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While gender is more universal, the use of race as a category of distinction has historically been more destructive. Though women have been seen as less than men, in general their essential humanity hasn't been denied. The modern category of race, however, is based on such a distinction. While people

have obviously always been aware of differences of skin tone and facial features, in premodern societies race wasn't an important way that people used to mark difference. Religion, territory, and eventually being civilized versus uncivilized were much more important categories for most of human history. Race, as such, only became important with the dawn of modernity and specifically capitalism. Capitalism provided the motivation (accruing profit at the least possible expense) and the means (commodification) to make race the primary marker of difference in modern nations. While slavery had always existed, it wasn't until the advent of capitalism that *chattel* slavery—people seen as property—could exist. It was also modernity that brought to the forefront the issue of human nature as a political concern. You'll recall that political rights in modernity exist for the individual simply because of his or her humanity. Thus, one's standing as a human became an issue of concern and definition.

We are without a doubt at a significant moment of change in U.S. race relations. In 2008, the country elected its first black president. But are we now in a “post-racial” society, one in which race no longer makes a difference? Current statistics appear to say no. The 2008 median income for white families was \$55,530, while black family median income was \$34,281 (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2009). The U.S. Department of Justice (2008) reports that at midyear 2008 there were 4,777 black male inmates per 100,000 U.S. residents being held in state or federal prison and local jails, compared to just 727 white male inmates per 100,000 U.S. residents. The National Urban League (2009) has an overall statistical index of African American equality as compared to whites: The 2009 Equality Index was 71.1 percent.

The three theorists in this chapter will explain how race matters. Each of our theorists will have a somewhat different way of understanding how racial inequality works. In considering W. E. B. Du Bois' theoretical work, we'll see how and why the dividing line of race defined the separation between human and subhuman. With Du Bois, we'll also think about how culture and identity are used to subjugate black people, and he will show us that there are social psychological effects stemming from economic and cultural oppression. William Julius Wilson, on the other hand, focuses solely on structures, specifically the structural arrangements among government, capitalist economy, and the division of labor. In doing so, we will look at race relations in the United States over three historical periods. In the end, Wilson argues that race as such plays a lesser role today than in previous periods in black oppression. Finally, Cornel West's work brings us back to the issues of culture and social psychology, as he argues that increasing market saturation has created black nihilism, a denial of the intrinsic meaning and value of human life.

Double Consciousness—W. E. B. Du Bois

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868–1963) was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. His mother was Dutch African and his father French Huguenot–African. Du Bois’ education in the abject realities of blackness in America came during his college years at Fisk, a historically black university in Nashville, Tennessee; it was his first visit to the southern United States during the “Jim Crow” era. During his life, Du Bois advocated a two-pronged approach in overcoming oppression. He encouraged blacks to work together to create their own culture, art, and literature, and to create their own group economy of black producers and consumers. Du Bois also advocated active protest, which at times put him at odds with Booker T. Washington, another significant black leader of the time. Du Bois was also a principal force in the Pan-African movement, which was founded on the belief that all black people share a common ancestry and should therefore work collectively around the globe for equality. Du Bois died in 1963 at the age of 95.

Probably more than any other single person, Du Bois was responsible for black consciousness in America and possibly the world during the twentieth century. His book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, defined the problem of the color line. He was a founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and its chief spokesperson during its most formative years. Du Bois also produced the first scientific studies of the black condition in America. Among Du Bois’ other important books are *The Philadelphia Negro*, *The Negro*, *John Brown*, *Black Reconstruction*, and *Darkwater*.

Concepts and Theory: The Expanding Economic Base

Following Marx, Du Bois argues that the basic force behind racism is the economic structure of capitalism. As we’ve seen, capitalism is dependent upon a cheap labor force to exploit, and at the outset capitalism used chattel slavery as a way to get the most profit from the least investment. However, as we’ve seen, democracy is an expanding, unfinished project. Thus, over the years, slavery was defeated and blacks were ultimately freed. But, as we all know, that wasn’t the end of the story. Legally abolishing slavery did little to change the culture of racism that had provided the legitimation for slavery. Du Bois sees that this cultural authority is still being used as the basis of exploitation in global capitalism. Due to the nature of exploitation, workers in places like the United States push for and gain higher wages, which obviously reduces profits. Along with increasing worker rights, technological growth in

core economies helps to create the middle class and with it, increasing levels of affluence—but only in the core nations and only at a price.

Writing in the first half of the twentieth century, Du Bois saw the beginnings of what we now call globalization. Du Bois also saw that the affluence of the American middle class was based upon exploiting other nations and peoples—dark nations and dark peoples. Du Bois (1920/1996a) explains, “There is a chance for exploitation on an immense scale for inordinate profit, not simply to the very rich, but to the middle class and to the laborers. This chance lies in the exploitation of darker peoples” (pp. 504–505). He goes on to say, “This labor is kept cheap and helpless because the white world despises ‘darkies’” (p. 507), and finally, “This exploitation of the ‘dark lands’ has “only one test of success—dividends!” (p. 505). Thus, even as political and economic structures in the United States change, the culture of racism continues, not only so blacks in this country can be oppressed, but even more so that dark nations can be used as fields of exploitation.

