

IMAGE ISN'T EVERYTHING: CONTEMPORARY SYSTEMIC RACISM AND ANTIRACISM IN THE AGE OF OBAMA

Stephen F. Ostertag
Tulane University

William T. Armaline
San Jose State University

ABSTRACT

In order to be properly addressed or assessed, racism must be appropriately and consistently defined. We employ critical race theory to challenge the popular notion that the election of Barack Obama and other images of diversity signify racism's decline, end, or reversal. Further, we illustrate the utility and accuracy of critical race theory and the persistence of contemporary systemic racism through a brief analysis of the U.S. criminal justice system. In the interest of theoretically grounded antiracism, we suggest why and how activists, scholars, and mobilized communities might challenge and dismantle the U.S. War on Drugs and failed project of mass incarceration as devastating manifestations of contemporary systemic racism. We conclude with specific suggestions for both ourselves and our colleagues.

REFLEXIVE STATEMENTS

Stephen F. Ostertag: *From 2003 until 2008, Stephen Ostertag was a volunteer with the Hartford Independent Media Center (HIMC) in Hartford Connecticut. HIMC is a volunteer-driven, grassroots organization that produces media on issues related to social justice in and around Hartford. He has written and participated in actions revolving around criminal justice and racism, with a focus on the state of Connecticut. Students enrolled in his criminology courses at Tulane University work closely with the Orleans Public Defender office, an organization that provides legal services to indigent clients.*

William T. Armaline: *As a faculty member in Justice Studies at San Jose State University, Will is a multidisciplinary scholar-activist who works primarily in the fields of sociology, education, and human rights. His areas of interest include*

sustainable political economic and ecological theory, critical race theory and antiracism, critical pedagogy and transformative education, critical ethnography, inequality and youth, prison abolition, and drug policy reform.

When 53 percent of the voting public chose Barack Obama over John McCain in the 2008 presidential election, many viewed it as a promising sign for “race relations” in the United States. Indeed, recent public opinion data demonstrate the widespread belief that racism—typically reduced to individual attitudes and actions in mainstream public and media discourse—is no longer a social problem, or that it is a problem in great decline with the election of Barack Obama. In what follows we present and challenge the dominant (public) conceptualization of “racism” and notions of racism’s decline under the leadership of the first African American president of the United States. We present an alternative conceptualization of racism grounded in critical race theory that might better inform public discussions of racism’s existence, decline, or potentially exploitable weaknesses. We then demonstrate the usefulness of critical race theory and the concept of “contemporary systemic racism” by applying such a theoretical lens to current state policies and practices including the “War on Drugs” and mass imprisonment. We conclude by suggesting the usefulness of critical race theory in developing antiracist strategies and offer suggestions as to how public intellectuals might better inform and participate in broader antiracist movements and mainstream public discussions of racism.

POPULAR NOTIONS OF RACISM UNDER THE FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

Critical scholars on race and racism in the United States have convincingly argued for nearly two decades that dominant ideology, policy discourse, and popular political discourse concerning the existence and prevalence of racial oppression in the United States reflects (1) a perspective that racism is reducible to interpersonal bigotry—a matter of individual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors; (2) a central belief that racism no longer exists—that we have become a “color-blind” society after the civil rights movement and the close of formal racial segregation in the United States; and (3) a belief that the racial diversity of an institution (especially among decision-makers) automatically yields race-neutral practices (see, for example, Alexander 2010; Bonilla-Silva 1996, 2003; Brewer and Heitzeg 2008; Feagin 2010; Winant 2001). For those who internalize and/or demonstrate one or all of these assertions, the election of an African American president would plausibly solidify their convictions. We might ask directly, *does this “color blind” ideology (discussed later in further detail) persist under the*

first African American president in U.S. history? Public opinion polls conducted after the election of Barack Obama seemed to suggest so.

A 2008 USA Today/Gallup Poll conducted the day after the election found that more than two-thirds of those surveyed believed the election of Barack Obama signified either the most (33 percent) or one of the most (38 percent) important advances for African Americans in the past 100 years. Further, roughly 70 percent of those polled thought that so-called “race relations” (a problematic proxy for contemporary systemic racism, discussed below) in the United States would improve as a result of the election, with 28 percent saying it would improve significantly. While these data may have represented a high-water mark—perhaps an emotional reaction to the election of the first African American president—a USA Today/Gallup Poll (2009) conducted in the following October still revealed similar patterns. Despite general economic decline and massive unemployment and foreclosure rates for people of color, 61 percent of those polled thought “race relations” would improve in the years ahead (USA Today/Gallup 2009). A December 2009 CNN/Opinion Research Corporation Poll found that 51 percent of respondents believed that, with this historic election, the United States had now *completely fulfilled* the vision identified in Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, and 72 percent of respondents believed African Americans in their communities have an equal chance of employment in a job as white applicants, given equal and appropriate qualifications.

Such popular sentiments are manifested in the contemporary “Tea Party” movement—purportedly a “populist” movement to end “big government,” promote fiscal responsibility, support conservative interpretations of second amendment rights, and so forth (TeaParty.org 2011; Tea Party Patriots 2011). In fact, a recent survey of six major “battleground” states¹ and California examined the extent to which the Tea Party movement reflected racial animus and the popular notion that we had entered a “post-racial society” in the United States (Parker 2010). Parker (2010) found that nearly half (45 percent) of white respondents approved of the Tea Party movement, indicating it is much less of a far-right “fringe group” than many previously believed. Further, Parker noted that supporters seem “predisposed to intolerance,” where among white supporters surveyed, “. . . only 35 percent believe Blacks to be hardworking, only 45 percent believe Blacks are intelligent, and only 41 percent think that Blacks are trustworthy,” with similar beliefs of Latinos/as (Parker 2010). Aligned with previous research (Feagin 2010), Parker’s findings indicate that many whites still tend to deny the existence of racism in any structurally consistent form, while they continue to hold unsubstantiated if not stereotypical and oppressive beliefs about people of color. We believe that such data reflect a

dominant belief that racism is no longer a significant force in structuring life chances.

These beliefs are held by many nonwhites as well. A January 2010 Pew Research Center survey on race concluded that “blacks’ assessment about the state of black progress in America has improved more dramatically during the past two years than at any time in the past quarter century.” The same survey also found that 52 percent of African Americans “say that [African Americans] who cannot get ahead in this country are mainly responsible for their own situation,” compared with 34 percent who say that racial discrimination is the main reason. This finding is a complete reversal from what was found in duplicate studies 15 years earlier (Pew 2010). While evidence suggests that this transition was happening before the election of Barack Obama (Pew 2010), his election plausibly exacerbated the trend. More important, the data on African Americans’ beliefs illustrate the reach and pervasiveness of such a dominant ideological stance. For further demonstration, we might turn to examples in mass media.

