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978-0-521-45810-8 - Portraits of White Racism, Second Edition

David T. Wellman

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First published in 1977, *Portraits of White Racism* advanced a distinctively sociological theory of racism. Based on five case histories, it critically assessed the prevailing social-psychological paradigm that equated racism with prejudice and provided an alternative interpretation. Racism, the book argued, could be understood as culturally sanctioned strategies for defending social advantage based on race; it was not simply the product of psychological abnormalities.

The revised edition has two new features. The theoretical perspective is updated, taking into account recent theorizing in the sociology of racism. Professor Wellman suggests that, like 15 years ago, sociologists today still fail to view racism as a cultural and structural phenomenon. The new edition also assesses recent developments in American race relations. Based on new research, Wellman argues that both hate crimes in ethnic working-class communities and opposition to affirmative action policies at elite American universities can be understood as culturally acceptable defenses of the racial status quo.

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# Portraits of White Racism

Second Edition

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In loving memory of my mother, Peggy Wellman  
and my friend, Bob Starobin:

They were brave and genuine people for whom  
thought without action was inexcusable,  
and action without thought ineffective.

Their footsteps are huge.

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## PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

**S**ECOND editions are normally cause for celebration. In this instance, however, that is not the case. The need for a new edition to a book about white racism is not a reason to celebrate.

Although much has changed in the world since this book was originally published, the changes have not reduced the book to a sociological relic, or an outdated “period piece.” Were that the case, there would certainly be cause for celebration. But unfortunately, the enormous differences between then and now do not overshadow two striking parallels between yesterday and today. One: Race continues to be a deadly serious source of advantage and disadvantage; and two: Sociological theorizing about racism still minimizes the structural impact of race on American life. Thus, this book remains relevant and an update is in order.

I have no illusions about the impact of a second edition. Ideas, even if they are good ones, are always socially located, and there is little reason to believe that the relationship between race and advantage will be seriously relocated in the foreseeable future. Thus, I doubt that another edition will redirect the promiscuous career of racism in America.

Why do a second edition then?

Because too many white Americans – on the left and the right – have become smug and complacent about racism. Because it is currently fashionable to minimize racism, to explain it away, to dismiss its objects as excuse-making, irresponsible victims. Because such things need to be said and heard about white America, even if nothing positive comes of it.

Fortunately for me, some people have heard these ideas, and this book is considerably better because of it. A number of dear friends and

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*Preface to the Second Edition*

close colleagues read drafts of the new chapters, making suggestions that improved them significantly. I am indebted to them, even if I didn't always follow their advice. They are: Michael K. Brown, Elliott Currie, Jan Dizard, Troy Duster, Joe Feagin, Ruth Frankenberg, Herman Gray, Ron Lembo, Jeff Lustig, David Minkus, Thomas F. Pettigrew, Howard Pinderhughes, Steve Steinberg, Wendell Thomas, Deborah Woo, and Robert Yamashita.

Janice Tanigawa deserves a bunch of credit for making the Institute for the Study of Social Change a wonderfully warm world where intellectual work flourishes.

A very special thanks to Greta Fields Clarke, M.D. Her encouragement, intelligence, and integrity were critical and necessary ingredients for constructing this edition.

The debt to my family – immediate and extended – has been compounded and extended since the last edition. Their love and support makes this work possible, and worthwhile. They are: Saul Wellman, Vickie Wellman, the Sheins: Sivi-Rae, Meagan, and Christopher, Ian MacDonald, Meyer and Vera Baylin, Woody and Kathy Hughes-Donovan, George and Alma Hill, Al and Juanita Rowland, Orian and Rosemary Worden, Richard Clarke, and George and Willa Fields.

David T. Wellman

Richmond, California  
November, 1992



## PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

**T**HIS book is about white racism. Unlike most books on the subject, however, it is not about prejudice. For reasons that I make clear in the second chapter, I find that concept troublesome: it does not adequately explain the pervasiveness and subtlety of racist beliefs in American life. Thus, instead of assuming that racist sentiments are expressed as prejudice, I explore an alternative: Racism can mean culturally sanctioned beliefs which, regardless of the intentions involved, defend the advantages whites have because of the subordinated position of racial minorities. Viewed through these lenses, racism need not be restricted to the obvious hostilities expressed by bigots, nor found solely among the ranks of lower- and working-class people. It is seen to be more pervasive, existing throughout the American class structure.

I am suggesting that racism is much more subtle, elusive, and widespread than sociologists have acknowledged. Part of the reason they have been unable to see racism in this light is conceptual: They have not “looked” for these expressions of it. The other part is methodological: Traditional instruments used by sociologists in large-scale surveys are not yet sensitive to these manifestations of racism. The structured questions asked in highly systematic research designs also assume a great deal of knowledge about the subject *before* the questions are posed. Since we know relatively little about that face of racism that I am exploring, traditional sociological methodologies are not much help; in fact they probably get in the way of understanding.

