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in the
United States

From the 1960s to the 1990s

SECOND EDITION

Michael Omi & Howard Winant

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Racial Formation

of structural inequality and invidious racial representation, which has been confronted during the post-World War II period with an opposition more serious and effective than any it had faced before. As we will survey in the chapters to follow, the result is a deeply ambiguous and contradictory spectrum of racial projects, unremittingly conflictual racial politics, and confused and ambivalent racial identities of all sorts. We begin this discussion by addressing racial politics and the state.

The Racial State

Introduction: The Trajectory of Racial Politics

Two recent incidents reveal some of the ironies and incongruities of contemporary racial politics:

- In 1989, the Republican National Committee established a tax-exempt foundation called Fairness for the 90s. The group's mission was to provide money and technical assistance to black and Latino organizations seeking to create minority-dominated legislative and congressional districts. In anticipation of the legislative redistricting that would follow the 1990 census, the Republicans offered black and Latino leaders and organizers the prospect of creating "safe seats" for minority legislators. The Republicans went so far as to ally themselves with black and Latino plaintiffs in redistricting suits brought under the Voting Rights Act. What accounted for the strange bedfellows of redistricting politics? The answer was simple: Republicans sought to segregate racial minority voters into separate districts, to divide white from nonwhite Democrats, and so to increase their opportunities to win legislative seats in adjoining white districts.¹
- In the late 1980s, Asian American academic leaders, civil rights organizations, and university students began to suspect that informal quotas for Asian American admissions had been put in place

in the leading U.S. universities in violation of civil rights laws. As they mobilized to confront this situation and initiated negotiations with university administrators on various campuses, they suddenly received support from an unsolicited, and unexpected, quarter. In November, 1988, Ronald Reagan's neoconservative Deputy Attorney General for Civil Rights, William Bradford Reynolds, not only agreed that such quotas had been established, but blamed these restrictive practices on the existence of affirmative action admissions policies. "The phenomenon of a 'ceiling' on Asian American admissions is the inevitable result of the 'floor' that has been built for a variety of other favored racial groups," Reynolds said. Asian Americans were alarmed that the issue of "quotas" would be used as part of a broader attack on preferential policies for under-represented minorities.²

As these examples illustrate, advocacy groups and movement organizations which seek to represent racially defined minority interests, mobilize minority group members politically, and articulate minority viewpoints, are frequently faced with bitterly ironic political choices. No sooner did egalitarian and antidiscrimination policies emerge from the political tempests of the 1960s than they began to "decay." From the early 1970s of Richard Nixon to the early 1990s of Bill Clinton, the state has sought to absorb, to marginalize, and to transform (or "rearticulate") the meaning of the reforms won in the earlier decade.

How have these transformations occurred? What are the dynamics of the relationships between the state and racial minorities? Why does a pattern of alternating activism and quiescence characterize both state racial activities and movement ebbs and flows? In this chapter we consider these questions in an effort to understand the *trajectory* which contemporary racial politics—and thus racial formation processes—follow in the contemporary U.S.

By "trajectory" we mean the pattern of conflict and accommodation which takes shape over time between racially based social movements and the policies and programs of the state. We consider the central elements of this trajectory to be the state and social movements, linked in a single historical framework of racial formation.

Social movements and the state are interrelated in a complex way. Racial movements arise, and race becomes a political issue, when state institutions are thought to structure and enforce a racially unjust social order.³ State institutions acquire their racial orientations from the processes of conflict with and accommodation to racially based movements. Thus "reform," "reaction," "radical change," or "backlash"—indeed every trans-

formation of the racial order—is constructed through a process of clash and compromise between racial movements and the state.

These are the dynamics of present-day racial politics in the U.S. Yet there is nothing permanent or sacred about this pattern. Indeed, the existence of political channels for the expression of racial conflict is a relatively recent phenomenon. The broad sweep of U.S. history is characterized not by racial democracy, but by racial despotism, not by trajectories of reform, but by implacable denial of political rights, dehumanization, extreme exploitation, and policies of minority extirpation. Democracy has never been in abundant supply where race is concerned. The very emergence of political channels through which reform can at times be achieved is an immense political victory for minorities, and for democracy itself.⁴

In order to understand the interaction of today's racial state and minority movements, we must examine the origins of racial politics in the U.S. In the next two sections of this chapter, we survey the historical context from which modern racial politics emerged, and the role of the state in the process of racial formation. We then proceed to a theoretical sketch of the contemporary political dynamics of race.