During *CNN*’s (November 4, 2008) presidential election coverage, host Anderson Cooper asked a panel of speakers what the election of Barack Obama meant for “race relations” in the United States. One of his guests, William Bennett, former Secretary of Education under President Reagan and Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy under President George H. W. Bush, responded with the following statement: “Well, I’ll tell you one thing. It means, as a former Secretary of Education . . . You don’t take any excuses anymore from anybody who says, ‘the deck is stacked, I can’t do anything, there’s so much in-built this and that.’” Of course, by “anybody,” Bennett is referring to people of color who would seek justice in the face of racial oppression, as people did in response to many of his sponsored policies under Reagan and Bush Sr.

While these data reflect a belief that racism is no longer a significant force in structuring life chances, we might also note a concern over “reverse racism.” Maybe to no surprise, we find this discourse coming from such conservative moral entrepreneurs as Rush Limbaugh. Considered an unofficial leader and spokesperson for the Republican Party and the American Right, Limbaugh’s comments over the nomination of Sonya Sotomayor are indicative of the view that Obama’s election has paved the way for a tide of “reverse racism.” On his nationally syndicated radio show (May 26, 2009), Limbaugh argued,

So here you have a racist [Justice Sotomayor]. You might want to soften that and you might want to say a reverse racist. And the [liberals] of course say that minorities cannot be racists because they don’t have the power to implement their racism. Well, those days are gone because reverse racists certainly do have the power to implement their power. Obama is the greatest living example of a reverse racist, and now he’s appointed one.

Collectively, these data might indicate a backlash to Obama's election, and they help explain a 2009 *Intelligence Report* by The Southern Poverty Law Center that noted a rise in number and size of white supremacist groups in the United States, particularly armed militias, since Obama took office (SPLC 2009). A second (2011) *Intelligence Report* illustrates the continued rise of such groups, exacerbated in part by their ability to exploit continuing patterns of joblessness and economic decline among the white working class. These data might also help explain such actions as those of Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY), who recently voiced his public support for a "review" of the Fourteenth Amendment, or those of such senators as Jon Kyl (R-AZ) who called for formal hearings on radical reinterpretations of the Fourteenth Amendment as it pertains to populations of color—particularly immigrants (DemocracyNow! August 1, 2010). Further, some in the Republican Party are suggesting we repeal U.S. citizenship by birthright ("Birthright Citizenship Act"). There should be reason for serious reflection in the antiracist movement when congressional leaders begin dismantling the constitutional amendment (XIV) and section (1) designed to protect people of color in the United States—particularly former slaves, immigrants of color, and Native Americans—from being deprived by the state of "life, liberty, or property without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws" (U.S. Constitution XIV[1]).

Indeed, both in conservative talk radio and mainstream news media we see discourses on Barack Obama's election to the presidency of the United States as indicating racism's reversal, decline, and/or relative insignificance as a social problem or in determining one's opportunity structure.² In contrast to popular notions of race and racism in the contemporary United States, critical race theory might suggest the relative *insignificance* of the election of Barack Obama as an indicator of racism's existence or persistence. Instead, it seems to predict the image of diversity among powerful elites as part of racism's evolution into a largely covert system that draws strength from its ability to remain elusive. How might such a theoretical lens, at this historical juncture in U.S. history, guide antiracist scholarship and action? We mean to investigate and illustrate the importance of *appropriately defining racism* before making claims about its relevance or disappearance. As we will suggest, scholars and public intellectuals—particularly humanist and public sociologists—have a great responsibility and role to play in this regard.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF (SYSTEMIC) RACISM

Antiracism in the United States is often hamstrung by a lack of public critical consciousness about what exactly racism is, how it works, and where it came from. Dominant ideology and research still typically define racism as patterned attitudes and beliefs (Bonilla-Silva 1996, 2001; Feagin 2006, 2010). Racism is commonly reduced to the phenomenon of “not liking people because of the color of their skin” that had supposedly, up until the civil rights movement, materialized in racially exclusionary laws, the common use of racial slurs, and the widespread terrorizing of people of color by white supremacists. However, this “I know it when I see it” conceptualization of racism cannot explain current social conditions: the systematic caging of people of color in the United States carceral boom since the early 1970s, the persistence of oppressive racial geographic segregation in the United States, enduring patterns of under- and unemployment for populations of color, the lasting comparative socioeconomic advantages of those constructed as white (Feagin et al., 2001; Feagin 2006, 2010), or the willful neglect of suffering African Americans and other marginalized populations following catastrophic climate events such as Hurricane Katrina. We join critical race theorists in arguing that such phenomena are largely the result of *contemporary systemic racism*: in an age relatively devoid of explicitly racial social policy, and where we see African Americans occupying some of the highest seats of power in the United States, we might turn to relevant theory to foster a more critical public consciousness of race and racism.

Critical race theorists (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Brewer and Heitzeg 2008; Feagin 2010, 2006; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Winant 2001; etc.) have come to define racism broadly as a complex system and process of oppression and privilege along the socially constructed lines of “race.” These theorists tend to share (1) a common critique of “racial and ethnic relations” in social science³—particularly in the United States—as an approach that has typically defined race uncritically⁴ and has failed to connect racial oppression and privilege to the historical development of institutionalized policies and practices; and (2) critical, power-centered approaches to race (as a concept) and racism (as a system). That is, critical race theorists see “race” as a socially constructed concept formed in the context and for the purposes of domination on the part of those constructed as “white” (primarily connoting legitimate dominance and social privilege) over those constructed as racialized others (Omi and Winant 1994; Said 1978; Smedley 1999). Racism is seen not as interpersonal bigotry or the sum of individual attitudes toward people with different phenotypical traits but as a

centuries-old, pervasive, flexible, and thus resilient social system based on the concept of race to (re)produce power and privilege for those constructed as white. This includes

. . . the complex array of antiblack practices, the unjustly gained political-economic power of whites, the continuing economic and other resource inequalities along racial lines, and the white racist ideologies and attitudes created to maintain and rationalize white privilege and power. *Systemic* here means that the core racist realities are manifested in each of society's major parts [institutions]. (Feagin 2006:6)

While systemic racism indeed has deep historical roots, it has also “shape shifted” (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001) across several identifiable eras in U.S. history: Western conquest/slavery, post-Civil War Reconstruction, legal segregation, and post-civil rights (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Wilson 1996; Feagin 2010). A fundamental characteristic of contemporary, “post-civil rights” era systemic racism is that it no longer depends on the consciously “racist” (bigoted or explicitly discriminatory) actions of individuals for its perpetuation. Few among the informed would suggest that the civil-rights movement brought the end of racism. Instead, it brought the end of explicit racial discourse and the beginning of racism's covertly structural entrenchment (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967; Feagin 1977). This should not be surprising as social institutions in the United States did not emerge in vacuums, but rather in the context of racialized ethnic cleansing (Native Americans), brutal chattel slavery (Africans and African Diaspora), and indentured servitude (Chinese, Mexican, and other racialized populations of immigrant labor) (Davis 2003; Feagin 2010; Chomsky 2010). Further, institutions are commonly retooled to endure antiracist resistance while maintaining structural advantages for those constructed as white.

