

The Abolition of White Democracy

Joel Olson

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Today at last we know: John Brown was right.

—W. E. B. Du Bois

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Introducing the White Democracy

Racial discrimination has no place in a democratic society. There is little disagreement with that. It embodies inequality, intolerance, exclusion, and injustice. Democracy, on the other hand, stands for equality and freedom. Democratic citizenship is inclusive of all members of a polity while racial oppression actively prohibits certain people from exercising their rights as citizens. Yet in spite of these sharp contrasts, racial matters pervade nearly every aspect of life in the United States. Race influences where we live, the schools we attend, the friends we make, the votes we cast, the opportunities we enjoy, even the television shows we watch. As contrary as discrimination and democracy seem to be, they somehow coexist in the American political order.

In his 1940 book *Dusk of Dawn*, the great political theorist W. E. B. Du Bois argues that race is the central problem facing democracy in the United States and the world. One question this problem raises is how can African Americans and people of color throughout the world become part of democracy, which has heretofore been reserved exclusively for whites. Another question is how would the "self-government" of the world's peoples of color, once achieved, change democracy. How might American democracy, for example, be transformed if it was shorn of white supremacy? Would it simply be more inclusive or would its nature be fundamentally altered?¹ Contemporary political theory has had difficulty grappling with both of these questions. Part of the reason

is because it has had a hard time figuring out what to do with race. If racial oppression is contrary to democracy, there seems to be little that an analysis of race can contribute to questions of citizenship, participation, or equality. Beyond arguments opposing racism, there does not seem to be much for political theory to do. As a result, it has devoted few resources toward answering either of Du Bois's questions, particularly the latter, even though it is especially suggestive.

Political theory has had little to say about Du Bois's questions because it has not theorized race as a political category. Reflecting American society at large, the discipline has generally treated race as something created prior to or outside the political realm. This "pre-political" conception of race tends to separate racial inequality out from democratic ideals, which makes it difficult to recognize the ways in which race and democracy are interconnected.

I argue that we need a specifically political theory of race. I mean "political" in two ways. First, an effective theory must identify race as a set of relations within a network of power that organizes people into particular groups and/or roles for the purpose of governing the polity. Second, such a theory must consider politics as participation, community, and the initiation of new possibilities, or in Mary Dietz's words, as "the collective and participatory engagement of citizens in the determination of the affairs of their community."² The disciplinary aspect of politics must be complemented by its democratic aspirations. A theory of race must take into consideration both senses of the political. It must understand race as produced within the political realm rather than prior to it and therefore as a product of democracy rather than its antithesis. This requires, however, breaking with the dominant theoretical approach toward the American racial order, which tends to bracket race from democracy.

Ideals/Practices

The bracketing of racial discrimination from democracy generally takes the form of an assumed contradiction between the ideals and practices of American democracy. In his classic *An American Dilemma*, Gunnar

Myrdal argues that Americans universally hold to the "American Creed": the belief in progress, equality, the essential dignity and perfectibility of humans, and their inalienable right to freedom, justice, and fair opportunity.³ The Creed derives from the essential message of the Declaration of Independence: "All men are created equal." The problem, Myrdal continues, is that the ideal of equality is not always lived up to. Numerous disadvantaged groups in the United States, particularly African Americans, are discriminated against daily despite the Creed. The result is a conflict between the ideals of the Creed and those local and individual values, jealousies, parochialisms, prejudices, norms, and folkways that undermine the Creed in practice. The "Negro Problem" is "an American dilemma" because the treatment of African Americans stands as a vivid contradiction between democratic ideals and discriminatory practices.

From the point of view of the American Creed the status accorded the Negro in America represents nothing more and nothing less than a century-long lag of public morals. In principle the Negro problem was settled long ago; in practice the solution is not effectuated. The Negro in America has not yet been given the elemental civil and political rights of formal democracy, including a fair opportunity to earn his living, upon which a general accord was already won when the American Creed was first taking form. And this anachronism constitutes the contemporary "problem" both to Negroes and to whites.⁴

The great moral and political project of the nation, according to Myrdal, is to make practices consistent with ideals.