Historical Change in the U.S. Racial Order

Since the earliest days of colonialism in North America, an identifiable racial order has linked the system of political rule to the racial classification of individuals and groups. The major institutions and social relationships of U.S. society—law, political organization, economic relationships, religion, cultural life, residential patterns, etc.—have been structured from the beginning by the racial order.

Clearly the system of racial subjection has been more monolithic, more absolute, at some historical periods than others.⁵ Where political opposition was banned or useless, as it was for slaves in the South and for Native Americans during much of the course of U.S. history, transformation of the racial order, or resistance to it, was perforce military (or perhaps took such economic forms as sabotage). An oppositional racial ideology requires some political space, a certain minimal conceptual flexibility about race, upon which to fasten in order to recast racial meanings and constitute alternative racial institutions. During much of U.S. history, this political and ideological space was extremely limited.

But even at its most oppressive, the racial order was unable to arrogate to itself the entire capacity for the production of racial meanings, of racial subjects. Racial minorities were always able to counterpose their own cul-

tural traditions, their own forms of organization and identity, to the dehumanizing and enforced "invisibility" imposed by the majority society.

As the voluminous literature on black culture under slavery shows, black slaves developed cultures of resistance based on music, religion, African traditions, and family ties through which they sustained their own ideological project: the development of a "free" black identity and a collectivity dedicated to emancipation.⁶ The examples of Geronimo, Sitting Bull, and other Native American leaders were passed down from generation to generation as examples of resistance, and the Ghost Dance and Native American Church were employed by particular generations of Indians to maintain a resistance culture.⁷ Rodolfo Acuña has pointed out how the same "bandits" against whom Anglo vigilantes mounted expeditions after the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo—Tibúrcio Vasquez, Joaquín Murieta—became heroes in the Mexicano communities of the Southwest, remembered in folktales and celebrated in *corridos*.⁸ We do not offer these examples to romanticize brutal repression or to give the air of revolutionary struggle to what were often grim defeats; we simply seek to affirm that even in the most uncontested periods of American racism, oppositional cultures were able, often at very great cost, to maintain themselves.

Without reviewing the vast history of racial conflict, it is still possible to make some general comments about the manner in which the racial order was historically consolidated. Gramsci's distinction between "war of maneuver" and "war of position" will prove useful here.

For much of American history, no political legitimacy was conceded to alternative or oppositional racial ideologies, to competing racially defined political projects. The absence of democratic rights, of property, of political and ideological terrain upon which to challenge the monolithic character of the racial order, forced racially defined opposition both *outward*, to the margins of society, and *inward*, to the relative safety of homogeneous minority communities.

Slaves who escaped, forming communities in woods and swamps; Indians who made war on the U.S. in defense of their peoples and lands; Chinese and Filipinos who drew together in Chinatowns and Manilatowns in order to gain some measure of collective control over their existence—these are some examples of the movement of racial opposition *outward*, away from political engagement with the hegemonic racial state.

These same slaves, Indians, and Asians, as well as many others, banned from the political system and relegated to what was supposed to be a permanently inferior sociocultural status, were forced *inward* upon themselves as individuals, families, and communities. Tremendous cultural resources were nurtured among such communities; enormous labors were required

to survive and to develop elements of an autonomy and opposition under such conditions. These circumstances can best be understood as combining with the violent clashes and the necessity of resistance (to white-led race riots, military assaults, etc.) which characterized these periods, to constitute a racial *war of maneuver*. } u e t.

However democratic the U.S. may have been in other respects (and it is clear that democracy has always been in relatively short supply), in its treatment of racial minorities it has been to varying degrees *despotic* for much of its history. "War of maneuver" describes a situation in which subordinate groups seek to preserve and extend a definite territory, to ward off violent assault, and to develop an internal society as an alternative to the repressive social system they confront.