Part of this “retooling” that perpetuates systemic racism may be found in policy discourse. While racism remains institutionalized, unlike previous eras, policy discourse in the “post-civil rights” era of racism does not employ or require explicitly racial language in the policies that may, nevertheless, perpetuate and (re)create racism's structural and ideological forms. To be blunt, this means that we cannot simply look for policies that say, for instance, “African Americans should be policed and imprisoned because they are African American” (as we would have seen in previous eras; see Davis [2003], Feagin [2006] and Wilson [1996]). Instead, we might look, for example, to the criminalization and incarceration of racially oppressed populations through less overtly “racist” language, ideologies, policies, and practices.

Hence, unique to systemic racism in the “post-civil rights” era is its ideological component, sometimes called “color-blind racism” or “color-blind ideology” (Bonilla-Silva 1996, 2001; Brewer and Heitzeg 2008), which is crucial

to its covertly institutionalized structural form. Color-blind ideology refers generally to the ideas or beliefs that (a) racism does not exist, or is no longer a problem; (b) inequalities along racial lines are not the result of racism, rather some other form of oppression (e.g., social class) or personal fault(s) of those racially oppressed;⁵ and (c) whites, particularly white elites and policymakers, no longer “see” race, and are “color-blind” in action and thought. Within a dominant ideological framework of color-blindness, the election of Barack Obama, absent also the explicitly racial policies that preceded the civil rights movement, would seem case-in-point for racism’s end, decline, or reversal. Herein lies the strength of systemic racism to endure challenge. Rather than operating as an overt, centrally exclusionary and coercive system, it has become hegemonic in ideological form and effect. Neubeck and Cazenave (2001:22) describe this phenomenon as “white racial hegemony,” rooted in European American’s systemic control over racialized subordinate groups. In discussing European Americans’ systemic exercise of domination over racially subordinate groups, they state that,

Today this domination is maintained not so much through coercion or force, but by exercising control over cultural beliefs and ideologies, as well as the key legitimizing institutions of society through which they are expressed [e.g., the state and mass media]. Consequently, European Americans have been able to maintain a position of advantage politically, economically, and socially when it comes to enriching their own life chances over those of people of color.

This is not to suggest that contemporary systemic racism is absent of (particularly) state coercion, but that the unique character of contemporary systemic racism, and what differentiates it from the more open and obvious manifestations of past eras is that overt coercion is no longer the primary or singular mechanism for its persistence. Instead, contemporary racism endures because it now reflects more sophisticated, hegemonic mechanisms for the uneven distribution of power and resources despite resistance.

In sum, contemporary systemic racism might be identified by its intersecting structural (institutionalized) and ideological (“color-blind”) forms, reflecting both hegemonic and coercive mechanisms for ensuring white power and privilege, as expressed structurally and as experienced in “everyday” life (Collins 2000; Essed 1991). Today, we see the prevalence of racism’s institutional entrenchment as we look at major social institutions—namely the U.S. criminal justice system—where the systematic coercion of populations of color (particularly African Americans) is staggering. We also see the dominance of color-blind ideology reflected in beliefs that Barack Obama’s election signals racism’s decline, end, or reversal—as previously discussed. Such ill-supported

ideological stances give way to ill-advised action regarding antiracism. Specifically, color-blind ideology has led to an antiracist strategy geared to diversifying society's institutions (as opposed to altering their structure or form) in some attempt to create the effects (or illusions) of a more "equal playing field." Images of diversity among the more powerful and public elites (such as CEOs, the president, U.S. Congress members, Supreme Court justices, military leaders, and so forth) are often uncritically touted as signs of success in antiracist struggles.

POPULAR ANTIRACISM STRATEGIES: IMAGES OF DIVERSITY

If an African American were elected president⁶ in the previous period of legal segregation, it would have been tremendously meaningful. This is because during that era racism operated largely through explicit racial segregation and exclusion. In the contemporary era, the belief that the election of an African American president signals racism's demise actually signifies the effectiveness and dominance of racism's color-blind ideological form. What could have been more predicable, for a racist system evolving toward the unseen shadows, than the election of a "safe" African American leader⁷ who in action would do little to threaten the power status quo, and in simple existence would seemingly prove the end of racism itself? This is not to suggest conscious conspiracy of any kind. Rather, relevant research and theory seem to suggest that antiracists should look deeply into shifts in actual policy or practice, instead of the image of diversity in powerful circles—a lesson that could have been learned during the appointment of such stunningly conservative African American figures as former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. That is, we should be concerned with shaking the very foundation of the house racism built, rather than celebrating because someone changed the drapes.

Alexander (2010) touches on the issue of image diversity with the notion of "black exceptionalism," where, even among antiracists and civil rights activists, the success of a few is used to deny the existence of racism and divert attention from structural critiques of systems, policies, and practices that sacrifice the lives and opportunity structures of the many. Antiracist strategies are then reduced, again, to diversifying fundamentally problematic institutions rather than addressing their fundamental structural problems. Such a focus is found in the near fetishization of affirmative action programs by liberal antiracists, civil rights activists/organizations, and ill-informed "reverse racism" proponents on the Right over the past 30 years. Although we agree that affirmative action policies might be one legitimate response to the historically "unjust enrichment" of whites and "unjust impoverishment" (Feagin 2010) of people of color stemming from institutional forms of racial oppression, it is also potentially problematic to

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draw affirmative action policies as the central concern for the antiracist movement. As Alexander (2010:232-33) argues, this strategy may not prove an effective structural threat to contemporary racism, and is problematic in that

. . . (a) it has helped to render a new [racial] caste system largely invisible; (b) it has helped to perpetuate the myth that anyone can make it if they try; (c) it has encouraged the embrace of a ‘trickle down theory of racial justice’; (d) it has greatly facilitated the divide-and-conquer tactics that gave rise to mass incarceration; and (e) it has inspired such polarization and media attention that the general public now (wrongly) assumes that affirmative action is the main battlefield.

Alexander agrees that affirmative action programs have certainly benefited some people of color (and women), and achieved some tangible and ideological gains for people of color as a whole—particularly those beneficiaries of educational diversity programs. However, she argues that our focus on affirmative action distracts us from potentially superior approaches as she reminds us that,

. . . as a group, African Americans are doing no better than they were when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated and riots swept inner cities across America. Nearly one-fourth of African Americans live below the poverty line today, approximately the same as in 1968. The child poverty rate is actually higher today than it was then. Unemployment rates in black communities rival those in the Third World countries. And that is *with* affirmative action. (Alexander 2010:233)

Instead, one might consider appropriate, theoretically grounded empirical measures of whether a particular antiracist strategy seems effective, worthy of time and resources.⁸ In considering the relevance of images of diversity in elite circles, one might take note of the remarkable *differences* between radical freedom fighters such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Ella Baker, or Huey Newton⁹ and the relatively conservative stances of the Obama administration and other notable African American “leaders” of late.

