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BELL'S CURVE:
WHY THE ARC OF AMERICAN HISTORY DOES NOT BEND TOWARD RACIAL EQUALITY

by

JON THOMAS

Under the Direction of Andrew Altman, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Socioeconomic disparities between whites and blacks are pervasive in American society. Structuring of the discussion of these disproportions is the liberal race relations paradigm. According to Racial Liberalism, racial inequalities are an impermanent feature of American society because they are due primarily to race prejudice and discriminatory practices, which are continuously diminishing among whites. Challenging this view is Racial Realism. Racial Realism attributes the persistence of racial inequality to institutional privileges whites retain and refuse to relinquish whether or not they are conscious of them. I argue that Racial Realism, with some qualification, is the better explanation for the persistence of racial inequality. Racial inequalities will persist, because American society and its entrenched institutions continue to affirm, white supremacy.

INDEX WORDS: African-American philosophy, Derrick Bell, Interest convergence, Institutional racism, Racial justice, White privilege

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JON THOMAS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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JON THOMAS

Committee Chair: Andrew Altman

Committee: Andrew Cohen

Sebastian Rand

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my thesis to those people who have had the greatest influence in developing my disposition. To my mother, who taught me the cost to one's self-esteem is too high a price to allow anyone to bully you intellectually or physically—even once. To Doris Powell, M.D, who taught me that kindness is not optional and criticism is justified only to the extent you are morally invested in the ideas of others, not by the need to be or feel right. To La Donna O'Bannon, who taught me that shared experience amplifies that experience and is more important than money or any physical object. To Vincent O'Bannon who, in revealing both his vulnerability and determination, has shown me what it takes, and what it means, to be a man. To my childhood friend and kindred spirit, Keith Williams, who taught me that everyone has something valuable to teach us and that we are each of us worth a moment of someone's undivided attention. To my closest friend, Kevin Moore, M.D. who taught me that more than preparation, great achievement first requires commitment; successfully directing a life depends as much on answering the question of what one should to do, as it does on answering the question of how one should go about doing it. Lastly, to my wife, Laura Falley, a loving and caring person, who on more occasions than she ought to have endured, has reminded me that ideas that diminishes the value of the lives of others, no matter their perceived brilliance, are manipulative and self-serving. Out of love and respect for her insight, I have tried to be considerate and other-regarding as possible in presenting this thesis. If I have failed here, it was not because I lacked for proper motivating influence.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Americans of visibly African descent have made considerable strides against racism since the Civil Rights era. Black American's have been able to direct their lives to find inclusion in all endeavors an American citizen might wish to pursue, even helping to elect an African American to the presidency of the United States.

Nevertheless, while individual blacks have entered valued sectors of society formerly reserved for whites, if we compare blacks as a group to whites, by every significant measure blacks remain in a state astonishingly similar to the conditions that existed under Jim Crow. The case is even worse for blacks who have not achieved middle-class status. Blacks in the urban ghettos of the United States remain isolated both from positive market forces and from empathetic moral concern by the white majority that might otherwise garner remedial support for their situation.

An explanation for the causes and perpetuation of racial inequality does not require commitment to any particular theory of equality or justice. The problem of racial inequality in the United States is, broadly, about our commitment to establishing a society where aggregate life outcomes for individuals are roughly the same no matter their race. In a racially egalitarian society, a person's race would be as statistically significant in predicting expected life outcome as that same person's eye color. The United States is far from being such a society, but the vast majority of our citizenry voices a commitment to ensuring individual ability and personal decisions, not race or any other morally insignificant category, are the primary determinants of social achievement. Given this social commitment, we are entitled to an explanation as to why racial disparities in our society consistently and substantially disadvantage African Americans.

Scholars have offered three main explanations for continuing racial inequality in America (Conyers 2002: 250). The first is there is some deficiency in black biology, cultural values, or family structure, which makes white individuals or the white community inherently and unconditionally superior. This view, which I call Racial Determinism, assumes some form of the doctrine of white supremacy, the

conviction that differential awards and privileges between the races is attributable to inferior ability or talent among blacks when compared to whites.

In locating the source of racial inequality in some comparative deficiency within the black community, Racial Determinists typically reject the idea that society has a moral responsibility to remedy racial inequities. Common to most forms of Racial Determinism are an appeal to a meritocratic ideal and the attribution of continuing black-white inequality to a lack of ability or effort on the part of blacks in taking advantage of the intellectual and socioeconomic opportunities available to them. On this view, blacks are incapable of assimilating into the mainstream culture or stubbornly refuse to do so, even though assimilation is the only hope of advancement in American society. Unfortunately, American history has been so racist that we find examples of expressions of the doctrine of white supremacy and Racial Determinism in the written works and speeches of those persons who were influential in giving the United States its national character. Prominent and conspicuous among these persons are those whose faces we engraved on Mount Rushmore in South Dakota and Stone Mountain in Georgia. Academics have discredited the most egregious form of Racial Determinism, namely, biological determinism—the view that one's race determines one's behavior and intellect. Nevertheless, public response to recent publications such as Dinesh D'Souza's *The End of Racism* (1995) and Richard J. Herrnstein, and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve* (1994) demonstrates that even that arrant form of Racial Determinism, one that assumes genetic black inferiority as the cause of racial inequality, retains some purchase in American society.

Today a softer form of Racial Determinism, one that attributes racial inequality to cultural rather than genetic inferiority, is *de rigueur*. This softer version maintains that black culture is morally defective, leading many black to make poor social choices. These poor choices, rather than racial oppression, are what perpetuate racial inequality. Politicians in America exploit this pervasive social assumption to gain favor among white voters and to counter arguments in favor of race-centered affirmative action policies. Despite its popularity as an explanation for racial inequality, Racial Determinism is a position those committed to achieving racial equality find repugnant. It denies our egalitarian ideals and affirms white

supremacy. One cannot be committed to achieving racial equality and affirm Racial Determinism at the same time, because such determinism systematically disregards racial injustice as the key factor accounting for persistent black-white inequality.

The second explanation offered for the persistence of black-white inequality is that continuing white prejudice and discrimination prevents blacks from gaining equal opportunities to succeed in society. This view, called Racial Liberalism, places the responsibility for achieving racial equality primarily on the dominant group in the United States: white Americans. The most influential expression of this hypothesis is Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy* (Myrdal 1944). According to Myrdal, racial inequality is due to a vicious cycle of unjustified prejudicial beliefs and discriminatory practices by whites that prevents black integration into mainstream society. Exclusionary practices by whites segregate blacks from the main sources of political power and wealth in America, causing the substandard socioeconomic status we observe in black communities. These observations provide whites with confirming evidence for their stereotypes about blacks, which in turn promotes further white prejudice and discrimination.

Racial Liberalism maintains both that white Americans will broaden their egalitarian ideals and principles to include blacks and that direct action taken by blacks will accelerate this shift toward racial justice in American society. As a result, blacks will ultimately assimilate into American society and achieve racial equality just as the European immigrant had done at the turn of the twentieth century. On this view, the responsibility for achieving racial equality lies with both whites and blacks. Whites have to do some moral introspection and act in a manner consistent with their ideals, and poor urban blacks have to take advantage of every opportunity the diminishment of white racial animus allows. Racial Liberalism is a widely held view concerning the problem of racial inequality in the United States. It represents a sort of middle ground in assigning the cause of racial inequality to whites and their psychological biases, but also in holding blacks personally responsible for altering their material status in society.

A third possible explanation is that entrenched legal, political, or socioeconomic structures of American society perpetuate racial inequality and this is the explanation that I defend in this thesis. In

particular, I will argue for the version of the structural hypothesis called “Racial Realism,” a term Derrick Bell first used in 1992 to refer to his view that black-white inequality is a permanent feature of American society. Racial Realism maintains that racial differences are not natural, but “socially constructed.” Racial differences are ‘real’ not because whites are biologically or culturally superior to other races, but because dominant social forces perpetually affirm racial distinctions and have constructed institutions that reflect and entrench the doctrine of white supremacy. While Racial Determinists deny that black-white inequality constitutes a moral problem because inequality does not violate meritocratic ideals, Racial Realists maintain that a moral problem still exists, because black-white inequality tracks a morally irrelevant criterion (race) in determining life outcomes.

This thesis focuses on the disagreements between Bell and Myrdal. In the next section, I present and analyze Myrdal’s Racial Liberalism, outlining the evidence for its claim that white prejudice and discrimination are the causes of racial inequality. While this evidence undercuts Racial Determinism and other black deficiency theories as plausible explanations for the origin and persistence of racial inequality, it does nothing to explain why the diminishment of visible signs of white prejudice and discrimination has not translated into substantial progress in reducing the black-white gap.

