

## Introduction

# Race Preferences and Race Privileges

**A**t the turn of the last century, the African American leader and scholar W. E. B. Du Bois declared that the “problem of the twentieth century” was “the problem of the color line.” Today, as a new century begins, race is still a pervasive and troubling fault line running through American life. We are not divided because we fail to “get along” as Rodney King lamented after the Los Angeles riots a decade ago. Nor is it because diehard advocates of affirmative action insist on stirring up racial discord. What divides Americans is profound disagreement over the legacy of the civil rights movement. At the core of our national debate are very different opinions about the meaning of race in contemporary America and the prospects for racial equality in the future.

The crude racial prejudice of the Jim Crow era has been discredited and replaced by a new understanding of race and racial inequality. This new understanding began with a backlash against the Great Society and took hold after the Reagan-Bush revolution in the 1980s. The current set of beliefs about race rests on three tenets held by many white Americans. First, they believe the civil rights revolution was successful, and they wholeheartedly accept the principles enshrined in civil rights laws. They assume civil rights laws ended racial inequality by striking down legal segregation and outlawing discrimination against workers and voters. They think racism has been eradicated even though racist hotheads can still be found throughout America. While potentially dangerous, racial extremists are considered a tiny minority who occupy political space only on the fringes of mainstream white America.

Second, if vestiges of racial inequality persist, they believe that is because blacks have failed to take advantage of opportunities created by the civil rights revolution. In their view, if blacks are less successful than whites, it is not because America is still a racist society. In fact, a sub-

stantial majority believe that black Americans do not try hard enough to succeed and “with the connivance of government, they take what they have not earned.”<sup>1</sup>

Finally, most white Americans think the United States is rapidly becoming a color-blind society, and they see little need or justification for affirmative action or other color-conscious policies. Inspired by the ideals so eloquently expressed in Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I have a dream” speech, they embrace his vision of a color-blind America and look forward to the day when race will not determine one’s fate, when a person is evaluated, in King’s words, by the content of one’s character rather than the color of one’s skin.

Jim Sleeper echoes these sentiments. Author of a caustic critique of white liberals and civil rights leaders, he rejects any suggestion that Du Bois’s warning is still relevant to America’s racial divide. The nation’s future lies in a color-blind society, he believes, and “it is America’s destiny to show the world how to eliminate racial differences—culturally, morally, and even physically—as factors in human striving.”<sup>2</sup> If Americans remain racially divided, he asserts, it is because we have abandoned “the great achievement of the civil rights era—the hopeful consensus that formed in the 1960s around King’s visions of a single, shared community.” Tamar Jacoby agrees. The author of a lengthy study of racial conflict in three cities, she attributes the failure to create a color-blind society to a “new” black separatism and the “condescension of well-meaning whites who think that they are advancing race relations by encouraging alienation and identity politics.”<sup>3</sup>

On the surface at least, these beliefs about race are compelling. They appeal to widely held principles like fairness and equality of opportunity, diminishing the differences between liberals and conservatives. More important, they also resonate with the experiences of many white Americans. In an era when economic inequality is growing, when many families stand still financially despite earning two and sometimes three incomes, these beliefs provide a convenient explanation for their circumstances. Historically, class inequality has exacerbated racial inequality, and the present is no different. The idea that lazy blacks get government handouts inflames white men whose real wages barely increased during the 1990s economic boom. And for whites turned away from elite colleges and professional schools that accept African Americans, these notions provide an outlet for deep resentment.<sup>4</sup>

The goal of a color-blind America is an old and cherished idea. When segregation was legal and racial classification determined where one sat

or drank or worked or lived or went to school, color-blindness meant abolishing the color-coded laws of southern apartheid. Color-blindness was the opposite of Jim Crow. It was liberals who championed the idea of color-blindness in the 1960s, while conservatives were ardent defenders of racial segregation.<sup>5</sup> Thirty-five years ago many Americans, inspired by the civil rights movement's transcendent vision of an inclusive society, passionately searched for solutions to the problem of racial inequality. While nationalists on both ends were often strident, apocalyptic, and pessimistic, the liberal architects of color-blind politics were optimistic and confident that this approach would generate greater equality between the races.