Concepts and Theory: The Defining Power of Culture

While he draws on Marx to explain the economic base, Du Bois turns to Weber’s theory of legitimation to explain how the power of racism continued into the twentieth century. In terms of oppression, the problem with distinctions made using premodern social categories is that they were by definition temporary. People within oppressed groups could become civilized, could convert to the dominant religion, and could move and thus claim different territorial identities. There was also a problem with premodern slavery: Even at its worst, it was based on social relationships. For most of human history, slavery was used either primarily as a method of controlling and punishing a conquered people or criminals, or as a way of paying off debt or getting ahead. The latter is referred to as indentured servitude. People would contract themselves into slavery, typically for 7 years, in return for a specific service, like passage to America, or to pay off debt. Notice that whether this type of slavery was used as a result of war or crime or economic need, it maintained and was based upon social relationships, but not so with chattel slavery. Under the capitalist notion of property, it became possible for people to be defined as property, and there are no associated obligations. The key, then, to black slavery was to define race as a natural, God-given distinction that was immutable and characterized blacks as less than human.

This sort of thing was distinctly possible at the dawn of modernity. Remember that modernity brought a fundamental shift in the way people were viewed. Prior to modernity, people were subjects under the rule of emperors

and monarchs. While rule was absolute in such systems, subjects were also seen as charges—people who needed to be cared for and guided like children. Subjects were not only ruled over; they were also *seen as incapable of ruling themselves*. Modernity changed all that. People began to be understood as having rights as well as having the mental and ethical capabilities to make reasoned decisions for themselves and thus society. It's out of this caldron of new beliefs and values that true freedom could arise—humankind is free, not because some government makes it so, but because God endowed humans with inalienable rights. Notice how spiritual, biological, and social forces come together here: Because of our biological birth as humans, God bestowed upon us the spiritual gift and responsibility of free will, which is to be used to enrich human existence. Notice also how these biological and spiritual narratives are legitimations. You'll recall from Weber that legitimations are stories that undergird power relations; they provide an ethical basis for belief in authority. These same sorts of narratives were used to deny blacks their human nature and thus their rights. Du Bois sees these narratives at work in history and representation (defined below). The insidious thing about historical legitimation is that it can work through omission.

History as Ideology

The first historian was Thucydides (460 BCE–395 BCE), who wrote *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, but history took on added significance under modernity. Before the advent of the nation-state, people were loyal to immediate local groups or to their religion. Nation-states break these distinctions down: They cover large territories, embrace diverse peoples, and de-center religion. One of the things that defines a nation and creates a sense of identity and solidarity is a common history. National histories, then, act as narratives that bring people together, create national identities, and legitimate common values and institutional arrangements.

In this way, history plays an important role in legitimation and creating a sense of reality. For example, why does marriage exist? No one subjectively knows—none of us was there when it was instituted and thus we don't have firsthand knowledge. Instead, we have historical accounts and stories of how and why it came about. Because we weren't there, history takes on objective qualities and thus feels like fact. This facticity legitimates our institutions and social arrangements unquestionably. But, Du Bois tells us, current national history is written from a politicized point of view. Because people of color were not seen as having the same status and rights as white people, our history did not see them. We have been blind to their contributions and their place in society. Du Bois calls this kind of ideological history “lies

agreed upon.” Du Bois, however, holds out the possibility of a scientific history. This kind of history would be guided by ethical standards in research and interpretation, and the record of human action would be written with accuracy and faithfulness of detail. Du Bois envisions this history acting as a guidepost and measuring rod for national conduct. Du Bois (1935/1996b) presents this formulation of history as a choice: We can either use history “for our pleasure and amusement, for inflating our national ego,” or we can use it as a moral guide and handbook for future generations (p. 440).

Representation

History is a kind of representation. To represent means to depict, describe, image, interpret, portray, render, or express. As we saw in Chapter 2, our social world is a symbolic, represented world. In that chapter, we also saw that the meaning any sign or symbol conveys isn’t an intrinsic characteristic of the sign or the object. So, for example, the meaning of money isn’t part of the paper we use to represent money, just as history doesn’t represent a chronological record of facts and events. The question becomes, then, what do cultural symbols and practices represent? The short answer is that they represent the social world, along with its values and relationships. Sometimes what’s represented are cultural images that can be bought and sold. For example, the image of the woman on this month’s *Cosmopolitan* magazine doesn’t reflect what real women look like, nor does it represent their lifeworld, but it does represent and stimulate a desire to be such a woman. This representation, however, isn’t simply this empty image of capitalism. There are cultural structures and discourses of power that lie beneath the gloss.

In speaking about the representations of his time, Du Bois (1920/1996c) says, “The whites obviously seldom picture brown and yellow folk, but for five hundred centuries they have exhausted every ingenuity of trick, of ridicule and caricature on black folk” (pp. 59–60). The effect of such representation is cultural and psychological: The disenfranchised read the representations and become ashamed of their own image. Du Bois gives an example from his own work at *The Crisis* (the official publication of the NAACP). *The Crisis* put a picture of a black person on the cover of the magazine. When the readers saw the representation, they perceived it (or consumed it) as “the caricature that white folks intend when they make a black face.” Du Bois queried some of his office staff about the reaction. They said the problem wasn’t that the person was black; the problem was that the person was *too black*. To this, Du Bois (1920/1996c) replied, “Nonsense! Do white people complain because their pictures are too white?” (p. 60).

Du Bois is seeing the differences between denotative and connotative meanings. One of the definitions of denote is to announce. So, the denotative meaning is that which the sign clearly announces. The literal meaning of connote is to mark; words can thus be marked by additional, connotative meanings. A good illustration is our *Cosmo* woman: The surface meaning is woman, but behind the image is an entire world of beliefs, ideas, values, behaviors, and relationships that have been generated—or encoded—to induce people to buy into the image. This connotative meaning then acts as a myth that delineates gender: Women must be attractive and sexually available, women are the objects of gaze, women are to be pursued and conquered, and so on.