Myrdal's influence pervades contemporary attempts to address the racial "dilemma," even among his critics. Rogers Smith, for example, argues that liberal and republican ideals in the United States have always been accompanied by numerous "inegalitarian ascriptive traditions" such as racism, patriarchy, and nativism.⁵ Instead of an American Creed pit against discriminatory practices, Smith proposes a "multiple traditions" approach that acknowledges that ascriptive traditions like

racism are full-blown ideologies (not just practices) that have always coexisted alongside liberal and republican traditions. "American political actors have always promoted civic ideologies that blend liberal, democratic republican, and inegalitarian ascriptive elements in various combinations designed to be politically popular."⁶ For Smith, the "massive inequalities in American life" are not a violation of the Creed so much as they represent a conflict between rival traditions, one emphasizing the fundamental equality and liberty of all, the other insisting on the special status and privileges of a particular group. Rather than distinguish good ideals from bad practices, Smith differentiates between good and bad traditions, specifically the vaunted traditions of liberalism and republicanism versus the "illiberal, undemocratic traditions of ascriptive Americanism."⁷

Despite their differences, Myrdal and Smith both believe that democratic ideals are distinct from racist practices and ideologies. Thus, both bracket race from democracy. Myrdal believes that if more whites had a full awareness of the contradiction between their belief in human equality and the fact of Black subordination, they would act to eliminate the gap between ideals and practices. "There is no doubt," he writes, "that a great majority of white people in America would be prepared to give the Negro a substantially better deal if they knew the facts."⁸ Smith's multiple traditions thesis holds that republican and liberal traditions exist alongside and often do battle with ascriptive traditions such as racism and sexism but presumes that each tradition is logically coherent and relatively independent from the others. This formulation leaves the ideals/practices dichotomy essentially intact, only with Smith it is not a conflict between racist practices and egalitarian ideals but egalitarian versus inegalitarian ideological traditions. Thus, the multiple traditions thesis does not overthrow the ideals/practices dichotomy; it just cuts it another way. Both Myrdal and Smith insulate American democratic ideals from the taint of racial oppression, for in each account discrimination contradicts democratic traditions but in no way forms a part of these traditions themselves.⁹

Slavery, the seizure of American Indian lands, Chinese exclusion

laws, Jim Crow legislation, Japanese internment, Mexican *bracero* programs. Instead of understanding these as unfortunate episodes in violation of the egalitarian ethos of the democratic tradition, what if we understand these events as perfectly compatible with American democracy? Historian Edraund Morgan argues that "The rise of liberty and equality in this country was accompanied by the rise of slavery."¹⁰ There is no contradiction between democratic ideals and practices of slavery; the former depended on the economic base of the latter. This interdependence of slavery and freedom, Morgan holds, is "the central paradox of American history."¹¹ Similarly, Derrick Bell and Preeta Bansal argue that the early American republican notion of a "common good" was defined against Black subordination. There was no contradiction between republican ideals and racial oppression; rather, they were intimately linked.¹² What if, as these arguments suggest, racial oppression and American democracy are mutually constitutive rather than antithetical?

This central question drives this book. It is a question that Myrdal's and Smith's models cannot contemplate. The ideals/practices split cannot explain how racial subordination constructs democratic ideals as well as violates them. Yet I argue this is precisely the case. It is not so much that racial discrimination is a "dilemma" for white Americans or that liberal citizenship coexists with ascriptive traditions that exclude people of color. Rather, the very structure of American citizenship is white, to the point where, for most of American history, to be a citizen was to be white and vice versa. Racial oppression makes full democracy impossible, but it has also made American democracy possible. Conversely, American democracy has made racial oppression possible, for neither slavery nor segregation nor any other form of racial domination could have survived without the tacit or explicit consent of the white majority. American democracy is a white democracy, a polity ruled in the interests of a white citizenry and characterized by simultaneous relations of equality and privilege: equality among whites, who are privileged in relation to those who are not white. The burdens of white citizenship—particularly on efforts to expand democracy—remain with us today.