The triumph of the civil rights movement, however, exposed the limits of color-blind social policy: what good were civil rights if one was too poor to use them? As Martin Luther King Jr. told his aide Bayard Rustin after the explosion in Watts, "I worked to get these people the right to eat hamburgers, and now I've got to do something . . . to help them get the money to buy it."<sup>6</sup> And in a posthumously published essay, he wrote about what it would take to achieve a genuinely inclusive society. His vision went beyond color-blind civil rights laws.

Many whites who concede that Negroes should have equal access to public facilities and the untrammelled right to vote cannot understand that we do not intend to remain in the basement of the economic structure; they cannot understand why a porter or housemaid would dare dream of a day when his work will be more useful, more remunerative and a pathway to rising opportunity. This incomprehension is a heavy burden in our efforts to win white allies for the long struggle.<sup>7</sup>

Too many whites in America have failed to heed Martin Luther King Jr.'s warning of what it would take to achieve a genuinely inclusive society. Writing twenty-five years after *Brown v. Board of Education* was decided, Judge Robert L. Carter, who argued the case before the Supreme Court alongside Thurgood Marshall, observed, "It was not until *Brown I* was decided that blacks were able to understand that the fundamental vice was not legally enforced *racial segregation* itself; that this was a mere by-product, a symptom of the greater and more pernicious disease—white supremacy." Unlike those who believe that the dream of integration was subverted by color-conscious policies, Carter pointed out that "white supremacy is no mere regional contamination. It infects us nationwide," he wrote, "and remains in the basic virus that has debilitated blacks' efforts to secure equality in this country."<sup>8</sup>

With the clarity of hindsight, we can now see that it was naïve to

believe America could wipe out three hundred years of physical, legal, cultural, spiritual, and political oppression based on race in a mere thirty years. The belief, even the hope, that the nation would glide into color-blindness was foolish. Indeed, there are good reasons to believe the current goal of a color-blind society is at least as naïve as the optimism of the 1960s and conveniently masks color-coded privileges.

The conflict over color-conscious public policies poses a powerful challenge: the issue in the debate goes beyond the future of specific policies to the very meaning of racial equality and inclusion. Advocates of color-blind policies believe that the defenders of color-conscious remedies to achieve racial justice are separatists who practice “identity politics.” They oppose race-conscious solutions on the grounds that racial inclusion requires only that individuals be treated similarly under the law—no more, no less.

Those of us who disagree wonder whether it would be fair, even if it were possible and desirable, to now use color-blind and race-neutral criteria when people apply for jobs, adoptions, home loans or second mortgages, and college admissions. Racial equality requires social and political changes that go beyond superficially equal access or treatment.

Today, many white Americans are concerned only with whether they are, individually, guilty of something called racism. Having examined their souls and concluded they are not personally guilty of any direct act of discrimination, many whites convince themselves that they are not racists and then wash their hands of the problem posed by persistent racial inequality. This predilection to search for personal guilt has been reinforced by a Supreme Court that analogously locates the constitutional problem of racial injustice solely in an individual’s intent to discriminate.

But if Americans go no deeper than an inquiry into personal guilt, we will stumble backward into the twenty-first century, having come no closer to solving the problem of the color line. Given America’s history, why should anyone be surprised to find white privilege so woven into the unexamined institutional practices, habits of mind, and received truths that Americans can barely see it? After three decades of simply admitting Asian American, Latino American, and African American individuals into institutions that remain static in terms of culture, values, and practices, the inadequacy of that solution should be obvious.

