

GREAT DIVIDES



Readings in Social Inequality
in the United States

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Part IV

RACE AND ETHNICITY

PART IV ADDRESSES THE IMPORTANT ISSUES OF race and ethnicity. We Americans think of the United States as a nation where peoples from diverse cultures, lands, and languages successfully unite into one nation. America's diversity is unquestionable. In fact, America is more ethnically diverse today than it was when we initially began thinking of ourselves as the first new nation composed of immigrants.

The current wave of immigration has dramatically changed the face of American society. The proportion of Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans in the United States population is growing rapidly, whereas the number of African Americans is growing at a slower rate. Non-Hispanic European Americans are declining in relative proportion to other groups, so that less than 75 percent of today's United States population is non-Hispanic European American. It should not be surprising, then, that various ethnically and racially charged issues have become hot topics for political discussion and action, including immigration policy, interethnic conflict and violence, language-related policies (e.g., multilingual and Ebonics movements versus English-only and standard-English initiatives), and public education (e.g., multicultural vs. majoritarian instruction).

The introduction to this book outlined how race and ethnicity are sociohistorical-political conceptions. It also noted the importance of power relationships in determining how societies construct the meaning of the terms *race* and *ethnicity*. An important consideration is how people define a group as being either a minority or part of a

majority. The sociological term *minority group* is somewhat misleading because a group does not have to be numerically small to be called a "minority." Rather, power and discrimination are the points of departure from which we derive any meaning of the term *minority group*. A *minority group* is a group that is disadvantaged and subjected to unequal treatment, status, power, and rewards. A minority group is also usually distinguished by one or more visibly identifiable characteristics; for instance, women, African Americans, and Latinos fit this conception. A *majority group* is one that controls superior resources and rights in society and thus is advantaged by its power, not necessarily its numbers. The terms *subordinate group* and *dominant group* are often used synonymously with *minority* and *majority groups*, respectively.

The first section of this part focuses on current problems of racial equality by placing them within a historical context. This part opens with W. E. B. Du Bois's landmark statement about the importance of race in American history, "The Problem of the Twentieth Century Is the Problem of the Color Line." Du Bois reviewed racial apartheid in the United States and the progress made in the first half of the twentieth century, proposing that our ideals about social equality and modern democracy be measured against the objective conditions of African Americans in an economy dominated by corporate wealth. He urged all Americans to pursue social equality, reminding African Americans not to abandon their egalitarian goals once they have gained some economic, political, and social advantages.

William Julius Wilson emphasizes social class as a factor sustaining racial inequality. He suggests that the racial barriers of the past are less important than present-day social-class attributes in determining the life chances of African Americans. The selection from Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged* argues that the relative importance of class and race must be reexamined in our shifting economy. Wilson highlights an important aspect of economic restructuring: In most central cities, employment opportunities have shifted away from "goods processing" jobs (blue-collar work, requiring little or no education) to information-processing jobs (white-collar work, requiring higher levels of education), so that poorly educated workers have shrinking opportunities for employment in America's inner cities. He shows how this restructuring has especially dire consequences for African Americans who remain in these poverty-stricken areas with high levels of unemployment, welfare dependency, crime, and family instability. These increasingly isolated ghettos of extreme poverty are being abandoned by stable working-class and middle-class African-American families. According to Wilson, the concentration of disadvantaged and poorly educated segments of the African-American population creates an environment in which escape from destitution seems highly unlikely.

In "A Sociology of Wealth and Racial Inequality," Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro raise these significant analytic questions: What causes racial inequality? What factors were responsible for creating it, and what factors maintain it? Social scientists have emphasized either race (Du Bois) or class (Wilson) or some combination or interaction between the two as the major factors responsible for racial inequality. Oliver and Shapiro analyze the opportunities for African and European Americans to create wealth, as structured by the intersection of class and race. In doing so, they show how the events and policies of the past influence the events and experiences of today.

In "A History of Multicultural America," Ronald Takaki recounts this history through the voices of all of America's peoples. In examining

what it means to be an American, Takaki argues that we must use "a different mirror"—one that reflects reality—so we can see an undistorted view of our past. Once we truly appreciate and understand our tradition of diversity, we can realistically discuss race and ethnicity in American history and in contemporary experience.

The second group of readings in this part focuses on distinctions between race and ethnicity, highlighting various dimensions of racial and ethnic stratification. "A Piece of the Pie: Occupational Trends," by Stanley Lieberson, examines the historical roots of discrimination toward and occupational segregation of immigrant (ethnic) groups, as compared with the treatment of native-born African Americans. His work reveals a fundamental difference between the immigrant experience of European Americans (focusing primarily on immigrants from southern, central, and eastern Europe) and the postslavery experience of African Americans. Although the immigrants clearly faced discrimination and many hardships, African Americans definitely have faced much tougher challenges, much more blatant and enduring discrimination, and a much greater historical burden of deprivation.

Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton's "The Continuing Causes of Segregation" investigates residential segregation, its causes, and its consequences. If residential segregation is the linchpin of American race relations, then Massey and Denton's findings are quite sobering. Three quarters of African Americans or European Americans would have to move to substantially different neighborhoods in order to achieve racially balanced communities. These authors' data demonstrate persistent and profound degrees of racial isolation in major cities in the United States.

In "Black Wealth/White Wealth," Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro use wealth as a significant measure of financial security and well-being, to demonstrate crucial differences between European Americans and African Americans. Oliver and Shapiro show that equally achieving, equally educated, and even equally earning European Americans and African Americans possess