This is not to say that there is no *possible* contradiction between democratic ideals and the privileged status of whites, only that there is no *necessary* contradiction. Logically, absolute equality and privilege conflict. When equality is reserved only for some, however, it can co-exist with privilege. When this occurs, any contradiction between them must be articulated, as the oppressed challenge the oppressor to "live up to its ideals." As Pierre van den Berghe argues, "Notwithstanding some soul-searching by a few genteel slave-owning intellectuals like Jefferson and Madison in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there is little evidence of an 'American Dilemma' during most of the nineteenth century and the first third of the twentieth century. The democratic, egalitarian, and libertarian ideals were reconciled with slavery and genocide by restricting the definition of humanity to whites."¹³ Slaves and free Black persons had to point out the contradiction between praising the principles of the Declaration while also holding slaves.¹⁴ Myrdal's inability to see that the contradiction between ideals and practices is not inherent but created by the victims of racial oppression left him stunned by the emergence of the civil rights movement just ten years after his book was published. He could not see that Black agency forced the American dilemma, not the American Creed itself. The contradiction between racial oppression and democracy may seem self-evident today, but it took the deeds of Nat Turner and Ella Baker to make them so.¹⁵

The ideals/practices dichotomy makes it difficult to study race as a political category because it tends to insulate democratic ideals from criticism. It renders liberty, equality, democracy, and citizenship as pure, unalloyed ideals to aspire to rather than essentially contested concepts.¹⁶ Democracy becomes an unsullied ideal to strive for, albeit always unsuccessfully, rather than a space of action, struggle, contestation, and conflict. The logic of the ideals/practices split is that exclusion and discrimination is the problem, for which equality and democracy is the solution. But democracy is not just a solution; it is a political problem itself. The question is not just democracy for whom but what kind of democracy, not just who is to be made equal but what kind of equality,

not just who is to be free but what kind of freedom. Democracy is not a refuge that exists above the fray of interminable political conflict. It is a rough-and-tumble product of such conflict.¹⁷ One of the advantages of analyzing democracy and race as mutually constitutive is that, in addition to providing a better way to understand how race functions, it renders democratic ideals political again. It takes them down from their pedestal, makes them amenable to critical analysis, and reveals how they can foster both equality and privilege, freedom and slavery. It provides new ways of imagining what democracy is and could be. One of the purposes of my critique of the white democracy, then, is to reimagine democracy and its radical potential.

Race as a Political Category

It is widely acknowledged in academia (if not in the general public) that race is a "social construction." To say that race is a product of social forces rather than a biological category, however, tells little about how these forces operate. As David Roediger notes, "[T]he insight that race is socially constructed is so sweeping that by itself it implies few specific political conclusions."¹⁸ An analysis of the relationship between race and democracy illuminates the concept of social construction by understanding race as a relatively autonomous political system in its own right, with its own norms, ideology, power relations, and logic.¹⁹ Race functions by organizing people into particular groups. One group or "race" receives preferential treatment through the social order while the other race or races are subordinated to a status below that of the members of the dominant race. The result is the political docility and economic utility of all races, as the dominant race represses the subordinate one and is itself disciplined by the imperatives of perpetuating the system of privilege. Race, then, is by definition a system of discrimination, hierarchy, and power. As van den Berghe writes, "The existence of races in a given society presupposes the presence of racism, for without racism physical characteristics are devoid of social significance."²⁰ Further, the racial order functions to preserve the privileges of the dominant race at the expense of the other race or races. The key to understanding

race as a political system, then, is through an analysis of the dominant or "white" race. Thus, a critique of whiteness, or the condition of racial privilege in a democratic polity, is crucial to understanding how race functions as a political system.