The proponents of color-blind policies and their critics have very different understandings of race and of the causes of racial inequality. People’s views on these questions have become polarized, meaningful

exchange is rare, and the public policy debate has stalemated. For these reasons we think it is time to get beyond the debate over affirmative action or individual guilt and try to figure out why racial inequality continues to be an intractable American problem. Toward that end, we take a careful look at the emerging public understanding of race and racism in America. By thoroughly scrutinizing this evolving perspective and then comparing it to an alternative view, we want to show what is at stake in the current American debate over racial equality and inclusion.

### THE EMERGING RACIAL PARADIGM

In the past few years a number of books have appeared that elaborate and refine the new popular understanding of race and racial inequality in America. Besides Jim Sleeper's *Liberal Racism* (1997) and Tamar Jacoby's *Someone Else's House* (1998), the other books include Dinesh D'Souza's *The End of Racism* (1995), Shelby Steele's *A Dream Deferred* (1999), and, most important, Stephen and Abigail Thernstrom's *America in Black and White: One Nation Indivisible* (1997). These books are promoted as reasoned and factually informed discussions of race in America. All of the authors give this emerging understanding of race and racism the appearance of scholarly heft and intellectual legitimacy. And they represent a diverse set of political positions. Sleeper is a self-identified liberal who believes that color-conscious policies dodge the "reality of social class divisions, which are arguably more fundamental than racial divisions in perpetuating social injustice." D'Souza, Jacoby, Steele, and the Thernstroms are conservatives.<sup>9</sup> Yet all might be identified as "racial realists," as Alan Wolfe calls the proponents of this perspective.

Although each of these authors has written a very different book about race, all set out to demolish the claims of color-conscious policy advocates and anyone who suggests that racial discrimination is a persistent American problem. Sleeper chastises liberals, either those who protest police mistreatment of blacks or *New York Times* editorial writers that hold African Americans to lower standards of behavior and accomplishment than whites. Jacoby argues that most of the blame for the failure of integration lies with blacks. And the Thernstroms' book is a not-so-subtle rejoinder to both the Kerner Commission's national report on race in America, issued in the aftermath of the 1960s urban upheavals, and Andrew Hacker's *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (1992).

The Kerner Commission concluded that "our nation is moving

toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.” Hacker updated the Kerner Commission’s assessment and provided substantial data documenting the differing conditions and fates of black and white Americans. The Thernstroms wade into the debate accusing critics of the racial status quo like Hacker of polemical posturing. They claim that, by contrast, their analysis complies with standards of neutrality and is committed to factual reporting. *America in Black and White*, the Thernstroms assert, is a treatise that overcomes ideology and addresses the hard truths. Their stated aim is to move beyond dichotomies, to find more complicated options, to construct an analysis that transcends race.

Racial realists make three related claims. First, they say that America has made great progress in rectifying racial injustice in the past thirty-five years. The economic divide between whites and blacks, in their view, is exaggerated, and white Americans have been receptive to demands for racial equality. Thus, racism is a thing of the past. Sleeper accuses liberals of a “fixation on color” and says they do not want “truly to ‘get beyond racism.’” As he sees it, liberals consistently ignore evidence of racial harmony, of blacks and whites working together, or of growing intermarriage between blacks and whites. Instead, they favor a portrait of America as irredeemably racist.<sup>10</sup>

One reason race has remained so politically and socially divisive, racial realists often say, is that ill-conceived and unnecessary race-conscious policies such as affirmative action have been adopted. They believe these policies exacerbate white animosities and do more harm than good. One recent study, in fact, claims that merely mentioning affirmative action to otherwise nonprejudiced whites “increases significantly the likelihood that they will perceive blacks as irresponsible and lazy.”<sup>11</sup> Many opponents of affirmative action point out that were it not for these distorting and distracting policies whipping up racial consciousness, race would virtually disappear as a marker of social identity. Race remains divisive, in their view, because race-conscious agitators exploit it to demand race-conscious policies.<sup>12</sup>