Du Bois is marking these sorts of distinctions here for race. We use the term *white* to analogously refer to everything that is good, pure, and decent. The term *black* is likewise reserved for things or people that are despicable, ignorant, and depressing. In our cultural language, we also perceive these two categories as mutually exclusive. For example, we will use the phrase “this issue isn’t black or white” to refer to something that is undecided, that can’t fit into simple, clear, and mutually exclusive categories. The area in between is a gray, no-person’s land. It is culturally logical, then, to perceive unchangeable differences between the black and white races, which is also the logic behind the “one drop rule” (as mentioned in Chapter 4, a historical slang term used to capture the idea that a person is considered black if he or she has any black ancestor). Du Bois (1920/1996a) refers to this as the theory of human culture that has worked its way into our daily thought: “Everything great, good, efficient, fair, and honorable is ‘white’; everything mean, bad, blundering, cheating, and dishonorable is ‘yellow’; a bad taste is ‘brown’; and the devil is ‘black’” (p. 505).

The Importance of Identity

Du Bois saw the importance of culture in the formation of identity long before we had theoretical terms to talk about such things. We can define identity simply as a sort of correspondence between the individual and types of persons, or roles and status positions, available in culture and social networks. For example, you identify yourself as a student. Student is a type of person that is available to you and others culturally and socially. It exists apart from you, and will continue to exist long after you’re gone. When you identify yourself as a student, you’re accepting the status position and roles that come with that kind of person. You’re saying that part of you corresponds to that identity. Identities, then, are about existence. You exist as a student, as a male, as a bisexual, as a Christian, as a son, as an African American, and so on. You would be hard-pressed to name a part of you that

isn't tied to some identity—identities give you a way of understanding and guiding your existence. Your subjective experience can only become objectively real as you locate it within an already existing identity framework. Identities are also how you understand and make meaningfully real the actions, thoughts, and feelings of others.

Now, imagine a situation where the strongest identities available to you were constructed by people who denied some or all of your humanity. Imagine a culture that deprived you of all that we just said; your very existence as a vibrant, living human being with full potential for expression was denied by the culture you found yourself in and by the social practices and relations of those who held power. In speaking to such a situation, an African living under colonial rule, Franz Fanon (1952/1967), cries out, “Out of the blackest part of my soul, across the zebra striping of my mind, surges this desire to be suddenly *white*. I wish to be acknowledged not as *black* but as *white*” (p. 63, emphasis added). W. E. B. Du Bois (1903/1996d), living as a black man in the United States, echoes, “Between me and the other world this is ever an unasked question. . . . How does it feel to be a problem?” (p. 101).

Double Consciousness

Double consciousness comes out of the interplay of identity and representation. As you know, consciousness is the distinctly human awareness of the world. It is, in fact, self-awareness, a reflexive move through which you situate your self in the social context. One way to understand this—one that fits in well with Du Bois' work—is through Charles Horton Cooley's (1902) theory of the looking glass self. A looking glass is another term for mirror. Cooley's use of that phrase helps us see that the self is reflexive, or, put differently, the self is born and exists in the reflections that others give it.

Cooley (1902) argues that there are three steps to this mirroring process. First, we imagine what we look like to other people. This is obviously the reflection of the looking glass. Note that Cooley didn't say we actually perceive how others see and judge us; rather, we imagine their perceptions and judgments. Yet this imagination is not based on pure speculation. It is based on commonly available social identities that contain images and scripts associated with a cultural identity. Second, we imagine how they feel about how we look. Identities always have expectations and evaluative standards associated with them. When people identify us as a certain kind of person, they then expect us to behave accordingly. These evaluations are not disinterested but are laced with emotional investment because all identities come in clusters, not individually. Thus, identities are always dependent upon the other identities in a set, as the identity of professor is dependent upon that of student, or,

more pointedly, the identity of racial superiority is dependent on the existence of inferiors. Third, we have an emotional response to their evaluative feelings. That emotional response is either pride or shame.

For blacks in America, Du Bois argues, there are two looking glass selves—a double consciousness. On the one hand, there is the identity mirror that exists due to legal status and citizenry, that of being an American. However, there is also the mirror that white superiority holds up to blacks. This mirror's reflection is clearly inferior to that of American. Those two mirrors thus form a double consciousness in African Americans,

[a] sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois, 1903/1996d, p. 102)

Race and Class—William Julius Wilson

William Julius Wilson (1935–) was born in Derry Township, Pennsylvania. Wilson attended Wilberforce and Bowling Green Universities before completing his PhD in sociology at Washington State University in 1966. His first professorship was at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and he joined the faculty of the University of Chicago in 1972. There he held the position of professor and was the director of the Center for the Study of Urban Inequality. He moved to Harvard in 1996, where he currently holds the Lewis P. and Linda L. Geysler University Professorship. Wilson has received many top honors in his career, including the 1998 National Medal of Science (the highest such honor given in the United States), and he was named by *Time* magazine as one of America's 25 Most Influential People in 1996. He has authored several groundbreaking and significant books including *The Declining Significance of Race*, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, and *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*.

