

THE “WORK” RACE DOES

Back to the Future

Lawrence D. Bobo

*Department of Sociology and of African and African American Studies,
Harvard University*

Michael C. Dawson

Department of Political Science, University of Chicago

The year 2008 has provided many opportunities to look back and take stock of what has and has not changed along the color line. Perhaps of greatest salience is that this year marks four decades of uneven progress since the tragic assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and of Senator Robert F. Kennedy. It also marks the fortieth anniversary of the publication of what became known as the Kerner Commission report (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders 1968). The great sadness following those tragic deaths, and the somber tone set by the “two nations” declaration at the heart of the Kerner Report, call to mind an era of acute racial division, but also of steady struggle for change.

The year 2008 is, of course, a watershed in its own right as well. For the first time a major political party in the United States nominated an African American, Senator Barack Obama, to be President of the United States. Indeed, Obama delivered his nomination acceptance speech on the anniversary of King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. That night of the convention also featured remarks from Martin Luther King III and Bernice King, as well as from civil rights activist and now Congressional Representative John Lewis. Enormous change indeed.

So much so, some might say, that these audacious achievements promise the emergence of a “postracial” United States. Yet, as the long primary campaign illustrated and the early stages of the presidential campaign itself now reinforce, the question of race remains far from settled. Insidious racial messages and tensions worked a path into the campaign during the primary season, and continue to do so even as this essay goes to print. Indeed, should Obama be successful in his quest for the White House, it is clear enough that much remains to be done for racial divisions in the United States to heal. Great progress and even what might be regarded as monumental achievements do not easily undo the manifold ways that race and racism influence society.

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The myriad ways that race has been and is still conceived, constituted, used, and abused are on display in this issue of the *Du Bois Review*. Our lead article is a powerful and highly innovative examination of the microlevel processes that undergird racial residential segregation in the United States. Numerous scholars have wrestled with how to assess whether it is race or class that drives White resistance to live in certain neighborhoods (Massey and Denton, 1993; Farley et al., 1994; Bobo and Zubrinsky, 1996; Harris 2001; Charles 2006). In a representative-sample social survey, conducted in the major cities of Chicago and Detroit in 2004–2005, sociologists Maria Krysan, Reynolds Farley, and Mick Couper use video vignettes to answer this question. They do so in the most definitive fashion seen to date. Krysan and colleagues use identical video footage from real neighborhoods, viewed by respondents on a laptop in their own homes, in a systematic experimental format that differs only in whether the footage shows Blacks, Whites, or both Blacks and Whites—thus giving these scholars unusually crisp and direct evidence on the extent to which race or class cues matter. The evidence they find is clear: White aversion is primarily about race, not class.

In a wide-ranging, analytically careful, and provocative essay, Jay Pearson takes on one of the key assumptions in the study of public health, namely, that higher socioeconomic status always buys better health. Pearson points out that previous scholarship arrived at this conclusion by often ignoring or discounting data on members of racial minority groups. He thus provides a necessary specification and corrective to the literature, and highlights the pitfalls of the failure to more explicitly theorize and contextualize race and racial differences in social research (Zuberi 2001; Hunt et al., 2000; Bobo and Fox, 2003). In particular, he shows how previous research has often missed the alternative strategies of adaptation and resource deployment by members of marginalized groups and how even the more successful members of such groups may still face unique barriers. In addition to his cogent critique of extant research, Pearson develops a powerful typology for use in future analyses of the intersection of ethnoracial boundaries, socioeconomic status resources, and health outcomes.

Almost as hackneyed and trite as the observation that race is a social construction is the claim that the “work” actually done by notions such as race and ethnicity is undertheorized, understudied, and often overestimated (see Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Fields 2001). Several of the articles published in this issue directly take on aspects of this challenge. Political scientist Marek Steedman provides a trenchant assessment of how understandings of race were deployed both to make an honored space for the wage-laboring White working class and to secure a subordinated status for Blacks in the post–Civil War South. In this historically grounded analysis, it is possible to see how race is made and the work the concept does, even at the same moment that one utterly rejects biological and primordialist views of race.

The next two articles move far beyond the shores of the United States but remain intently focused on capturing the work that race does. Sociologist Rick Baldoz provides an account of how debates on the understanding of race in the United States influenced and were influenced by U.S. imperial and colonial aspirations in the Philippines. He traces both significant congressional debates on annexation of the Philippines and the reports of investigative commissions sent by the United States. The end result is clear specification of various ways that deeply racialized lenses came to shape Filipino incorporation into the U.S. sphere of influence. International relations scholar Rita Edozie takes on the toppling of the Aristide regime in Haiti in 2004. Drawing on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1529, which authorized a joint U.S.–French force to engage in a “humanitarian

intervention," she takes this case as an opportunity to put a "postcolonial critique paradigm" in dialogue with an emerging conventional international relations model that justifies "top-tier state" intervention in the otherwise sovereign affairs of "bottom-tier states." She stresses the role that postcolonial voices, or marginalized people, can and should increasingly play on the global stage.

The status and the voices of marginalized people may be elevated in many ways and in different types of spaces. The influence of African Americans in the halls of Congress is the central concern of political scientists Charles Tien and Dena Levy. For more than a decade, scholars have debated the importance of "descriptive representation" for constituents who have elected officials of their same ethnoracial background (Swain 1993; Tate 2003). Unlike much previous research, Tien and Levy focus less on legislative outcomes and more on political context and process. Specifically, they perform a content analysis of congressional debates on civil rights legislation from 1957 to 1991. They find that having Black members in Congress does change the content of the debate. But more than this, it influences how White members of Congress frame and talk about the issues as well. The educational achievements of African Americans, especially as differentiated by gender, are the concern of sociologists Rachele Brunn and Grace Kao. Using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study, they show a widening gender disparity in the completion of postsecondary education among African Americans.

The State of the Discourse section features two essays. The first of these is a special essay by Paul Anthony Dottin. He takes on the matter of reparations for slavery in the United States. In particular, he meticulously reviews and evaluates the case made against reparations by public intellectual David Horowitz. He finds Horowitz's analyses flawed and unconvincing. In a capacious review essay, sociologist Frédéric Guillaume Dufour tackles four books dealing with various aspects of state making and racism on the European continent.

Whether judged from the vantage point of forty years of movement since 1968, or from the panoramic view of the here and now, the social significance of race endures. It does so not because biology or nature makes things that way. Notions of race, as these articles and essays make clear, get defined, contested, and mobilized, and redefined, recontested, and remobilized in different contexts. Excellent work documenting the dynamics and details of these processes gives us grounds for hope, both as scholars and as engaged citizens.

Corresponding author: Professor Lawrence D. Bobo, Department of Sociology, William James Hall, 33 Kirkland Street, Cambridge, MA 02138. E-mail: bobo@wjh.harvard.edu

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