The racial realists’ second claim is that persistent racial inequalities in income, employment, residence, and political representation cannot be explained by white racism, even though a small percentage of whites remain intransigent racists. As they see it, the problem is the lethargic, incorrigible, and often pathological behavior of people who fail to take responsibility for their own lives. In D’Souza’s view, persistent and deep black poverty is attributable to the moral and cultural failure of African Americans, not to discrimination.<sup>13</sup>

For racial realists, color-blindness means, among other things, recognizing black failure. Jacoby reports that she has a note above her desk that reads: “‘If you can’t call a black thug a thug, you’re a racist.’ It is,” she says, “an idea I stand by.”<sup>14</sup> Racial realists charge that blacks and their liberal supporters are unwilling to acknowledge the failures of black people. Sleeper calls this the sin of liberal racism. He thinks that white liberals are guilty of holding blacks to a lower standard. They set “the bar so much lower” for blacks, he writes, “that it denies them the satisfactions of equal accomplishment and opportunity.”<sup>15</sup> It is also counterproductive. Jacoby argues that the idea that racism still matters just encourages blacks to believe the fallacy that “all responsibility for change lies with whites.” Contemporary allegations of racism, the Thernstroms insist, are mainly a cover, an excuse. Blaming whites—arguing that the “white score is always zero” or that “white racism remains a constant”—simply obscures the reality of black failure, self-doubt, and lack of effort. It deflects attention from changing the values and habits of many black people to overcome the “development gap” between blacks and whites, a process Jacoby calls “acculturation.”<sup>16</sup>

The racial realists’ final assertion is that the civil rights movement’s political failures are caused by the manipulative, expedient behavior of black nationalists and the civil rights establishment. Or, as Alan Wolfe puts the matter in a review of Tamar Jacoby’s recent book on integration, “Those who claim to speak in the name of African Americans do not always serve the interests for those for whom they supposedly speak.”<sup>17</sup> The real problem today is not racists like David Duke who still prey on white fears. Instead, the genuine obstacles are misguided black militants like Al Sharpton who overdramatize white racism and white apologists who have a pathological need to feel guilty. Racial realists feel that since black civil rights leaders and militants benefit from government handouts and affirmative action, they have a vested interest in denying racial progress and fomenting racial divisions. Many black politicians, according to the Thernstroms, particularly those elected to Congress, ignore the real needs of their constituents and pursue instead “the rhetoric of racial empowerment” and separatism.<sup>18</sup>

Although racial realists do not claim that racism has ended completely, they want race to disappear. For them, color-blindness is not simply a legal standard; it is a particular kind of social order, one where racial identity is irrelevant. They believe a color-blind society can uncouple individual behavior from group identification, allowing genuine inclusion of all people. In their view, were this allowed to happen, indi-

viduals who refused to follow common moral standards would be stigmatized as individuals, not as members of a particular group.<sup>19</sup>

Ironically, like some multiculturalists, racial realists assume that the real problem facing America is not racial discrimination. Instead, it is a problem of recognition and identity, of how people see themselves. Were it not for racial preferences and black hopelessness-helplessness, the Thernstroms believe, race would virtually disappear as a political and social issue in the United States. Racial realists pay only lip service to the idea that racial discrimination matters; they do not seriously investigate how and why racism persists after the dismantling of Jim Crow laws or what causes racial inequality. They would much prefer to slay the evil dragon of racial separatism. For racial realists, upholding Martin Luther King Jr.'s noble dream to transform "the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood" requires that the words *race* (and *racism*) must disappear from our political lexicon, and, along with rights, personal responsibility (read black failure) must be acknowledged.<sup>20</sup>