In section III of this thesis, I present and defend Bell’s Racial Realism. Crucial to his account is his “Interest Convergence Principle,” which helps to explain why large black-white disparities have persisted since the Civil Rights era. More generally, Bell’s account provides good reason to think that the arc of history in the U.S. will likely never bend toward racial justice.

2 RACIAL LIBERALISM

Racial Liberalism supplanted Racial Determinism as the dominant race relation paradigm in the United States soon after Swedish humanist and social scientist Gunnar Myrdal published *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy* in 1944. Considered a definitive account of black-white race relations even today, Myrdal's work was conceived and funded by the Carnegie Foundation in 1937 and was intended to have policy implications (MacLean & Williams 2008). By that time, there was widespread rejection in academic circles of the view that blacks were innately intellectually and morally inferior to whites, but the question left open was why the offspring of African slaves remained much worse off than the offspring of European immigrants in the United States. The answer *American Dilemma* produced was unequivocal—white prejudice and caste discrimination was responsible for the unique and unequal status of African Americans in America.

Because racist attitudes and differential treatment of Negroes was contrary to the ideals of equality and liberty embodied in America's Creed, Myrdal theorized that our society suffered a moral dilemma, the recognition of which would drive acceptance of national change. Rendering the "Negro problem" as a moral dilemma convinced Myrdal that white prejudice and discrimination were an anomaly in an otherwise egalitarian society, and that black-white inequality was a temporary feature of American society which would be overcome by a process of "cumulation" or "slowly rectifying the beliefs" of whites "thereby also influencing their valuations" (Myrdal 1944: lxxiii) of blacks.

2.1 White Prejudice and Discrimination as the Principle Source of Racial Inequality

Myrdal offered the following evidence for his claim that racial inequality is "A White Man's Problem" (Myrdal 1944: li; 667-669), meaning that throughout history, it was racially biased decisions by white men that led to the inferior status of blacks in the United States.

Slavery, an institution justified in a white supremacist political theory that had intellectual respectability until the beginning of the 20th century, was the original restraint on blacks preventing them from improving their condition on their own initiative (Myrdal 1944: 221-222; 441). Unlike modern

capitalism, which relies on technology and a replaceable literate labor pool for its success, the noncompetitive nature of slavery offered no hope of advancement for blacks. It took a Civil War to decide that America's economic destiny would be capitalism, but the Union victory put most Southern blacks in a more precarious position economically than they had endured under slavery (Myrdal 1944: 222).

After the Civil War, the Lincoln administration prepared for the millions of former slaves who now found themselves without means of subsistence. Legislation establishing the Freedman's Bureau made provisions for distributing land confiscated from confederate soldiers and their supporters to the freed slaves. However, after Lincoln's assassination, President Johnson ordered that land returned to its former owners (Myrdal 1944: 224-227; Steinberg 1995: 206). Even today, the unfulfilled promise of "forty acres and a mule" is part of popular black parlance, offered as an *ad absurdum* refutation to claims that whites will honor their political promises to blacks. The effects of this reversal on the black population were immediate and devastating. Without land, blacks did not have an independent means of subsistence, and given that the black population was concentrated in the South, they had to rely primarily on their white supremacist former slave owners for employment (Myrdal 1944: 227-229).

In 1877, the Presidential election was deadlocked between Republican Rutherford B. Hayes and Democrat Samuel J Tilden. The deadlock was resolved when the Southern Democrats agreed to support the Hayes's claim for the presidency if Hayes would agree to end Reconstruction. As president, Hayes removed the remaining federal troops from the former Confederate states, ending Reconstruction. Blacks called this the "Great Betrayal" (Jones 2011: 213), and this compromise enabled the South to establish the contemporary caste system we know as "Jim Crow" (Myrdal 1944: 88-89).

By 1930, the mechanization of Southern agriculture meant black agriculture skills and labor were no longer in demand. Because of the Hayes compromise and resulting caste-system, few blacks owned farms themselves. This led to massive unemployment for Southern blacks, six million of whom sought refuge by moving to the more industrialized North—the so-called "Great Migration." In the North however, there were practically no jobs in agriculture, so blacks came there unskilled and looking for manufacturing jobs in a market European immigrants had already saturated. These factors, coupled with

the Great Depression and virulent racial discrimination in the unions, meant that the majority of manufacturing industries did not provide jobs to blacks, so unemployment for blacks was high even in industrialized North (Myrdal 1944: 191-193). In neither the South nor the North were professional, business, or clerical positions available to blacks unless the job catered exclusively to their community. Blacks had to rely mainly on menial, low paying jobs in industry (Myrdal 1944: 206) which prevented them from accumulating wealth.

Myrdal cited market factors that conspired to entrench black poverty. He argued that raising earning levels for farm labor, the skill for which most Southern blacks had aptitude, would only increase the number of blacks unemployed because whites would then be attracted to those better paying jobs. With the agricultural labor market oversaturated, the few industrial jobs that were available would also go to whites (Myrdal 1944: 264-265). Myrdal's gloomy economic prophecy contrasted with hope that had been expressed in Booker T. Washington's 1895 *Atlanta Compromise Speech*. This speech, stressed accommodation to the racist order under which Southern blacks lived, in order to promote both white and black economic interests: "In all things purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress" (Harlan 1972: 583-587). However, the picture that Myrdal presented showed that accommodation was not an effective option for blacks. He argued that blacks would be the main group excluded from employment during industrial expansions (Myrdal 1944: 297). Solidarity among poor whites meant that blacks were not likely to be able to find employment in industry, since even when white workers were paid lower "negro wages," they would, "at least be offered the consolation of being protected from Negro competition" (Myrdal 1944: 284-286).

Myrdal documented other discriminatory practices by whites against blacks during the Jim Crow era, the period from the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in 1896 to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Publicly administered facilities such as hospitals, libraries, and parks, were all much poorer for blacks than for whites, though the need was often greater among blacks. Inferior housing and sanitary conditions meant that blacks suffered more illness than whites did. In spite of this, public utility equipment was distributed to white neighborhoods first (Myrdal 1944: 344). In education, expenditures for teachers' salaries in

1930-31 showed that states paid teachers more if they worked at a white school than a black school. In addition, the expenses per pupil in the South were decidedly unequal. Georgia and Mississippi, for example, spent \$9 per black pupil and \$45 per white pupil (Myrdal 1944: 339).

Myrdal used empirical data and keen analytical skill to rebut arguments that sought to justify or explain away black exclusion by shifting the causes of racial inequality to blacks. Addressing the argument that the cause of economic inequalities between poor European immigrants and African Americans was extravagant expenditures by blacks, Myrdal discovered that because of limited opportunities to obtain credit, blacks were more careful budgeters than whites were. His data refuted the notion common among whites that poor blacks are imprudent in their spending habits. It should come as no surprise to anyone who has been poor that blacks consistently spent more of their income on necessities such as food, housing, and personal care than more affluent whites did (Myrdal 1944: 368-69). Myrdal also dispelled the myth that we can explain economic difference between white immigrants and poor blacks by the fact that blacks are “lazy workers.” Myrdal noted that the total number of employed workers was much larger proportionately among blacks than among whites because a lower income average for the black family forced a greater percentage of black women to work than their white counterparts did (Myrdal 1944: 298-299). Despite having two incomes, many black families remained in poverty because black unemployment rate was twice as high as that of whites. Employers paid whites more than they paid blacks, so white immigrant families, who often had only one income, prospered. Myrdal explanation for this economic discrepancy was that whites were far more willing to give blacks assistance through public and semi-public organizations such as the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and the Red Cross (Myrdal 1944: 1276 footnote 62), than worthwhile jobs. In addition, whites seldom allowed blacks to prepare themselves for jobs requiring high skill or professional training, concluding that they were unqualified. Because of residential segregation, blacks were confined to economically depressed slums to an even greater extent than their low purchasing power would indicate (Myrdal 1944: 364). Economic discrimination against blacks was so pervasive and so many blacks had to

resort to public relief in the 1940's that Myrdal warned that there was a real danger of blacks becoming a burden on the American economy if whites did not change their policies (Myrdal 1944: 301).

Myrdal undercut the popular argument used to rationalize economic discrimination that, since blacks were so poor and paid virtually no taxes, they deservedly received fewer public services than whites did. Myrdal said that, if it were sound, then poor white neighborhoods would be just as lacking in public services as poor black neighborhoods, but that the data showed that the white neighborhoods were not equally lacking in such services. Furthermore, Myrdal noted correctly that in America "it is commonly understood that laws and rights in this Nation are given to *individuals* and not groups" (Myrdal 1944: 35-336), so raising the issue of *black* entitlement was irrelevant to claims by individual black persons that failing to give them access to public resources violated their rights.

Myrdal's data and analysis refuted Racial Determinism by demonstrating that it was "systematic, willful, and ruthless subjugation of an entire people" (Steinberg 1995: 41), and not congenital deficiencies in blacks that caused and perpetuated black-white inequality. It was decisions by white men that led to the inferior status of blacks in America in the middle of the 20th century.

