Race Relations: the Problem with the Wrong Name

written by Stephen Steinberg | March 2, 2009

> *Which deception is most dangerous? Whose recovery is more doubtful, that of him who does not see or of him who sees and still does not see? Which is more difficult, to awaken one who sleeps or to awaken one who, awake, dreams that he is awake?*
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> — Søren Kierkegaard

IN *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, Betty Friedan came up with an ingenious formulation for the malaise she detected among middle-class suburban housewives. She called it "the problem that has no name." Implicit here is a critique of sociological practice. Except for a few pieces by those rare women in American sociology—for example, Helen Hacker's 1951 article on "Women as a Minority Group"—the categorical subordination of women was not even on the radar screen of the sociological establishment. "Sexism" had not yet entered the sociological lexicon. The idea that women were consigned to uphold the patriarchal family and the suburban dream was beyond the sociological imagination. The relegation of women to traditional roles was accepted by the male professoriat as an unquestioned fact of life.

Thanks to Daniel Horowitz's biography (*Betty Friedan and the Making of* The Feminine Mystique), we now know that Friedan was no ordinary housewife who arrived at her epiphany through experience and introspection. She was a seasoned political activist who had been schooled in radical thought at Smith College in the 1940s, worked as a labor journalist for two decades, and was steeped in the feminist thought and politics of the 1950s. By the 1960s Friedan was also a suburban housewife, but she brought a conceptual and ideological lens to this experience that allowed her to see clearly what was opaque to most others. Friedan knew better, but as a skillful rhetorician, she refracted social reality through the lens of the average suburban housewife when she wrote that this was a "problem that has no name."

Race in America presents quite another situation: a problem that has been *mis*diagnosed and *mis*labelled—a problem with the *wrong* name. The term that has dominated sociological discourse on race for seven decades is "race relations." Ponder for a moment the implications of applying this designation to the subject at hand. In the 1930s, when Robert Park introduced "race relations" into the sociological lexicon, blacks were a totally downtrodden people. All but 13 percent fell below the poverty line. Three-quarters lived in the South where they were denied elementary rights of citizenship, were subjected to an all-encompassing system of racial segregation, and were threatened with violence and death for even minor deviations from a debasing system of racial etiquette. During the 1930s there were 119 lynchings. Yes, Robert Park had a point: "race relations" were a problem. Small wonder that mainstream sociology still celebrates his perspicacity!

How is it that we apply such benign language to such a malignant problem? It is rather like diagnosing a melanoma as a skin rash, and prescribing a topical salve. Putting the wrong name on a problem is worse than having no name at all. In the latter instance, one is at least open to filling the conceptual void. In the first instance, however, words lead us down a blind alley. They divert us from the facets of the problem that should command our attention, and as the analogy to melanoma suggests, they lead to remedies that are ineffectual or worse.

Sociology can hardly be accused of turning a blind eye to the problem of race. As Franklin Frazier pointed out in 1947, the first two treatises on sociology in America concerned race (actually, they were pro-slavery tracts), and sociology has since produced an enormous body of research and writing on race and racism. But is this a case of seeing and still not seeing? What is the conceptual lens that the sociologist brings to the study of race? Does it illuminate or does it obscure? And what are we to say of a field whose very name—"race relations"—is already an artful obfuscation?

What terminology would more accurately capture the essence of race in America? The right name, I submit, is "racial oppression." This in fact was the term used by Marxist writers in the 1930s, and it entered sociological parlance in the 1970s with the publication of Bob Blauner's *Racial Oppression in America*. Unlike "race relations," "racial oppression" conveys a clear sense of the nature, magnitude, and sources of the problem. Whereas the race relations model assumes that racial prejudice arises out of a natural antipathy between groups on the basis of difference, "racial oppression" locates the source of the problem within the structure of society. Whereas "race relations" elides the issue of power, reducing racism down to the level of attitudes, "racial oppression" makes clear from the outset that we are dealing here with a system of domination, one that entails major political and economic institutions, including the state itself. Whereas "race relations" implies mutuality, "racial oppression" clearly distinguishes between the oppressor and the oppressed. Whereas "race relations" rivets attention on superficial aspects of the racial dyad, "racial oppression" explores the underlying factors that engender racial division and discord. Whereas the sociologist of "race relations" is reduced to the social equivalent of a marriage counselor, exploring ways to repair these fractured relationships, the sociologist of "racial oppression" is potentially an agent of social transformation.