Racial realists did not produce this new assemblage of beliefs about race and racial inequality; they have codified it. And their case against color-conscious public policies has found receptive audiences throughout the country, among both Republicans and Democrats, young and old. But their synthesis of this new set of beliefs was not, as they claim, produced by nonpartisan, neutral observations of race in America. Rather, it is an offshoot of the conservative turn in American politics. Like Dinesh D'Souza and most conservatives, racial realists categorically reject biological explanations for racial inequality while subscribing to the notion that any possibility for reducing racial inequality is undermined by black behavior and values. Like other conservatives, both D'Souza and the Thernstroms believe in a version of racial realism that assumes that government intervention only makes things worse. Racial progress, in this view, is best achieved by letting the free market work its magic. In this instance, conservative ideology, like racial realism, makes a case against color-conscious policies and represents a generation of conservative attacks on liberal social policy.<sup>21</sup> In an important sense, the public's new understanding of race and racism is both a cause and a consequence of the emergence of modern conservatism, which is the context for the rise of racial realism.

It is time to take a cold, hard look at the case for racial realism and the new understanding of racism that it synthesizes. In the following analysis, we assume people bear certain responsibility for the outcomes of

their lives. We do not ignore or make excuses when broadly accepted moral and legal standards are violated. Nor do we attribute every problem and failure in communities of color to persistent racism. But we cannot accept the proposition that racial inequality does not matter and that racism has all but disappeared from American life. In our judgment, the new public understanding subscribes to a false dichotomy: either we have racial prejudice or we have black failure. We think this view is deeply flawed. In this book, we present an alternative perspective, one that is sustained by empirical evidence and is more consonant with the realities of race in America as the nation enters the twenty-first century.

Throughout this book we use the term *racial realists* to refer to individuals who subscribe to the new belief system. Racial realists do not agree on every tenet of the new understanding of racial inequality, and they span, as we have indicated, the political spectrum. However, many of the writers we consider are conservatives, and they combine racial realism with political conservatism. When we analyze their views, we refer to them as conservatives rather than racial realists.

#### THE LOGIC OF COLOR-BLIND POLICIES AND FREE MARKET RACISM

The racial realists claim that segregation was defeated and white prejudice minimized after Congress passed the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act but that these gains have been derailed by the misguided policies of the civil rights establishment and liberal politicians. They believe that the United States made greater progress in removing racial prejudice and racist behavior in this period than many liberals will acknowledge. The Thernstroms cite big changes in racial attitudes among whites since the 1940s as evidence for this assertion. White prejudice, in their estimation, started to decline much earlier than most people realize. The shift began, the Thernstroms argue, in the early 1950s. And when the civil rights movement abolished Jim Crow, white racism withered away.

Equating attitudes with institutional practices, the Thernstroms boldly assert that racial inequality substantially diminished between 1940 and 1970. This progress, they contend, accompanied economic growth and individual achievements in education, not government programs. This claim radically twists the commonly held assumption that civil rights policies were responsible for the growth of the black middle class. There is no question that since the early 1940s African Americans have made enormous strides in income, occupation, and education. But the Thernstroms claim that the black middle class made its greatest strides *prior* to

affirmative action policies and government programs designed to assist African Americans. The largest income gains and the greatest reductions in poverty rates, they assert, did not come in the 1960s but in the two decades following the Great Depression. According to the Thernstroms, Lyndon Johnson's Great Society played a small role in the creation of a flourishing black middle class and the alleviation of black poverty.

This historical account enables the Thernstroms to make an inference that is vital to the new understanding of race and racism. In this reading of history, African American economic progress—narrowing the racial gaps in wages, occupation, employment, and wealth—depends almost entirely on reducing the deficit in black people's levels of education, job skills, and experience. The idea here is that individuals succeed economically when they acquire the skills and experience valued by employers. The Thernstroms, along with many of the writers and scholars on whom they depend, assume that the most important factors that determine economic achievement for blacks are growth of the economy and the opportunity for employers to rationally choose between skilled and unskilled workers in competitive labor markets, not the elimination of institutional practices that systematically privilege whites. In this view, racial differences in employment, wages, and family income will presumably disappear as blacks acquire more job-related skills and education.<sup>22</sup>

Not every racial realist accepts the Thernstroms' historical account of black people's economic progress. But many people believe that after the 1960s, labor market discrimination was substantially diminished or eliminated and that what matters now is education and job skills. White racism, in their view, has very little to do with black income and wages or persistently high poverty rates in the black community.<sup>23</sup> It clearly makes much more sense, these people think, to look at the counterproductive and antisocial choices of poor blacks—choices that lead young women to have babies out of wedlock, young men to commit crimes, and young men and women to drop out of school.

