

Preface

The Prospect for Post-Raciality

As we finalized this collection of essays, American Senator Barack Hussein Obama became the Democratic Party's nominee for president of the United States. The significance of Obama's achievement in June 2008 will be lost on few readers: he was the first person of African-American descent to run for the presidency on behalf of a major political party. More than a political milestone, however, Obama's nomination (and much of his campaign) also generated lively international debate about the emergence of a post-racial political culture in America (and Canada).

The prospect for post-racial politics in America derives cultural and intellectual inspiration from the proliferation of "post-al" politics over the last couple of decades — that is, such trends in thought as post-structuralism, post-essentialism, post-feminism, post-Marxism, postmodernism, and even post-postmodernism. In contemporary dialogue, it is common to find the prefix "post-" treated as an epochal synonym for "after" or "beyond," as somehow distinct from what came before. But the "post-" in post-racial politics is better conceptualized in terms of a set of interrelated institutional and cultural changes that can neither be separated from historical relations nor be reducible to the past. It is not that then Senator Obama's nomination marked the point at which the social designation of race no longer mattered in American institutions and social life. Rather, his nomination — and his presidency — offers a useful reference point to signify a series of progressive changes taking place across social and institutional spaces in the United States.

Despite the connotations associated with post-raciality, therefore, arguments in favour of a post-racial politics do not deny the continuing significance of racial politics. Indeed, Obama's entire campaign for the Democratic nomination was saturated in racial politics. He tirelessly cited his father's Kenyan background and his mixed-racial heritage. International press agencies ceaselessly speculated on the direction of the Black, White, and Hispanic vote. His opponent in the Democratic primaries did not hesitate to fan the flames of racial and religious intolerance when opportunity presented itself. His wife was accused of harbouring hostilities toward "Whitey," and one of his presidential campaign's main civil-rights priorities was to eradicate racial profiling by law enforcement agencies.

What does characterize arguments for a post-racial politics is the abandonment of the guarantee of racial positioning in American society. The certainty of racial positioning in America has been debated for some time, and Obama's nomination (and victory in the presidential race) was as much an effect of institutional and cultural change as it was a catalyst for future change. Post-raciality is a future-oriented politics of possibility, but one that simultaneously confronts the forces of continuity and change. Far from a denial of the continuing signifi-

cance of race, post-raciality derives from a politics of maturity (Obama 2006) that recognizes the salience of race but avoids resolute arguments about the fixity of difference and the uniformity of group experience.

For purposes of simplification, it is useful to think about post-raciality as comprised of at least two analytically distinct but empirically overlapping dimensions: institutional and hermeneutic. Institutionally, African-Americans are collectively wealthier, healthier, and better educated today than they have ever been. Important and persistent structural disadvantages persist in terms of wage opportunities, high school and college graduation rates, access to legal and political institutions, incarceration, and civil rights. But differential levels of access to valued material resources — such as jobs, savings, education, personal property, politics, the law — can be observed between African- and Euro-Americans as well as within the African-American community.

Hermeneutically, in Obama's many public addresses, he became fond of linking changing institutional patterns of participation and incorporation to subjective and inter-subjective feelings of belonging. Only in America, the Senator regularly preached, is a story like his possible: the son of a Black man from Kenya and a White woman from Kansas, raised with the help of White grandparents, and whose family is comprised of brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles, and cousins of every race and colour. What Obama articulated, and what resonated with a good number of Black and White Americans, is a sense of unity, collectivism, shared destiny, and hope for a fair and just future. Indeed, following his victory in the Democratic primaries, the international media provided dozens of testimonials from African-American men and women who explained that Obama's success was inspiring because it stood as a concrete example of what is possible. Although Obama's supporters are not always able to articulate clearly what it is about the idea of post-raciality that appeals to them personally and interpersonally, they are nevertheless certain that he generates energy and charisma rarely seen in formal political proceedings. The elusive hermeneutic character of this of post-raciality was perhaps best captured in Toni Morrison's endorsement letter to Obama:

When, I wondered, was the last time this country was guided by such a leader? Someone whose moral centre was un-embargoed? Someone with courage instead of mere ambition? Someone who truly thinks of his country's citizens as "we," not "they"? Someone who understands what it will take to help America realize the virtues it fancies about itself, what it desperately needs to become in the world? Our future is ripe, outrageously rich in its possibilities. Yet unleashing the glory of that future will require a difficult labor, and some may be so frightened of its birth they will refuse to abandon their nostalgia for the womb. There have been a few prescient leaders in our past, but you are the man for this time. (Morrison 2008)

Admittedly, the prospect for post-raciality touches many nerves across the

political spectrum. While some observers embrace post-raciality as a sign of the times and of things to come, others balk at the mere suggestion that race is anything less than the primary determinant in all areas of American (and Canadian) life. If nothing else, Obama's endorsement of post-racial politics has generated productive public debate about racism, identity, and justice well beyond the parameters of the United States. In the context of international public debate about the prospect for a post-racial politics, the time is fitting to present a collection of essays on race, racism, and the politics of inequality and change.

In this volume, we present a set of essays that collectively prioritize complexity over simplicity, progress over retrenchment, unity over diversity, and polemics over dogmatism. We seek to inform discussion and debate about the prospect for a post-racial politics that is not oblivious to either the importance of racial classification or the persistence of racism and injustice. For us, the prospect of a post-racial politics is one that avoids determinant statements based on essentialized identities. It is one that embraces contradictory empirical evidence. And it is one that moves forward progressively, yet reflexively.

In one sense, then, the volume is proscriptive. Over the past couple of decades, research and publications in the field of racism studies have narrowed to the point where there is increasingly little to differentiate among books and arguments. Orthodoxies have developed, and what was once a body of knowledge characterized by evidence-dependent investigation is filled with rhetorical claims and arguments based more on assumption and ideology than fact. The contributing authors to this volume present a number of polemical arguments to assess the current state of knowledge about race, racism, and justice, with the primary goal of critically examining the state of knowledge about the politics of inequality and change.

In a second sense, this volume is creative and original. By assessing the current state of knowledge about the politics of inequality and change through the proxies of major policy issues — such as reparations, essentialism, multiculturalism, anti-racism, and citizenship — we introduce debate, not only on the current state of knowledge in ethnic and racial studies, but also on future possibilities for social-justice work. The chapters provide fresh argumentation to inspire further exploration, theorization, and debate.

If there is one guiding philosophical framework to this book, it is an eschewal of either/or thinking — racism either exists or it does not, race either matters or it does not, progressive justice is either achievable or it is not. The cultural and institutional fabric of American and Canadian society is far too complex to characterize with a single stroke of the pen. A set of opportunities is available in both societies that people of all social designations can take advantage of to realize their dreams and aspirations. At the same time, social scientists have spent a considerable amount of time over the last forty years documenting how the structural bases of inequality and injustice operate to thwart those dreams and aspirations for millions of people. Our aim is to navigate some of these

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contradictions in academic and everyday life, and to begin to shed light on the complexities of our time. We hope this volume leaves readers better informed about pursuit, racism, and justice. And, we hope that readers leave it with as many questions as answers.

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Introduction

Paradoxes of Progress

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In his presidential address to the Midwest Sociological Society, Joel Best (2001) argued that the historical record of twentieth-century America is marked by significant social progress. At the turn of the century, he reasoned, a newborn male's life expectancy was forty-six years. By the turn of the next century, the average life expectancy for an American male had increased to seventy-three years. Female life expectancy rose even more dramatically in this period, and the life expectancy of non-Whites grew more rapidly than the life expectancy of Whites. In addition to gains in longevity, Best maintains that advances were also made in many other areas. At the turn of the twentieth century, for example, the right to vote was restricted to persons over twenty years of age, women could not vote in most states, and African-Americans were barred from voting in the Confederacy. At the close of the century, by contrast, the franchise had been generally granted to all Americans over seventeen years of age. Levels of high school graduation among seventeen-year-old Americans climbed from approximately 6 percent in 1900 to 85 percent in the late 1990s. And by 2000, the standard of living in America increased by about seven times what it was in 1900, to the extent that amenities once considered luxurious had become commonplace.