Clearly, one can identify very real historical and modern dangers simply to “changing the drapes” when it comes to systemic racism. Antiracists would do well to concentrate on whether the image of diversity actually reflects or results in social change. We suggest that antiracists—including public intellectuals such as those found in public and humanist sociology—help to inform a more critical public consciousness on race and racism in the United States, and participate in theoretically grounded approaches to addressing and resisting contemporary systemic racism. Specifically, we agree that such resistance can and should begin with an unapologetic critique and dismantling of the U.S. War on Drugs and the failed project of mass imprisonment.

GROUNDING ANTIRACISM: LOCATING AND RESISTING CONTEMPORARY SYSTEMIC RACISM IN THE U.S. CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

It should first be said that an exhaustive discussion of the connection between contemporary racism and the criminal justice system is beyond our scope or purposes here. We mean only to construct a comparative illustration to demonstrate how antiracists might otherwise assess and resist systemic racism and its deleterious effects as guided by relevant theory, rather than by dominant notions suggesting the relevance of a racially diversified power elite. That said, we suggest that the U.S. criminal justice system—specifically the failed and unsustainable experiment with mass imprisonment and related War on Drugs—might be the crucial terrain for antiracist struggle.

For those with any familiarity with mass imprisonment in the United States, our suggested focus on U.S. carceral practice and the U.S. War on Drugs should come as no surprise. As data below suggest, mass incarceration and other lasting forms of state sanction and surveillance—particularly through executing the drug war—have been disproportionately applied to African Americans and (depending on region) Latino/as with lasting, devastating effects on individuals and communities of color. Still, as scholars continue to point out (Davis 2003; see Alexander 2010 for an extended discussion), political representatives of the liberal “Left” and civil rights organizations, including the NAACP and Congressional Black Caucus, repeatedly omit fundamental criminal justice reform from their national agendas—choosing to pursue instead the kinds of “image diversity” noted earlier. We mean here to join scholars and, for example, prison abolitionist organizations in a unified stance against mass imprisonment and the drug war as explicit forms of oppressive social control and institutional manifestations of contemporary systemic racism. Further, this is an attempt to convince readers—particularly humanist and public sociologists—that such an agenda of active resistance and the building of sustainable alternatives is both urgent and required for the dismantling of systemic racism and the development of more effective means for producing safe communities and broader forms of equity and social justice.

Incarceration and State Supervision

The post-civil rights era has seen massive investments in carceral institutions in the United States; African Americans, particularly those born after 1965 (Western 2006), have suffered the brunt of this trend. While in the early 1970s the United States incarcerated roughly 300,000 people, the United States now incarcerates approximately 2.3 million people in federal and state prisons (two-

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thirds) and local/county jails (one-third; Bureau of Prison Statistics 2009). Most of this increase can be directly linked to the increased policing, sentencing, and surveillance of the poor and people of color (particularly African Americans) living in urban areas through the U.S. War on Drugs (Black 2009; Mauer 2006). While less than 14 percent of the entire U.S. population, African Americans account for approximately 39 percent (900,000) of the incarcerated population. For the purposes of national comparison, the incarceration rate for whites is 412 per 100,000, 742 per 100,000 for “Hispanics,” and 2,290 per 100,000 for African Americans.¹⁰ Additionally, roughly 59 percent of African American men born between 1965 and 1969 and who dropped out of high school risk being imprisoned. This is compared to only 11 percent of whites born in the same years and with the same education level (Western 2006). If current (as of 2007) incarceration rates continue, “one in three black males born today can expect to spend time in prison” (Mauer and King 2007; cf. Sabol, Minton, and Harrison 2007). Similarly, in large urban areas—the primary geographic targets of the drug war—statistics suggest that as many as 80 percent of African American males have criminal records (Alexander 2010; Street 2002). Ironically, President Obama lives and works in a city (Washington, DC) where three out of four African American males can expect to serve time in prison in their lifetimes. Indeed, we continue to ignore a “human rights nightmare on our watch” (Alexander 2010:15), where in California’s overcrowded prisons alone we incarcerate more people than are imprisoned in France, Great Britain, Germany, Japan, Singapore, and the Netherlands combined (Petersilia 2006). Further, as a nation we lock up a greater number and percentage of racial minorities than any other country on Earth—more “black” folks in number and proportion than South Africa under Apartheid (Alexander 2010).

Similarly apparent racial disparities exist when we look at parole, defined as “a period of conditional supervised release following a prison term” (Glaze 2007:1). Approximately 39 percent of the 798,202 adults on parole in 2002 were African American (Glaze 2007). While slightly less disparate, similar trends exist for probation—a conditional community supervision option that is sometimes offered as an alternative to incarceration. Further, given the fact that people of color disproportionately receive mandatory minimum sentences and are disproportionately affected by other statutes that deny the privilege of judicial discretion in sentencing, we would expect alternatives to incarceration sentencing disparities to be less severe. Yet, they still reflect disproportional outcomes by race: as of 2006, people of color represented 29 percent of the 4,237,023 national probationers, compared to whites, who represented 55 percent (Glaze 2007).

The U.S. criminal justice system disproportionately surveils and imprisons people of color, African Americans in particular. The late-twentieth-century

“carceral boom” (Wacquant 2005) and its characteristic incarceration of African Americans cannot reasonably be linked to actual patterns and rates of crime among the general population or particular populations of color. In fact, rates of incarceration and/or prison expansion cannot be reasonably and consistently linked to trends in crime (particularly drug crime) in any sense—as a reaction to spikes in crime or as the exclusive cause of drops in crime rates (Mauer 2006; Western 2006). Instead, we join any number of scholars¹¹ and international organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International in seeing such trends as structural expressions of systemic racism through the criminalization and coercive disenfranchisement of people of color. Such practices violate both civil and international (human rights) law, with devastating consequences for individuals and communities of color. Indeed, we continue to fund and support the coercive and punishment arms of the state while living under its increasing reach and gaze.

The War on Drugs

The War on Drugs pioneered by Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Bill Clinton is a more recent manifestation of the conservative political strategies rooted decades earlier in presidential nominee Barry Goldwater and President Richard Nixon (Beckett 1997). They similarly draw on racialized discourse to mobilize political and popular support against populations deemed dangerous to the state or ruling interests, such as antiwar protesters or disgruntled populations of color. Numerous policies throughout the 1980s and 1990s made federal funding available for states and municipalities to build prisons, strengthen their police forces with more officers, organize specialized narcotic branches, and purchase the latest in law enforcement technologies. The drug war helped to facilitate and employ sentencing and related statutory policies as punitive approaches to crime control and the social control of people of color. These now common practices include mandatory minimum sentencing, three-strikes laws, truth in sentencing policies (requiring convicts to serve 85 percent of their prison sentence), the trying of youth as adults in many states, and “school-zone” drug laws. Due to the nature of law enforcement, urban geography, and a focus on drug related crime, all of these practices disproportionately affect populations of color (Kajstura, Wagner, and Sakala 2009).