In 1964, twenty years after he published *An American Dilemma*, Myrdal would lament, "For sixty years [after the establishment of Jim Crow], until about the time when I happened to be finishing my study of the Negro problem in America, the status of the Negroes remained almost unchanged" (quoted in Lyman 1998: 346). Presently, we will see that for nearly identical reasons, the relative status of the "Negro" remains almost unchanged sixty years *after* Myrdal finished his study as well.

2.2 The American Creed

Myrdal postulated a unifying value system of liberty, equality, justice, and fair opportunity (Myrdal 1944: xlviii) that he labeled the *American Creed*:

Americans of all national origins, classes regions, creeds and colors have something in common: a social ethos, a political creed. It is difficult to avoid the judgment that that this "American Creed" is the cement in the structure of this great and disparate nation (Myrdal 1944: 3)

For Myrdal and other Racial Liberals, the American Creed identifies a unique brand of rational and moral nationalism uniting an otherwise heterogeneous and immigrant society (Myrdal 1944: 1044; 1028) and expressing the way “...*the American thinks, talks, and acts under the influence of high national and Christian precepts*” (Myrdal 1944: lxxi: emphasis in original).

Myrdal’s analysis of the American Creed has implications that are central to his idea that the American dilemma is a moral dilemma. Generally, when someone is committed to egalitarian ideals, we can infer that he or she is also committed to racial egalitarianism, should the question of racial inequality arise. However, Myrdal acknowledged that the white Americans did not actually practice the Creed when it came to racial inequalities. He argued that whites were generally unconscious of this moral discrepancy, rationalizing racial inequality on the grounds that blacks were heritably inferior to whites in significant ways (Myrdal 1944: 102). Myrdal surmised that without these racist beliefs and rationalizations, the American Creed would operate directly to suppress the dogma of racial inferiority and to make people’s thoughts more and more ‘independent of race, creed, and color,’ as the American slogan runs (Myrdal 1944: 89). If the “the chief hindrance to improving the Negro is the white man's firm belief in his inferiority” (Myrdal 1944: 101), then the ultimate remedy must consist in whites relinquishing their racist beliefs in order to live up to the American Creed. The dilemma to which the title of his book refers is the choice confronting white Americas: they can choose to follow the American Creed or to maintain their racial supremacy, but cannot have it both ways. Myrdal was optimistic that white America would choose to follow their creed. Nowhere is that optimism more apparent than in his anomaly thesis, the view that the white racial subjugation is an aberrant feature of an otherwise egalitarian American society:

2.3 The Anomaly Thesis

Whites do not treat blacks in an egalitarian fashion because they believe that blacks are behaviorally, culturally, or intellectually inferior to whites. Myrdal maintained that the attitude of white supremacy expressed in these beliefs constituted an anomaly in American society, not only because it ran contrary to the deepest egalitarian values held by white Americans, but also because the notion of racial

superiority was demonstrably false (Myrdal 1944: lxxiii). Based on these erroneous and inegalitarian beliefs, however, whites rationalized an exception to the Creed in order to justify their inegalitarian treatment of blacks, just as they did when justifying slavery (Myrdal 1944: lxxi). This anomaly presented a moral dilemma for American society, which Myrdal called the “Negro Problem”:

To the great majority of white Americans the Negro problem has distinctly negative connotation...It is embarrassing. The very presence of the Negro in America; his fate in this country through slavery, Civil War and Reconstruction...his present status...his protest and his aspiration...represent to the ordinary white man...an anomaly in the very structure of American society (Myrdal 1944: xlv)

Exacerbating the difficulty of achieving a racially egalitarian society was that, while many whites might be convinced that blacks had the same behavioral and mental capacities as themselves, this acknowledgement would not necessarily lead to racial equality. Commitment to egalitarianism *caused* them to come up with rationalizations to explain the obvious inequality whites experienced around them. Myrdal held that “...conflict between...the valuations [of] the American Creed and personal and local interests,” (Myrdal 1944: lxxi), compelled white Americans to adopt two “mechanism[s] of rationalization” (Myrdal 1944: 1027). The phrase “Negro Problem” implied the first rationalization.

Whites tended to project the source of the race relations problem on to blacks, not whites:

Trying to defend their behavior to others, and primarily to themselves, people will attempt to conceal the conflict between their different valuations of what is desirable and undesirable, right or wrong, by keeping away some valuations from awareness and by focusing attention on others. For the same opportune purpose, people will twist and mutilate their beliefs of how social reality actually is (Myrdal 1944: lxxiii).

The second rationalization was derived from a “...liberalistic trust” (Myrdal 1944: xlvi) among whites that tried and tested American institutions would take care of the race relations issues over time, just as they had resolved the problem of slavery.

These two rationalizations blunted progress toward racial equality because they justified white confidence in their moral and intellectual rectitude in the face of evidence to the contrary. Our psychological need to maintain belief in our integrity generally overrides our psychological need to act in accordance to what we believe is true, at least when the two mental states come into conflict. Couple our interest in believing we live a life of integrity with the general interest whites have in maintaining

racial dominance, and it would seem that racial injustice is not going to be undermined with empirical evidence or reason anytime soon.

With the above considerations in mind, Myrdal appealed to an intuition about human moral psychology to support his view that our society can exploit the aberrant nature of racism to achieve racial progress. Myrdal said that even the least reflective white supremacists unconsciously recognize the inconsistency between their attitudes and their practices:

We shall find that even a poor and uneducated white person in some isolated and backward rural region in the Deep South, who is violently prejudiced against the Negro and intent upon depriving him of civic rights and human independence, has also a whole compartment in his valuation sphere housing the entire American Creed of liberty, equality, justice, and fair opportunity for everybody. He is actually also a good Christian and honestly devoted to the ideals of human brotherhood and the Golden Rule (Myrdal 1944: lxxx)

Generally, the recognition that we lack moral integrity causes psychological stress, and so, “[t]o the great majority of white Americans the Negro problem...makes for moral uneasiness (Myrdal 1944: xlv). Myrdal identified this anxiety as the symptom in whites that turns “The Negro Problem” in his book’s title into a curable problem of white psychology. Myrdal argued that given the human tendency toward self-reflection, whites were beginning to put into practice the liberal ideals of America’s Creed: “[N]ot since reconstruction has there been more reason to anticipate fundamental changes in American race relations” and these changes “will involve a development toward the American ideals” (Myrdal 1944: xix). While recognizing that America had so far failed to live up to its creed, Myrdal insisted this was because “Practically no white people are sufficiently incited to examine their beliefs critically. And so, *through the generations, strengthened by community and consensus, a public opinion is formed by whites which is plainly opportunistic in the self-interest of the majority group*” (Myrdal 1944: 102 emphasis in original). However, with some reflection on the part of whites, the bigotry blacks experienced in their daily lives would become more and more exceptional. With the diminishment of race prejudice stemming from such reflection, the way would be paved for commitment to democratic egalitarianism to address, rather than suppress acknowledgement of racial injustice in American society. But what process could smooth that path to racial equality?

2.4 The Principle of Cumulation

The Anomaly thesis explains why white commitment to the American Creed alone is insufficient to achieve a racially egalitarian society. Whites believe or rationalize black deficiencies, and not white oppression, as the cause of racial inequality. Psychological and material self-interest deters whites from critically examining their inegalitarian and unjustified racial assumptions. For these reasons, Myrdal acknowledged that merely appealing to democratic egalitarianism would not overcome the opportunistic self-interest of the majority. A more direct means of challenging white beliefs was necessary, for so long as whites believed blacks were responsible for their inferior status, they would not abandon their prejudices and discriminatory practices.

Myrdal's solution was that we could undermine racist beliefs by promoting policies that improved the status of Blacks. An improvement in the status of blacks would provide whites with the necessary evidence that blacks were equal to them, undermining the source of their racist beliefs and practices—the images of blacks they observe.

In order to get our society to support incremental improvements to Black status, Myrdal argued that we must appeal to a psychological principle he calls “cumulation” (Myrdal 1944: Chapter 3 and Appendix 3). The principle of cumulation (Myrdal 1944: 75 ff.) maintains that white oppression and inferior black status are interdependent and self-recycling. White oppression is the cause of all the factors that lead to the inferior conditions of blacks, but black behavioral adaptations to those conditions serve to “cause” or promote racial stereotyping by whites (thus, ‘reciprocal causation’ might be a better name for Myrdal’s principle). Whites typically interpret substandard black living conditions as providing some empirical evidence that white stereotypes about blacks are true: “White prejudice and discrimination keep the Negro low in standards of living, health, education, manners, and morals. This in turn gives support to white prejudice” (Myrdal 1944: 75). Then, whites use this “evidence” to support oppressive policies against blacks or reject progressive policies aimed at remedying black socioeconomic conditions, and the cycle continues. In this way, “white prejudice and Negro standards thus, mutually ‘cause’ each other” (Myrdal 1944: 75).