When the Thernstroms argue that labor market discrimination was relatively unimportant in the 1940s and assert that labor market discrimination is all but gone, they rely on the economic theory of discrimination. This theory assumes that in competitive economic markets, discrimination is short-lived because ruthlessly competitive entrepreneurs will take advantage of the opportunities racial exclusion provides and hire low-wage black workers instead of their high-priced white counterparts. Victims of market discrimination, therefore, will always have an option to work, because some employers will not subordinate their

chance to make a profit on cheap black labor to a desire to exclude black workers. In “a world of free access to open markets,” the legal scholar Richard Epstein writes, “systematic discrimination, even by a large majority, offers little peril to the isolated minority.”<sup>24</sup> Because the theory assumes that competition drives discriminatory employers out of the market, any differences in wages or income must be attributable to differences in education, job skills, or cultural values. In this account, when de jure segregation was demolished by 1960s civil rights legislation, blacks were free to compete on a more or less equal basis with whites. As a result, race-conscious policies that guarantee employment or education are not only unnecessary but are also harmful to the free market.

For the Thernstroms, as well as for the full range of racial realists and conservatives who subscribe to this remarkable revisionist history of racism since the 1960s, the main problem facing America was *state-sponsored* racial discrimination. The difficulty with Jim Crow laws in this view was not that they institutionalized white supremacy and racial domination. The problem with *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which upheld the power of state governments to segregate public facilities and transportation by race, is that it interfered with an unfettered market. According to Epstein, southern politicians were catering to the prejudices of white voters by imposing legally binding segregation throughout the South. But these misguided laws made it impossible for employers to hire blacks and pay equal wages to blacks and whites, and this then short-circuited competition in labor markets. In this vein, he is troubled because the Supreme Court did not strike down these laws on the grounds that they interfered with the “liberty of contract,” as it did when it struck down minimum wage and hours laws in the North. Epstein argues that even if segregated labor markets were to emerge in a free, competitive economic market, it would be the result of voluntary choices rather than coercion and therefore “must be sharply distinguished from the system of government-mandated segregation on grounds of race.”<sup>25</sup>

Voluntary, individual choice is crucial to the color-blind worldview one finds in racial realism and to the new understanding of racial inequality that it promotes. Although the civil rights movement demolished publicly sanctioned racist laws, racial realists do not believe civil rights laws were intended or designed to promote integration or to eliminate racial differences in economic status. Color-blindness in this view is a formal guarantee of equality before the law; it only means that government may not treat individuals unfairly or discriminate against them. But being blind to color does not mean that racial differences in income,

wages, or status will disappear. According to this version of color-blindness, people will rise or fall according to their own efforts and abilities. The onus of responsibility for success is squarely on the individual.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that these proponents of color-blindness strongly believe affirmative action policies in the late 1960s twisted and distorted the goals and statutory achievements of the civil rights movement. Affirmative action, in their view, refers to any race-conscious policy that mandates racial integration in schools, the creation of black or Latino majority legislative districts, or preferences in college admissions, employment, and business contracts. In each case, critics argue that the original, laudable goals of the civil rights movement were perverted by arrogant elites—black civil rights leaders, judges, and white liberals—who insisted on imposing their agenda and subverted the dream of a color-blind society.