If Du Bois provides the foundation for a critique of whiteness, as I argue in the next chapter, James Baldwin provides the language and polemical framework. In his powerful essay "On Being 'White' . . . And Other Lies," he argues that white people are not white because of their skin color or European ancestry but through a moral and political choice.

Americans became white—the people who, as they claim, "settled" the country became white—because of the necessity of denying the Black presence and justifying the Black subjugation. No community can be based on such a principle—or, in other words, no community can be established on so genocidal a lie. White men—from Norway, for example, where they were Norwegians—became white: by slaughtering the cattle, poisoning the wells, torching the houses, massacring Native Americans, raping Black women.²¹

Whiteness, Baldwin argues, is not a genetic inheritance so much as it is a social relation. It is not something one is; it is something one does. As the historian Theodore Allen writes, "For when an emigrant population from 'multiracial' Europe goes to North America or South Africa and there, by constitutional fiat, incorporates itself as the 'white race,' that is no part of genetic evolution. It is rather a political act: the invention of 'the white race.'" ²² "White" or "Caucasian" is not a neutral physical description of certain persons but a political project of securing and protecting privileges in a society whose ideals would seem to forbid them. Yet because whiteness is a decision made, it is also a decision that can be undone. Undoing it does not mean simply refusing to classify people by race; it means abandoning a politics in which the standing of one section of the population is premised on the debasement of another. (This explains why I do not capitalize white throughout the book, but I

do capitalize Black. The two terms are not symmetrical. Black is a cultural identity as well as a political category, and as such merits capitalization like American Indian, Chicana, or Irish American. White, however, for reasons I detail in the next chapter and in chapter 4, is strictly a political category and thus, like "proletarian," "citizen," or "feminist," requires no capitalization.)

As Baldwin suggests, race is a form of political power. It confers full citizenship to those who can prove themselves white and guarantees their privileged status over those deemed not-white and therefore less than citizens. The privileges of whiteness, then, include and rest upon the rights and duties of citizenship. Hence, the racialization of citizenship and in particular the citizenship of the dominant race, or *white citizenship*, becomes a central problem for democratic theory. White citizenship is the enjoyment of racial standing in a democratic polity. It is a position of equality and privilege simultaneously: equal to other white citizens yet privileged over those who are not white. It is both a structural location in the racial order and a product of human agency. Individual whites may consciously defend their privileges, reject them, or deny they exist, yet the structure of the racial order makes it difficult for individual whites to "jump out" of their whiteness at any given time. The category does not explain every belief or behavior of every white person but encompasses the structures and social relations that produce white privilege and the ideas that defend it. In this way, the category is similar to the phrases "the white man" or "the Negro" that were common in the civil rights era (as in "What does the Negro want?"). The white citizen is not necessarily coextensive with persons of pale skin or predominant European ancestry. Skin color is but a "badge," as Du Bois writes, that is used to distribute people along the color line.²³ Nor is it coextensive with wealth. As I argue in chapter 1, the distinctive feature of white citizenship is that it crosses class lines.

The white citizen is one who enjoys the status and privileges of a racial polity. The political challenge is to eliminate these advantages in favor of more democratic forms of citizenship. The consequence of doing so, I maintain, would be the dissolution of white democracy.

The Democratic Problem of the White Citizen

This book attempts to bring questions of participation and race together in the context of political theory. The central challenge I confront is how to expand political participation in a society that has been historically marked by racial discrimination. The key to this challenge, I argue, lies in the white citizen, and the task of democratic politics is to abolish him.