More recent history suggests that war of maneuver is being replaced by *war of position* as racially defined minorities achieve political gains.⁹ A strategy of *war of position* can only be predicated on political struggle—on the existence of diverse institutional and cultural terrains upon which oppositional political projects can be mounted, and upon which the racial state can be confronted. Prepared in large measure by the practices undertaken under conditions of war of maneuver, minorities were able to make sustained strategic incursions into the mainstream political process beginning with World War II. "Opening up" the state was a process of democratization which had effects both on state structures and on racial meanings. The postwar black movement, later joined by other racially based minority movements, sought to transform dominant racial ideology in the U.S., to locate its elements in a more egalitarian and democratic framework, and thereby to reconstruct the social meaning of race. The state was the logical target for this effort.

Historical Development of the Racial State

[The state from its very inception has been concerned with the politics of race.] For most of U.S. history, the state's main objective in its racial policy was repression and exclusion. Congress' first attempt to define American citizenship, the Naturalization Law of 1790, declared that only free "white" immigrants could qualify. The extension of eligibility to all racial groups has been slow indeed. Japanese, for example, could become naturalized citizens only after the passage of the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952.¹⁰

Historically, a variety of previously racially undefined groups have required categorization to situate them within the prevailing racial order.

Throughout the 19th century, many state and federal legal arrangements recognized only three racial categories: "white," "Negro," and "Indian." In California, the influx of Chinese and the debates surrounding the legal status of Mexicans provoked a brief juridical crisis of racial definition. California attempted to resolve this dilemma by assigning Mexicans and Chinese to categories within the already existing framework of "legally defined" racial groups. In the wake of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), Mexicans were defined as a "white" population and accorded the political-legal status of "free white persons." By contrast, the California Supreme Court ruled in *People v. Hall* (1854) that Chinese should be considered "Indian" [!] and denied the political rights accorded to whites.¹¹

The state's shifting racial perspective is also revealed by the census. Latinos surfaced as an ethnic category, "Persons of Spanish Mother Tongue," in 1950 and 1960. In 1970 they appeared as "Persons of Both Spanish Surname and Spanish Mother Tongue," and in 1980 the "Hispanic" category was created.¹² Such changes suggest the state's inability to "racialize" a particular group—to institutionalize it in a politically organized racial system. They also reflect the struggles through which racial minorities press their demands for recognition and equality, and dramatize the state's uncertain efforts to manage and manipulate those demands.¹³

The state is the focus of collective demands both for egalitarian and democratic reforms and for the enforcement of existing privileges. The state "intervenes" in racial conflicts, but it does not do so in a coherent or unified manner. Distinct state institutions often act in a contradictory fashion.¹⁴

Does the state, however clumsily, actually capture, steer, or organize the realities of racial identity and racial conflict? There is some validity to the idea of a racially "interventionist" state. With this theoretical concept, it is possible to investigate certain racial dimensions of state policy. The 1960s civil rights reforms, for example, can be interpreted as federal intervention in the area of racial discrimination.

Yet this approach does not reveal how the state itself is racially structured; it depicts the state as intervening, but not *intervened*, structuring, but not *structured*. Such a state is not basically shaped by race since it intervenes in race relations from *outside* them. The treatment afforded to racial politics is thus confined to "normal" political arenas.

In contrast to this, we suggest that the state *is* inherently racial. Far from *intervening* in racial conflicts, the state is itself increasingly the pre-eminent site of racial conflict. In the following sections of this chapter, we examine this expanding involvement of the state in the racial formation process. We first present a model of the racial state, and then consider contemporary patterns of change in the racial order, focusing on the interaction between state and social movements.

A Model of the Racial State

The state is composed of *institutions*, the *policies* they carry out, the *conditions and rules* which support and justify them, and the *social relations* in which they are imbedded.¹⁵

Every state *institution* is a racial institution, but not every institution operates in the same way. In fact, the various state institutions do not serve one coordinated racial objective; they may work at cross-purposes.¹⁶ Therefore, race must be understood as occupying varying degrees of centrality in different state institutions and at different historical moments.

To illustrate this point, let us contrast two agencies of the federal state, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the National Science Foundation (NSF). HUD must deal directly with questions of residential segregation, urban development pressures, housing subsidization programs, and the like; it is staffed by numerous minority-group members, and is subject to constant pressures from lobbies, community groups, and local and state governments (many of which address racial issues or are organized along racial lines). Thus it can be expected to be more racially oriented than the National Science Foundation, where staffing along professional/academic lines, a technical mandate, and a politically more limited range of constituents limit the racial agenda. Nevertheless, in certain areas (e.g., hiring policies, funding priorities, positions taken in respect to racially oriented scientific disputes—does Shockley get a grant?)¹⁷ the NSF too is a racial institution.