As Thomas Pettigrew suggested in 1964, the ultimate fallacy of the race relations model was that it placed more importance on reducing prejudice among whites than on improving conditions among blacks. Think about it: here was a praxis that ministered to the oppressor rather than the oppressed! In effect, black aspirations for deliverance from poverty and racism were put on hold while whites underwent a therapeutic transformation. What clearer evidence that sociologists, despite their best intentions, have practiced white social science?

I hope it is clear that I am raising issue not just with the term "race relations" but with the entire paradigm that the term represents. Other terms of discourse are equally problematic. In 1984 Barton Meyers, a psychologist at Brooklyn College, wrote an incisive paper entitled "Minority Group: An Ideological Formulation." Meyers argued, much as I do here, that the term "minority group," coined by Louis Wirth in 1945, presents "a distorted understanding of reality," whose effect is "to make obscure, especially to subordinate groups, the prevailing system of power and the intentions of the powerful." Needless to say, his proposal to expunge "minority group" from the sociological lexicon, and to substitute "oppressed groups," has fallen on deaf ears. Is it that we hear, but we still do not hear?

The terms "prejudice" and "discrimination" are also ideologically laden. Marxists have long argued that prejudice and discrimination are the mere epiphenomena of *systems* of racial domination. Oliver Cox wrote sardonically: "If beliefs per se could subjugate a people, the beliefs which Negroes hold about whites should be as effective as those which whites hold about Negroes." The tendency in

social science has been to reify prejudice, to treat it as a problem unto itself, and to pretend that racism could be ameliorated by disabusing whites of the distorted beliefs that they harbor about blacks. This set of assumptions has given rise to a stream of redundant studies, conducted over five decades, that chart the prevalence and distribution of prejudiced beliefs. We measure—with meticulous care—but we measure the "wrong" things, or more exactly, the epiphenomena of racism. Or we measure the right things—glaring inequalities between blacks and whites in wealth, status, and power—but we attribute them to the wrong causes: to deficits in human capital or to aberrant or dysfunctional cultures that are said to perpetuate poverty from one generation to the next.

"Discrimination" suffers from the same problem. Instead of focusing on the historical and structural processes that reproduce racial inequalities from one generation to the next, discrimination is reduced to the level of discrete acts by discrete individuals. However, far more is involved here than individual acts of discrimination, even as they constitute larger aggregates. We are dealing here with the systematic exclusion of an entire people from whole job sectors through all of American history. To describe this as "discrimination" is to trivialize the issue, to elide its institutional character, and again, to obscure its magnitude and sources. I prefer the term "occupational apartheid," which captures the *systemic* character of the problem, and provides a logic for affirmative action—which is aimed, not at atomized individuals, but at large-scale organizations, such as corporations, unions, and universities.

As I argued in *Turning Back*, the racial crisis of the 1960s provided stark proof of the failure of the race relations paradigm to explain, much less do anything about, the forces that were tearing American society apart. This opened up the canon to radical and minority voices that had long been cast to the periphery. In *Racial Oppression in America* Blauner explicitly rejected the race relations model and, picking up on the rhetoric and politics of Third World movements, he used the term "internal colonialism" to describe the encapsulation and plight of blacks and other Third World groups in America. Another key conceptual innovation was proposed in a book that was a collaboration between a political activist and a political scientist. In *Black Power* Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton drew a distinction between "individual racism" and "institutional racism." The latter, they said, did not depend on intentional acts of racial animus, but was embedded in established and respected institutions of society. Here was a truly revelatory way of looking at racism, one that avoided the reductionist tendencies within sociology, and that treated racism as a systemic problem that required systemic change. Despite these theoretical advances, the insurgent sociology of the 60s never developed a full-fledged alternative paradigm. Reflecting the racial backlash in the society at large, mainstream sociology has reverted to the language and logic of "race relations."

Like the Confederate flag, the race relations paradigm has endured the challenges of history. A recent study published in *Race and Society* examined the 34 course syllabi included in the 1997 edition of the ASA's publication on *Teaching Race and Ethnic Relations*. All but one course had prosaic titles such as "Minority Groups," "Minority Relations," "Race and Minority Relations," "Race and Ethnic Relations," and for a new but equally obfuscating twist, "Race and Ethnic Diversity." The exception was a course entitled "White Racism," which aroused fierce controversy when introduced at the University of Connecticut.

