Systemic racism and the white racial frame

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Introduction

Systemic racism and its white racial frame are concepts essential for understanding contemporary racial group dynamics and racial group conflict in the United States and other countries developed through violent social histories of European imperialism and colonialism targeting peoples of color. These racist foundations have been further perpetuated and extended through whites’ more recent racialized conquests, exploitations, and genocides targeting peoples of color. In probing the fundamental realities of contemporary societies, knowledge of the societal dysfunctionality of systemic racism and its white racial framing is necessary for conceptualizing well broader group dynamics, systemic power structures and inequalities, and group hierarchies and asymmetry in the US and other nation-states principally controlled by European invaders and their descendants. At the top of these societies, the decision-makers have largely been white men and from elite class (e.g. capitalistic) backgrounds.¹

First, we provide background on the development of the concepts, systemic racism and the white racial frame, and their relation to other racial conceptualizations. These concepts emanate from a long-marginalized tradition of critical black social thought and are ideas that often run into conflict with mainstream racial analyses produced by whites. Next, we present a theoretical discussion of systemic racism and white racial framing in the US case, assessing the relationship between the two.² Our analysis then responds to significant criticisms of systemic racism theory and concludes with a call for challenging systemic racism and white framing in both racial analyses and the larger societal world.

Background

For more than four decades now, Joe Feagin and his colleagues have been refining conceptualizations of “systemic racism” in numerous works such as Discrimination American Style: Institutional Racism and Sexism (1978); White Racism: The Basics (1995); Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Reparations (2001/2019), Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression (2006); White Party, White Government: Race, Class, and U.S. Politics (2012); and Systemic Racism: Making Liberty, Justice, and Democracy Real (2017). Systemic racism refers to whites’ historical
and systemic oppression of non-European groups that manifests in the structures and operations of racist societies like the United States.

Rooted ultimately in an older critical black tradition, the need and demand for a systemic racism framework was reinvigorated during the 1950s and 1960s civil rights movements in the US, when black American protests and community uprisings made clear that the still conventional social science and policy concepts like prejudice, bias, and bigotry were far too individualistic to understand well the character of the societal conditions giving rise to these and other anti-racist uprisings by Americans of color. The renewed emphasis on institutional and systemic racism concepts emerged very substantially out of the speeches and writings of activists in the civil rights movements (e.g. Carmichael [Ture] and Hamilton, 1967) and soon spread to the field research and conceptual work of scientists and policymakers of diverse social backgrounds (e.g. Blauner, 1972; Feagin and Feagin, 1978).

Analysis of systemic racism is fundamental in explaining “the centuries-old foundation of American society” and the “racialized character, structure, and development of this society,” specifically the “unjustly gained political-economic power of whites” and “continuing economic and other resource inequalities along racial lines” (Feagin, 2001, p. 6, 2006, p. 2).

A central component of systemic racism is the “white racial frame,” an “organized set of racialized ideas, stereotypes, emotions, and inclinations to discriminate” that are part of the “color-coded framing of society,” which includes a “positive orientation to whites and whiteness and a negative orientation to racial ‘others’ who are exploited and oppressed” (Feagin, 2001, p. 11; 2006, p. 25). This concept of the white racial frame presents an epistemological tool vital for explicating systemic racism, a concept that explicitly calls out self-identified “whites” as the racial oppressor group who devised and largely supported the social structures of western slavery and colonialism. They continue as the principal engineers and operators of contemporary systemically racist societies that developed out of these earlier oppressive societal realities.

As Feagin demonstrates in *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Framing and Counter-Framing* (2009/2013), the systemic racism materially and socially constructed by whites was created by, is buttressed by, and is perpetuated through a complex process involving overt and covert white racial framing. Over several centuries, the subtle-to-obvious racialized ideas, narratives, interpretations, and emotions of the white racial frame have produced a broad worldview that permeates the minds and hearts of US citizens of all racial backgrounds, as well as the citizens of other systemically racist societies. Nearly a century ago, W.E.B. Du Bois (1920) perceived that “whiteness” had become the new civic religion in societies shaped by the color line and racial group hierarchies constructed by powerful whites. The white racial frame is central in the establishment, legitimation, and indoctrination of this “new religion of whiteness” and in the key structuring and functions of the socially constructed “white world.”