Through *policies* which are explicitly or implicitly racial, state institutions organize and enforce the racial politics of everyday life. For example, they enforce racial (non)discrimination policies, which they administer, arbitrate, and encode in law. They organize racial identities by means of education, family law, and the procedures for punishment, treatment, and surveillance of the criminal, deviant and ill.¹⁸

State institutions and their policies take shape under a series of *conditions and rules*. These "rules of the game" integrate the disparate racial policies of different state agencies, define the scope of state activity, establish "normal" procedures for influencing policy, and set the limits of political legitimacy in general. To speak, for example, of an agency's "mandate," of a policy's "constituency," or of an epochal political "project" (the "Keynesian welfare state," the "conservative opportunity society")¹⁹ is to accept a set of political rules about who is a political actor, what is a political interest, and how the broad state/society relationship is to be organized.²⁰

The specific *social relations* through which state activity is structured constitute the materiality of politics. Examples include the complex linkages of agencies and constituencies,²¹ the dynamics of coalitions and gov-

erning or oppositional blocs, and the varieties of administrative control exercised by state agencies throughout civil society.²² Racial politics are not exceptional in this respect. For example, civil rights organizations, lobbying groups, and “social programs” with significant constituency bases, legal mandates, etc., may engage the state in the “normal” politics of interest-group liberalism,²³ adopt movement tactics of direct action and confrontation “from without,” or—as is most likely—combine these tactics.

The state is also imbedded in another kind of social relations: the cultural and technical norms which characterize society overall. These affect the organizational capacities of state agencies, their coordination, both with “external” social actors and with each other, and the practices of their own personnel.²⁴ In racial terms, these relationships are structured by “difference” in certain ways: for example, minority officials may establish caucuses or maintain informal networks with which to combat the isolation frequently encountered in bureaucratic settings.

Despite all the forces working at cross-purposes within the state—disparate demands of constituents, distinct agency mandates and prerogatives, unintended and cross-cutting consequences of policy, etc.—the state still preserves an overall unity. This is maintained in two ways: first, strategic unity is sought at the apex of the apparatus by key policy makers, and in legislative and judicial agencies by established decision rules.²⁵ Second, unity is imposed on the state by its thorough interpenetration with society. In advanced capitalist societies *hegemony* is secured by a complex system of compromises, legitimating ideologies (e.g., “the rule of law”), by adherence to established political rules and bureaucratic regularities, etc.²⁶ Under all but the most severe conditions (economic collapse, war), this severely limits the range and legitimacy of both dominant and oppositional political initiatives, no matter how heavy the conflicts among contemporary U.S. political institutions and their constituents may appear to be.²⁷

The Trajectory of Racial Politics

It is useful to think of the U.S. racial order as an “unstable equilibrium.”²⁸ The idea of politics as “the continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria” has particular resonance, we think, in describing the operation of the racial state.²⁹ The racial order is equilibrated by the state—encoded in law, organized through policy-making, and enforced by a repressive apparatus. But the equilibrium thus achieved is unstable, for the great variety of conflicting interests encapsulated in racial meanings and identities can be no more than pacified—at best—by

the state. Racial conflict persists at every level of society, varying over time and in respect to different groups, but ubiquitous. Indeed, the state is itself penetrated and structured by the very interests whose conflicts it seeks to stabilize and control.³⁰

This unstable equilibrium has at times in U.S. history gone undisturbed for decades and even centuries, but in our epoch its degree of “stability” has lessened. Under “normal” conditions, state institutions have effectively routinized the enforcement and organization of the prevailing racial order. Constituency relationships and established political organizations are at least implicitly and frequently explicitly racial.³¹ Challenges to the racial order are limited to legal and political marginality. The system of racial meanings, of racial identities and ideology, seems “natural.” Such conditions seemed generally to prevail from the end of Reconstruction to the end of World War I, for example.

Now let us imagine a situation in which this unstable equilibrium is disrupted. There can be many reasons for this, and the disruption may take many shapes, for example the emergence of a mass-based racial movement such as took place in the 1960s, or of a powerful counter-egalitarian thrust such as appeared in the 1870s (with the beginnings of Asian exclusion and Jim Crow), or in the 1980s (with the institutionalization of new right and neoconservative interpretations of race). We shall be concerned with movement phenomena presently. Here we are interested chiefly in the effects on the state of racial disequilibrium.