Despite these and numerous other examples of extraordinary net social improvements that transformed the lives and life chances of millions of people over the course of the twentieth century,¹ many sociologists — and, we would add, other social scientists — persist in laying claim to the era as racist, sexist, imperialist, and genocidal. As Best explains, in four mutually reinforcing paradoxical ways sociologists avoid talking about social progress, instead preferring to emphasize social division, dissolution, and decay. Undeniable strides continue to be made toward social parity and equality of opportunity, and social-justice measures have dramatically reduced overall patterns of social inequity and deprivation. But our efforts to achieve the perfect society inevitably fall short of realizing this ultimately unattainable goal, and the progress that has been made is unevenly distributed within and among social domains. Given that patterns of social inequality have not been eliminated altogether, the optimistic pursuit of the perfect society has the paradoxical effect of fostering a disciplinary pessimism about the state of social affairs in (North) America. This “paradox of perfectionism,” says Best, exists alongside a second mutually reinforcing paradox in research into social problems — a “paradox of proportion” — whereby, as larger social problems are reduced in significance (e.g., infant mortality rates), smaller problems start to appear larger and more alarming (e.g., childhood obe-

sity). As smaller problems assume greater significance, claims to a greater number of social problems proliferate (a “paradox of proliferation”) — a paradox not unrelated to the proliferation of sociologists and social scientists themselves. The culmination of these interrelated paradoxes is, for Best, a “paradox of paranoia” that things are bad and that they are only getting worse.

By identifying four interlocking paradoxes of social progress, Best doesn’t suggest that American or Canadian society is free of social problems or that the social problems increasingly concerning social scientists are insignificant or undeserving of sustained attention. He does suggest, however, that there are different ways to conceptualize and explain the problems we face, that the assessment of social progress is not an all-or-nothing exercise, and that the sense of our collective glass as half-empty rather than half-full is in no small part a result of the ways in which analysts themselves lay claim to, and construct, social problems.

One indispensable, albeit taken-for-granted, component of successful social-justice politics is the ability to recognize social progress and to build on the institutional and cultural factors that make possible collective gains in human rights and social equality. Only the most dogmatic of readers will deny that twentieth-century North America witnessed remarkable social progress in health, social welfare, and human rights. This is neither to ignore nor to minimize the significance of the wars, exclusions, genocides, aggressions, and inhumanities that marked the century. Social progress is not a zero-sum game — it is observed inconsistently, haphazardly, and differentially between and among societies and peoples (Hier 2007). The politics of social justice must never lose sight of the indignities and atrocities that have brutalized, and continue to scar, human societies. But social-justice politics must also be progressive and forward thinking. It is important to remain critical of current social injustices and to understand how historical patterns of inequality inform contemporary culture and politics. It is also important to develop progressive, empirically informed strategies to build on the progress that has been achieved through policy, legislation, and cultural practice. Although many social scientists continue to argue that structural barriers restrict the full and equal institutional participation of women, minorities, and other historically disadvantaged groups, these barriers are increasingly, albeit unevenly, contested as partial, fragmented, shifting, and — importantly — surmountable.

Social Progress and Racism in Canada

The social scientific literature on racism in Canada has failed to escape the paradoxes of progress that characterize research into social problems generally. Although considerable social progress has been achieved over the past fifty years in key institutional domains, the closer approximation to perfection is, paradoxically, fostering pessimism about the state of racism in Canada. Since the 1960s, for example, systemic changes to Canadian immigration policies and human-rights culture have dramatically altered the ancestral composition of the population. Prior to the 1960s, Canada’s population was predominantly

European in origin (almost 97 percent), the majority of which originated from Western Europe. Following changes to immigration policies in 1962 and 1967, the non-European (including Aboriginal) proportion of the population grew from approximately 6.3 percent in 1986 to 11.2 percent by 1996 (Li 1996). In real figures, the number of Canadians (including Aboriginals) who traced their ancestry to geographical locations other than Europe grew from approximately 420,283 people in 1951 to 9,267,564 in 1991, a net increase of 8,847,281 people in the span of four decades. It is estimated that between 19 and 23 percent of Canadians will be able to claim visible minority or Aboriginal status by 2017 (Heritage Canada 2005).