Through the concerted ideas and subordinating practices of whites, the white racial frame upholds and legitimates the white supremacy and Eurocentrism so central to the development and continued operation of systemic racism. This highly consequential framing of social reality in the contemporary period justifies and enables the many aspects of systemic racism. It justifies and facilitates the racist system’s unjust material gains benefiting whites and obstacles disadvantageing people of color and naturalizes the inequitable racial group hierarchy. And it valorizes, elevates, normalizes, and hegemonizes whites, while demonizing, stigmatizing, marginalizing, and devaluing people of color. For example, the white racial frame discounts or distorts the many societal contributions and profound acts of human agency exhibited by people of color in the face of everyday racial oppression, and it excuses
or ignores recurring white mob and state violence and the exclusion or segregation of people of color from society’s major societal institutions and opportunities.

Joe Feagin’s published work, and that with colleagues and students, as well as writings of like-minded scholars who address white racism issues, reveals that systemic racism is very much alive in US society and across the globe. Much research systematically and empirically documents how whites have orchestrated a long-standing, deeply embedded societal racism through an ongoing white racial framing of social realities (see Thompson-Miller and Ducey, 2017). The central arguments of systemic racism analysis—that white racism is flourishing in plain sight and that whites are central in the construction of racist societies—counter positions of mainstream racial analyses that avoid investigating structural racism and avoid discussing whites’ role in preserving systemically racist societies and advancing the socio-economic interests of whites as a group, especially those of the white male elite. As a primary starting point, systemic racism analysis identifies whites as architects of racist societies, societies segregated by a persistent construction of the color line that divides social worlds of whites and people of color. White-constructed societies routinely create hurdles and disadvantaged realities for people of color: disparate life chances and social opportunities; differences in access to important social institutions and networks; and status distinctions and different levels of access to basic rights of citizenship and human rights in general.

A systemic racism critique of mainstream racial analysis

Systemic racism analyses often present a different portrait of social reality and of human social interaction than mainstream racial analyses. As noted, they argue that well-institutionalized racism is an ever-present reality largely defining many aspects of certain societies. In contrast, most mainstream analyses of racial matters avoid or downplay discussion of systemic white racism, including indispensable subject matter like white supremacy, racial oppression, genocide, the racial hierarchy, enslavement, colonialism, and the white racial terror, inhumanity, and social pathologies that accurately describe the disquieting realities of systemic white oppression from its earliest days. Mainstream analysts have mostly been silent or diffident on these topics and often discourage or marginalize scholarship that addresses them (Elias and Feagin, 2006).

Not only have most mainstream racial analysts dismissed a deep racism analysis and discussion of whites’ role as the responsible social actors, they have often, from the earliest days, promoted white-framed ideas and practices regarding the concept of “race.” For example, early white social theorists constructed or espoused biological understandings of race that supposedly disclosed inherent intellectual, physical, and moral differences among different race groups. Today, the growing field of socio-genomics and offshoots of sociobiology have reinvigorated a new racial biologism that substantially mimics some earlier biologic understandings of racial group differences (though now differences are often internal and invisible, not external and visible).

Assimilation theory is another major approach in mainstream racial analysis that often imbeds troubling biases and presuppositions about racial matters. The assimilationist tradition is well-represented in the classic mainstream scholarship on racial matters, including analyses of Robert Park, Gunnar Myrdal, Milton Gordon and their current acolytes. The mainstream assimilationist perspective developed as a white-framed understanding of racial relations that assumes that a white-constructed, white-run society is the model society—and that all people should generally assimilate to its white-constructed norms, beliefs, and behaviors.
While assimilation theorists often attempt to skirt this white-racialized reality, nonetheless assimilation is a mostly one-way process of adaptation to a society which is white-controlled and where whites have highly privileged access to resources and power, relative to most people of color. Assimilation theory usually avoids serious discussion of the vivid discrimination and segregation—the systemic racism—that restricts many non-white individuals and groups from fairly accessing US society’s institutions, networks, and opportunities, and thus from many of the socio-economic fruits of full societal membership.