Democracy and racial oppression are intimately connected in the United States—the freedom of some has depended on the subordination of others. This connection is sealed through citizenship. Citizenship is a political identity signifying equality in the public sphere and the shared enjoyment of rights and duties, including the all-important right to participate in governing public affairs. American citizenship, however, historically has also been a form of social status that has served to distinguish those who were or could become full members of the American republic from those who could not. In the formative years of American democracy, citizenship was in a very real sense proof that one was not and could not become a slave. Given the racial character of chattel slavery in the United States, its antithesis, citizenship, was also racialized. If the Black race was associated with slavery in the public imagination, the white race was associated with citizenship. The standing of citizens, then, was a *racialized* standing. In the antebellum era, citizenship granted an individual not just political status but a white racial status as well. The two were indissoluble. Whiteness became the political color of citizenship. The significance of racialized citizenship is not that only white persons could become citizens; it is that becoming a citizen effectively made one white.

As I stated above, white citizenship is simultaneously an identity of equality and privilege. The privileges of white citizenship, or what Roediger calls the “wages of whiteness,” are public, psychological, and material.²⁴ They include the enjoyment of all the rights accorded citizens including suffrage, the right to join political parties, access to desired jobs, the ability to compete in an unrestricted market, the capacity to sit on juries, the right to enjoy public accommodations, and the right to consider oneself the equal of any other. Whiteness, legal scholar Cheryl

Harris notes, is a “consolation prize,” particularly for poor and working-class whites.²⁵ It does not guarantee that all whites will be successful but it ensures that no white citizen will ever be thrown down to the absolute bottom of the social hierarchy. In exchange for this prize, working-class whites acquiesce to the domination of the political and economic system by powerful elites. Whiteness grants working-class whites a special status—not quite rich but not quite powerless—that becomes the focus of the white citizen’s political energy rather than challenges to elite rule. As a result, the wages of whiteness constrain “any vision of democracy from addressing the class hierarchies adverse to many who considered themselves white.”²⁶

Only with the victories of the civil rights movement was the linkage between white standing and citizenship formally broken. Nevertheless, the movement was unable to completely eradicate the anti-democratic influence of whiteness. The legacy of white standing remains at the root of advantages whites currently enjoy over African Americans and others in nearly every social indicator, from life expectancy to unemployment rates to net financial assets to incarceration rates to SAT scores. Yet the “wages of whiteness” do more than dole out a set of privileges to whites. They shape how the white citizen understands democracy. The political values and vision of the white citizen bundle racial privilege with democratic ideals. What appears as an obvious unjust advantage to those who are not white appears to the white citizen as a natural right, a normal condition, or a deserved advantage. As a result, the white citizen resists any political vision in which his or her privileges are not respected. The democratic problem of the white citizen is that the tension between the desire for equality and the desire to maintain one’s racial standing results in a narrow political imagination that constrains the way white citizens understand citizenship (as status rather than participation), freedom (as negative liberty), and equality (as opportunity rather than social equality). The white imagination exhibits little incentive to expand participation in public affairs because it construes citizenship as an identity to possess rather than a power to employ.

The political challenge, then, is to subvert the privileges of the white citizen and transform his or her democratic imagination. In practical terms, this means eradicating any disparity between whites and people of color in the realms of education, law enforcement, employment, housing, health care, and politics. Thus, my argument refutes growing arguments to replace so-called "divisive" race-based policies such as affirmative action with "universal" or "class-based" policies and insists on defending and strengthening those programs that directly undermine the wages of whiteness. The implications of my argument go beyond public policy, however. Since whiteness is a position of privilege, I argue that the subversion of this privilege amounts to no less than the *abolition* of white citizenship itself. This, of course, is not ethnic cleansing. The white citizen is not a biological or cultural group but a political category. Eliminating the powers of the category eliminates the category itself, much like the end of feudalism abolished the aristocracy and the Civil War abolished the slaveholders. Further, just as these previous forms of abolition paved the way for new, more democratic political orders (representative democracy and Radical Reconstruction, respectively), abolishing the white citizen paves the way for new possibilities in which privilege would be inimical to democracy rather than a functional part of it. In other words, movements against racial domination might not realize liberal democracy so much as suggest a world beyond it.