Dramatic changes to the ancestral composition of the Canadian population have facilitated increasing participation rates for members of visible minority groups in other valued institutional and cultural arenas. A growing number of Canadians of visible minority status are graduating from high school and entering college and university programs. While differences remain within and among visible and non-visible minority groups in terms of high school and post-secondary graduation, there has been an upward trend in rates of attendance and graduation over the past three decades. Since 1970, there has also been a steady increase in the number of foreign-born, non-European professional workers in the country, and, as a result, the earning potential of their Canadian-born offspring (and their offspring's offspring, etc.) has grown. Furthermore, members of Canada's visible minority groups are entering formal politics at an accelerated rate, and there has been a decline in the proportion of members of the corporate elite in Canada who trace their ancestry to Western Europe (Ogmundson and McLaughlin 1992). There is consistent evidence that educational attainment, labour market successes, and occupational distribution for visible minority groups compares to if not exceeds Canada's charter groups, the British and French (Herberg 1990; Reitz and Breton 1994; Hum and Simpson 1999), and a scholarly interest in "Canadian" as an ethnic identity among English-speaking, non-Aboriginal Canadians has recently developed (see Howard-Hassman 1999). While these general aggregate changes do not imply that racism ceases to be a significant social problem in Canada, they do attest to the fact that considerable social progress has been made over the last four or five decades.

Still, given that anti-racist and social-justice efforts have fallen short of entirely eradicating racism in Canadian society, many social scientists continue to lay claim to the pervasiveness of institutional or systemic forms of racism in the country. Henry and Tator (2006), for example, argue that despite the historical and contemporary evidence of racism as a pervasive and intractable reality, White Canadians exist in a state of collective denial. Although formal racist policies have been eradicated in the country, they maintain that a covert form of racism persists that is invisible to everyone but those who suffer from it. Bannerji (2000: 9) contends that Canada's official discourse of cultural permissiveness deflects critical attention from "a constantly racializing Canadian political economy." Fleras and Elliot (2002: 261) conclude their assessment of ethno-racial diversity

in Canada on a cautionary note, opining that “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” And, in her study of equality of opportunity in Canadian medical schools, Beagan (2001: 583) argues that, despite the express commitment of the medical institution to race, gender, sexuality, and class equality, “micro inequities and everyday inequities construct an institutional climate that may marginalize and alienate some students.” For Beagan, the persistence of “micro inequities” operating at the interactional level of everyday life amounts to an institutionalization of privilege that signals who belongs in Canada and who does not.

This last example acutely exemplifies the paradoxes of social progress operating in studies of racism and ethno-racial diversity in Canada. In her investigation, Beagan finds no evidence attesting to systemic barriers in the medical school admission processes or in the profession generally. What is significant to her, rather, is the persistence of everyday inequities, including personal perceptions of prejudice and infrequent but nevertheless repetitious race-based jokes. She acknowledges social progress in the realm of formal patterns of institutional incorporation, to the extent that “medical schools today have an institutional commitment to equality which has led to the reduction or eradication of overt discrimination... and to the establishment of policies and procedures to address harassment and discrimination” (587). Nevertheless, she finds grounds for pessimism about the institutional climate in Canadian medical schools. We do not wish to contest the argument that micro inequities are significant sociological concerns that demand attention within and beyond the medical establishment. We argue, however, that it is a sign of remarkable social progress that sociologists are increasingly, albeit unevenly, shifting their attention away from overt forms of structural racism that function to exclude, degrade, and deny entire groups of people and to examine more closely the cultural significance of glances, stereotypes, and the enduring query, “Where are you *really* from?”