In contrast, more critical social thinkers reflecting on assimilation have recognized that it has long meant one-way adaptation to white racial framing and white dominance and that systemic racism has been the major obstacle for full societal incorporation of most people of color. These analysts have asked such critical questions as: Exactly what are people assimilating toward? For what? And why? These critical questions have been addressed by perceptive black social theorists for centuries. Without question, the deep insights of critical black social thought are essential for understanding the systemic racism that has powerfully shaped US society and its human relations since its 17th-century founding.

The significance of critical black social thought in systemic racism analysis

To chart the centuries-long, social-historical progression of the systemic racism that developed across the globe, contemporary racial theorists ought to substantially ponder the writings of critical black social theorists who have exposed its inner workings and delineated its legitimating white racial framing over many decades now. In large part, the concepts of systemic racism and white racial framing ultimately derive from the critical black theorists’ understandings and critiques of white racism, including understandings of the plight of people of color under racial oppression and of whites’ position and activities as oppressors. Some of the most trenchant “counter-frames” of people of color deconstructing the white racial frame have been developed by critical black thinkers and activists (Feagin, 2006, 2015; Elias, 2009; Elias and Feagin, 2016). Challenging the dominant white frame demands intellectual and social-action counter-framing. Indeed, most critical black social thinkers were, and continue to be, social activists engaged in the practice of dismantling persisting white racism.

Reading the writings of historical black social thinker-activists—such as Benjamin Banneker, Maria Stewart, David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Anna J. Cooper, W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, Alexander Crummell, and Marcus Garvey, to name just a few—reveals the widespread and harsh racial realties of systemic racism, especially the horrific racist practices and crude racist framing of whites during the long slavery and Jim Crow eras. These black thinkers’ critical take on racism as a well-organized structure of oppression and of whites’ tyrannical actions propped up with an extensive white racist framing are usually forgotten or ignored, and thus underutilized, in contemporary studies of racial matters. The relevant critical black writings are extraordinarily perceptive in depicting the realities and operation of systemic racism and in their rigorous critiques of white propagandists who from the early days of the new republic aggressively promoted racist framing and subjugating racist actions flowing out of it (Elias and Feagin, 2016).

One of the earliest critics of whites’ abusive racist beliefs and practices was the black abolitionist David Walker, a courageous thinker-activist who in the 1820s dared to advance scathing criticisms of the oppressive and hypocritical treatment of people of African descent by “white Christians.” In his Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World Walker (1829) describes the destructiveness and immorality of white-imposed slavery, the façade of
democracy and other western values, and the social pathologies of whites from an historical and sociological point of view of the oppressed. He offers evidence of whites’ social misdeeds and concludes that whites who enslave and exploit fellow humans represent an “unjust, jealous, unmerciful, avaricious and blood-thirsty set of beings, always seeking after power and authority.” His distributing the Appeal among free and enslaved black Americans signals a critical black theorist putting ideas into action. Walker, a social theorist and public sociologist, performs a necessary racial analysis of whites still missing in most mainstream racial analyses.

Other critical black social thinkers noted above also provide valuable perceptions of the key features of systemic racism and white tactics to maintain racial power over people of color. A pivotal figure is W.E.B. Du Bois (1896, 1915, 1945, 1947), whose critical writings not only address the African slave trade, African civilizations, and European colonialism but also more contemporary realities of systemic racism. Another important black thinker-activist is Ida B. Wells (1892, 1895), who documented well post-Reconstruction white terrorism, the realities of lynching and other violent brutalizing of black people as a means of maintaining a white supremacist racial order; she also developed some of the first critical analyses of racism in the criminal justice system.

