of racial relations – there are, in fact, competing interests, and these need to be recognized and resolved if durable coalitions are to form. Asians and Latinos, for example, may favor bilingual education while Blacks, like whites, may worry that supporting such educational strategies could divert resources from the needs of low-income children in the public school system.⁶ Sorting out these conflicts is not a simple matter of calling for unity. We need to complicate the picture of racial relations, considering inter-ethnic dynamics and how they fit within the dominant system of power.

The Latin American perspective on these questions is of great utility to U.S. research, particularly as Latin American societies have long dealt with multiple racial categories. But in doing all this, it is imperative that we keep our eyes on the prize: the transformation of racism. We need to recognize that what Manuel Castells (1997) writes about identity in general is equally true for racial or ethnic identity in terms of race and ethnicity: it takes place within the context of power relationships.⁷ Failure to understand this will lead to a superficial unity that cannot be sustained; constructive and honest conversations could instead lead to a new approach that builds more sustainable coalitions and helps us move from a mosaic of suspicion to a tapestry of sharing.

⁶ Of course, the analysis and politics of such divergences varies by region: while there are Black-Brown conflicts in both Oakland and Miami, which group wielded power and the consequences of this, however, have varied greatly in both settings. For case studies of Black-Latino conflicts and collaboration across a wide range of U.S. cities, see Betancur and Gills (2000).

⁷ In our joint paper, Powell notes that “Castells locates identity across three types: legitimizing identity, resistance identity and project identity. The first is the identity imposed or ascribed by the dominant culture; the second is the identity of resistance in those subjected to the dominating process resist who thus claim their own meaning and space; and the third is the process whereby those subjected engage in efforts that transform the entire society and its structures and institutions.”

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Figure 1. Changing American Demographics, 1970-2050

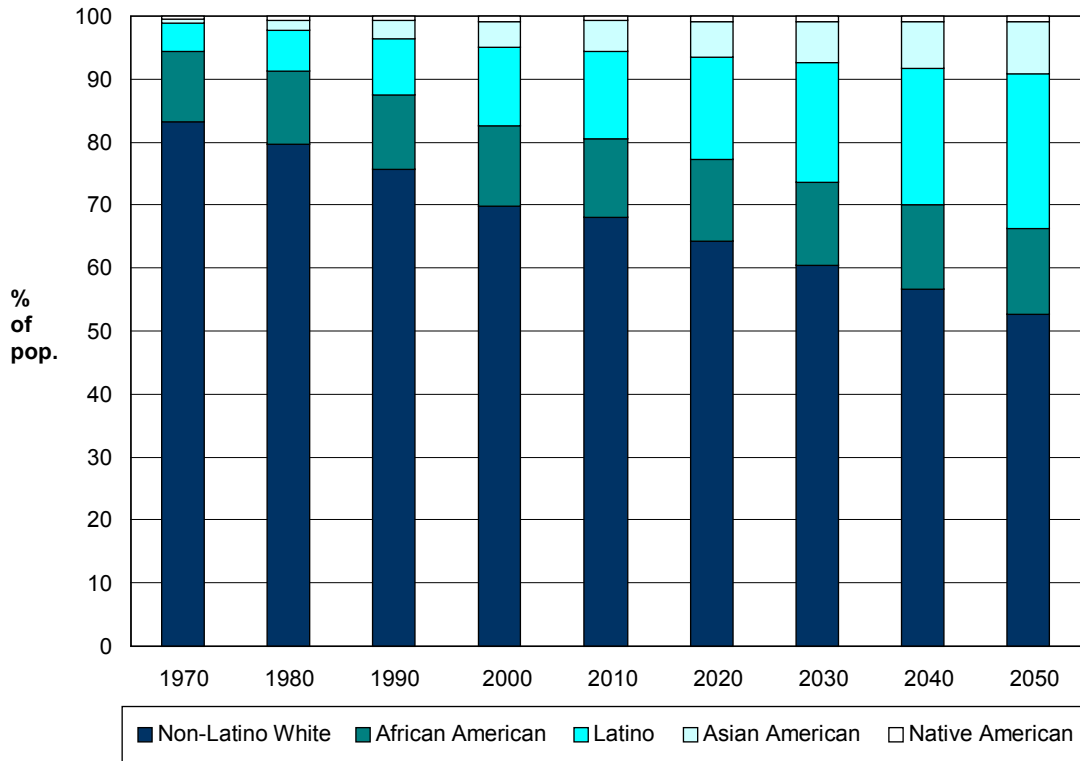


Figure 2. U.S. Median Family Real Income by Race and Hispanic Origin, 1947-2000, in 2000 dollars