In the 1980s, it became increasingly common for sociologists to conceptualize racism as a structural phenomenon embedded in core institutions such as the educational system and the labour market. Influenced by the resurgence of Marxism through the 1970s, as well as by the growing visible minority population and important shifts in the ways multiculturalism policy was administered in Canada, social scientists began to conceptualize racism as an ideology. The general argument was that racism is a complex set of beliefs, values, ideas, and assumptions that functions to mystify or distort similarities among human beings in the wider interests of capital accumulation, profitability, and the maintenance of power. To measure racism as an ideology that informs everyday practices and patterns of incorporation, social scientists investigated multivariate relationships in an effort to document the material effects of racist ideology in key institutional areas. Importantly, the ideology of racism was understood to manifest itself in the inequitable distribution of valued social resources (e.g., jobs, education), and the remedy for racism was understood to involve state interventions to “level the playing field.”

Taken as a whole, levels of institutional racism have declined over the last twenty-five years. As structural racism declined throughout the 1980s and 1990s, however, claims of racism paradoxically increased. Inspired by a number of studies, including Philomeno Essed's (1991) *Understanding Everyday Racism*, it became increasingly common for Canadian scholars to substitute explanations for racism as objectively measurable structural phenomena with explanations of racism as a subjective, inner feeling or experience that can only be understood through individual narratives and self-reports. As the 1990s wore on, analytical emphases on multivariate relations were outnumbered by studies that emphasized personal perceptions, experiences, and stories, and "White people" were called upon to individually recognize and avow their power and privilege. The onus of responsibility for eradicating racism increasingly shifted from the Canadian state to "White people" as an undifferentiated group, and it became fashionable in scholarly writings for authors to provide protracted accounts of their personal and cultural status to establish their credentials to speak on matters of race and racism. These trends toward experiential-interpretive research not only exacerbated the paradoxes of progress in Canadian racism studies, but they also and more importantly contributed to the depoliticization of anti-racist interventions by fostering explanations of racism as individual rather than structural in character.

The purpose of this book is not to rationalize, minimize, or ignore the embarrassment, hurt, disrespect, or sense of exclusion that comes with everyday forms of injury and insult. Indeed, the contributing authors and editors are keenly aware of the experiential dimensions of racism and related inequalities. The purpose of this book, rather, is to critically assess the current state of knowledge about racism, justice, and social change in Canada and beyond. Over the past couple of decades, research and publications in the field have narrowed. The empirical literature on race and racism has also become increasingly polarized. On the one hand, a large number of researchers lay claim to the pervasiveness of "institutional" or "systemic" racism in Canadian cultural and institutional life. For these researchers, race cannot be subordinated to any other social indicator (e.g., class): to question the significance of race or the pervasiveness of racism is, for them, a rationalization or denial of racism. On the other hand, a smaller group of researchers is producing a body of evidence that contests the extent to which the social category of race functions as an irrefutable determinant for the inequitable distribution of services and resources in the country. For these researchers, race is often overplayed at the expense of other social indicators: they contend that there is as much variation among members of the same visible minority groups as there is among different groups.

The collection begins with the assumption that the formation of a social-justice infrastructure in Canada over the past thirty-five years has resulted in widespread social change as far as ethno-racial minorities are concerned. While we are not oblivious to the fact that racism continues to negatively affect the lives and life chances of members of Canada's diverse ethno-racial communities, we

nevertheless acknowledge significant social progress in Canadian institutional and cultural life. We find ourselves, therefore, at a unique historical moment: like no other time in Canadian history, the institutional infrastructure is now in place to push ethno-racial equality to a level that was difficult to imagine even ten years ago. Assessing the current state of knowledge through the proxies of major policy issues such as reparations, essentialism, multiculturalism, anti-racism, and citizenship, the authors introduce debate not only on the current state of knowledge in ethnic and racial studies, but also on future possibilities for social-justice work.

As the ethnic, racial, cultural, and religious composition of the country continues to diversify, and as the number of Canadians classified as “visible minority” continues to grow, sociological research must address the complex material and social relationships that accompany demographic, political, economic, and cultural change.

Note

1. There were other progressive developments that accompanied the improvements cited by Best. For instance, the institutionalization of labour standards and laws, basic social-welfare provisions, improved public hygiene and education, and advances in legal and judicial rights profoundly influenced the development of a social-justice infrastructure in North America.