Throughout the 20th century and up until today, critical black social theorists have often produced very thorough, theoretically erudite, and empirically rich analyses of US racial matters, analyses that disrupt much mainstream understanding of these matters. They provide deep critical assessments of the institutional and systemic nature of white racism, how the US state upholds systemic racism, the operation of European colonialism in subjugating peoples of color, white tactics to maintain racial power, and the connection between capitalism’s growth and exploitation of people of color and their lands (see Ladner, 1973; Blackwell and Janowitz, 1974). They also were the first to critically examine the negative psycho-social effects of white racism on people of color and the connections among racial, class, and gender oppression (intersectionality) (see Collins, 1990). These crucial understandings of racial matters are just a few examples of critical black thought’s contribution to understanding the racialized social phenomena later termed systemic racism.

Over time, critical black social scientists have developed a tradition of social thought and research that offers distinctive perspectives on social reality from the position of a marginalized and oppressed racial group. This counter-framed perspective often provides heightened insights, as Du Bois (1903, 1915) notes. It offers a raw and detailed portrait of the systemic subjugation of people of color over centuries and of the persisting reality of white-constructed racial group divisions. Building on these earlier analyses, during the peak of the most recent civil rights era (1960s–1970s) numerous critical black social scientists and other social thinkers researched and offered profound insights about US racist realities, including about the dysfunctionality of human relations and the white pathologies central to systemic white racism. Additionally, these critical social scientists presented penetrating critiques of white-framed mainstream social science generally, and of mainstream racial analyses most specifically. They questioned fundamental tenets of white-framed social scientific knowledge, including white social scientists’ claims of objectivity, epistemological certainty, and value neutrality in social scientific research (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Indeed, professional associations like the Association of Black Sociologists (ABS) were formed in the 1970s, and continue today, because of the marginalization and alienation of many black social scientists and white resistance to their social science research in regard to black Americans and US racism.
Inside and outside academia, critical black social thinkers of the 1960s–1970s era advanced crucial and precise explanations of white racism. The especially influential 1967 book *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, written by black social thinker-activist Stokely Carmichael (later Kwame Ture) and black political scientist Charles Hamilton, in the midst of black community protests and uprisings, first outlined in contemporary detail the “institutional” nature of white racism. They delineated the well-designed organization of the “white power structure” that has been central in the racial colonization and oppression of people of color. While highly marginalized in academic circles, critical racial analyses like those of Carmichael and Hamilton and of critical black sociologists (for example, Joyce Ladner, Robert Staples, and James Blackwell) intellectually liberated a new generation of black social science analysts, as well as other social analysts of color and a few white social scientists (for example, Bob Blauner and Joe Feagin), who focused on institutional and systemic racism issues. Shortly thereafter, a related analytical tradition termed *critical race theory*, also drawing on the older tradition of critical black thinkers, emerged out of critical legal studies in US law schools (see Delgado, 1995).

As we now shift to a discussion of the theoretical understandings of systemic racism theory, we acknowledge that key observations of and approaches to contemporary systemic racism analysis are deeply informed by this centuries-old tradition of critical black social thought.

**Theoretical understandings of systemic racism and the white racial frame**

So how is systemic racism distinct from and related to other explanations of racism? Why is identification and delineation of the central white racial frame necessary for understanding the system-wide racism that structures racial group relations in contemporary societies like the US? And what are key features of the relationship between white racial framing and the ongoing white-orchestrated racial oppression against people of color that define systemic racism?

**Systemic racism**

In *Racist America* (2001), Feagin describes key features of systemic racism and the orientation of systemic racism analysis. “Begun some time ago by Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois, a revolution in the analysis of American racism is slowly developing, one that views the U.S. social system as imbedding racism at its very core.” Systemic racism analysis “places the reality, development, and crises of systemic racism at the heart of U.S. history and society … as a centuries-old foundation of American society” and other societies shaped by European colonialism and slavery. Overall this systemic racism includes the complex array of [discriminatory practices directed at people of color], the unjustly gained political-economic power of whites, continuing economic and other resources inequalities along racial lines, and white racist ideologies and attitudes created to maintain and rationalize white privilege and power. Systemic here means that the core racist realities are manifested in each of society’s major parts … Each major part of U.S. society—the economy, politics, education, religion, the family—reflects the fundamental reality of systemic racism.