The Thernstroms are typical of this sentiment. Their account of school desegregation is a classic attack on race-conscious policies. Desegregation was an entirely appropriate goal in their estimation, and it could have been achieved by abolishing Jim Crow laws and constructing school district boundaries that promoted racial balance. But, unfortunately, self-aggrandizing civil rights leaders and radical white liberals replaced this sensible policy with court-ordered busing, together with other forms of forced integration, and the results were predictably bad. In their view, the same scenario was played out with race-conscious employment policies, college admissions, business set-asides, and legislative redistricting. So far as the Thernstroms are concerned, all color-conscious policies, like much governmental regulation, are wasteful, make things worse, are prone to corruption, and, in this instance, stir up the reservoirs of racial resentment. If that were not serious enough, the Thernstroms add, none of these policies provide jobs for black students or raise their cognitive abilities.

This is racial realism's intellectual framework. It is reflected in and reinforced by contemporary white American public opinion about issues triggered by race. Persistent racial inequality is accepted as normal; African Americans are thought to be "the cultural architects of their own disadvantage." Lawrence Bobo calls this "laissez-faire racism."<sup>26</sup>

#### THE PERSISTENCE OF DURABLE RACIAL INEQUALITY

This snapshot of race in America is out of focus. Racial realists pose the wrong question. The real issue, so far as they are concerned, is whether

the United States has made progress in reducing racial inequality. But every serious student of contemporary racial inequality concedes there has been progress. The Thernstroms remind us repeatedly that the good news “regarding the emergence of a strong black middle class has not received the attention it deserves.”<sup>27</sup> Good tidings, they assert, are neglected because of a volatile mixture of “black anger” and “white guilt.” This is hardly true. Every gain the black middle class has made, every uptick in black employment is trumpeted from the rooftops. There is no gainsaying the progress of the black middle class, but to dwell on this amounts to celebrating economic gains while ignoring the large and persistent gaps in economic and social well-being between blacks and whites.

An abundance of evidence documents persistently large gaps between blacks and whites in family income, wages, and wealth since the economic boom of the post–World War II years and *after* the civil rights revolution. Black families have clearly gained relative to whites over the last fifty-five years, but the absolute income gap between them has widened. In 2001, the real median income of black families was 62 percent of that of whites, only 10 points higher than it was in 1947 when the ratio was 52 percent. Over the same period, however, the *absolute* real median income gap doubled, rising from \$10,386 to \$20,469.<sup>28</sup> (If one compares black family income to that of non-Hispanic whites, a more accurate measure, the ratio is 58 percent, a gap that is largely unchanged since the early 1970s.<sup>29</sup>)

Relative to non-Hispanic white men, black men made income gains between 1972 and 2001. Their real median income rose from 60 percent to 67.5 percent of white median income. The absolute gap declined slightly over the same period, falling from \$11,624 to \$10,325. (Almost all of black males’ income gains came during the economic boom of the late 1990s; at the beginning of the decade black male income relative to whites’ was lower than it was in 1972.) The picture for black women is very different. Compared to non-Hispanic white women, black women’s real median income declined from 92 percent in 1972 to a low point of 79 percent in 1988 and then rose to 94.5 percent by 2001. The absolute gap in annual income between black and white women is much smaller than the one for the men—a reflection of the wage discrimination experienced by all women.<sup>30</sup> Large disparities in income remain even when the comparison is restricted to full-time workers, despite a black unemployment rate that is much higher than the rate for whites.<sup>31</sup>

Just as important is the startling persistence of racial inequality in

other areas of American life, despite laws passed to address the disparities. Housing and health care are two matters vital to the well-being of individuals and their families, and both illustrate the limits of the civil rights revolution. The 1968 Civil Rights Act outlawed housing discrimination, yet African Americans continue to be the most residentially segregated group in the United States. They are far more likely to live in segregated neighborhoods than either Asian Americans or Latinos.<sup>32</sup> Blacks are much less likely to own a home, and when they can get a mortgage, they receive far less favorable terms than do comparable whites. For example, between 1993 and 1998, subprime lending—loans with higher interest rates and predatory foreclosure practices—grew by thirty times in Chicago’s black neighborhoods, but by only two and one-half times in white residential areas. Race, not social class, explains this difference: in 1998, subprime lenders made 53 percent of the home-equity loans in middle-income black areas but only 12 percent of the loans in middle-income white areas.<sup>33</sup>