The crucial point for Myrdal is that a cumulative cycle may be virtuous or vicious. When white impartiality and black well-being both increase, we have a virtuous cycle, leading to diminishing inequality; and when white impartiality and black well-being both decline, we have a “vicious cycle,” leading to increased inequality (Myrdal 1944: 75 footnote b).

The vicious cumulation cycle explains the tenacity of the belief in white supremacy: what people see influences them more than what people are told. Seeing that blacks do indeed have lower living standards than whites reinforces the belief that blacks are not as qualified for positions in society that would otherwise contribute to an exodus from the urban ghettos. “[The white man] ‘knows’ that the Negro is not “capable” of handling a machine, running a business or learning a profession” (Myrdal 1944: 208). Vicious cumulation also explains the lack of empathic concern most whites have for the condition of blacks. Myrdal noted that discriminatory segregation leads to white stereotypes of blacks and causes whites to focus on the differences between blacks and themselves. This, in turn, affects how whites regard blacks. When whites have less regard for blacks, they are less likely to want to associate or interact with blacks, and blacks will be less likely to work or live with whites who have little regard for them. This reciprocal mistrust further reinforces racial stereotypes and de facto segregation (Myrdal 1944: 956).

Cumulation has a negative effect on poor whites as well. Since “[p]overty itself breeds the conditions which breed poverty,” poor whites are not immune to the negative implications of the vicious circle for how more affluent members of their race view them. While recognizing that the upper classes generally have contempt for the laboring classes of either race, Myrdal acknowledged that blacks have the additional impediment of disdain that is “fortified by an elaborate system of racial beliefs and discriminations [that] are organized in the social institutions” (Myrdal 1944: 209). Thus, unlike poor whites, economic exploitation is not the only form of social injustice blacks endure. This additional source of injustice is the American society’s assumption of white supremacy (Myrdal 1944: 53-57) which leads to “race prejudice” a term that “embraces the whole complex of valuations and beliefs which are behind discriminatory behavior” (Myrdal 1944: 52 footnote a).

On the other hand, the virtuous cycle suggests that our society can reverse white prejudicial attitudes and attendant discrimination: improvement in either white impartiality or black well-being would bend American society in the direction racial equality. This conclusion led Myrdal to suggest a number of remedial proposals (Myrdal 1944: 198ff). Schools, trade unions, and the government are the armory of the American Creed. Policies aimed at changing white racial beliefs through these institutions would mobilize a positive or virtuous cycle reducing discrimination in America society as a whole. For example, incorporating blacks into the labor movement would help both black Americans and the American labor movement by increasing the number of their affiliates and thus their political influence. In addition, cumulation entails that black self-help measures can improve their condition with respect to whites. An educated black population can produce lawyers to sue persons and institutions practicing discrimination. Blacks can migrate to areas like the industrialized North and West, where the Southern ideology and belief in black deficiency are less entrenched. Finally, Myrdal suggested a traditional Keynesian governmental economic policy but aimed at full employment for blacks rather than whites. Myrdal felt that such a policy was feasible as blacks only represented ten percent of the population at the time, and President Franklin Roosevelt had successfully implemented a similar policy during the Depression for the majority of Americans. Implementing any or all of these changes would improve the socioeconomic conditions of blacks, reducing prejudice against blacks, beginning a virtuous, nondiscriminatory cycle.

2.5 Myrdal's Impermanence Hypothesis

The conceptual framework for Myrdal's research operates under the assumption that whites will remain in the majority and blacks in the minority in the future (Myrdal 1944: li). Myrdal's framework also assumes that whites have the power to discriminate effectively based on race, and do so, but there is no reciprocal power among blacks to discriminate effectively against whites. The gap between racial groups is "determined by 'race prejudice'" on the part of whites, not blacks (Myrdal 1944: 1065). The racial status quo is such that "there is —under these static conditions—just enough prejudice on the part

of whites to keep down the Negro plane of living to that level which maintains the specific degree of prejudice, or the other way around” (Myrdal 1944: 1066).

Myrdal recognized that these assumptions make racial injustice appear to be an “irreversible process” writing, “One would expect a constant tendency toward increased race prejudice...” (Myrdal 1944:79). Nevertheless, as we have seen, he rejected that idea, identifying the American Creed and the institutional structures in the U.S that disseminate its principles as the two factors that would lead to racial progress. Together, these moral values and institutional principles would bring constant pressure to bear on race prejudice (Myrdal 1944: 80) and would cause whites to abandon their racial precepts and establish a racially egalitarian society.

Myrdal contended that his virtuous cycle, operating in tandem with the American Creed, would erode the presumption among whites that black deficiencies are the cause of racial inequality. Once society removed the impediment of racial prejudice and discrimination, the gap between blacks and whites would close. Consequently, Myrdal concluded we should reject the thesis that black-white inequality is a permanent feature of America society (Myrdal 1944: 79-80).

2.6 Objections to Myrdalian Racial Liberalism

Critics of Racial Liberalism challenged Myrdal’s account of the relationship between white beliefs and racial inequality, as well his analysis of the relationship between democratic egalitarianism and racial inequality. His sternest contemporary critic was black Marxist sociologist Oliver Cromwell Cox. Cox criticized Myrdal’s for focusing on individual white prejudicial beliefs instead of the economic racial injustice of our oppressive society:

We cannot defeat race prejudice by proving it is wrong. The reason for this is that race prejudice is only a symptom of a materialistic social fact...The articulate white man’s ideas about his racial superiority are rooted deeply in the social system, and it can be corrected by changing the social system itself (Cox 1948: 463).

According to Cox, the problem in locating the ultimate source of racial inequality in beliefs is that doing so imputes a mystical quality to white belief. He argued, “If beliefs, per se, could subjugate a people, the beliefs which Negroes hold about whites should be as effective as those whites hold against Negroes”

(1948: 531). This rebuttal was intended to show that Myrdal “closes his eyes to the material interests which support and maintain racial inequality” (Cox 1945: 137). For Cox, the economic injustices that secured white dominance over blacks in the United States reflected these interests. Rather than locating the source of racial inequality in systematic economic subjugation of blacks by whites, Myrdal avoided the obvious implications of his data that connects race prejudice to class positioning (Cox 1948: 509, 538). Myrdal located the remedy for racial inequity primarily in a resolution of the moral conflict that arises in the minds of whites from observing racial disparity. In doing so, Myrdal “seeks to eliminate only the racial aspects of the exploitative system” and thus “he compromises with the system which produces racial antagonism” (Cox 1948: 535). Rather than presenting his abundant evidence of white racial bias as indicative of a deep racial divide, Myrdal presents slavery and Jim Crow as anomalous or regionally isolated historical events. The effect of Myrdal’s decision to view a problem of racial domination as a problem of white moral turpitude was to put “a gloss over the raw facts and in doing so obscured them from full view and blunted their impact” (Steinberg 1995: 40). As a result of this gloss, sociology subsequently treated racial inequality as a problem “in the hearts of men” rather than a “complex dynamic of group conflict resulting from the differential distribution of power, wealth, prestige, and other social rewards,” until the Civil Rights movement compelled sociologists to seek other explanations (van den Berghe 1967: 7)

Myrdal’s closest American research associate (Jackson 1995: 122), Ralph Bunche, raised a related concern. A decade before Myrdal published *An American Dilemma* with its faith in the power of American institutions to free minorities from discrimination, Bunche wrote:

...the instruments of state are merely reflections of the political and economic ideology of the dominant group...the political arm of the state cannot be divorced from the prevailing economic structure, whose servant it must inevitably be (Bunche 1935: 314-315)

Bunche believed that blacks could only be what Derrick Bell would later call “fortuitous beneficiaries” of political and economic policies, since racial policies in the United States must ultimately secure the interests of the dominant group. This meant that “the only hope for improvement in the conditions of any

minority group in America is the hope that can be held out for the betterment of the masses of the dominant group” (Bunche 1935: 320). Later in his career, Myrdal echoed this view saying:

Improving the lot of this whole submerged group [the poor] has become a very acute problem for America, and it is only in that larger setting that the Negroes will be able to achieve anything more than formal equality (Glazer 1964 op. cit.)