Among users and lower-level dealers, poverty and perpetually segregated (typically urban) housing make easy targets of people of color in the drug war. The persistence of geographic segregation makes it easy to police and coerce African American or Latino/a neighborhoods, and concentrated poverty makes street-dealing more likely in these communities. As a result, common

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surveillance practices, “buy and busts,” wiretaps, certified informants, and surprise “jump-outs”—a majority of the policing tactics employed throughout the drug war—are more likely to bust a street dealer of color in an impoverished neighborhood than a middle-class dealer operating out of a private home in white suburbia (Gray 2000; King 2008) or on a college campus.

Both these contextual variables and the bias of the general public (including police) toward viewing African Americans as the typical drug criminal all contributed to the systematic criminalization, incarceration, and stigmatization of African Americans in record numbers. African American drug arrests rose by 225 percent between 1980 and 2003, while white drug arrests rose by only 70 percent—primarily among the poor (King 2008). Although, white illicit drug users are in the statistical majority, white teenagers are more likely to use illicit substances than teenagers of color, and the fastest category of drug overdose deaths are white, middle-aged, middle-class prescription drug users, yet three-fourths of all those imprisoned for drug crimes in the United States have been African American or Latino/a (Alexander 2010; Males 2008; Mauer and King 2004; Snyder and Sickman 2006).

As a notable but not-so-curious result, the drug war is an abysmal failure on all measures. Illicit substances are of higher or equal potency and in higher supply, and the raw financial size and scope of illicit drug trades have increased steadily since the inception of the war on drugs in the early twentieth century (Gray 2000). In fact, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that the global drug trade, driven largely by consumer markets in the United States that began to grow rapidly in the 1960s, accounted for 8 percent of international trade in 2003, with a total value of about \$322 billion at the retail level (Black 2009). Whether or not one believes the drug war is a manifestation of contemporary systemic racism, one must admit that the systematic, disproportionate sanctioning of African Americans and Latinos/as has produced virtually nothing in terms of measurable success. However, manifest failure has not stopped the disparate incarceration and surveillance of people of color under the guise of a drug war.

Nor has it stopped the Obama administration from continuing the failed drug war virtually unaltered outside of language. Though the appointed drug czar (former Seattle Police Chief Gil Kerlikowske) publicly agrees with President Obama’s pledges to treat drug addiction as a public health (not criminal) problem (DPA 2009), he publicly criticizes attempts to argue for the decriminalization or legalization of illicit substances “including Marijuana” (Ellis 2010), and as of yet has failed to end any significant punitive or coercive practice of drug war enforcement. Though Attorney General Eric Holder sent a memo to the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) office in California ordering a halt to pursuing medical marijuana patients and dispensaries who followed state law (Johnson

2009), this order was promptly and repeatedly ignored by the DEA and other law enforcement agencies in California (ASA 2010), and Holder indicated that any attempt to legalize *Cannabis* in California or elsewhere would be met with federal law enforcement (Wohlsen 2010). This is relatively unsurprising, given that Michelle Leonhart was appointed as the new head of the DEA in direct opposition to the pleas of drug policy reform organizations, and seems to have every interest in pursuing the more coercive elements of the drug war—particularly concerning medical and/or decriminalized *Cannabis* (Armentano 2010).

The Obama administration also continues the drug war as a point of foreign policy. In direct contradiction with nearly the entire Western hemisphere, the Obama administration has chosen to pursue a military and law enforcement strategy toward shutting down the now exceedingly violent cartels. According to the Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy (2010), the problems of illicit drug sales, related organized crime and violence, and drug addiction must be addressed with legalization and regulation. To no surprise, the militaristic approach continued by the Obama administration has so far proven a very expensive and bloody failure. A great deal of investigative journalism and scholarship indicates that (1) many cartels work from violent terrorist strategies once learned from U.S. security agencies (Zetas, for example); (2) much of the monetary support for “Mexico’s drug war” falls prey to the deep corruption that plagues law enforcement on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border; (3) the U.S. population serves as the cartels’ primary drug sales market (we supply the money); and (4) since the expiration of the assault weapons ban during the G. W. Bush administration, a significant amount of the assault weapons used by the cartels flow from U.S. states with lax gun laws (see for example, MSNBC 2010; Cray 2009; Bowdon and Molloy 2010). In sum, we simply mean to point out that the drug war seems to continue relatively unaltered under the Obama administration—despite its failure and devastating effects on the poor and people of color.

Many of these devastating effects can be found in large U.S. cities. In a longitudinal analysis of 43 of the nation’s largest cities, researcher Ryan King (2008) found that in 36 of these cities, drug arrest rates for African Americans increased at a much faster pace than white drug arrest rates between 1980 and 2003. Moreover, in 11 cities, the arrest rate for African Americans increased more than 500 percent. Despite all the talk of “big busts” and crackdowns on high-level suppliers and financiers in the drug war, a majority of arrests and convictions go to those at the bottom of this trade: users and small-time distributors who are quickly replaced (Gray 2000; Mauer 2006). According to the U.S. Department of Justice, nonviolent, low-level drug offenders comprise over 21 percent of the 2.3 million people currently incarcerated, and account for

approximately 45 percent of the increase in state prisoners from 1980 to 2001 (Western 2006). More broadly, “at the federal level, prisoners incarcerated on a drug charge comprise half of the prison population, while the number of drug offenders in state prisons has increased thirteen-fold since 1980” (The Sentencing Project, 2009). In practice, we see that the war on drugs is manifestly an effort to incapacitate low-level dealers and users frequently living in urban areas. Because of segregated urban housing, neglect, and poverty, this directs law enforcement predominantly toward people of color.¹²

Such statutory policies and their subsequent enforcement grow out of a long history of sentencing disparities and the general employment of the state to exert social control over populations of color (Davis 2003; Mauer 2004; Western 2006). In short, the war on drugs has provided a proxy for the otherwise explicit criminal disenfranchisement of populations of color. It allows the state to fill its social control function in color-blind fashion, where the control and coercion of people of color continues as an institutionalized practice in the drug war—not hunting black and Latino/a folks, but stamping out the crack epidemic, aggressively pursuing the schoolyard predator who preys on our children, or the thug who will rob innocent citizens at gun point to pay for his drug addiction are all notable (and in many ways recycled) narratives. The contemporary drug war as waged by the U.S. criminal justice system, and which continues relatively unchanged under the Obama administration, clearly reflects the definition of contemporary systemic racism as defined by critical race theorists: institutionalized policies and practices that maintain and perpetuate the domination by those constructed as white over racialized others without the need for leadership by “racist” agents, as expressed through a color-blind discourse that presents the racial status quo as the natural way of things (white racial hegemony), or as the result of unrelated variables (cultural susceptibility or predispositions to “crime,” for example).