Medicare and Medicaid succeeded in expanding access to health care to many people, a clear example of progress. Racial and income differences in the use of health care facilities, including hospital stays as well as visits to doctors’ offices, diminished substantially after these two laws were enacted. These laws made a difference; largely because of Medicaid, black infant mortality rates dropped by half between 1960 and 1980. Yet racial differences for many health indicators remained unchanged or in some cases widened. The black infant mortality rate remained twice as high as the white rate, and by 1998 it had actually widened.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, one specialist on race and health care has pointed out that in 1995 “black age-adjusted mortality rates were still 1.61 times that of whites, a disparity essentially unchanged since 1950.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, neither the civil rights revolution nor diminishing prejudice have made much difference to racial disparities in mortality, the most fundamental matter of health. Neither income nor poverty status alone can explain these racial differences.<sup>36</sup>

One reason for these disparities is that blacks and Latinos are still much less likely to have access to primary care physicians than whites. For example, in South Central Los Angeles, where the population is overwhelmingly African American and Latino, the ratio of primary care physicians to the population is 1 to 12,993. By comparison, in wealthy Bel Air, only a few miles away, the ratio is 1 to 214.<sup>37</sup> Limited access to primary care shows up in many basic health statistics. David Smith reports that “the proportion of blacks receiving adequate prenatal care,

up-to-date childhood immunizations, flu shots as seniors, and cancer screenings lags significantly behind whites, even though most of the financial barriers to such preventive services have been eliminated.”<sup>38</sup> African Americans, Latinos, and members of other minority groups account for 75 percent of active cases of tuberculosis, and the Centers for Disease Control reports that blacks are five times as likely to die of asthma as are whites.<sup>39</sup> Even when blacks have *equal* access to medical care, recent evidence indicates that significant racial disparities in treatment and care remain. For example, among Medicare beneficiaries of similar age, gender, and income, blacks are 25 percent less likely to have mammography screening for breast cancer and 57 percent less likely to have reduction of hip fracture.<sup>40</sup>

Any credible analysis of race in America at the beginning of the twenty-first century must confront and account for these durable and persistent inequalities between blacks and whites. Many proponents of racial realism as well as those Americans who subscribe to the new explanation for racial inequality fail to do this for two reasons. First, they ignore or obscure dramatic and persistent facts of racial inequality. Second, the methodological assumptions that guide their investigation of race in America lead them to ignore alternative explanations that more closely “fit” the evidence they do cite. In the following analysis, we address each of these concerns.

#### THE MINIMAL RELEVANCE OF INDIVIDUAL CHOICE TO DURABLE RACIAL INEQUALITY

Today the predominant approach to understanding racial stratification in American life assumes that “social life results chiefly or exclusively from the actions of self-motivated, interest-seeking persons.”<sup>41</sup> For those promulgating this view, it is solely the stated intentions and choices of individuals that explain discrimination. It leads writers to focus on individual whites’ beliefs about African Americans and civil rights. Throughout *America in Black and White*, for example, the Thernstroms focus on the positive upward spiral of individual whites’ attitudes as measured by public opinion data. The positive shift in expressed attitudes is then assumed, *prima facie*, to be evidence of behavior. If (white) people say they are not discriminating against blacks, the Thernstroms believe them, and infer that discrimination must be diminishing. In a like manner, persistent racial inequality is attributed to blacks’ individual choices of lifestyles and attitudes.

The Thernstroms’ assessment of residential discrimination is a prime