Taken together, the above considerations imply that Myrdal’s principle of cumulation rests on a questionable assumption. Myrdal assumed that there would be a self-reinforcing virtuous cycle spurred by improvements in black well-being and diminishing anti-black prejudice. However, it is just as plausible to believe that whites would view black socioeconomic success as coming at their expense, since any job employing a black would be one less job employing a white, leading whites to favor policies that would re-establish their advantage. The virtuous cycle would then be cut short and reversed. T Cox summarized these early criticisms neatly. In failing to emphasize the forces of white reaction, “Myrdal did not bring to light the social determinants of this well-known dilemma; he merely recognizes it and rails against its existence” (Cox 1945: 131-32)

2.7 Myrdal’s Response to his Critics

Myrdal defended his account of the relationship between white beliefs and racial inequality and view of the ability of national institutions to free minorities from discrimination. He countered that his critics wrongly dismissed the power of moral consideration to influence our actions and behavior. Myrdal reminded us that human behavior was always a compromise between material and moral interests

Ideals, rooted in institutions such as the Constitution and in the people’s hearts, are real forces, though not the only forces, sometimes not even the most powerful forces. That is the dilemma; it is not my capricious invention but a description of a real situation (Myrdal 1972: 31)

Myrdal directed his research efforts toward resolving the dilemma caused by competing white material and moral interests, not because he believed material interests were irrelevant, but because he believed that a politically impotent and despised black minority could not achieve institutional reform without appealing to white moral values. Whites would have to compromise their “opportunistic prejudices and interests” in order for blacks to achieve racial equality, and “behind these compromises are the higher

valuations” (Myrdal 1974: 31). By choosing a framework focusing on individual and local white prejudicial beliefs instead of the economic racial injustice of our oppressive institutions, Myrdal was confident that he was presenting the only workable and logical basis for a successful effort by blacks to improve their status in American society (Myrdal 1972: 30-31). Myrdal recognized that the problem of race relations is a moral problem, but its resolution requires addressing problems of political economy and empowerment. Concessions of power and privilege are rarely made on the basis ethical principles alone, as Myrdal recognized:

As to white attitudes toward Negroes, yes, I do believe that there have been changes. But you know, no upper class ever gave up its monopoly or its privileges out of ethical principles; the submerged group needs power to force its way in, and it is this that makes the ethical principles prevail (Glazer 1964 op. cit.)

Thus, Myrdal understood that, in the actual life of society, the moral demand for black-white equality does not by itself trump white’s interest in controlling their political and socioeconomic destiny.

Finally, as Leach (2002) argues, Myrdal’s analysis of the relationship between democratic egalitarianism and racial inequality takes into account the double-edged nature of commitment to a moral creed. Myrdal acknowledged, rather than ignored, the possibility that democratic egalitarian societies could institutionalize inequality. He maintained that inequality “emerges from millions of acts often done by individuals who do not see the cumulative effects of what they are doing” and “all of these individual acts form and reinforce a social system that is grimly disadvantages Negroes (Myrdal 1972: 33). Myrdal notes that while the American Creed operates to restrain racist beliefs in black inferiority, “it *indirectly calls forth* the same dogma to justify a blatant exception to that Creed” (Myrdal 1944: 89 emphasis in original). Therefore, contrary to the claims of van den Bergh and others, Myrdal addressed Bunch’s concern because he did not divorce the instruments of state from the political and economic ideology of the dominant group in his analysis.

2.8 The Main Objection to Racial Liberalism: The Inverted Metric

Evidence for Racial Liberalism's view that racial inequality is an impermanent feature of American society at first appears compelling (cf. US Census Bureau 2013). In the nearly fifty years from 1963 to 2011, we see remarkable black progress. The number of elected black official increased 700% from 1,469 in 1970 to 10,500. The median family income (in 2011 dollars) for blacks nearly doubled from \$22,266 to \$40,495. The poverty rate for blacks decreased a third, from 42% to 28%. High school graduation rates for blacks were 26% and only 4% of blacks had four years of college under their belt in 1963. By 2011, graduation rates had tripled to 85% and 21% of blacks had four years of college.

However, it would be a mistake to conclude from the above data that Myrdal's anticipation of a virtuous cycle has been vindicated. Such a conclusion would rest on an "inverted metric" (Steinberg 2007 45) that judges black progress only in comparison to the situation of blacks in the past, and not to whites in the present. Steinberg (1995) gives James Baldwin credit for recognizing the inadequacy of such a metric:

Thus, the appropriate standard for measuring black progress is not how much better off blacks are than they were in the past, but how they compare with whites at the present time in terms of incomes and living standards (231)

When we measure racial progress in the way Baldwin suggests, a more accurate picture of black-white inequality emerges. Socioeconomically, comparative standards of living for blacks are no better, and in some cases are worse, than they were during Jim Crow. When it comes to household income and wealth, the gaps between blacks and whites have *widened* since 1963 (Pew Research Center 2013: 2-3). Black income remains just over half that of whites. It is true that, expressed as a share of white income, black households earn about 59% of what white households earn, a small increase from 55% in 1967. However, when expressed as dollars, the black-white income gap widened, from about \$19,000 on average in the late 1960s to roughly \$27,000 today. In addition, the racial gap in household wealth has *increased* from \$75,224 in 1984 to \$84,960 in 2011.

In relation to poverty, homeownership, and unemployment, the black-white gaps are roughly the same as they were 40 years ago (Pew Research Center 2013: 20-24). The gap between black and white

poverty rates has only decreased by 5 percent over that last 50 years. The black unemployment rate has consistently been about double that of whites since the 1950s. In housing, the cornerstone of the American dream, the homeownership rate for blacks remains about the same: it has only increased from 42 percent to 43 percent since 1970 (the earliest this information was available). At the same time, the percentage of US renter occupied housing units that were black households increased from 15 percent to 19 percent despite the doubling of black median income.

In education, white and black high school completion rates have converged, and both blacks and whites have about a 90 percent completion rate by the age of 25. However, the trends in college completion rates tell a more nuanced story. Today, white adults 25 and older are significantly more likely than blacks are to have completed at least a bachelor's degree (34% vs. 21%, a 13-percentage point difference). Fifty years ago, the completion gap between whites and blacks was only about 6 percentage points—10% vs. 4% (Pew Research Center 2013: 25-27).

In 2010, the incarceration rate for black men in federal and state prisons and local jails, was six times that of whites. This ratio represents an *increase* from 1960, when imprisonment of black men occurred at “only” five times that of whites (Pew Research Center 2013: 31).

Those committed to achieving racial equality do not measure racial progress by how well blacks improve their status compared to their black ancestors, but by how well they improve their status with respect to those who have benefited from black exclusion. The crucial reason for rejecting Myrdal's Racial Liberalism is that, in spite of a reduction in the overt expression and practice of anti-black bias, the gap between blacks and whites remains the same as it was in Myrdal's time, even though our society extended formal equality to blacks more than five decades ago. Racial Liberalism has no explanation for this fact.

It is not clear that Myrdal retained the view that he developed in *An American Dilemma*. Discussing his book thirty years after its publication he asked, “How, in 1942, could anyone foresee that America would permit the stupendous deterioration and ghettoization of its cities?” (Myrdal 1972 op.cit.) In the next part, I give what I believe is a plausible answer to Myrdal's otherwise rhetorical question.

3 RACIAL REALISM

In 1992, the American legal thinker Derrick Bell abandoned Racial Liberalism (Feldman 2012: 248-52) in favor of “Racial Realism,” his term for the view that racial inequality is a permanent rather than temporary feature of American society. Bell’s Racial Realism revolves around two claims: the Permanence of Racism Thesis and Interest Convergence Principle. According to the former, there will never be equality between blacks and whites in American society. Bell writes:

Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those Herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary "peaks of progress," short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it, not as a sign of submission, but as an act of ultimate defiance (Bell 1992: 12)

Bell’s interest convergence principle describes and explains the institutionalized mechanism that preserves racial inequity in the United States. According to this principle, “The interest in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when [and only to the extent that] it converges with the interest of whites” (Bell 1980: 523), and such convergence will always be quite partial. ‘Interests’ in this view are defined in terms of material factors such jobs, income, wealth, and political power (Delgado 2002: 371). Interest divergence (which might be a better name for Bell’s principle) ensures that racial inequality will perdure because US institutions operate to protect white material interest from any threat posed by competing black interests. Underlying interest divergence is the widespread assumption that black cultural or intellectual inferiority is the cause of racial inequality, and so whites often view policies that narrow the socioeconomic gap between blacks and whites with suspicion. Throughout U.S. history, the governing institutions in the U.S, invariably overturn or revise any gap-narrowing policy that does not conform to white interests. In this way, white hegemony is preserved, and contrary to Myrdal, even in 1942 it could have been foreseen that America would permit the “stupendous deterioration and ghettoization of its cities” or anywhere else the black community was segregated from the white.

3.1 The Property Right in Whiteness: Bell's Permanence of Racism Thesis

The most controversial aspect of Racial Realism is its main thesis that American racism is not, as Racial Liberalism maintains, a vestige of discredited attitudes or beliefs regarding slavery or racial determinist reasoning (Bell 1993: 571). Instead, Racial Realism claims “racism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society” (Bell 1992: ix).