Wilson gives us a unique and complex way of seeing racial inequality. Obviously, his concern is the oppression of black people in the United States, but to simply see this inequality as a product of racism is too simplistic. Wilson argues that racism as such requires a particular kind of structural configuration among the state, the economy, and social relations. This triangle of relations comes from Marx. Wilson's approach is to first understand the state as a relatively independent actor that can limit capitalism as well as support it. Wilson also questions whether racism is always the causal force in the

oppression of blacks. In order to answer that question, Wilson analyzes black inequality in the United States from slavery to the current system.

In the end, Wilson argues that racism as a causal factor in determining the overall condition of blacks in the United States has been declining in significance since the Civil War. To document the causal force of racism, Wilson tracks the changing relationships between the economy and the state. We'll see that to be effective, racism needs a particular kind of institutional configuration. In its absence, other factors become important for influencing the position of blacks in the United States—in particular, a split labor market and class. As we discuss Wilson's theory, keep in mind that he is not arguing that racism is no longer present or important. Racism is still a problem, but Wilson is pointing out that because of shifts in the relationship between the economy and the state, the *relative importance* of race has declined over time and has been replaced by class-based issues.

Concepts and Theory: American Racial History

Wilson divides U.S. history into three economic phases and demonstrates that different theories are best at explaining different kinds of economic race relations. There's an important insight into theory that we can glean from Wilson's approach. Most theories contain scope conditions; very few are claimed to be a "theory of everything." Scope conditions limit the applicability of any theory, and understanding the scope conditions is a part of evaluation in critical thinking. Most students understand that scope conditions can be set by topic. So, for example, Mead's social psychological theory is probably not good for explaining globalization. But scope conditions can also include issues of time or historical change. In Wilson's case, he uses three different theories—Marx's state-capitalist collusion, split labor market theory, and his own class-state theory—to explain race relations for the three different time periods: pre-U.S. Civil War, post-Civil War through the 1930s, and post-World War II.

The Plantation Economy

You'll recall that Marx's theory argues that capitalists as the dominant class use their power to exploit workers and to enlist the state's active support. In this model, the state and economy are in collusion to exploit the worker. Wilson argues that Marx's theory is best for explaining the racial caste system that worked under the American plantation economy, at least in the South. This type of non-manufacturing, agrarian society is characterized by a simple

division of labor and a small aristocracy. In such a society, there is very little if any job market competition. During this period in the southern United States, working whites were either craftspeople or serfs, and blacks were generally held as slaves. In addition, in a plantation economy there is a vast distance between the upper and lower classes. Because of this distance, there is little contact between classes, and what contact does happen is highly ritualized and subject to strong social norms of manners and etiquette. These conditions result in little to no class conflict, with the white workers having “little opportunity to challenge the control of the aristocracy” (Wilson, 1980, p. 13).

In such systems of production, the aristocracy dominates both economic and political life. In the United States, the white, landed elite were able to secure laws and policies that were extremely favorable to their economic interests, and they were able to propagate a ruling ideology concerning the differences between the races. As in classic Marxist thought, the system of production and the state formed a mutually reinforcing cycle. As a result, “the system of slavery severely restricted black vertical and horizontal mobility” (Wilson, 1980, p. 24), and race relations with elite whites took the form of paternalism (the care and control of subordinates as a father). An important issue to notice is who benefits from the system: In this case, it’s the capitalist class.

Post–Civil War to New Deal Politics

After the U.S. Civil War, the industrialization of the economy grew quickly and the Southern economy in particular expanded rapidly. In addition, the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution abolished slavery and granted civil rights to the black population. As a result, from the latter part of the nineteenth century through the 1930s, there were massive changes in the system of production and race relations. This period marks a shift from race relations based on a paternal, racial caste system to a more class-based labor market. In the South, economic expansion greatly increased the political power of the white working class. Blacks were freed but had very little economic or political power, as white workers attempted to control the newly available skilled and unskilled positions. The outcome was an elaborate system of Jim Crow segregation that was reinforced with a strong ideology of biological racism. The name “Jim Crow” doesn’t refer to an actual person but to the stereotypical characterization of blacks in minstrel shows at the time. The idea of Jim Crow segregation references the laws that many states enacted after the Civil War in order to control blacks and preserve white privilege. Jim Crow segregation generally benefited the higher-paid white working class by keeping blacks out of the competition for jobs, especially in the South.

The North experienced a different configuration. Due to high levels of migration of blacks from the South and high immigration rates of European whites, blacks most often entered the job market as strikebreakers. White workers would strike for better wages or working conditions, and management would bring in black workers to keep production going. In some cases, management would preempt a strike by hiring black workers on permanently. This move obviously created high tension between black and white workers, which culminated in a number of race riots in 1917 and 1919. The Great Depression of the 1930s shifted things considerably for both black and white workers in the North. During the Depression, there was a strong movement toward unionizing. The unions themselves began to recruit black workers. As a result, black antagonism toward the unions was reduced, black and white workers saw themselves as united in their stand for economic reforms, and the practice of employers using blacks as strikebreakers was eliminated.

Wilson (1980) argues that race relations in this time period are best explained using split labor market theory. This theory assumes that, in general, business would support a free and open market where all laborers compete against one another regardless of race. This kind of competition would result in an overall higher level of exploitation because capitalists could pit blacks against whites. In addition, split labor theory proposes three key classes, rather than the two of orthodox Marxist theory: the capital business class, higher-paid labor, and cheaper labor. Understanding that there is another interest in the labor market besides capitalists, and knowing that capitalists would benefit from an open rather than restricted job market, we see that segregation benefited the white working class rather than capitalists.