One might argue that the Chicago sociologists who pioneered the study of race were "products of their times." But why is it that sociologists are still wedded to these same obfuscating categories seven decades later, as though the Civil Rights Revolution never happened? Why is a course entitled "White Racism" seen as a provocation? Why has sociology failed to develop a discourse that illuminates, instead of obscures, the systemic character of racism?

Like Cox and Du Bois in an earlier time, the proponents of a critical sociology on race are reduced to

carping from the sidelines. It is fundamentally a question of hegemony: of which perspectives prevail; which command resources; which are central to intellectual discourse, both inside and outside the academy; which are influential when it comes to the formation of public policy. To pursue the question of hegemony, one would have to examine the web of relationships among elite universities, professional associations, government, the media, book publishers and book review editors, "dream teams," and those all-important foundations—which together constitute a power elite that has a decisive influence on discourse, intellectual production, and social policy.

Nowhere is the hegemonic status of the race relations paradigm more evident than in the recent report issued by the advisory board for President Clinton's Initiative on Race. The initiative itself illustrates the schizophrenic split between social reality and the construction of that reality that is endemic to the race relations model. Here is a President who helped to instigate and enact the repeal of welfare, removing billions of dollars of subsidies to poor minority families; who signed a crime bill that has increased the prison population to over two million people, two-thirds of them black and Latino; who promised to "mend, not end" affirmative action, and yet did little or nothing to oppose Proposition 209 in California, and presided over the quiet dismantling of affirmative action policy.

Instead of public policies to attack structural racism, Clinton provided us with the spectacle of a national conversation on race predicated on the assumption that dialogue "helps to dispel stereotypes," and is "a tool for finding common ground." However, these bland assumptions are not politically innocent, as Adolph Reed argued in his column in *The Progressive* (December 1997):

> The problem isn't racial division or a need for healing. It is racial inequality and injustice. And the remedy isn't an elaborately choreographed pageantry of essentializing yackety-yak about group experience, cultural difference, pain, and the inevitable platitudes about understanding. Rather, we need a clear commitment by the federal government to preserve, buttress, and extend civil rights *and* to use the office of the Presidency to indicate that commitment forcefully and unambiguously. As the lesson of the past three decades in the South makes clear, this is the only effective way to change racist attitudes and beliefs.

The report finally issued by the Commission represents at once the nullification of the 1968 Kerner Commission Report, and the reinstatement of the race relations model as the intellectual framework for race policy in America. Whereas the Kerner Report confronted the nation with the harsh reality that it was "moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal," the Franklin Report provides a reassuring illusion of "One America in the 21st Century." Whereas the Kerner Report presented the grisly facts about racial inequality and racial conflict, designed to galvanize the nation to action, the Franklin Report is replete with platitudes about "accomplishments, challenges, and opportunities."

The most glaring point of difference pertains to social policy. The Kerner Report concluded with 73 pages of policy recommendations that envisioned a comprehensive program of economic development and social reconstruction targeted at poverty areas and racial ghettos. Not only does the Franklin Report lack any major policy initiatives, but there is no sense of crisis that the three pillars of anti-racist public policy—affirmative action, school desegregation, and racial districting—have all been gutted, effectively bringing the Second Reconstruction to an unceremonious end.

It is true that the Franklin Report includes an endorsement of affirmative action, albeit a tepid one,

along with a litany of proposals for reforming housing, health care, education, and criminal justice. Its main emphasis, however, is on bridging the racial divide through dialogue. Nero has been subjected to the judgment of history for fiddling while Rome burned. In this case we are asked to dialogue—and the Commission's report provides us with a dazzling array of alternatives: One America Conversations, Campus Weeks of Dialogue, Statewide Days of Dialogue, meetings, forums, conferences, public service announcements, and visits to the One America Web Site. Finally, the Franklin Report concludes with a section entitled "Ten Things Every American Should Do To Promote Racial Reconciliation."

It is as though Durkheim concluded his masterpiece with "Ten Things That Everybody Should Do to Avoid Suicide." Or Weber offered ten tips for succeeding in business. Or Marx advocated a WPA-style jobs program for the lumpen proletariat. If the President's Advisory Board on Race has displayed an abysmal failure of sociological imagination, who are we to blame but the sociologist of "race relations" who has betrayed the promise of sociology's intellectual tradition by reducing social facts down to the level of individual predispositions? What can we hope of a Presidential commission or the public at large if sociologists, despite their assiduous labors, still do not see that good race relations are unattainable—indeed, inconceivable—unless there is a basic parity of condition between the black and white citizens of this nation?