*(Feagin, 2001, pp. 5–6)*
In basic terms, systemic racism involves white-generated discrimination and other oppression directed at people of color that is spread throughout a society. This racism is *systemic* in that it embodies wide-ranging racist ideas and practices that infiltrate and thread through most societal institutions, organizations, and networks. White racism is deeply embedded in US social institutions, which reflect and shape racial group relations and positions in society’s white-constructed racial hierarchy. In *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression* (2006), Feagin further details these central characteristics of systemic racism. In addition to the central white racist frame, other critical concepts, issues, and themes are examined, including “racial oppression” (“the exploitative and other oppressive practices of whites”); the essential “intergenerational transmission of unjust enrichment [of whites] and unjust impoverishment [of people of color]”; and the great “centrality and injustice of white wealth, power, and privilege” (Feagin, 2006, pp. 2–4).

Unlike most mainstream understandings of racism, the systemic racism approach stresses the foundational nature of the white oppression that is grounded in long European and European American histories of slavery, genocide, and colonialism. That is, contemporary racial oppression still has deeply connected roots in past racial oppression. In contrast to most mainstream approaches that do address racism, systemic racism analysis highlights white Europeans’ “predatory ethic (of conquering lands and people), ethnocentrism, and xenophobia” as key characteristics of past and present white racism. Most mainstream racial theory tiptoes around assessing the ugly predation and extensive social costs of racism, the enforced asymmetry and persisting imbalance of racial group relations, and the lasting effects of whites’ socially constructed racial hierarchy that divides people according to perceived physical characteristics. Few mainstream approaches to discussing racism focus thoroughly and strongly on how present forms of color-coded discrimination regularly relate to those of the past in human destructiveness and social dysfunctionality, how whiteness has become hegemonic in intellectual thought and social practice, and how racism is aggressively and regularly resisted by people of color.

Mainstream analyses of racism tend to focus on studying micro- and meso-level racial “attitudes” and “biases” of individuals and groups, not on the macro-level foundational, institutional, and systemic features of white racist practices and framing. Additionally, many mainstream racial analyses bypass or downplay white racism and stress the social “assimilation” process without assessing the commonplace racial exclusion, segregation, and discrimination of people of color in regard to this process. Frequently, when it is considered by mainstream analysts, racism is individualized and viewed as just one of many “social problems” in an otherwise healthy social system. In contrast, analyses of systemic racism focus on demonstrating its structural, institutional, and systemic characteristics, as well as its operation at the micro- and meso-levels. These analyses are, thus, critical of white-framed assimilation theories of racial relations that do not address white control over the norms of, and pathways to, substantial societal assimilation and incorporation for racialized individuals and groups.

In addition, current systemic racism analyses, like those of earlier institutional and structural racism analyses, problematize certain basic ideas rhetorically articulated by mainstream social scientists, such as freedom, democracy, human rights, racial progress, and civilization. They also question the assumed sanctity, preeminence, and idealization of western beliefs, values, and knowledges. Like the aforementioned black social theorists, systemic racism analysts also question key principles of white-framed social scientific knowledge (e.g. scientific objectivity) and the damaging applications of much white-designed research. A systemic racism approach to understanding racial realities recognizes that:
Much of the social terrain of this society is significantly racialized. Most major institutional and geographical space, acceptable societal norms, acceptable societal roles, privileged language forms, preferred sociopolitical thinking, and favored understandings of history are white-generated, white-shaped, white-imposed, and/or white authenticated. All people, whether they are defined socially as white or not white, live largely within a substantially white-determined environment.