Race, then, became a tool of the higher-paid working class to preserve its own economic interests. The white higher-paid working class promoted racist ideologies and discriminatory practices in order to monopolize skilled labor and management positions, prevent blacks from obtaining necessary skills and education, and deny blacks political resources. Thus, while race was still an issue, it originated with white workers rather than collusion between capitalists and the state. Also notice that class became increasingly important during this time. Labor markets are primarily split over class, not race. Race thus became a marker for class antagonisms rather than for racism itself.

World War II and Beyond

Before describing this time period, let's be clear about Wilson's theoretical argument. It's a structural argument, which means that structural arrangements are seen as determining social relations. For Marx, the driving structure is the

economy: The means of production determine the relations of production. As we've seen, Wilson adds an independent state to this theory. This means that the interrelations between the state and the economy structure our social relationships, in this case race relations and black inequality. Wilson argues that the role of the state continued to change from the classic Marxist model. World War II brought a ban on discrimination in defense and government agencies. This move also provided for on-the-job training for blacks. Black workforce participation continued to expand under the equal employment legislation of the 1950s and 1960s and growing affirmative action programs. These changes obviously didn't come as a result of the government's desire for equality, but in response to the civil rights movement, which also boasted black political involvement. But regardless of the source, the state took successive steps to address black inequality.

In addition, the trend toward industrialization that began in the North prior to the Civil War expanded geographically and exponentially from the 1940s onward. This facilitated a shift in the black population toward urbanization, away from rural, agricultural settings and low-paying farm jobs and toward cities and industries with better-paying jobs. A large black population thus began to develop in urban centers, which in turn prompted an increase in the number of black business owners and black professionals oriented toward serving the needs of the growing black community. As a result of affirmative action and these economic and population shifts, more and more businesses were seeking black employees. For example, during the 10-year period between 1960 and 1970, the average number of corporate recruitment visits to traditionally black colleges jumped from 4 to 297; in some southern colleges, the number rose from zero to 600 corporate visits. During this time, there was also a jump in the percentage of blacks working in government jobs, rising from 13 percent to almost 22 percent, and the overall percentage of black males in white-collar positions rose from 16 percent to 24 percent (Wilson, 1980, pp. 88–109).

However, the United States began to noticeably shift toward a postindustrial economy beginning in the 1970s. This move away from manufacturing and toward service- and knowledge-based goods brought the decentralization of U.S. businesses, further expansion in government and corporate sectors, and demographic shifts from urban to suburban settings (sometimes referred to as "white flight"). These economic and population changes created a situation in which city tax resources either declined, or increased at slower-than-necessary rates. At the same time, and due to the same social factors, cities experienced a sharp increase in expenditures. This situation obviously created problems for municipal services, such as public assistance and urban schools.

The picture that Wilson gives us of the time following World War II involves two opposing forces. On the one hand, political and economic opportunities for blacks increased dramatically. Through the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, the black working class experienced increasing opportunities and urbanization, which at the time was a positive move. On the other hand, from the 1970s on, there was the decentralization of American business, decreases in manufacturing and increases in government and corporate jobs, and white flight from urban to suburban settings. These overlapping yet opposing forces fragmented the black labor force and resulted in “vastly different mobility opportunities for different groups in the black population” (Wilson, 1980, p. 121).

Those African Americans who were already moving toward the middle class were poised to take advantage of the economic and political shifts. They continued to experience upward mobility and “unprecedented job opportunities in the corporate and government sectors” (Wilson, 1980, p. 121). These middle-class blacks, like their white counterparts, have been able to move to more affluent neighborhoods. The other segment of the black labor force, however, has become locked into the cycle of inner-city problems: declining city revenues in the face of increasing social needs. These are “the relatively poorly trained blacks of the inner city, including the growing number of younger blacks emerging from inferior ghetto schools” (Wilson, 1980, p. 121) who are locked into low-paying jobs with high turnover rates and little hope of advancement.

Based on this theoretical understanding of race relations and black inequality, Wilson (1997) argues that our very best efforts at ending such inequality should be aimed at improving the class opportunities of Americans as a whole, especially as we move into a postindustrial, globalized economy. While these efforts would alleviate the economic suffering of many,

Their most important contribution would be their effect on the children of the ghetto, who would be able to anticipate a future of economic mobility and share the hopes and aspirations that so many of their fellow citizens experience as part of the American way of life. (p. 238)

Market Moralities and Black Nihilism—Cornel West

Cornel West (1953–) was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He began attending Harvard University at 17 and graduated 3 years later, magna cum laude. His degree was in Near Eastern languages and literature. West obtained his PhD at Princeton, where he studied with Richard Rorty, a well-known pragmatist. West has taught at Union Theological Seminary, Yale Divinity School, the University of Paris, and Harvard, and is currently at Princeton. Among his most

significant works are *Race Matters* and *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*. His recent works include *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* and a rap CD, *Never Forget: A Journey of Revelations*.

West picks up Wilson's theme but moves it into the realm of culture. West, then, can be seen as furthering Du Bois' analysis into the beginning of the twenty-first century. Since the 1960s, the upwardly mobile black population in the United States has increasingly become the target of capitalist markets. Capitalists have spent over two centuries marketing to whites, but blacks have constituted a strong and viable market for only the past 40 years or so. Given the historical background of the black community in the United States, this concentrated marketing has had unique effects on African Americans of all classes. In order to see into this distinctive process, West creates a unique theoretical perspective by blending critical Marxism, pragmatism, existentialism, and Christianity.