However, it would be a mistake to move forward in this analysis without considering the effects of the drug war beyond filling prisons. To grasp better the extent to which the U.S. War on Drugs affects targeted populations of color, one must consider state sanction and surveillance beyond incarceration and the extensive “collateral damage” that reverberates from current drug law and sentencing policies. Examples are numerous, but include lasting civil penalties and restrictions that serve as serious hurdles for those who wish to recover from a felony conviction “on the outs.”

Felon Disenfranchisement

Felon disenfranchisement has become a recent focal point among criminologists (Manza and Uggen 2006; Uggen and Manza 2002), as it refers to the enduring

civil penalties attached to felony convictions. Such “collateral damages” are many and include losing one’s right to vote, one’s right to educational financial aid, and one’s eligibility to gain employment in any number of public (and often private) sectors. For example, 48 states and the District of Columbia deny incarcerated felons their right to vote, 35 states extend this denial to those on parole, and two (Kentucky and Washington)¹³ deny felons the right to vote for life. These penalties have real consequences as studies show that felon disenfranchisement has had significant impacts on close electoral contests such as the presidential election of Bush versus Gore in 2000 (Uggen and Manza 2002). Currently, estimates suggest that 5.3 million Americans are denied the right to vote, including approximately 13 percent of all African American males (The Sentencing Project 2008). The permanent removal of voting rights and other forms of federal assistance disproportionately limits the opportunity structure and “legitimate” political voices of people of color, making it increasingly difficult for those most heavily affected by, say, sentencing policies or law enforcement practices, to enact change through legitimate democratic avenues. Further, this phenomenon automatically gives more relative voice to those constructed as white and least likely to suffer from such collateral damages.

Felon disenfranchisement does not stop with challenging one’s civil right to political participation. In fact, especially for drug-related felony offenses, ex-convicts are denied access to public housing and other forms of state and federal assistance, employment in most public sector jobs and in much of the private sector that screens for ex-convicts at point of application, and all forms of federal financial aid for educational opportunities. These civil penalties are cause for serious concern where, in terms of education, we already know that the denial of educational attainment and opportunity for African Americans is a major determining factor in their rates of incarceration and general social vulnerability to the effects of poverty and (police) state aggression (see Western 2006 for an extended discussion). Further, at least in terms of employment, African American men with felony convictions are the least likely to receive job offers when they apply for them (Holzer and LaLonde 2000). As vicious irony, in many state parole programs the failure for ex-convicts to find consistent work constitutes a violation of parole, often causing a return to prison (Rhine, Smith, and Jackson 1991).

Because of the lasting forms of sanction (typically civil penalties) and surveillance that accompany felony charges, and the extent to which people of color in the United States have been systematically targeted for policing and incarceration, particularly in the case of drug felonies, many researchers describe U.S. criminal justice practices as exclusive forms of racial social control. In fact, Alexander (2010) goes so far as to suggest that in the discourse of color-

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blindness, it is acceptable to hate felons, but not African Americans—though African Americans are conveniently criminalized as felons and otherwise “dangerous” to the social order. As a result, criminalized populations of color are warehoused in cages and permanently sanctioned and stigmatized, not by their race per se, but by their being felons. Racism is thereby perpetuated, dressed up as color-blind “get tough on crime” policy. The physical removal and disenfranchisement of so many adults of color for such long periods of time carries consequences for entire communities as well as individuals and their families.

Coercive Mobility

Recent scholarship on incarceration argues that high rates of incarceration that is concentrated in poor, largely African American communities destabilizes social networks, undermines informal social control, and ultimately leads to more “crime” and further punitive responses from state and city governments (Clear 2009). This is due to what Todd Clear (2009) refers to as “coercive mobility,” or the constant coerced (or forced) removal and reentry of young men (and increasingly, young women) in and out of communities that, due to their already existing marginalization and isolation, struggle to absorb and adapt to the constant ebb and flow of residents and the resources they provide. The repeated removal of young adults from urban communities of color where prison is quickly becoming a “normative” experience (Clear 2009; Davis 2003) effectively destabilizes both families and local economies. It does this by removing adults who would otherwise care for youth; work and hire other workers; invest wealth in the local tax base and consumer economy; provide necessary finances (whether gained legally or not) for food, rents, and utilities; and contribute to the community’s general well-being. As these resources are removed, social networks and the support they offer break down, the informal controls necessary to enforce norms disintegrate, and communities become even more disorganized and isolated (Black 2009; Clear 2009). In yet another ironic twist, aggressive law enforcement focused on a number of personal, property, and drug crimes may indeed further erode community organization and exacerbate the conditions that foster such unwanted behavior in the first place.

An Expensive Failure

The drug war and resultant “carceral boom” have been costly diversions. In 1987, for every dollar spent on higher education, states spent on average 32 cents on corrections. In 2007, for every dollar states spent on higher education, they spent 60 cents on corrections (Pew 2008). Now, in states like California,

expenditures on prisons exceed expenditures on higher education, as pointed out by organizations such as the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights (Oakland, CA). In sum, since 1987, the amount of money states spent on corrections rose 127 percent, while the amount spent on higher education rose by only 21 percent (Pew 2008). In the current context of prolonged economic recession, where states have slashed budgets for education and social services, the choice to fund prisons and jails over schools should be seen as a decision with serious implications, particularly for people of color. African American males' exclusion from equal education and access to legitimate educational credentials plays a significant role in their relatively high rate of incarceration (Western 2006). Where there is a historical trend of African Americans suffering higher unemployment and economic duress during times of economic recession (Wilson 1996), and where we see this trend continued today in unemployment and poverty rates by race, decisions to redirect public funds from education and social services to prisons only seem to exacerbate the disparate representation of African Americans and other people of color in the criminal justice system. Further, the mass incarceration of people of color in the U.S. criminal justice system clearly operates to disenfranchise and destabilize communities of color with lasting effects.

CONCLUSION: STEPS FORWARD

We have primarily attempted to suggest and demonstrate the usefulness of critical race theory in guiding how antiracists might view "what is to be done" about racism in the "age of Obama." Given unique current events, we must begin by addressing a dominant belief—that the election of Barack Obama signifies a major decline, end, or even reversal of racism. To get us beyond this mystification, critical race theory directs our view to the structural entrenchment of systemic contemporary racism, as manifested most notably in the criminal justice system. In terms of scholarship, we have attempted to show both the utility and accuracy of critical race theory as a relevant theoretical lens. Broadly speaking, we have also attempted to demonstrate the necessity of thoroughly defining the social problem one wishes to address before offering forms of strategy or assessment—an important point for scholars and activists alike.

