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STRUCTURAL RACISM

Racism is like a Cadillac, they bring out a new model every year.

MALCOLM X[1]

What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.

THE NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMISSION ON CIVIL DISORDERS
(KERNER COMMISSION REPORT)[2]

RACISM IS COMMON, ROUTINE, AND ORDINARY

Critical race theorists see racism as common, routine, and ordinary, not rare, aberrant, or unlikely. Typical definitions of racism see it as a special category of meanness. In this view, racism is perpetuated by bad, prejudiced individuals who hold negative ideas about a racial out-group. These negative ideas or stereotypes are seen as stable personal attitudes that, when acted upon, are discriminatory. Under mainstream definitions, racist figures are easy to recognize. They are police with their murderous knees on Black men's necks, Civil Rights–era cops straining against dogs trying to maul peaceful protesters, or torch-bearing Klans-

men. Racism is thought of as primarily interpersonal, implying that once individuals are held accountable for racist incidents, the problem is solved. Educate these backward figures, and racial enlightenment awaits. Critical race theorists call this mainstream definition of racism the "perpetrator perspective," because it evaluates racism based upon individual culprits' intent.[3]

Rather than seeing racism as purely individual, critical race theorists argue that racism is structural. Structural racism recognizes that discriminatory ideas are important, especially when those ideas are combined with access to resources that allow for the creation of resilient systems of inequality. Structural racism can be perpetuated through conscious intent, unconscious bias, or policies and practices that privilege one racial group over another. Structural racism creates harm through the control of legitimate social organizations—including the court system, police departments, schools, banks, hospitals, and real estate offices—on a scale that far surpasses isolated individual meanness. Control of these organizations connects individual discriminatory actions to larger patterns. Structural racism doesn't mean individual racism is inconsequential. It means individual racism is empowered by its incorporation into a system that can magnify its impact through biased patterns of resource allocation. Discriminatory police officers are backed by state power, and discriminatory employers are rarely held legally accountable.[4] When biased processes are

built into policy rules or the law—such as exams for college entry or policing that requires racial profiling—structural racism compels even people without individual animus to participate.

Defining racism from the perspective of perpetrators—rather than as a political system that distributes resources unequally—is advantageous for the beneficiaries of that system. Seeing racism as a negative personal quirk obscures how individual acts of discrimination can pass benefits to entire communities. A white homeowner who refuses to sell to a Black family, thereby keeping the neighborhood mostly white, reinforces residential segregation and contributes to the value of all the houses in a neighborhood.[5] The ripple effects of housing discrimination don't stop at individuals, as property taxes fund schooling and contribute to the nation's vast educational disparities. Opportunities are downstream from education, so racial inequalities built into schooling cascade across one's life. Privileging the perspective and internal feelings of individual racists also allows people who vicariously benefit from discrimination to believe that, because they haven't used a racial slur or denied anyone a loan, they are unimplicated and untouched by the wider system of structural·racism. Seeing education alone as the solution to racism ignores the fact that many of the most sophisticated manifestations of racism—from eugenics to mass incarceration and immigration restrictions—were developed and implemented by

the most educated people in American society.[6] Perhaps most important, seeing racism as a negative individual quirk makes it difficult to understand the depth and resilience of racial inequality.

STRUCTURAL RACISM IS A POLITICAL SYSTEM

Critical race theory thus replaces the perpetrator perspective with an understanding of structural racism as a political system. Calling racism political doesn't mean it is partisan (throughout much of U.S. history, white supremacy was a bipartisan project), although partisans can and do use racist appeals to garner support. Structural racism is political in the sense that it helps to determine differential access to employment, healthcare, education, and other important resources. As a political system, racism may be *reflected* in individual actions and attitudes, but it isn't *reducible* to those actions and attitudes.[7] Structural racism is a distributional system that combines ideas about race with unequal access to social and material resources.[8]

Structural racism's conceptual roots are found in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* by Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee chairman Kwame Ture (formerly known as Stokely Carmichael) and political scientist Charles Hamilton, first published in 1967. The first chapter of that book discusses institutional racism:

When White terrorists bomb a Black church and kill five Black children, that is an act of individual racism, widely deplored by most segments of the society. But when in that same city—Birmingham, Alabama—five hundred Black babies die each year because of the lack of power, food, shelter and medical facilities, and thousands more are destroyed and maimed physically, emotionally and intellectually because of conditions of poverty and discrimination in the Black community, that is a function of institutional racism. . . . But it is institutional racism that keeps Black people locked in dilapidated slum tenements, subject to the daily prey of exploitative slumlords, merchants, loan sharks and discriminatory real estate agents. The society either pretends it does not know of this latter situation, or is in fact incapable of doing anything meaningful about it.[9]

The problems Ture and Hamilton highlighted in 1967 are still here. Although the concept of structural racism emerged from social movements to explain the unjust system they were protesting, the concept is widely accepted among scholars. Nearly every indicator of social well-being—health,[10] income, wealth,[11] life expectancy, and occupational standing—shows that white people are, on average, doing better than people of color in general, and Black people in particular.

Structural racism is powerful because once discrimination is built into a system, and that system comes to be seen as legitimate, commonsense, or "just the way things are," it obscures the roots of inequality. For instance, many don't know the history of collusion between banks and federal and local governments that created residential redlining that locked people of color in under-resourced neighborhoods, or how housing discrimination contributed to contemporary racial wealth gaps.[12] Lacking knowledge around the causes of racial inequality makes it easy for people to assume that it results from some deficiency with the culture or work ethic of people of color, rather than a planned, expected, and predictable result of social policy.

Segregation is the basic unit of structural racism because segregation facilitates resource hoarding. Informal discussions often refer to "segregated" schools or neighborhoods as synonyms for under-resourced Black and Brown communities. But this elides the fact that white neighborhoods and schools are also segregated spaces.[13] All-white or nearly-all-white spaces aren't accidental; they are the intended outcome of exclusionary policies and practices.[14] Instead of being named as such, however, segregated white spaces are often described with seemingly race-neutral terms such as "good" neighborhoods and schools. The "good" parks, schools, grocery stores, and other amenities that are overrepresented in white areas are resources protected and hoarded through processes of segregation.

Structural racism reflected in segregation means communities of color are less likely to live near a hospital, less likely to have access to healthy choices around food and exercise, and less likely to have access to a high-quality education.

EVIDENCE OF STRUCTURAL RACISM IS COMPELLING AND OVERWHELMING

The stakes of individual racism are changing people's feelings. The stakes of structural racism are, fundamentally, life and death. Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines racism as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death," tying the consequences of systematically under-resourcing nonwhite communities to dire outcomes.[15] In isolation, a negative attitude is relatively inconsequential. But when people are empowered—as bosses, teachers, or doctors—to channel their negative attitudes into the denial of resources, including access to competent and equal medical care, it can steal time, in the form of life expectancy, from people of color.[16]

Ture and Hamilton's visceral description of Black babies dying in Birmingham highlights that structural racism in America begins taking a toll before birth. Preexisting conditions and unequal treatment in the healthcare system mean Black women are more than twice as likely to experi-

ence stillbirth.[17] The Black infant mortality rate is 2.3 times higher than that of white infants.[18] Black children are more likely to be born with low birth weight, predisposing them to subsequent illnesses, including heart disease, diabetes, and high blood pressure.[19] Socioeconomic differences don't fully account for these facts, because Black Americans are more likely to die an early death at every education level, and life expectancy gaps between Black and white Americans *are greater* at higher levels of education.[20] Many structural factors contribute to these early deaths for Black Americans. Residential segregation ensures Black Americans are more likely to be exposed to harmful environmental pollutants that can shave years off lives. The daily frictions of racism, from workplace slights to surveillance in stores and neighborhoods, to fighting to have doctors take symptoms seriously, contribute to these adverse health outcomes and early deaths.