(Feagin, 2006, p. 47)

The white racial frame

A substantial focus on the social history and ongoing mechanisms of systemic racism and its central white racial frame (worldview) is very useful for developing a more exact comprehension of contemporary patterns of white racial oppression. This approach contrasts sharply with numerous mainstream analyses of racial matters that take the white discriminators and related white actors out of the analytical picture or de-emphasize whites’ primary and continuing role in the creation and maintenance of racist societies like the US. Such mainstream analyses often imply or claim that “any person or group can be racist.”

In contrast, from a systemic racism perspective whites—especially powerful whites—are the primary actors in the construction and maintenance of white racist societies. Specifically, whites’ construction and utilization of a legitimating white racial frame has been fundamental in the creation and perpetuation of other aspects of systemic racism (Feagin, 2006, 2010).

Central to the persistence of systemic racism has been the development of a commonplace white racial frame—that is, an organized set of racialized ideas, stereotypes, emotions, and inclinations to discriminate … the frame and associated discriminatory actions are consciously or unconsciously expressed in the routine operation of racist institutions … this white framing of society has strongly buttressed anti-Indian genocide, African American slavery, legal segregation, and contemporary incarnations of racial oppression. Today, as in the past, this frame provides an encompassing conceptual and interpretive scheme that shapes and channels assessments of everyday events and encounters with other people.

(Feagin, 2006, pp. 25–26)

An essential function of this white racial framing involves aggressively promoting narratives depicting “a positive view of white superiority, virtue, and moral goodness.” This view has become

hegemonic in [U.S.] society—that is, it has been part of a distinctive way of life that dominates all aspects of this society … the white racial frame is more than just one significant frame among many; it is one that has routinely defined a way of being, a broad perspective on life, and one that provides the language and interpretations that help structure, normalize, and make sense of society.

(Feagin, 2010, p. 11)

Thus, the white racial frame operates in societal mores, religious beliefs, political views, and ideas of beauty, morality, and intelligence; in the dominant culture, including in music, sports, and mainstream media; and across political, economic, educational, and other major institutions.
Reaching into all walks of life, the white racial frame is prominent or just beneath the surface in most social interaction, social thought, and social practices in white racist societies. It follows that “those with the greatest power, white Americans in the US case, have the greatest control over society-wide institutional memories, including those recorded by the media and in most history books, organizational histories, laws, textbooks, films, and public monuments” (Feagin, 2010, p. 15). Because of their position atop the racial hierarchy in society, whites have the greatest power to determine what society’s collective memories are and what gets forgotten, specifically the collective forgetting of inconvenient, less flattering social and historical truths regarding systemic racism, particularly whites’ oppressive mistreatment and associated mis-framing of people of color for centuries.

Establishing and steering the dominant white frame requires constant activity, a process of white racial framing. More specifically, “white racial framing involves the explanation and construction of social reality from the perspective of the dominant whites, one normally steeped in Eurocentrism” (Elias and Feagin, 2016, p. 7). Successfully propping up the white racial frame requires accenting the racial superiority of whites and whiteness; it also requires delegitimizing, distorting, and marginalizing the perspectives of people of color and their counter-frames. Stated differently, a major aspect of this racial framing involves a general mis-framing of people of color that misrepresents and demeans their character, intelligence, value, and contributions to society.

Negative and false frames of people of color produced by whites have historically been challenged by people of color, including in the intellectually rich historical tradition of critical black social thought. Since the first European colonialist rampages, indigenous genocides, and enslavement of peoples of color, the latter’s counter-framing has presented very “different understandings, practices, visions of socio-racial arrangements of society, and the innovative means of realizing that vision … the counter-framing of people of color challenges the status quo and dominant narratives of white racial framing” (Elias and Feagin, 2016, p. 7). Previously, we identified critical black social thought as among the most developed counter-frames to the white frame, but we do not have the space here to adequately discuss the importance of other people of color’s counter-frames to that still dominant white racial frame.

In our view, attaining a historically, empirically, and theoretically accurate understanding of the ways that racial oppression developed since early European colonization of people of color requires acknowledging and highlighting the centrality of this legitimating white racial framing. Importantly, explications of systemic racism and its powerful racial frame are necessary for addressing whites’ current, still extensive oppression of people of color. This also aids in better understanding and researching the reproduction and reframing of the color line, racial hierarchies, white societal supremacy, and the ongoing unjust enrichment for whites and unjust impoverishment of people of color.