Just as critical race theory might guide our assessment of contemporary systemic racism, it offers guidance for antiracist action and discourse. We join many others in being encouraged by the massive mobilization behind the Obama brand of American political "leadership" throughout and following the 2008 elections. If nothing else, it likely demonstrates a genuine desire and capacity for fundamental social change amid a significant portion of the U.S. rank-in-file. However, this massive mobilization was directed toward the election of a

politician, who then, as the story goes, somehow has the obligation and capability of following through on the platform he purports to embody. As we have shown here, this follow-through has yet to be demonstrated (the same goes for challenges to capitalism, patriarchy, or military imperialism under the Obama administration) and seems naïve from our historical perspective. To use images of diversity as significant measures of and goals for antiracist action is to destine antiracism to failure. Given all of this, how might energies and resources be otherwise employed, particularly for antiracists?

As far as antiracism is concerned, we suggest that such efforts begin with developing unapologetic, theoretically and empirically grounded agendas for the delegitimation and dismantling of racism's institutional (structural) manifestations. We would begin with the criminal justice system, given the crucial role played by the state historically as the primary tool of formal social control in the maintenance of systemic racism (Davis 2003; Wilson 1996). We join and applaud the efforts, for example, of organizations such as Critical Resistance, The Ella Baker Center for Human Rights (Oakland, CA), the Louisiana Justice Institute, and the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana (New Orleans, LA) in the design and implementation of campaigns for prison abolition, and the diversion of funds away from the coercive arm(s) of the state into prevention and social enrichment (public education, health care, antipoverty measures, childcare, drug rehabilitation, food programs, and so forth).

We also suggest that antiracists take very seriously the task of ending the Herculean failure known as the U.S. War on Drugs. Our reasons are two fold: (1) as we and others have demonstrated, the War on Drugs has for some time been the primary mechanism through which populations of color have been made subject to state coercion and surveillance since the civil rights movement; and (2) there are significant signs of hope for such a movement against the drug war.

As recent studies have shown (King and Mauer 2005), the criminalization of *Cannabis* is a crucial tool in perpetuating the racially slanted U.S. War on Drugs. As notable illustrations, (a) marijuana arrests now constitute approximately half of all drug-related arrests (1.5 million annually as of 2005) and simple marijuana possession accounted for 82 percent of the increase (450,000+) in these arrests between 1990-2002, (b) an estimated \$4 billion is spent annually in prosecuting marijuana offenses, and (c) though African Americans represent only 14 percent of marijuana users in the United States, they represent 30 percent of all marijuana-related arrests (King and Mauer 2005). In short, the drug war has been largely dependent on and employed around criminalized *Cannabis*.

In the past decade we have seen great strides in the medical marijuana and *Cannabis* legalization movements. Several states have passed decriminalization and medical marijuana legislation, and there is significant support (and standing legislation) for full legalization and taxation of *Cannabis* in states such as

California, Rhode Island, Michigan, and Nevada. Further, the historically conservative American Medical Association recently reversed its stance on *Cannabis*, suggesting that *Cannabis* sale and use should not be a criminal matter and that open medical research on *Cannabis* should be pursued for the treatment of various chronic diseases.

At the same time that the medical marijuana and “tax and regulate *Cannabis*” movements seem to point to a weakness in the drug war’s armor, they also serve as reminders of the need to be vigilant in applying appropriate theory to review and critique proposed solutions and alternative approaches. California’s Proposition 19, which was voted down by the public in November (2010), would have functionally legalized *Cannabis* in the state—drawing up guidelines for its taxation and regulation. Though it would seem obvious for those against the drug war to support passing such a measure, Proposition 19 was far from perfect from an antiracist perspective. Under the bill as it was written, penalties for *Cannabis* possession and sale were likely to *increase* for those under the proposed legal age of 21. Under these conditions, youth and adults under 21 might have been increasingly criminalized and sanctioned. This should be a point of concern for antiracists, where teens and young adults of color are among the most policed for marijuana offenses (King and Mauer 2005; CJCJ 2010).

Similar scrutiny is necessary in light of recent changes in federal sentencing policies related to the infamous 1-to-100 powder/crack cocaine disparity, where a federally mandated minimum five-year sentence is mandatory for those charged with possession of either 5 grams of crack cocaine (more commonly found among inner-city African Americans), or 500 grams of powder cocaine (more common among middle- and upper-class whites). The recently passed Fair Sentencing Act of 2010 addresses this disparity, yet upon closer examination, it allows for a more “fair” disparity of 1-to-18. While this might be seen as a success for antiracists and justice advocates, it also signifies both a recognition among members of Congress and President Obama that racial disparities exist in sentencing policies, and that a certain degree of disparity is acceptable. While this legislation indicates a real and fundamental change in sentencing policy, we might also question the extent to which it revised institutionalized racism for a more sustainable future.

Both California Proposition 19 and the Fair Sentencing Act of 2010 also point to the general need to be explicit about *why* the drug war and project of mass incarceration should be dismantled. We agree with the conclusions of Davis (2003), Feagin (2010), and Alexander (2010) in that we must be explicit about our resistance to such institutions and institutional practices as manifestations of systemic racism and state-sanctioned racial social control. Though valuable pieces to the anti-drug war and prison abolitionist positions, attempts to alter fundamentally the criminal justice system should not be attributed to cost or

sustainability alone—antiracism must be part of the resistant discourse. Otherwise, as the complexities of California Proposition 19, The Fair Sentencing Act of 2010, and historical examples of white racial backlash (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001) previously discussed illustrate, the practices would change but the racial oppression would likely continue in other forms. All that said, we see these and other similar bills springing up nationally as encouraging signs for the potential of antiracist resistance to the U.S. War on Drugs. Finally, we would like to end with some specific suggestions for humanist and public sociologists, the primary audience of *Humanity and Society*, who might be interested in pursuing the flavor of antiracism presented herein.

SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS FOR OUR COLLEAGUES

Arguably, a central position of humanist and public sociologists in critical research is that we should operate as public, organic intellectuals. Relatively new publications such as *Societies Without Borders* and *Theory in Action* indicate the emergence of professional recognition of such public intellectualism. We seem to share an ethical commitment and fundamental connection to the public that supports us and depends on our contribution to broader society and tangible communities. As we argue here, one of our shared responsibilities as public intellectuals and one of our tasks as social change agents is to inform public discourse and political debate and to engage social problems however our research and the needs of our communities seem to guide us. What specific steps might this type of project entail?