Under conditions of disrupted equilibrium, inter-institutional competition and conflict within the state is augmented, as some agencies move toward accommodation of challenging forces while others “dig in their heels.” Re-composition of constituencies and political alliances takes place. Opposition groups may resort to “direct action,” and explicitly seek to politicize racial identities further; challenge will also take the route of “normal politics” (legislation, legal action, electoral activity, etc.), assuming this possibility is open to racially identified minorities. Strategic unity will therefore become more necessary for the governing forces or bloc.

The establishment or restoration of conditions of unstable equilibrium—let us say by means of reform policies—suggests an opposite cyclical phase. Such a situation guarantees the relative unity of the racial state by reducing the stakes of intra-state, or inter-institutional, conflict. It poses formidable obstacles to the fomenting of oppositional political projects. It minimizes the government’s need to strategize and promises the automatic reproduction of the prevailing order, obviously an optimum situation from the standpoint of the dominant racial groups.

Disruption and restoration of the racial order suggests the type of cyclical movement or pattern we designate by the term *trajectory*. Both racial

movements and the racial state experience such transformations, passing through periods of rapid change and virtual stasis, through moments of massive mobilization and others of relative passivity. While the movement and state versions of the overall trajectory are independently observable, they could not exist independently of each other. Racially based political movements as we know them are inconceivable without the racial state, which provides a focus for political demands and structures the racial order. The racial state, in its turn, has been historically constructed by racial movements; it consists of agencies and programs which are the institutionalized responses to racial movements of the past.

The point at which we begin to examine the trajectory of racial politics, then, is arbitrary. Let us assume, therefore, a beginning point of *unstable equilibrium*₁. At this historical point, the racial order is (relatively) undisturbed by conflict and mobilization. The racial state is able to function (again, relatively) automatically in its organization and enforcement of the racial order. We first address the racial movement version of the trajectory, and then that of the racial state.

Racial movements come into being as the result of political projects, political interventions led by "intellectuals."³² These projects seek to transform (or rearticulate) the dominant racial ideology. They thereby summarize and explain problems—economic inequality, absence of political rights, cultural repression, etc.—in racial terms. The result of this ideological challenge is a disparity, a conflict, between the pre-existing racial order, organized and enforced by the state, and an oppositional ideology whose subjects are the real and potential adherents of a racially defined movement. When this conflict reaches a certain level of intensity, a phase of *crisis* is initiated.

During a period of crisis, racial movements experiment with different strategies and tactics (electoral politics, "spontaneity," cultural revitalization efforts and alternative institution-building, lobbying, direct action, etc.). We assume that at least some of these are successful in mobilizing political pressure, either through "normal" political channels or through disruption of those channels.³³ Indeed the success of a racial movement probably depends on its ability to generate a wide and flexible variety of strategies, ideological themes, and political tactics, as both the minority movements of the 1960s and the new right/neoconservative movements of the present have demonstrated.

In response to political pressure, state institutions adopt policies of absorption and insulation.³⁴ *Absorption* reflects the realization that many demands are greater threats to the racial order before they are accepted than after they have been adopted in suitably moderate form. *Insulation* is a related process in which the state confines demands to terrains that are, if not entirely symbolic, at least not crucial to the operation of the

racial order. These policies then become ideological elements which are employed both by movements and state institutions. State agencies might argue, for example, that they have already met reasonable movement demands, while movement groups might claim that reforms don't address the problem, don't go far enough, etc.

Once the general contours of state reformism are clear, movements undergo internal divisions. A certain segment of the movement is absorbed ("coopted," in 1960s parlance) along with its demands, into the state, and there constitutes the core staff and agenda of the new state programs or agencies with which reform policies are to be implemented. The remaining active segment of the movement is "radicalized," while its more passive membership drops away to take up the roles and practices defined by a rearticulated racial ideology in the newly restabilized racial order (*unstable equilibrium*₂).