Concepts and Theory: Market Forces—Market Moralities

As a way of distributing goods and services, markets have been a part of human history for millennia. Capitalist markets, however, have a couple of unique characteristics. Modern capitalism, you'll remember, is defined by the endless accumulation of capital to create more capital. This drive implies that the need for profit is insatiable and thus continues to increase. Because markets are the mechanism through which profit and capital are gained, modern capitalist markets are intrinsically expansive: They expand vertically (through accessories for an existing product), horizontally (producing new products within a market), and geographically (extending existing markets to new social groups). A second unique characteristic of modern capitalism is an essential aspect of markets: Capitalists are driven to create a never-ending stream of new or different commodities. Keep in mind that commodification is a process that converts more and more of the human lifeworld into something that can be bought and sold, and it creates new "needs" within the consumer. Human beings are not just the only animal capable of economic production; we are also the only species able to create new psychological drives and needs for the new products. The primary tools through which these needs are created are mass media and advertising.

In our current society, expansive markets, commodification, and advertising have dramatically affected culture. In order to see this, let's set up a kind of ideal type we'll call "grounded culture." The primary functions of grounded culture are communication and the formation of social bonds. In traditional social groups, grounded culture was the norm; it emerged out of

face-to-face interactions and was generally unmediated. There were few if any written texts and most if not all communication took place in real social situations. There was then a strong correlation between culture and social reality: All communicative acts—including speech, gift giving, rituals, exchanges, and so on—were directly related to and expressive of social relationships.

Expanding markets, commodification, advertising, and mass media have emptied grounded culture of this type of social reality. In order to expand, markets and commodification reach into our lifeworld and create products where there used to be symbolic value. Let me give you an example: Back in the 1960s, hippies began wearing tie-dyed T-shirts. These shirts were hand-made, and only hippies wore them. The shirts also had very specific meanings attached to them: They most directly represented the experience of taking hallucinogenic drugs and the free-flowing nature of hippie life. As a piece of culture, the tie-dyed T-shirt did exactly what culture is intended for: It communicated meaning and social connections that arose out of real group experiences. Today, however, you can buy a tie-dyed shirt at Wal-Mart, and it has no clear meaning. The meaning has been emptied out because the shirt is now a commodity, rather than a group-specific sign. Markets and commodification thus trivialize meaning.

Advertising generally, and most specifically in postindustrial society, reduces commodities from their use-value to pure sign-value. Use-value is how much a product is actually worth in real-life terms—the value of a product is its use in your life. Exchange-value, on the other hand, is how much we pay for products. As you can imagine, we pay more for commodities in market exchange than they're worth in real terms. But Marx didn't live in a society utterly given over to commodification and advertising. "Today what we are experiencing is the absorption of all virtual modes of expression into that of advertising" (Baudrillard, 1981/1994, p. 87). Advertising does not seek to convey information about a product's use-value; rather, advertising places a product in a field of unrelated signs in order to enhance its cultural appearance. As a result of advertising, we tend to relate to the fragmented sign context rather than the use-value. Think about the example of clothing. The actual use-value of clothing is to cover us and keep us warm. Yet right now I'm looking at an ad for clothing in *Rolling Stone*, and it doesn't mention anything about protection from the elements or avoiding public nudity. The ad is interesting in that it doesn't even present itself as advertising at all. It looks more like a picture of a rock band on tour. The advertising, then, is selling the sign-value of these articles of clothing as part of the rock-and-roll lifestyle (which is mythical in its own right).

Thus, in the consumer society, social relations are read through a system of commodified signs rather than symbolic exchange. Commodities become

the sign-vehicles in modernity that carry identity and meaning (or the lack thereof). For example, in modern society, the automobile is a portable, personal status symbol. Driving an SUV means something different from driving a Volkswagen Beetle, which conveys something different from driving a hybrid. As this system becomes more important and elaborated, a new kind of labor eventually supplants physical labor: the labor of consumption. This doesn't mean the work involved in finding the best deal. The labor of consumption is the work a person does to place him- or herself within and read the signs of an identity that is established and understood in a matrix of commodified signs.

All of this has a general, overall effect. Cultural signs are no longer moored to any social or physical reality; all of them are fair game for capitalism's manipulation of desire. Any cultural idea, image, sign, or symbol is apt to be pulled out of its social context and used to advertise and to place the individual in the position of sign-consumer. As these signs are lifted out of the social, they lose all possibility of stable reference. They may be used for anything, for any purpose. Moreover, the more media that are present, and the faster information is made available (via cell phones, texting, instant messaging, DSL computer connections, and so forth), the faster the signs will circulate and the greater will be the appropriation of indigenous signs for capitalist gain, until there remains no sign that has not been set loose and colonized by capitalism run amok. All that remains is a yawning abyss of meaninglessness—a placeless surface that is incapable of holding personal identity, self, or society.

Black Nihilism

While the description of capitalist culture holds for everyone in it, it is especially significant for black Americans. Since civil rights and the rise of the black middle class, the African American community as a whole has been subject to what West calls "market saturation." West argues that being a focus for market activity, commodification, and advertising has changed black culture in America. Prior to market saturation, blacks had a long history of community and tradition. They were equipped with a kind of cultural armor that came in large part via black civic and religious institutions. This armor, used to survive first under slavery and then under segregation, consisted of clear and strong structures of meaning and feeling that "embodied values of service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence" (West, 2001, p. 24). However, as a result of the twin structural influences of civil rights and upward mobility, blacks moved out of black communities and churches, and the structural bases for cultural armor were thus weakened.