Historical struggles against white citizenship, then, provide crucial lessons for contemporary democratic theory. Particularly important are the Black freedom struggles. While various groups, from American Indians to the Irish to the Italians to the Jews to the Chinese to the Mexicans, have endured racial oppression in the United States, the archetype of not-whiteness historically has been Blackness. This is due to the original function of the racial order, which was the maintenance of slavery.²⁷ The system of racial subordination was designed primarily for African Americans for the purposes of exploiting their labor, first under slavery and then under segregation. This is not to say that only African Americans suffered under the domination of a racial state, only that, given their central role in economic production, their unique unfree

status in "the land of the free," and their signal contributions to resisting the racial order, the Black experience is central to understanding the relationship between race and democracy. As Lerone Bennett suggests, "America is, in large part, what it is because of what it tried to do to the slave and what the slave did to what was done to him."²⁸ African American freedom struggles have advanced democracy possibly more than any other kind of movement in the United States because they explicitly challenged the connection between whiteness and citizenship. The overthrow of slavery, the unfulfilled possibilities of Reconstruction, the triumphs of the civil rights movement: all of these efforts expanded and transformed American democracy and thereby provide a guidepost for future struggles. Such is the significance of the abolitionists' condemnation of the Constitution as a "covenant with death and an agreement with hell," the freedmen's insistence on "forty acres and a mule," and the Black Panthers' call for "Power to the people!" All of these efforts in some way imagined a world beyond liberal democracy. In their spirit, I argue for an *abolitionist-democratic* politics that makes the struggle against white privilege central not only in the fight against racial discrimination but also in the effort to expand the participation of ordinary people in those affairs that affect their daily life. Any strategy for a more democratic and participatory society, I insist, must directly confront and undermine the white citizen.

Despite its significance, contemporary political theory has generally not considered the democratic problem of the white citizen. Color-blind approaches do not account for the persistence of racial inequality since the civil rights movement, while multiculturalism and theories of recognition frame racial oppression as a cultural conflict rather than a problem of power. Theories of difference tend to consider race as one form of "difference" among others, isolating it from its historical context. All these approaches misconstrue racial domination as a problem of exclusion (for which the solution is inclusion) rather than a problem of privilege (for which the solution is abolition). Including the excluded is important, but by itself inclusion does not undermine the passive model of citizenship that white democracy promotes nor does it eliminate the

privileges of whiteness. By concentrating on whiteness rather than race in general and by connecting whiteness to participation, citizenship, and relations of power, an abolitionist-democratic politics places race in its specific historical context rather than lumping it in the general categories of difference, identity, or exclusion. It shifts the discourse of political theory from the problem of diversity to the problem of privilege, from strategies of inclusion to strategies for abolition, from a vision of the equal recognition of races to a vision of a world without whiteness, and from the goal of fulfilling liberal democracy to the possibility of transcending it.

I begin my argument in chapter 1 by using the work of Du Bois to propose a political definition of race that sets out what whiteness is and how it is fundamental to the American democratic experience. I argue that at the foundation of the American racial order is a *cross-class alliance* between the dominant class and one section of the working class. This alliance confers privileges to its members, in exchange for which they guarantee the social stability necessary for the accumulation of capital. This alliance, Du Bois argues, produces two "worlds" of race, the white and the dark worlds. It results in a peculiar kind of democracy, a *Herrenvolk* democracy, in which the white world enjoys democratic rights and political equality while the dark world is subjected to the tyranny of the white majority. I use this definition of race to reinterpret Du Bois's famous concept of "double consciousness," arguing that it is fundamentally an expression of alienation that results from racial oppression.

I apply this theory of race to American citizenship in chapter 2. After providing a brief history of the origins of white citizenship, I turn to Judith Shklar's conception of citizenship as standing and Du Bois's critique of the "public and psychological wages" of whiteness to show that the struggle for citizenship was also a struggle to join the cross-class alliance. As American workers fought to define themselves as citizens, they also fought to become white. Through an analysis of coverture and antimiscegenation law, I distinguish between the processes that created white and male citizenship and show how white women, including many

of those active in the movements for women's equality, sought and received racial standing. After discussing Tocqueville's chapter on the "Three Races" in *Democracy in America*, in which I argue that democracy and racial oppression were not contradictory in the Jacksonian era until slaves and abolitionists made them so, I return to Du Bois to show how white citizenship thwarts attempts to create a more democratic society.