Considering the trajectory of racial politics from the standpoint of the state, *unstable equilibrium*₁ at first coexists with a series of effectively marginalized political projects located outside the "normal" terrain of state activity. In racial terms the state's trajectory of reform is initiated when movements challenge the pre-existent racial order. Crisis ensues when this opposition upsets the pre-existing *unstable equilibrium*₁. The terms of challenge can vary enormously, depending on the movement involved. Opposition can be democratic or authoritarian, primarily based in "normal" politics or in disruption; opposition can even reject explicit political definition, as in the case of cultural movements.

Crisis generates a series of conflicts within and among state agencies as particular demands are confronted and the terms of the state response (repression, concessions, symbolic responses, etc.) are debated. Agency and constituent groups, confronted by racial opposition, explore the range of potential accommodations, the possibilities for reconsolidating the racial order, and their possible roles in a racial ideology "rearticulated" in light of oppositional themes. "Hard-liners" and "moderates" appear, and compromises are sought both with the opposition and within the state itself.

Ultimately a series of reforms is enacted which partially meets oppositional demands. Reform policies are initiated and deemed potentially effective in establishing a new *unstable equilibrium*₂. These policies are then regularized in the form of agencies and programs whose constituency bases, like those of other state apparatuses, will consist of former adherents and sympathizers of the movement (as well as "free riders," of course). A new racial ideology is articulated, often employing themes initially framed by the oppositional movements.

The concept of the trajectory of racial politics links the two central actors in the drama of contemporary racial politics—the racial state and

racially based social movements, and suggests a general pattern of interaction between them. Change in the racial order, in the social meaning and political role played by race, is achieved only when the state has initiated reforms, when it has generated new programs and agencies in response to movement demands. Movements capable of achieving such reforms only arise when there is significant "decay" in the capacities of pre-existing state programs and institutions to organize and enforce racial ideology. Contemporary patterns of change in the racial order illustrate this point clearly.

Contemporary Change in the U.S. Racial Order

In the period with which we are concerned, the "rules of the game" by which racial politics are organized have become tremendously complex. In the pre-World War II period change in the racial order was epochal in scope, shaped by the conditions of "war of maneuver" in which minorities had very little access to the political system, and understood in a context of assumed racial inequalities (i.e., comprehensive and generally unexamined racism). Today all of this has been swept away.

In the present day, racial change is the product of the interaction of racially based social movements and the racial state. In the postwar period, minority movements, led by the black movement, radically challenged the dominant racial ideology. As a result of this challenge, the racial order anchored by the state was itself destabilized, and a comprehensive process of reform was initiated. Later still, the reformed racial state became the target for further challenge, this time from the right. Racial politics now take place under conditions of "war of position," in which minorities have achieved significant (though by no means equal) representation in the political system, and in an ideological climate in which the *meaning* of racial equality can be debated, but the desirability of some form of equality is assumed. The new "rules of the game" thus contain *both* the legacy of movement efforts to rearticulate the meaning of race and to mobilize minorities politically on the basis of the new racial ideologies thus achieved, *and* the heritage of deep-seated racism and inequality.

As we have argued, social movements create collective identity, collective subjectivity, by offering their adherents a different view of themselves and their world; different, that is, from the characteristic worldviews and self-concepts of the social order which the movements are challenging. Based upon that newly forged collective identity, they address the state politically, demanding change. This is particularly true of contemporary

racial movements. In fact these movements largely established the parameters within which popular and radical democratic movements (so-called "new social movements") operate in the U.S.

Racial movement mobilization and "normal" politics (the state, electoral activity, constituency formation, administrative and judicial systems, etc.) are now linked in a reciprocal process. Demands for state reform—for the transformation of racial society as a whole—are the consequences of transformations in collective identity, indeed in the meaning of race itself, "translated" from the cultural/ideological terrain of everyday life into the terms of political discourse. Such "translations" may come from movements themselves, or they may originate in "normal" political processes as electoral bases are sought, judicial decisions handed down, administrative procedures contested, etc. Our conception of the "trajectory" of racial movements and state reform policies suggests that the transformation of the racial order occurs by means of an alternately equilibrated and disrupted relationship between the formation of racial ideology and the elaboration of state policy.

Today racial movements not only pose new demands originating outside state institutions, but may also frame their "common identity" in response to state-based racial initiatives. The concept of "Asian American," for example, arose as a political label in the 1960s. This reflected the similarity of treatment that various groups such as Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, etc. (groups which had not previously considered themselves as having a common political agenda) received at the hands of state institutions. The census, the legislatures, the courts, the educational system, the military, the welfare state apparatus—each in its own way a racial institution—are all sources of such racial change.