First, we must take seriously, as public intellectuals, the responsibility of re-centering dominant discourse on issues of race and racism around empirically grounded and theoretically sophisticated interpretations of systemic racism and antiracist strategy. Where we might blame 40 years of misinformation and successful drug war propaganda on the opportunistic mass media and manipulative state, we might also take some responsibility for failing to inject our own critical perspectives into the public discourse. As exemplified here, we academics often talk to each other through journal publications and professional presentations rather than engaging the national rank-in-file. This separation of the knowledge in and of the disciplines from the knowledge of lived experience may contribute to our mutual social insignificance. Perhaps, especially as tenured faculty, we should value more public expressions of our work, as they may speak more directly to social change and community service. We can take a tangible step toward ending mass imprisonment and the U.S. drug war by seeking high-visibility outlets for our critical works—including writing editorials in our local newspapers, insisting to sit on hiring and oversight committees for

key public officials such as police chiefs, and engaging and challenging the positions and legitimacy of visible political pundits.

Second, although it may be difficult for us to affect mass media in the short term, we certainly have the opportunity to re-claim and fundamentally revise the educational institutions and curricula that train “justice” professionals. The recent emergence of “Justice Studies” as a field and as a specific department (at, for example, San Jose State University and Arizona State University) to replace the more traditional fields of “criminal justice” and/or “criminology,” and the growing movement among some universities (e.g., Tulane University) to encourage faculty and students to better understand and devise innovative models for social change¹⁴ might serve as excellent examples of our capacity to do so. The unsustainability and oppressive nature of the state has become increasingly apparent, and, as a result, many academics have begun to explore more critical approaches that emphasize forms of *social* justice as the goal of training legal and “justice” professionals, and describe forms and theories of “criminal” justice as subject to debate, scrutiny, and considerable empirical testing. These explorations have forced many of us to reflect critically on our more traditional discipline(s): Does it make sense for us to continue to ask “whether prisons work” in our teaching and research? Does it make sense for us to train students to become guards and soldiers in institutions already proven to be utter and abysmal failures? Do we continue to talk about archaic and brutal (yet dominant) carceral theory and practice as somehow legitimate with our students?

Arguably one of the reasons we still rely on prisons as the primary strategy for creating “public safety” is because intellectuals reify the questions above as still legitimate, genuine questions. We are largely the ones who “educate” future police, policymakers, lawyers, judges, and prison guards in their specific concentrations (typically sociology, criminology, criminal justice, and so forth), as well as those who typically populate the think tanks and research institutes who provide substantive policy and empirical review of current public practices (of a police department or juvenile diversion program, for example). Humanist and public sociologists should play very active roles in challenging colleagues and departments that continue in the uncritical reification of manifestly oppressive institutions and institutional practices. Alternatives can be and are being built around curricula that explore paths to social justice and sustainable democratic communities over traditional approaches simply targeting “crime.” We encourage our colleagues to join in these efforts.

Third, it is difficult for us to imagine fundamental changes in criminal justice practices and policies without considerable resistance and direct action “from below.” The history of successful antiracism in the United States is clearly one

of grassroots civil disobedience and direct action against powerful interests and the state. We see no reason to think that antiracist movements against mass incarceration and the drug war would or should be any different. As previously mentioned, organizations such as The Ella Baker Center for Human Rights and Critical Resistance (Oakland, CA) serve as contemporary examples of relatively successful grassroots players of this sort. We wholeheartedly encourage humanist and public sociologists to join in these grassroots struggles in their communities, as true partners with the stakeholders we supposedly serve.

Finally, in terms of direct action, we would encourage antiracists to confront directly the persistent specter of militant white supremacy and fascism once again seething across the country as white unemployment and economic destabilization continues to rise. Such movements historically have gained strength during periods of economic recession and upheaval (Wilson 1996). Further, white supremacist organizations and ideology continue to poison and drive debates over everything from immigration reform to domestic economic policy. We might learn from the Southern Poverty Law Center and take such threats more seriously by adopting a markedly less liberal (“just ignore them, and they’ll go away”) and more active approach to boldly confronting white supremacy in our communities and their legitimacy in policy debates.

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ENDNOTES

¹The swing states included Georgia, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, and Ohio.

²See Tim Wise (2009) for a more extensive discussion.

³For example, see Gordon (1961, 1964), Gouldner (1970), Horton (1966), Bash (1979), Blackwell (1982), Hirschman (1983), Taylor (1979). For critiques of these approaches, see Wilson (1996), Niemonen (1995), Cazenave and Maddern (2000), Neubeck and Cazenave (2001), Feagin (2001, 2006), Bonilla-Silva (1996, 2001).

⁴Race as a concept is presented as a given, as having biological, psychological, or cultural essential significance, or as a quantitative, independent variable unrelated to socially constructed power relationships.

⁵See Neubeck and Cazenave (2001), Roberts (2002), Feagin et al. (2001) for discussions of “blaming the victim” in public policy and discourse on “perceived” racial inequalities.

⁶Of course, some African Americans and Latino/as *did* gain political office and favor at more local levels, as very real indicators of the civil rights movement struggling to emerge.

⁷In this sense, Tim Wise (2009) discusses in his most recent work on the selling of Barack Obama to the American public as a “safe” African American male—one who

emphasizes an individualist, pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps approach to solving structured inequalities; that is, someone who is unlikely to publicly recognize, let alone resist, *systems* of privilege and oppression such as racism or neoliberal capitalism.

⁸This is not to suggest that antiracist struggles have achieved nothing to date in the United States, or that those who engaged and continue to engage in resisting systemic racism do so naively or to no effect.

⁹Martin Luther King Jr., whose image was widely evoked during the election of Barack Obama, was explicitly antiracist, antiwar (pacifist), and anticapitalist. He often risked, with his partners in struggle, arrest, harm, and eventual assassination. Comparisons between the two as historical political figures, with the exception of skin tone, are substantively unfounded and inappropriate.

¹⁰This number actually hides the racial disparity in incarceration rate between whites and African Americans because, as an ethnicity, some states do not offer Hispanic as an identification category, resulting in many Hispanics identifying as white and artificially inflating the incarceration rate for whites.

¹¹See, for example, Brewer and Heitzeg (2008), Davis (2003), DeGiorgi (2006), Feagin et al. (2001), Mauer and King (2007), Rome (2006), Sudbury (2005), Western (2006), and so forth.

¹²While we agree that both the project of mass incarceration and the U.S. War on Drugs have also worked to strengthen forms of political economic oppression (class), this does not challenge the position that systemic racism has a relatively exclusive affect on the form and effects of criminal justice policy and practice in the United States. Further, our paper here speaks to issues of race and racism as they are expressed in and through institutions—not to the root causes of incarceration or the War on Drugs.

¹³Washington State's ban on felon voting rights was recently challenged in court and ruled an unconstitutional violation of the Voting Rights Act. The 9th Circuit Court of Appeals will hear an appeal to this ruling on September 21, 2010.

¹⁴Tulane University has recently created a campus-wide program in social entrepreneurship. Not to be misunderstood as business-minded corporate responsibility, recent conceptions of social entrepreneurship are much broader and emphasize systematic understanding and change in ways consistent with public sociology/intellectualism. The recently launched *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship* illustrates this broad movement (<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/rjse>).

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