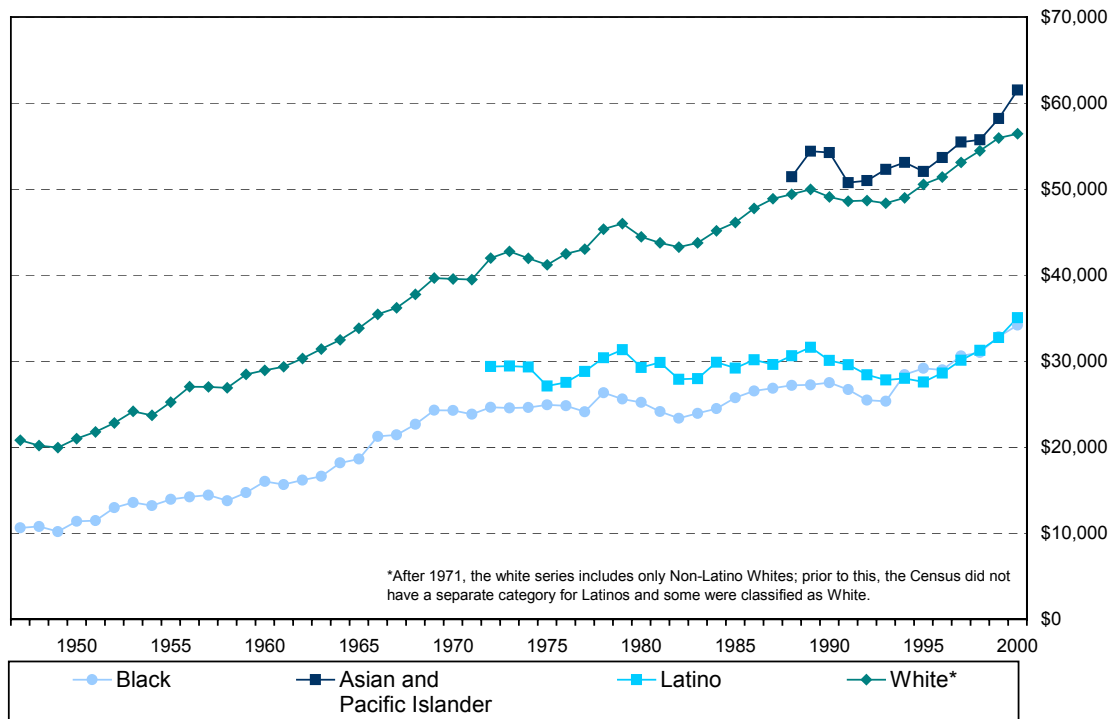


Figure 3. Percent of Individuals in the U.S. Below the Poverty Level by Race and Hispanic Origin, 1959-2000

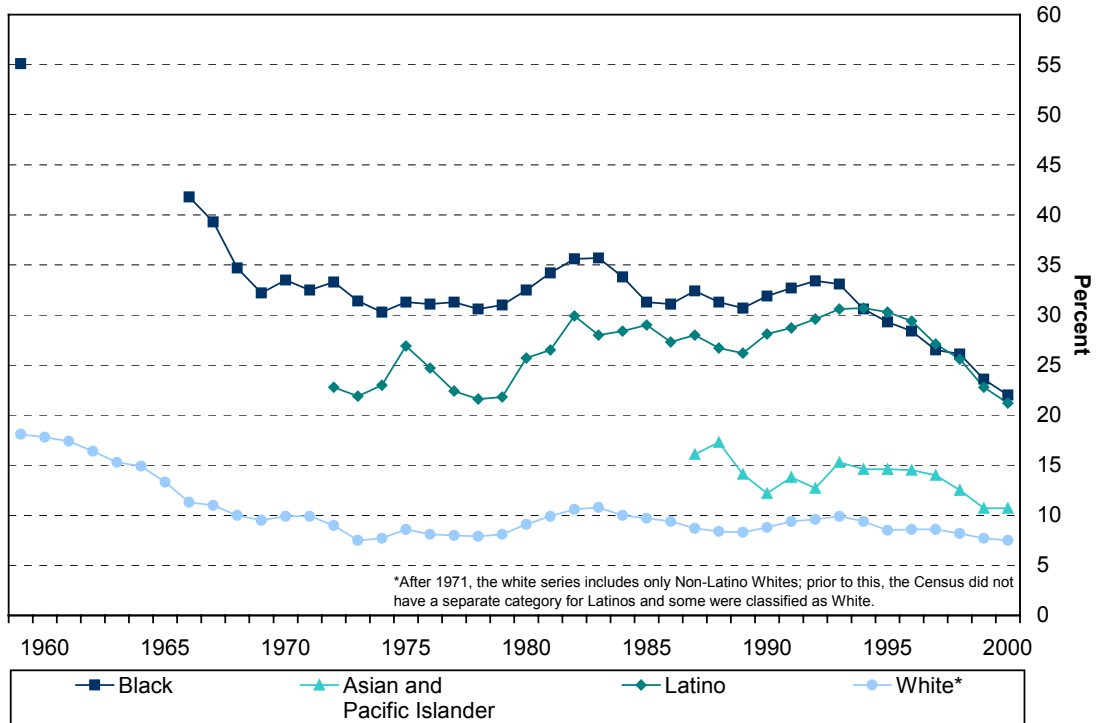


Figure 4. Child Poverty Rate by Race, average for 1997-2000