Response to criticisms of systemic racism analysis

As indicated earlier, mainstream racial analyses (e.g. assimilation theory) tend to ignore, de-emphasize, critique, or eliminate racial analyses exposing the everyday workings of systemic white racism. Indeed, some analysts of racial matters—such as Mara Loveman, Andreas Wimmer, Loïc Wacquant, Rogers Brubaker, and Shelby Steele—wish to do away with or severely deconstruct studies of racial meanings, racial groups, and white racism (see Elias and Feagin, 2016). Some of these analysts reject racial analysis entirely and posit theories of post-raciality and colorblindness that contradict the most basic and observable empirical evidence
of the historical and contemporary racial oppression still entrenched in systemically racist societies like the United States.

Furthermore, mainstream social scientists who do address contemporary racial matters often do with little epistemological rigor or with predictable white-framed research methods that avoid serious analyses of critical issues like the dominant white elite’s role in racial oppression, white racism’s well-institutionalized and systemic nature, and the serious societal dysfunctionality and human destruction created by a white racist society. Various mainstream racial analysts have been critical of systemic racism-based theory and methods, which is unsurprising given that these systemic racism studies often address and illuminate the significance of many issues of white-imposed racism that these mainstream racial analysts downplay or bypass (see Elias and Feagin, 2016).

The emphasis of systemic racism analysts on the centuries-old racist framing and enduring racist practices of elite and ordinary whites, the principal maintainers of racist societies like the US, has also been criticized by more progressive race theorists like Michael Omi and Howard Winant (Omi and Winant, 2013). They contend, for example, that systemic racism analyses are not optimistic enough about the positive racial changes over US history. However, investigations of US racism like those of Omi and Winant become problematic when they ignore or downplay the foundational and systemic continuities of US racial oppression, including the continuing role of elite and ordinary whites as central framers and facilitators of contemporary racism (Feagin, Vera, and Batur, 2000; Feagin, 2006; Feagin and Ducey, 2019).

Another criticism of systemic racism analysis is that it has addressed the US context and does not provide understandings of racism beyond the United States. It is true that systemic racism analysis has heavily focused on unraveling the operation of systemic white racism in the US, but that does not mean there have been no significant applications elsewhere. In numerous articles and books Feagin and his colleagues (Batur and Feagin, 1996, 2004; Feagin, 2006; Feagin and Ducey, 2017, 2019) have given substantial attention to global aspects of systemic racism, including many connections and impacts created by US corporations and government agencies overseas. Indeed, systemic racism theory has recently been applied by Feagin’s students to several Global South nations, including to explain anti-Haitian framing in the Dominican Republic (Liberato and St. Jean, 2017, pp. 309–332) and to assess climate crises facing numerous island nations, occupied by once or currently colonized people of color (considered disposable by white elites), in the Pacific Ocean (Batur and Weber, 2017). Currently, Ducey and Feagin (2021) are analyzing systemic British racism.

For decades, institutional and systemic racism analysts have made clear that many overseas societies connected to centuries of white European imperialism and colonialism—for example, “settler colonies” like South Africa, Brazil, India, the Philippines, and Australia—have been greatly shaped by systemic white racism and its white rationalizing frame. The countries above (and many others)—as well as the home countries of white colonizers such as Great Britain, Spain, the Netherlands, also among others—have long histories steeped in systemically racist white framing and its racially exploitative practices.