At the same time racial movements (both radical and conservative) continue to present the state with political demands. We understand this process as the *rearticulation* of racial ideology. Racially based movements begin as political projects which both build upon and break away from their cultural and political predecessors. Movement projects take shape in the interaction of civil society and the racial state. Movements set out to question the meaning of race and the nature of racial identity (e.g., "blackness," "Chicanismo," "minority" status; or for that matter, "majority" status, "whiteness"), while state initiatives seek to reinforce or transform the "unstable equilibrium" of racial politics in response to movement demands. Such "projects" challenge pre-existing racial ideology. They are efforts to *rearticulate* the meaning of race, and responses to such efforts.

The rearticulation of pre-existing racial ideology is a dual process of *disorganization* of the dominant ideology and of *construction* of an alternative, oppositional framework.

The dominant ideology can be disorganized in various ways. An insurgent movement may question whether the dominant racial ideology properly applies to the collective experience of its members. Examples of this interrogation of the pre-existing system of racial categories and beliefs may be found, not only in militant movement rhetoric,³⁵ but also in popular and intellectual discourse. During the 1960s, for instance, minority economists, political scientists, sociologists and psychologists rejected dominant social science perspectives on racial grounds:

For years, traditional (white) social science research—especially on political life and organizations—told us how politically workable and healthy the society was, how all the groups in society were getting pretty much their fair share, or moving certainly in that direction. There was a social scientific myth of consensus and progress developed.³⁶

Similarly, during the 1970s, conservative, whites-oriented racial movements, such as those of the “new right” or the “unmeltable” ethnics, developed counter-egalitarian challenges to the reforms which minority movements had achieved in the previous decade.³⁷ In this way the overarching racial ideology—in which racial minorities and the white majority alike recognize themselves—is called into question.

Insurgent racial movements also try to redefine the essential aspects of group identity. Demands for “self-determination” (which of course are linked to important democratic traditions in the U.S.) attain currency, while past organizational efforts are criticized. For example, militants of the 1960s attacked the political accommodations and compromises into which pre-existing community organizations and leaderships had entered. The NAACP and Urban League, the G.I. Forum and LULAC were criticized as “Uncle Toms” and “Tio Tacos” who had succumbed to “cooptation.”³⁸ Militants also denounced various cultural practices in minority communities which were judged to reinforce submission and dependence. Malcolm X, for instance, excoriated the black practice of “conking” (i.e., straightening) the hair with lye.³⁹

The construction of an oppositional movement employs a wide variety of ideological themes. Racially based movements have as their most fundamental task the creation of new identities, new racial meanings, and a new collective subjectivity. Not only does the articulation of a new racial ideology involve the recombination of pre-existent meanings and identities, but it also draws on quite heterodox and unexpected sources.⁴⁰

The disorganization of the dominant racial ideology, the construction of a new set of racial meanings and identities, the transition from political

project to oppositional movement, is a complex, uneven process, marked by considerable instability and tension. Change is being demanded, but any change in the system of racial meanings will affect all groups, all identities. [Challenging the dominant racial ideology inherently involves not only reconceptualizing one’s own racial identity, but a reformulation of the meaning of race in general. To challenge the position of blacks in society is to challenge the position of whites.⁴¹]

Racial movements, built on the terrain of civil society, necessarily confront the state as they begin to upset the unstable equilibrium of the racial order. Once an oppositional racial ideology has been articulated, once the dominant racial ideology has been confronted, it becomes possible to demand reform of state racial policies and institutions. There has been a change in the “rules of the game.” A new political terrain has been opened up.

By the same token, once such challenges have been posed and become part of the established political discourse, they in turn become subject to rearticulation. The state reforms won by minority movements in the 1960s, and the racial definitions and meanings embodied in these reforms, provided a formidable range of targets for “counter-reformers” in the 1970s and 1980s. “New right” and neoconservative currents, armed with the still-dominant social-scientific paradigm of ethnicity theory, were able to carry on their own political “project.” They were able to rearticulate racial ideology and restructure racial politics once again.

In the next chapters, we consider in detail the process by which the particular trajectory of racial politics—which involved both democratizing and authoritarian movements, both state reform and state reaction—developed in the postwar U.S.