Two factors figure most prominently in Bell's view. First, Bell maintains the institutional structures perpetuate a belief in the doctrine of white supremacy. Second, as we have seen, despite the expansion in the number of blacks into middle and professional classes, the actual economic condition of blacks as a group relative to whites remains the same or worse as before the civil rights legislation of the 1960's (Taylor 2004: 275).

As to the second factor, the progress that has been achieved—the ending of formal racial barriers, and the advances of certain individual blacks in education and in material and social condition—was expected to signal racism's end, but has not done so. Instead, beneath this surface progress there has been exposed “a more sophisticated and more invidious vehicle for maintaining white dominance” (Bell 1998: 128). One example of this invidiousness is how the entrance of blacks into the middle and professional classes serves not to raise the status of blacks generally, but to relieve social pressure to advance blacks. Even when the actual economic plight of blacks as a class is no better relative to whites than it was before the Civil Rights movement (Bell 1987a: 66-67), whites take instances of individual black success as evidence that racism is no longer an impediment to general black success. Changes in the relative socioeconomic status of whites and blacks are “more cosmetic than real (Bell 1987: 93) because the social and political structures that support white supremacy remain unaltered. Thus, while recognizing progress for present blacks relative to blacks under Jim Crow, Bell insists, “nothing has changed” for blacks with respect to whites (Bell 1987: 22).

As to the first, institutional factor, the authors of the American Creed—the framers of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, as well as the vast majority of whites in the late eighteenth century believed themselves to be inherently superior to blacks. It is in that sense that

American society is "racist" as Bell defines the term. Despite sound arguments that slavery was morally wrong, the sincere belief in the superiority of the white race was sufficient to "condone a blatant contradiction" of our "hallowed ideals" (Bell 1987: 36). The Constitutional compromise, which protected the property interests of slave owners over the moral interest of black human beings in equality, demonstrates that commitment to democratic egalitarianism does not imply commitment to racial egalitarianism in the United States. The "sacrifice of the rights of some in the belief that this involuntary forfeiture is necessary to secure the rights of others" (Bell 1987: 36) remains an important unifying factor for whites. Indeed, the provisions for maintaining the institution of slavery in the original Constitution reflect pragmatic, political compromises by the framers, without which there would have been no U.S. government at all (Bell 1987: 36). Bell believes that this compromise set a racial precedent whose force continues to this day. Egalitarianism and racism have competed to determine the outcome of national concerns since the inception of the U.S.

The compromise of black rights serves an additional function in maintaining social stability when whites have conflicting political or socioeconomic interests with each other. To this day, the subordination of black interests during these conflicts serves as a source of shared identity for whites and thereby enhances social stability (Bell 1992 *infra* 46-64). Racism is not a lingering vestige of a historical past; it is a present, ongoing system of subordination.

Bell explained this continuing system and structure of racial inequality in the U.S. as dependent on a "property right in whiteness" (Bell 1987 note †, 127; cf. Harris 1993). This property right has its origin in the doctrine of white supremacy and represents the "ideological hegemony of white racism" (Bell 1987: 156 quoting Marable 1981: 421), of which slavery and white prejudice and discrimination are merely symptoms. The property in whiteness offers an inherent entitlement to a superior status relative to the caste-like, less worthy social position of blacks (Bell 1987: 137). Harris (1993) explains:

Whiteness fits the broad historical concept of property described by classical theorists. In James Madison's view, for example, property "embraces everything to which a man may attach a value and have a right," referring to all of a person's legal rights. Property as conceived in the founding

era included not only external objects and people's relationships to them, but also all of those human rights, liberties, powers, and immunities that are important for human well-being, including: freedom of expression, freedom of conscience, freedom from bodily harm, and free and equal opportunities to use personal faculties (1725-1726)

The property right in whiteness encompasses a “set of assumptions, privileges, and benefits that accompany the status of being white.” These entitlements give priority to the needs and interests of whites over those of blacks (Bell 1998: 9, 55) and “can become a valuable asset that whites seek to protect” (Bell 2001: 185). What constitute “white interests” stem from attempts to retain this status and its advantages, which are socioeconomic, political, and psychological (Bell 2001: 188) and accrue to every white person, whether he or she seeks it or not (Bell 1998: 13).

One implication of white entitlement is a sense of individual and group identity. Whites “bond” on the basis race (Bell 2000: 540) and protect their racial property right when they deal with racial issues. Whites act not out of altruism or a sense of justice but in their racial group’s interest (Bell and Bansal 1988: 1609, 1611-12) and our institutions reflect this partiality.

Racial bonding presents a problem for Myrdal’s cumulation principle. The property interest in whiteness has proven resistant to educational efforts to promote black-white equality. The pull of racial self-interest and power has been too strong. “Viewing racism as an amalgam of guilt, responsibility, and power—all of which are generally known but never acknowledged” has no effect on whites, which “may explain why educational programs [about race] are destined to fail” (Bell 2000: 540). Whereas Myrdal had argued that black socioeconomic successes would begin a virtuous cycle of white impartiality, Bell argues that whites permit some black to advance only when it serve whites’ more basic interests in maintaining socioeconomic dominance, never to promote policies that will make those advances permanent.

America remains a society that considers policies that are effective in narrowing the gap in status between blacks and whites “extraordinary measures” or even “reverse discrimination.” As noted previously, many whites counter data that shows the great statistical improbability of positive life outcomes for anyone raised in an impoverished ghetto environment with the unrepresentative examples of individual blacks who manage to achieve success in spite of the long odds. These rare examples are

supposed to show that “racism is no more” (Bell 1987: 48) an impediment to black achievement. But black Horatio Alger stories do not serve to promote a cycle of policies designed to expand on the successes of these blacks. Instead, these examples serve to justify the status quo of white hegemony by “proving” that blacks already have a fair opportunity for succeeding and that any special consideration for blacks is unjust. As a result, “Instead of gaining access to real influence, it is more likely that we [blacks who gain mainstream success] are legitimizing a system that relegates us to an ineffectual but decorative fringe” (Bell 1998: 131-132).

This property interest in whiteness also militates against a political solution to black-white inequality that would involve an effective cross-racial coalition. Whites who are low on the economic ladder might have sought alliance with blacks in similar conditions in order to increase the political pressure on government to address gross income inequality that has ballooned in American since the last decade of the 20th century. From 1995 to 2013, 95% of economic gains went to the top 1% net worth (Pew Research Center 2014). Gross economic inequalities often cause political instability, but such instability is mostly absent in the U.S. Bell claims this is because racial solidarity supersedes class interests in America. A property interest in whiteness forms the basis of this white racial solidarity and blunts the effectiveness of any attempt at forming a coalition between low-income whites and blacks (Bell 1987: 162-65). Rather than work together with similarly situated blacks to redress the commonality of their plight, whites at the economic bottom identify with whites at the economic top and blame blacks of a class similar to their own as the source of their problem (Bell 2001a: 70-71). Lower and middle-income whites will often compromise their socioeconomic interests and professed beliefs in meritocracy, if it is perceived that blacks are getting a socioeconomic advantage because of their race. Bell gives the following anecdote:

A white student at a suburban law school...acknowledged that blacks were disadvantaged by past and present racial discrimination but insisted that jobs should be filled strictly on the basis of merit as determined by traditional measures: grades and test scores. In response, I noted that he seemed as able as most students attending nationally known law like Harvard and Yale, but predicted that if after graduation he sought employment in the large New York law firms, he would be rejected in favor of students whose social-class advantages had enabled them to graduate from nationally known schools. "That's the breaks," he said softly after a pause. I

jumped on him. *"What kind of answer is that? You seem ready to die rather than see a job you seek go to a black hired under an affirmative-action program if you have the higher grades and test scores, but you are ready to stand by passively if someone uses upper-class status to get a position you want that would advance your career and provide for your family."* Finally he said, "Well, one day, perhaps, I will be able to send my children to Harvard or Yale" (Bell 1987: 265 emphasis in original)

This example is intended to show that lower class whites often act against their class interests because doing so places them "in the dominant circle—an area in which most hold no real power, but only their privileged racial identity" (Bell 1992: 8, quoting Crenshaw 1988: 1380–81). This story also demonstrates one way racism promotes political stability in the United States. Without racism, the great majority of whites "would likely wake up and revolt against the severe disadvantage they suffer in income and opportunity when compared to whites at the top of or socio-economic heap" (Bell 1992: 571). Instead, an affluent minority of rich whites exploit the general white interest in maintaining white solidarity by blaming the economic woes of middle and lower class whites on blacks, even though it is economic institutions, created and run by rich whites, that determine the material fortunes of virtually every person in the United States.

In Bell's view, the political stability engendered by whiteness undermines Racial Liberalism's anomaly thesis: "Racism is not an anomaly, but a crucial component of liberal democracy in this country. The two are historically, even inherently, reinforcing. In effect, the apparent anomaly is an actual symbiosis" (Bell 2001b: 1271).