Critical race theorists have shown that far from being the answer to racial inequality, America's educational system is a key site in the reproduction of structural racism.[21] At every stage of schooling—from preschool to college—Black and white students experience the educational system differently. Nearly three-quarters of a century after the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision outlawing state-sponsored segregation, the American system of schools remains separate and unequal.[22] The U.S. elementary school system is highly segregated, and after declines until the

1980s, some schools are resegregating.[23] Black and Latino children often attend schools with high levels of impoverished peers.[24] Recall that schools serving students of color are relatively under-resourced because U.S. schools are funded in part by a property tax system whose values are indexed to residential segregation. The vast wealth disparities created through decades of state-sponsored segregation impact per-pupil spending, with students of color receiving less on average.

Within schools, Black preschool-aged boys are twice as likely to be expelled compared to their white and Latino counterparts.[25] Black girls, who make up just 20 percent of female preschool enrollees, account for "54 percent of girls receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions."[26] Some are quick to attribute these differences to behavior, but research shows that identical behaviors typical of all children—like interrupting a teacher—are interpreted differently based on students' race, with Black students punished more harshly than white students.[27] As students move through middle and high school, Black children are more likely to be tracked into noncollege pathways. Tracking within schools can create the kind of segregated education that used to be accomplished by separate buildings for white and Black children.[28]

Educational inequalities between Black and white students are often used by conservatives and moderate liberals to claim there is some problem with Black students. Black

students are said to lack a work ethic or have cultural problems ("They accuse high achievers of 'acting white'") that predispose them to educational underachievement. But the so-called "acting white" hypothesis has repeatedly been knocked down by research consistently showing that Black students are *more likely* to say they value education than white students.[29] Surveys show Black and Latino parents are more likely to say a college degree is essential for their children's success than white parents.[30] Black students also overestimate the economic returns they will receive from education because for each level of education they receive, Black people earn less than equally qualified white counterparts.[31] Many school procedures, from test scores to disparate discipline rates to tracking, are presented as neutral evaluations of student behavior and ability. But bias shapes these measures, channeling students into a segregated set of subsequent opportunities for the rest of their lives. Yet, like eugenic theories of prior eras, the acting white hypothesis is like a zombie that won't stay dead.

Structural racism is a basic feature of the American economy. The Black unemployment rate has been twice that of whites for almost fifty years.[32] As Dara Strolovitch points out, the "normal" Black unemployment rate would constitute an economic crisis if whites were experiencing similar levels of economic dislocation.[33] Once a job is secured, employers are more likely to give Black employees variable schedules, making it more difficult for them to

plan nonwork time.[34] Even the labor market signal of going
to an Ivy League school can't overcome labor market dis-
crimination, as Black Ivy League graduates are called back
for jobs at a rate similar to that for whites who attended
state flagships. If Black Ivy League applicants are called
back, they are offered less prestigious positions with lower
salaries.[35] Complaining to human resources about discrim-
inatory treatments is unlikely to help, as Black employees
who report workplace bias (or even outright interpersonal
racism) often say the response from programs putatively
designed to help is worse than the initial discrimination.[36]

Employment discrimination remains common, despite
the 1964 Civil Rights Act ostensibly banning the practice.
Social scientists often test for racial discrimination through
field experiments called "audit studies." Audit studies take
equally qualified people from different racial groups, train
them to behave similarly (for instance, answering inter-
view questions with indistinguishable prepared responses
or using identical résumés), and match them on measures
such as attractiveness and educational level. These studies
minimize (or eliminate) nonracial factors as explanations
for unequal treatment.[37] Once matched on factors that
could bias the results, testers venture forth to apply for jobs
or loans, buy cars,[38] attempt to rent apartments, or buy a
house or get good seats at restaurants.[39] Depressingly, audit
studies frequently find that discrimination against people
of color remains a widespread feature of American life. The

studies also reveal discrimination is often hidden from its victims, who are unaware that racism played a role in their being denied an opportunity.[40]