There are two stages of the white democracy, which are divided by the civil rights movement. Chapter 2 addresses the problem of the white citizen in the first stage, the *Herrenvolk* democracy. Chapter 3 addresses the second, post-civil rights stage, in which whiteness becomes less a form of *standing* and more of a *norm* that sediments accrued white advantages onto the ordinary operations of society. After explaining this shift, I use this analysis to address the "participation-inclusion dilemma" in contemporary democratic theory. The dilemma is that in a racial polity, the quest for greater participation may actually serve to strengthen the tyranny of the majority race. The quest for inclusion, on the other hand, may undermine racial tyranny but does little to increase participation. Through a critique of William Connolly's *Ethos of Pluralization*, I argue that political theories based on a strategy of inclusion perpetuate normalized white privilege even as they seek to resolve the problem of difference. I then contrast Connolly's argument with Iris Marion Young's *Justice and the Politics of Difference* and Lani Guinier's *Tyranny of the Majority*. Through an interpretation of these texts I argue that an effective democratic theory must go beyond inclusion by redefining the problem from exclusion to privilege and the lack of participation. The best way to undermine the tyranny of the white majority and to expand democratic participation, I contend, is through a politics aimed at the elimination of white privilege.

Whiteness also persists in the ways in which Americans have come to understand race and the proper resolution of its disorders. In chapter 4 I address the two principal racial paradigms since the civil rights movement, color blindness and multiculturalism. I argue that while both repudiate the essential principles of *Herrenvolk* democracy, neither effectively undermines whiteness. Through a critique of Justice John

Harlan's dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson* and Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom's *America in Black and White*, I show how whiteness persists in the color-blind ideal through its narrow, formal conception of race as a politically irrelevant physical attribute. Turning to multiculturalism, I analyze Charles Taylor's work on the "politics of recognition" and its influence on scholars such as Nancy Fraser and many of those working in the area of "whiteness studies." The key flaw of the multicultural ideal is that its political objective of achieving the "equal recognition" of cultures requires that it redefine race as culture. Understanding whiteness as one culture among others rather than a category of privilege, however, obscures its power. Ultimately, the color-blind and multicultural ideals perpetuate the passive model of citizenship inherited from the *Herrenvolk* era. Neither, then, provides a means to understand race or to expand democratic participation in the era of globalization.

I conclude in chapter 5 by sketching an outline of the "abolition-democracy," a politics that would abolish the white citizen in order to expand democratic participation as well as eliminate the racial order. I suggest the possibilities of Black radical political thought as a means to reimagine democracy and to leaven the suffocating pragmatism of contemporary democratic theory. Through a brief overview of the work of the original abolitionists, I set out the essential elements of a contemporary abolitionist-democratic politics, emphasizing in particular its radical nature and its emphasis on political action. In undermining the wages of whiteness, the abolition-democracy seeks to redefine citizenship from a passive identity concerned with status to a participatory activity. A democratic politics, I conclude, must be an abolitionist politics.