Bell's permanence of racism thesis directly challenges the Racial Liberal belief that society, by way of legal and psychological processes, progresses in a consistent evolutionary direction toward equality (Bell 1998: 47). The progress of blacks toward equality with whites has not advanced but been stymied by the law and widespread white supremacist attitudes. The belief in evolutionary racial advance is but "naive belief" (Bell 1998 134) as shown by the very large black-white socioeconomic gap which has persisted for more than 50 years since blacks gained formal legal equality with whites.

For Bell, these two factors, institutional privileging of white over black interests and entrenched white supremacist thinking, explain why racism is a permanent feature of American society. The social capital that comes with being born white rather than black in America, coupled the institutional principles that maintain white hegemony, reify the doctrine white supremacy, and so guarantee black subordination whenever that hegemony is challenged. Bell concludes that the idea that blacks can achieve racial equality is unrealistic: “[P]rogress in American race relations is largely a mirage, obscuring the fact that whites continue, consciously or unconsciously, to do all in their power to ensure their dominion and maintain their control” (Bell 198a: 48).

3.2 Bell’s Interest Convergence Principle

Bell discusses an additional invidious vehicle that maintains white dominance: the principle of interest convergence. Our governing institutions operate on this principle when deciding on policies that would directly benefit blacks by narrowing the black-white gap. Bell uses this principle to explain the peaks and valleys racial progress that we witness throughout U.S. history, and more importantly, to explain why he believes racial equality is not a realistic goal for black Americans.

Interest convergence derives from white supremacy, on Bell’s account. He claims that in Western societies, a deep sense of racial superiority exists among whites. This has led societies dominated by whites to reify a doctrine of white supremacy in their political and social systems. Western societies came to reject the notion that racial equality *per se* is of primary moral significance. Instead, they established and ordained societies dedicated to the sometimes spoken, but invariably implied proposition that the interests of whites constitute the true interests of humankind. The modern American version of this notion entails that any policy aimed at achieving racial equality must first demonstrate that such policies converge with white interests in preserving their superior legal standing, political influence, and socioeconomic status:

The interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when that interest converges with the interests of whites in policy-making positions. This convergence is far more important for gaining relief than the degree of harm suffered by blacks or the character of proof offered to prove that harm (Bell 2004: 69)

According to Bell, the system that gave rise to these legal, political, and socioeconomic inequalities in the past persists because the institutions originally established to preserve white privilege over competing egalitarian interest are the same institutions used to address racial grievances today. American institutions have not evolved consistently to live up to our Creed because general white interests compete and prevent advancement toward racial equality. As a result, any racial reforms must ultimately conform to white interest in maintaining their privileged status. Thus, there is a limit to how far reforms can go toward black-white equality, and this limit preserves white dominance. It is for this reason that racial inequality is an ongoing feature of the American system.

The interest convergence principle explains why blacks cannot close the socioeconomic gap with whites. The necessity of submission of black antiracist interests to white socioeconomic interests prevents blacks from successfully appealing to our governing institutions to gain equal access to the main sources of wealth and status in our society. The presumption that blacks are inferior to whites creates a social and political climate in the United States where blacks have no standing when it comes to complaining about inequality. Bell writes, “No matter what their experience or expertise, blacks' statements involving race are deemed 'special pleading' and thus not entitled to serious consideration” (Bell 1992: 111).

Bell also uses the interest convergence principle to explain why blacks can make substantial racial progress relative to their previous conditions, but cannot make such advances relative to whites. According to Bell, black advances are the product of “racial fortuity” (Bell 2004: 69). Blacks benefit and advance their socioeconomic condition, when interest-convergence results in laws that extend liberties and opportunities universally and thus indirectly to blacks. Bell likens racial fortuity to the principle of the third party beneficiary in contract law (cf. Restatement (Second) of Contracts § 302 (1981)). Just as the third party beneficiary cannot enforce an agreement’s obligations and rights if he or she is the unintended beneficiary, neither can blacks enforce the rights and obligations of racial justice remedies in the eyes of the law (Bell 2002: 69-70). At best, blacks remain only incidental beneficiaries of legal and institutional changes that are not really aimed at promoting black-white equality.

One of many examples Bell gives in explaining racial fortuity is President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln's executive order ostensibly freed blacks from slavery, but this was not the primary purpose, nor effect, of the Proclamation. In terms of purpose, Lincoln hoped the Proclamation would cripple the Confederacy by disrupting its labor force, preventing European powers from entering the war on the side of the Confederacy, and facilitate the Union's own exploitation of black labor in the form of military enlistment (Henderson 2012: 14). In terms of effect, the Proclamation had no effective legal authority in the states that had seceded; at the same time, the Proclamation "carefully excluded" slaveholding Unionist territories. As a result, the Proclamation itself freed no one within the Union's jurisdiction from the subordination of enslavement. Slavery persisted until the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment two years later (Henderson 2012: 15). In this example, America's enslaved blacks were the fortuitous beneficiaries of an act of war, a point that President Lincoln himself conceded in a letter to Horace Greely, stating, "What I do about the slavery and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union ..." (cited in Henderson 2014: 15 cited in fn.8).

Because blacks remain, at best, only incidental or fortuitous beneficiaries of legal and institutional changes, those changes are never likely to promote black advancement relative to whites:

Even when interest-convergence results in an effective racial remedy, that remedy will be abrogated at the point that policymakers fear the remedial policy is threatening the superior societal status of whites, particularly those in the middle and upper classes (Bell 2004: 69)

Bell concluded, "Racial justice, then, when it comes, arrives on the wings of racial fortuity rather than hard-earned entitlement" (Bell 2004: 9).

On Bell's account, the interest convergence principle (and its corollary, the racial fortuity principle) has several dire consequences for black well-being that ensure the permanence of racial inequality. The first consequence is that the courts will use facially neutral standards in ways that maintain white hegemony. For example, the courts will reify the notion that the Constitution is "colorblind" into a standard that ignores race as a criterion in determining the constitutionality of remedies for racial inequality. This has the effect of ensuring that civil rights laws will be ineffective, as it

is *impossible* to remedy racial inequality without non-neutral preference for the disadvantaged oppressed group (Bell 1992: 6 emphasis added). This “preference for whites” makes it almost impossible to prove discrimination outlawed by civil rights laws (Bell 1992: 6-7). Occasionally, sympathetic white elites, whose moral interests in achieving racial equality influence them more than their self-interest in maintaining racial dominance, gain control of the Supreme Court. In those instances, the interest of the Court temporarily converges with black interest in achieving racial equality, and effective remedies for achieving racial equality are possible. Nevertheless, according to Bell, this convergence is temporary at best. Even such heralded decisions as *Brown v. Board of Education* (347 U.S. 483 1954) reflect elements of the interest-convergence thesis. In that case, a sympathetic Court held that redress of segregated education should proceed not necessarily immediately but with “all deliberate speed” (Brown II: 349 U.S. 294, 301 1955). Bell draws attention to this “unprecedented deferral of a recognized constitutional right” (Bell 1998: 118) and maintains that this deference demonstrates that the Court made enforcement of the right to equality take a back seat to white self-interest. In deferring to this self-interest, the Court encouraged white resistance to the Courts’ original holdings (Bell 1987: 108). Consequently, even if blacks win a civil rights case, its goals can always be ignored, circumvented, or negated if they challenge existing claims of white entitlement (Bell 1987: 63). Any reforms that arise as a result of civil rights litigation must cohere with white self-interest because “the traditions of racial subordination are deeper than the legal sanctions (Bell 1987: 191-192).

A second consequence of the interest convergence principle is that blacks must rely on a weak or nonexistent white moral empathy to maintain progress once whites become aware that blacks are closing the racial gap. In fact, black advancement usually marks the beginning of white interest *divergence*, as it did under affirmative action. It is psychologically difficult for most whites to identify with blacks as a group, a prerequisite for viewing the problem of racial inequality from the points of view of the oppressed group, rather than the group to which whites are racially bonded (Bell 1992: 4).

3.3 A Defense of Racial Realism

Perhaps the severest critic of Bell's Racial Realism is Professor Justin Driver, who argues that Bell's argument for the permanence of racism, and his interest convergence principle, suffers from "four analytical flaws."

First, the theory's overly broad conceptualization of "black interests" and "white interests" obscures the intensely contested disputes regarding what those terms actually mean. Second, the interest-convergence theory incorrectly suggests that the racial status of blacks and whites over the course of United States history is notable more for continuity than for change. Third, the interest-convergence theory accords insufficient agency to two groups of actors—black citizens and white judges—who have played, and continue to play, significant roles in shaping racial realities. Fourth, the interest-convergence theory cannot be refuted—and, thus, cannot be examined for its validity—because it accommodates racially egalitarian judicial decisions either by contending that they are necessary concessions in order to maintain white racism or by ignoring them altogether (Driver 2011: 156-57)

Drivers first, third, and fourth criticisms are directed primarily at the interest convergence principle, which I will address first. Driver aims his second criticism primarily at the permanence of racism thesis, which I then take up. I will show that Bell has more than adequate responses to all of these criticisms.