Results from audit studies can be dramatic because they show how supposedly neutral evaluation processes ("We hire the best candidates, regardless of race") consistently devalue people of color. The Harvard sociologist Devah Pager created a variation on audit studies to see how prison time impacted one's chance of being hired. She found that white men who had served time for a nonviolent drug offense were more likely to be called back for an entry-level job than Black men without a criminal record.[41] In addition, employers who, when surveyed, stated they supported hiring nonviolent offenders fell short of their stated convictions. Self-reporting openness to a post-incarceration second chance didn't translate into a job offer, as those who indicated they would hire an ex-offender were no more likely to do so than survey respondents indicating past incarceration was a non-starter. People are often unaware of their racial biases and therefore discriminate, even when confident that they won't.[42]

Exclusion from opportunities extends far beyond entry-level jobs and in-person audits: even a Black-sounding name is enough to trigger discrimination. Economists Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan scoured major newspapers' want ads and sent nearly five thousand résumés in response. The résumés varied only in the Black- or white-

sounding names of the fake applicant (for example, Lakisha or Jamal vs. Emily or Greg). Despite identical qualifications, the Black-sounding names were 50 percent less likely to be called back, showing that racial discrimination in hiring exists "across occupation, industry, and employer size."[43] Evidence from these studies implies that the invisible hand of the labor market is white. What matters in these cases is not just the dislike potential employers have toward people of color. What matters is that they *are empowered by their role as gatekeepers responsible for distributing resources.*

I could go on. The scale, intensity, and historical continuity of racial disparities make individual explanations fall flat. Reducing racism to interpersonal dislike, simple prejudice, or grievance makes it difficult to explain the stunning resilience of racial inequality. Receiving unearned benefits under the relational system of structural discrimination undermines the notion that hard work and merit are the best predictors of economic mobility.[44] And in each of the above cases, the beneficiaries of an unequal system, who likely had no idea that discrimination was happening, may have profited nonetheless.

Structural racism, when built into policies and procedures, obscures the processes that keep racial hierarchies in place. If an entrance exam is racially biased, a teacher who is a committed antiracist, yet grades the exam accurately, will reinforce racial inequality. If a judge harbors no prejudice toward anyone she sentences, but racially biased laws

(such as the different penalties for possession of crack or powder cocaine) or patterns of policing (racial profiling) disproportionately send Black or Latino suspects to court, her compelled reliance on mandatory minimum sentencing laws will produce racially disparate outcomes. Rules and laws are designed to shape behavior, especially when individuals would behave differently absent the rule. Once biases are built into seemingly legitimate social sorting mechanisms, no ill intent is needed—following the rules reproduces racial inequality.[45]

Although it is uncomfortable to discuss this, people of color who have been incorporated into biased systems—such as policing—can end up reinforcing structural racism by simply doing their job, as biased policies, laws, and practices compel behavior. Take a hypothetical Black police officer in New York City, where the city's stop-and-frisk policy disproportionately targeted Black and Latino men for police stops (despite police finding more contraband on the white men they stopped). The hypothetical Black officer simply following orders and carrying out this policy is, by doing their job well, contributing to structural racism. Similarly, a Black Supreme Court justice who supports weakened voting rights is helping to institutionalize racism. Biased systems produce biased outcomes, regardless of the identity of the system's administrators.

Structural racism, as both an abstract concept and a set of social practices that are often intentionally obscured,

can be difficult to discern. Processes that reinforce struc-
tural racism are often neutral seeming and considered
legitimate, normal, and "just the way things are." The mun-
danity of structural racism makes it insidious and hard to
challenge. Yet many who deny the reality of structural rac-
ism (mostly because it doesn't negatively impact them) rec-
ognize how structures work when their tax rate increases,
the terms of interest on a loan change, their job benefits are
cut, or their kid's school district lines are redrawn. Seeing
racism as structural doesn't absolve individuals of complic-
ity in harmful systems. It explains how those systems
compel behavior (rules, laws, custom, and tradition), why
racism is so resilient (it distributes resources), and why rac-
ism impacts so many social domains, from segregated liv-
ing spaces to disproportionate encounters with police and
even life expectancy.