Other recurring criticisms are that systemic racism analyses depict an overly pessimistic vision of racial matters, that systemic racism theory does not perceive adequately the “flexibility” and “transformations” occurring in racial group relations and in the “racial formations” of society (Omi and Winant, 2013). However, this critique is inaccurate in that major changes in US oppression—such as the US move from slavery (after 246 years), to Jim Crow (another 92 years), to contemporary racial oppression (about 50 years so far)—are concretely and thoroughly examined in key systemic racism texts, such as Feagin’s Systemic
Racism (2006) and Racist America (2001, 2019), and in numerous articles in the edited collection of Thompson-Miller and Ducey (2017). While the racialized social world is in flux and does change in some significant ways over time, certain foundational social structures—including systemic racial discrimination and the rationalizing white racial frame—have demonstrably persisted in their US operations for four centuries now. Although the dominant white frame does periodically get reworked and refurbished with some new racist ideas, and even though systemic racism’s oppressive practices do sometimes shift, new and reimagined racist ideas and practices are part of centuries-old processes of promoting white supremacy and perpetuating white dominance (Feagin, Vera, and Batur, 2000; Feagin, 2001; Feagin and Ducey, 2017). In addition, systemic racial analyses document that racial progress is typically fueled by the protest and resistance actions of people of color, but that is usually met with new, rehabilitated, or revised forms of white oppression, and that ideas about racial democracy and racial group equality are far-off ideals in the contemporary racial climate (Elias and Feagin, 2017; Feagin and Ducey, 2019). To empirically and theoretically address the actual negative state of US and global racial oppression and consequent inequalities is thus not pessimistic, but indeed quite realistic.

Conclusion: addressing systemic racism in racial analyses and real-world change

Today, systemic white racism still plays a central role in the organization of society and social interactions of racial groups divided according to a white-constructed racial hierarchy. Developing theoretical and empirical insights about systemic racism assists in better understanding past and present social realities in the US and other white racist societies and is a necessary step in dismantling that systemic racism. Yet, not only are mainstream analyses of systemic racism usually lacking, there is an active move away from such analysis. Class-based, ethnicity-based, culture-based, and nationality-based understandings of group relations and social formations, while important for understanding the range of group relations, have sought to eclipse or eliminate white racism analyses, thereby avoiding the serious study of still racialized societies.

In addition to this trend, a more disturbing movement among certain mainstream social scientists is the resurgence of biological explanations of race, namely sociobiology and socio-genomics. This approach to understanding matters of “race” (i.e. supposed “races” sorted through DNA analysis) is riddled with theoretical and scientific research problems (see Morning, 2014). Problematical, too, is the resurgence of popular sociobiological explanations for white supremacy in society (e.g. Herrnstein and Murray, 1994). Serious theoretical and empirical analyses of foundational and systemic racism and white racial framing provide useful correctives to much of this problematical mainstream racial thought.

The 2016 election of Donald Trump created a powerful US president who has intentionally incited racial divisions and manipulated many beliefs, images, and emotions of a very reactionary version of the white racial frame. This demonstrates that proclamations, including from mainstream race scholars, of a post-racial US society being signaled by Barack Obama’s past presidency have proven overly optimistic and unfounded. Trump has emboldened many overt racist acts of white nationalist groups, openly displayed white racist ideas and actions toward various racial groups, and enacted government policies very damaging to people of color and beneficial for whites, especially for fellow white elite men. Trump’s election signals that white racial framing and other elements of systemic racism are still operative and central
in major US institutions. Whereas most mainstream racial analyses offer few or no conceptual tools for addressing the current Trump-era social realities of overt white racism, and of whites’ actions as continuing architects and controllers of racially oppressive societies, systemic racism analyses provide very useful intellectual and empirical tools that ultimately will be needed in the practical dismantling of this still foundational white racism.

Notes

1 Systemic racism is interwoven with systemic sexism (patriarchy) and capitalist exploitation, demonstrating that white-framed socially constructed divisions between different racial groups are strengthened and perpetuated through gender group and class group divisions. For a better understanding of this intersectionalist understanding of race-class-gender power, see bell hooks (1984) and Feagin and Ducey (2017).

2 We do not have space here to list and discuss the many empirical studies of systemic racism and white racial framing that Joe Feagin and his colleagues have performed over many years, including current ongoing studies.

References


Morning, A. 2014, “And you thought that we had moved beyond all that: biological race returns to social science,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 37, no. 10, pp. 1676–1685.