Driver first criticism challenges Bell's ability to distinguish between black and white interests, maintaining that "the idea of interest," where applicable, makes sense only in regard individuals and not to racial groups. Individuals "often—usually, perhaps—make decisions based upon a narrow idea of what will be good for them...But human beings—complex creatures that they are—sometimes have multiple motivations for reaching their decisions." Driver cites "raw material interests" and idealized interests such as "honor, altruism, justice, and morality," as the examples of the varied and often conflicting interests that drive individuals to act (Driver 2011: 169). According to Driver, attempting to assign distinct interests to different racial groups is overly speculative (Driver 2011: 170).

However, Driver's criticisms of the concept of group interest are unpersuasive. Thus Feldman (2012) says, "Driver fails to acknowledge that the concept of 'interest' is central to post-World War II intellectual thought" (253). Contemporary economic, political and social theorists who discuss any pluralistic system, that is, one in which two or more states, groups, principles, sources of authority, etc., coexist, must be "thoroughly conversant with interests and interest groups"(253). Feldman gives David

Truman's theory of pluralist democracy as one example. Truman (1971) defined a "group" as a combination of individuals who share "certain common habits of response, which may be called norms" (33). Group membership "exerts power" over individuals, so that "an individual's group affiliations largely determine his attitudes, values, and the frames of reference in terms of which he interprets his experience" (505). For this reason, members of a group generally conform to the group's norms and outlooks. Accordingly, "interests" are constituted by the "shared attitudes" of group member (34) and an interest group "refers to any group that, on the basis of one or more shared attitudes, makes certain claims upon other groups in the society for the establishment, maintenance, or enhancement of forms of behavior that are implied by the shared attitudes" (33). Given something like Truman's definition of 'group', Bell can concede Drivers' assertion that individual blacks and whites can have interests that diverge from those of their racial group without also conceding that this renders the idea of group interest incomprehensible. Bell's discussion of *Brown* (Bell 1980), shows that Bell was well aware that "neither blacks nor whites speak univocally" (Feldman 2012: 254). There, Bell nevertheless employed the idea of group interest to differentiate the interests of "middle and upper class whites" from those of "poorer whites" (Feldman 2012: 254 citing Bell 1980: 523, 525). Driver himself employed the concept of group interests when he admitted that for much of American history—until "the end of Jim Crow"—the collective interest of African Americans in equality was undeniable (Driver 2011: 165-66). If the idea of black collective interests made sense before the end of Jim Crow, then it certainly makes sense today, when the data shows there has been little positive change in the socioeconomic status of blacks compared to whites since that time. Feldman's conclusion that a recognition of a black interest in increasing substantive economic equality is "eminently reasonable" (Feldman 2012 255) and that "Bell's invocations of the concepts of "interest" and "interest-group politics" [is] "coherent and even conventional" (Feldman 2012: 254) is essentially correct.

Driver's third criticism asserts that Bell "accords insufficient agency to two groups of actors—black citizens and white judges—who have played, and continue to play, significant roles in shaping racial realities" (Driver 2011: 157). However, as Feldman points out, this criticism emphasizes a factor

that is irrelevant to the historical accuracy of interest convergence partly because it confuses interest convergence with the permanence of racism thesis. Bell's interest convergence principle explains what the constraints are on racial progress. It does not deny that, during some periods, the political agency of many blacks and some whites can diminish to a limited degree certain racial disparities. Bell himself acknowledges that political agency can bring about movement in the direction of black-white equality. His point is that the movement will not go so far as to challenge white dominance and will be very vulnerable to reversal (Feldman (2012: 255).

Driver's fourth criticism is that the interest convergence thesis, as stated, cannot be "refuted" or "falsified." (Driver 2011 note 3, at 157, 181) and "[t]herefore its "validity cannot be assessed" (Driver 3011 note 3, at 165). Feldman responds that Driver is demanding an inappropriate standard for evaluation the interest convergence principle:

Thus, if interest convergence were a forward-looking thesis that purportedly predicted future behavior, it might reasonably be held to a standard of falsifiability. But interest convergence is historical, and like most historical research it is empirical in the qualitative sense. Such research is generally not falsifiable because testing conditions are not repeatable (Feldman 2012: 257)

However, Feldman's response is unpersuasive because the interest convergence principle is not only a historical thesis, but is also future-oriented. To meet Driver's objection it is necessary to point out that Bell's position has been repeatedly confirmed by the continuing existence of large black-white gaps across measures of well-being. If, someday, those gaps disappear, or even diminish substantially, and matters stay that way year and after year, then we will have strong evidence against Bell's thesis. But we are still waiting for those days. In the meantime, the statistics on black-white inequality and its persistence decade after decade since the Civil Rights movement provides considerable support for Bell's view.

Driver's second criticism (Driver 2011 note 3 at 156-57) attacks the accuracy of Bell's view of American history. That thesis "suggests that the racial status of blacks and whites over the course of United States history is notable more for continuity than for change" (Diver 2011 156-57). According to Driver, Bell "ignores considerable racial advancement" (Driver 2011 165). However, Driver's objection fails to distinguish 'black progress' from 'racial progress' with regard to the advancement of blacks in the

U.S. Interest convergence explains substantial *black progress* (large improvements in the conditions of blacks since 1965), and why we have not achieved substantial *racial progress* (large improvements in the condition of blacks with respect to whites since 1965). Bell acknowledges that positive change has occurred with respect to the former. However, Bell is careful not to conclude on this basis that there has been substantial racial progress, that is, considerable advancement by blacks compared to whites. Driver's error is that he has fallen into the now familiar trap of using the incorrect metric to judge progress toward racial justice. Thus, while the overthrow of Jim Crow brought about large improvements in the lives of many blacks, it did not bring about much movement in diminishing the black-white inequality.

A final criticism of Bell's Racial Realism is that it presents an irresolvable dilemma for those who want to reform the institutional structures that perpetuate racial inequality. Accepting Bell's view means acknowledging that large and pervasive black-white inequality is permanent, no matter our efforts. If the institutional and organizational structures that give rise to racial inequality are incapable of reform, how does defiance make rational sense? If the causes of racial inequality are immutable structures embedded in the psychology, political economy, and culture of the United States, then isn't resistance futile?

Taylor (2004) draws from the work of Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and argues that just as sinfulness is a permanent condition of humankind, yet as individuals we should each strive to resist sin, so it goes with racism. Even if racism is a permanent feature of the society, we must each strive to resist its influence. While this does not solve Bell's conundrum, it makes existential sense, and gives Racial Realists a reason to "[r]isk despair as the necessary price of much-needed enlightenment (Bell 1987: xi)."

However, there is also more mundane reason to resist racist assumptions in our society and that is to prevent racial disparities from getting worse. Earning on average half of what whites earn is better than earning a third of what whites earn. Having a median net worth one eighth that of whites is better than living in debt.

3.4 Conclusion

Racial Realism identifies a pattern in American history that strongly suggests that racial inequality is a permanent feature of our society. Critics of Racial Realism tend to measure black progress against the conditions blacks endured under slavery and Jim Crow, and by this metric, we see more positive change than continuity. However, Bell was certainly correct in judging racial progress by looking at the gaps between blacks and whites in the various measures of well-being. When judged in this way, we find that American history contains more continuity than change and that substantial racial progress is nowhere in sight.

When critics charge that Bell's Racial Realism inculcates "passivity in its adherents, [who will sit and wait] for moments of 'racial fortuity'" (Driver 2011: 190), they fail to account for Bell's recommendation of an attitude of resistance. Bell argues that blacks should actively seek to "forge fortuity" (Bell 2004:90), not wait for it. Such sentiments do not contradict Bell's view that blacks will remain in a subordinate position—a rising tide of white privileges will only raise the standards of a few blacks.

Bell's analysis of the source and cause of racial inequality, coupled with the fact that so little progress has been made in diminishing black-white inequality since the Civil Rights movement, presents a dilemma of its own for Racial Liberalism. Liberals need to address this lack of substantial progress, but it is unclear that they can do so in a way that is consistent with their claims and also plausible. The idea that persistent black-white inequality is just an inexplicable statistical quirk is implausible.

Racial Determinism is inconsistent with liberal claims, but if Racial Determinism is ruled out as incompatible with both the best scientific evidence, and the substantial progress blacks have achieved relative to blacks since the Jim Crow, then the idea that black deficiencies are the reason for the lack of racial progress is implausible too.

In accounting for why blacks can make substantial racial progress relative to their previous conditions, but cannot make such advances relative to whites, Bell's Racial Realism, or something much like it, would seem to be the best explanation of the persistent statistical facts.

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