In place of cultural armor, blacks have since been inundated with the market moralities of conspicuous consumption and material calculus (value established through material goods rather than ethical or intrinsic characteristics). The culture of consumption orients people to the present moment and to the intensification of pleasure. This culture of pleasure uses seduction to capitalize “on every opportunity to make money” (West, 2001, p. 26). It overwhelms people in a moment where the past and future are swallowed up in a never-ending “repetition of hedonistically driven pleasure” (p. 26). Further, the material calculus argues that the greatest value comes from profit-driven calculations. Every other consideration, such as love and service to others, is hidden under the bushel of profit.

As I've mentioned, most of these cultural ramifications of markets and commodification have also been present in other groups. But in West's (2001) opinion, two issues make these effects particularly destructive for blacks. First, black upward mobility and the presence of the black middle class affect only a small segment of the population. Most of the black citizens of the United States still suffer economically, yet are still subject to market saturation. The other issue that makes the black experience of market saturation distinct is the “accumulated effect of the black wounds and scars suffered in a white-dominated society” (p. 28). In other words, there is a historical and cultural heritage, no matter how much the immediacy of market saturation and pleasure tries to deny it: Much of the history and economic prosperity of the United States was built on over the 188 years of black oppression, from 1776 to 1964.

Obviously, these two factors influence one another. Healing from past wounds can only take place in a present that is both nurturing and repentant, a place that does not replicate hurts from the past. According to West (2001), this isn't happening for blacks in America: Cultural beliefs and media images continue to attack “black intelligence, black ability, black beauty, and black character in subtle and not-so-subtle ways” (p. 27). Furthermore, as noted earlier, black upward mobility is still limited. In the abstract, West's argument so far looks like this: black upward mobility + increased civil rights → weakening of civic and religious community base → substitution of market moralities for cultural armor—all of which takes place within the framework of the black legacy in the United States and continued oppression. “Under these circumstances, black existential angst derives from the lived experience of ontological wounds and emotional scars” (p. 27). The “ontological wounds” that West is speaking of come from the ways in which black reality and existence have been denied throughout the history of the United States.

In general, existential angst refers to the deep and profound insecurity and dread that comes from living as a human being—basically, our anguish over life and death: What is the meaning of life; and what happens after we die? In traditional societies, this angst was addressed through religion, faith, and deeply embedded social structures. In contemporary society, it is left to the person to resolve. West employs the idea of angst to describe the uniquely black experience of living under American capitalism and democracy. Black experience is intensely historical, yet the past and the future are buried under the market-driven pleasures of the moment; black experience is fundamentally communitarian, yet that civic and religious base is overwhelmed by market individualisms; black experience is painfully oppressive, yet it is countered only by increasing target marketing and consumerism. Thus, West argues that the result of market saturation and moralities for blacks is a spiritual condition of despair and insecurity. West refers to this as “black nihilism.”

Concepts and Theory: Black Cultural Armor

Because blacks no longer have the necessary culture, community, or leadership, this angst cannot be used productively. Righteous anger, turned against the oppressor in hopes of liberation, becomes increasingly difficult to muster and express. Black nihilism denies the hope in which this anger would be founded. With no viable path, righteous anger is turned inward and expressed in black-against-black violence, especially against black women and children. However, nihilism can be treated. West argues that it is a disease of the soul, one that cannot be cured completely as there is always the threat of relapse. This disease must be met with love and care, not arguments and analysis. What is required is a new kind of politics, a politics of conversion, which reaches into the subversive memory of black people to find modes of valuation and resistance—a politics centered on a love ethic that is energized by concern for others and the recognition of one’s own worth. This kind of politics requires prophetic black leaders who will bring “hope for the future and a meaning to struggle” (West, 2001, p. 28). There is, however, a crisis in American black leadership.

For West, strong leaders come out of vibrant communities. With the breakdown of the black community, black leaders don’t have a social base that is in touch with the real issues. There is thus no nurturing of a critical consciousness in the heart of black America. Rather, much of the new black leadership in America comes out of the middle class, and black middle-class life is “principally a matter of professional conscientiousness,

personal accomplishment, and cautious adjustment” (West, 2001, p. 57). West maintains that what is lacking in contemporary black leadership is anger and humility; what is present in overabundance is status anxiety and concerns for personal careers.

West (2001) argues that there are three kinds of black leaders in society today: race-effacing managerial leaders, race-identifying protest leaders, and race-transcending prophetic leaders. The managerial/elitist model is growing rapidly in the United States. This style of leadership is one that conforms fully to bureaucratic norms. The leader navigates the political scene through political savvy and personal diplomacy, and race is downplayed in the hopes of gaining a white constituency. The second type of leader, the protest leader, capitalizes on the race issue but in a very limited way, resulting in racial reasoning—a way of thinking that is more concerned with clearly black issues rather than social justice. In racial reasoning, the discourse of race centers on black authenticity: the notion that some black experiences and people are really black while others aren’t. Racial reasoning results in Black Nationalist sentiments that “promote and encourage black cultural conservatism, especially black patriarchal (and homophobic) power” (West, 2001, p. 37). Closing the ranks thus creates a hierarchy of acceptability within a black context.