Throughout the book I take a historical approach toward understanding the relationship between race and American citizenship. In so doing, I take inspiration from Judith Shklar, who writes:

I want to remind political theorists that citizenship is not a notion that can be discussed intelligibly in a static and empty social space. Whatever the ideological gratifications that the mnemonic evocation of an original

and pure citizenry may have, it is unconvincing and ultimately an uninteresting flight from politics if it disregards the history and present actualities of our institutions. . . . [P]olitical theorists who ignore the best current history and political science cannot expect to have anything very significant to contribute to our political self-understanding. They stand in acute danger of theorizing about nothing at all except their own uneasiness in a society they have made very little effort to comprehend.²⁹

Unlike Shklar, however, I take an approach also guided by historical materialism, for I am particularly interested in the way in which white citizenship relates to class relations and the accumulation of capital. I assume that the development of productive forces explains the general course of a society and that the function of the racial order is generally related to the development of such forces. As I argue in chapter 2, race is a modern concept; it did not exist prior to the conquest of the New World and the first stages of capitalist accumulation. Its present meaning and importance, therefore, cannot be separated from the development of capitalism or from the moral and political thought of modernity. Thus, I follow Stanley Greenberg when he writes, "Racial domination . . . is essentially a class phenomenon. . . . Racial domination is not an amorphous, all-encompassing relationship between groups distinguished by physical characteristics but, for the most part, a series of specific class relations that vary by place and over time and that change as a consequence of changing material conditions."³⁰

This contrasts with approaches that define race as an ideology. Matthew Pratt Guterl's *The Color of Race in America*, for example, examines the rise of a biracial order from 1900 to 1940 through an analysis of the social and political thought of figures such as Du Bois, Madison Grant, Lathrop Stoddard, and Jean Toomer. Guterl's interpretations of these figures are acute and historically sensitive, yet his book too much assumes that the racial order is shaped by what people write and say about race rather than how it is reproduced in economic and social structures.³¹ Madison Grant's obsession with the supremacy of the "Nordic" white race and his fear of the corrupting influence of the lower "Alpine" and

"Mediterranean" races, for example, says much about Grant and other WASP intellectuals' anxieties at the turn of the twentieth century regarding the consolidation of legal segregation and the resultant expansion of the white race to include Southern and Eastern European immigrants, but we should not presume that his ideas illuminate how race actually functioned then. Jim Crow never recognized differences between Nordics and Mediterraneans. Guterl is correct that there is an important ideological component to the reproduction of race, but the history of ideas on race must be placed in a historical-structural context. As Michael Dawson notes, white supremacy is best understood not as an ideology, but as "a system of power relations that structure society."³²

* Nevertheless, given materialism's unfashionable standing these days, I feel obligated to point out that a materialist approach does not require me to reduce all social relations to class or to argue that social and political relationships, including racial ones, are secondary in importance to class relations. While some materialists have taken these positions, doing so generally results in the "uninteresting flight from politics" of which Shklar rightfully warns. Capitalism is not just an economic system that produces commodities. It is also the ensemble of relationships involved in such production. As Michel Foucault writes, the accumulation of capital requires an "accumulation of men."³³ In other words, humans in capitalist societies are "accumulated," or organized and arranged, through forms of power that make them more politically docile and economically efficient. It is my contention that racialized citizenship has been central in constructing the relations of docility-utility necessary for the accumulation of capital in the United States.

While some will question my materialist approach, I suspect that others will criticize my account of white democracy for granting too much agency to whites, particularly white workers, in their complicity with capitalist domination. To these critics my argument may seem to lack an appreciation of the more subtle and impersonal means by which power is exercised. I wholeheartedly agree that power acts through social structures in diffuse and complex ways that lie outside the bounds of rational agency, yet I insist that whites have made choices that have

ensured their privileged standing throughout American history and that these choices were crucial in shaping American democracy. White workers had a voice in the Democratic Party, the unions, and the local political machines, and all too often they opted for whiteness rather than class solidarity. Dixiecrats continually obstructed any legislation that whiffed of racial equality. White bosses deliberately established two-tiered wage systems. White parents consistently opposed efforts to desegregate their children's schools. White liberals constantly castigated Black civil rights leaders for "moving too fast." I do not intend for my argument to be too voluntaristic, but white citizenship must be posed as a choice (even if it is not just a choice) in order to suggest political alternatives. Historically white citizens have made the wrong choice about their democratic alternatives, but the beautiful thing about the ability to make a decision is that one can always change one's mind.