These two kinds of black leaders have promoted political cynicism among black people, and have dampened “the fire of enraged local activists who have made a difference” (West, 2001, p. 68). Part of black nihilism is fed by this sense of ineffectuality, of being lost in a storm too big to change. In this context, the liberal focus on economic issues is rejected as simplistic. Likewise, the conservative critique of black immorality is dismissed as ignoring public responsibility for the ethical state of the union. In their places, West proposes a democratic, pragmatically driven dialogue. West doesn’t propose absolutes; instead, he gives a prophetic call to radical democracy and faith, to finally take seriously the declaration that all people are created equal.

What is needed, according to West, is black leadership founded on moral reasoning rather than racial reasoning. Moral reasoning is the ethical center of race-transcending, prophetic leaders. Prophetic leadership does not rest on any kind of racial supremacy, black or white. It uses a coalition strategy, which seeks out the antiracist traditions found in all peoples. It refuses to divide black people over other categories of distinction and rejects patriarchy and homophobia. Prophetic, moral reasoning is also based on a mature black identity of self-love and self-respect that refuses to put “any group of people on the pedestal or in the gutter” (West, 2001, p. 43). Moral reasoning also uses subversive memory, “one of the most precious heritages [black

people] have” (West, 1999, p. 221). It recalls the modes of struggling and resisting that affirmed community, faith, hope, and love, rather than the contemporary market morality of individualism, conspicuous consumption, and hedonistic indulgence.

Both the coalition strategy and mature black identity are built at the local level. West (1999) sees local communities as working “from below and sometimes beneath modernity” (p. 221); socially embedded networks mitigate the effects of market saturation. It is within vibrant communities and through public discourse that local leaders are held accountable and earn respect and love. Such leaders merit national attention from the black community and the general public, according to West. Together, moral reasoning, coalition strategy, and mature black identity create the black cultural armor. West’s use of “armor” is a biblical reference. Christians are told in Ephesians 6:13 (New International Version) to “put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.” There, the threat was the powers of darkness in heavenly places; here, the threat is black nihilism in the heart of democracy. These two battles are at least parallel if not identical for West. The fight for true democracy is a spiritual battle for the souls of humankind that have been dulled by market saturation, especially the souls of black America. West (2001) exhorts black America to put on its cultural armor—a return to community life and moral reasoning along with coalition strategy and mature black identity—so as to “beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness” and create anew “cultural structures of meaning and feeling” (p. 23).

The Craft of Citizenship

Race

The Basics: Comprehension and Explanation

- Identify the main concerns and questions of each theorist. With those questions in mind, write a two- to three-sentence statement that captures their theoretical response.
- Make a detailed list of the primary theoretical concepts each theorist employs. Then define the most important concepts in Du Bois’ theory of cultural oppression, Wilson’s theory of race and class, and West’s theory of black nihilism.

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- According to Du Bois, how does culture work to oppress blacks?
- Explain how class is becoming increasingly important in U.S. race relations. Be certain to explain how racism works in each time period.
- Explain how market saturation is affecting African Americans today. Don't forget to explain how market saturation came about.
- How is black nihilism overcome?

Skill Set 1: Inference and Application

- What is it about early modern structures and culture that provided the basis for racism?
- If you're African American, explore how your values and sense of self are impacted by market moralities. If you're not African American, how have market moralities affected you?
 - *Helpful hints:* Like the implications about religious beliefs, this requires you to make a problem out of something you may take for granted and feel as if it were natural. However, while this is difficult, it is also the most authentic use of civic sociology and what C. W. Mills (1959) calls the sociological imagination: "The first fruit of this imagination—and the first lesson of the social science that embodies it—is the idea that *the individual can understand his own experience* and gauge his own fate only by locating himself with his period" (p. 5, emphasis added).
- In what ways do your buying practices perpetuate racism globally?
- Du Bois holds out the hope that history can be told in a way that doesn't deny the experience, existence, or contribution of any group. Describe the perspective from which such a history could be written.
 - *Helpful hints:* Go back in the text and consider the ideas of any who theorized about culture in modernity. What kind of culture do those theorists see as necessary for modern democracy? Apply those values and ideals to writing history.
- Explain the policy implications of Wilson's theory.
- What does West's critique of political leadership imply generally about what we should expect from leaders in a democratic society? Analyze the current national leadership using West's criteria. Think especially about Barack Obama. Where would you place him in West's scheme? Search the Internet to discover West's opinion of Obama.

Skill Set 2: Interpretation, Analysis, Evaluation, Synthesis

- Evaluate Wilson's class-based proposals using West's theory of black nihilism.
- Interpret and evaluate Wilson's state-economy model using Habermas' theory of organized capitalism. According to these two theories, what is gained and lost as the state becomes more involved in the economy?
- Using Dahrendorf's theory of bureaucratic society, explain why the number of race-effacing managerial leaders is growing rapidly in the United States.
- Explain West's notion of race-transcendent leadership and moral reasoning using the theoretical explanation of generalized culture found in Parsons and Durkheim (and implicit in Bellah).
- Synthesize Du Bois, Wilson, and West into a general theory of racial inequality.
 - *Helpful hints:* As in our work with gender, these theories have fairly clear theoretical inroads, or connections, that you can develop. Think in big terms about what each theory brings, and you should see the connections. It should be especially helpful to keep in mind the distinction between culture and structure.
- Compare and contrast Foucault's and West's theories of subjective experience. How can these theories be brought together to give us greater insight into how individual, subjective experiences are formed in this period of modernity?