Thus my research departs from orthodox procedures. This book is grounded in five “sociohistories,” case studies based on in-depth, qualitative interviews. The case studies reflect five different ways in

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which white Americans defend racial advantage; they show how people without prejudice continue to think in terms that maintain the racial status quo. Focusing intensely on a few people may limit the extent to which I can generalize, but it enhances my ability to show the subtleties and complexities of racism and to place racism within social, cultural, and biographical contexts. These contexts are crucial to my argument. As long as racial sentiments are evaluated independently of the contexts within which they occur, only the most obvious kinds of racism are detectable: the prejudiced kinds.

The arguments made in this book are not based on statistical “proof”: I do not pretend to measure how widespread the racism I am analyzing is, nor do I assess the quarters in which it is most prominent. The purpose of this book is not to show how racism is distributed throughout the population. In fact, since the data were not collected in a random sample, that is not possible. Thus, I have neither the basis nor the reason to use statistical evidence. What this book does provide are the tools and the perspective with which to see racism in sentiments that are usually considered nonracist. That *is* possible with the data at hand.

Writing is a solitary project, books are not. However, most of the people who contribute to the making of a book never see their names on title pages. This book is the product of many different efforts. Were it not for two people in particular it would never have seen the light of day. Professor Robert Blauner taught me a great deal about race relations. Through his example I have also learned irreverence, although not disrespect, for traditional ways of looking at the world; he has given me the courage to try new formulations. Bob read this book in many forms; his comments always pushed me farther than I thought was possible. As a friend and colleague he has always been around when I needed to be told “enough,” or “more,” or “great,” or “not quite.” He made this book possible in yet another way: He was principal investigator of the research project that collected the data on which it is based.

The other person I feel especially indebted to is Professor Jan Marie Newton. There is not one draft of this book she has not seen and put long hours of work into; there is not an idea in it which we have not discussed at great length. Trying to please Jan is not easy; but that is

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what I have tried to do. The extent to which I achieve theoretical and literary clarity is largely due to her influence. Jan is more than a teacher and colleague: She is one of my most intimate friends. She administered emotional first aid when it was required and infected me with spirit when I was caught with my confidence down. She also taught me how to relax and celebrate when there was cause. Without her love and friendship this book would have been impossible.

Other people have been instrumental in the making of this book. Throughout the writing of it Professor Troy Duster has been an insightful critic, a persistent advocate, and a dear friend; sometimes simultaneously, always at the right time. Professor Jan E. Dizard carefully read draft after draft, persistently but not belligerently insisting I refine one or another idea. When I did not, he did not give up; when I did, he pushed anyway. Professor Steven Deutsch read beginning drafts; he has offered me encouragement, constructive criticism, and a friendly ear. Professor Richard Hill read Chapter 3 with a magnifying glass. I did not expect an endorsement; I know it is richer because of his contribution. Todd Gitlin's sympathetic, suggestive reading of an earlier draft came at the right time; his questions, suggestions, and friendship were necessary. I probably would never have written a book if I had not known Buddy Stein. As fan and teacher he has helped me become a writer during the last ten years. The encouragement and questions offered by Professors William Tabb and John Leggett helped me reformulate one chapter and feel comfortable about another. Judy Small read the next-to-the-last draft with a fine-tooth comb. I am grateful for her contagious excitement and the literary polish she graciously offered. Barbara Hill took time from her already too-busy schedule to help me smooth the final rough edges on the book. I am an indebted and hopefully better writer for it. Pat Mazzeo patiently listened as I agonized over this project. When he could get a word in edgewise, he made many fine suggestions and helpful observations. I am also grateful to Professor John Gumperz, who took time from his busy schedule to carefully read an early draft.

I have a special debt to the research staff with which I worked in collecting the data for this study. Without Lincoln Bergman, Hardy Frye, Alex Papillon, Ed Price, and Lynn Turner there would have been

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no study to write about. I have also benefited from discussions with William Dorsey and Jeffrey Prager, other members of the staff.

One of the painful dilemmas of “doing” sociology is that there is no real payment of the debt one owes to the people about whom he or she writes. Acknowledgment may not be compensation. It is necessary nonetheless. I am deeply grateful to the people who agreed to share their lives with us. I hope I do them justice.

I have an enormous intellectual debt to Professor Herbert Blumer. It goes considerably beyond this book. Right now I can only acknowledge the obligation; I am currently in the process of assessing it. Professor Blumer read drafts of Chapter 2. Since I am quite familiar with his critical side, I was especially encouraged by his supportive readings of it.

I am grateful to Jennifer Neaves and Dina Wills, who did excellent jobs typing early drafts of some chapters. I am indebted to Jan O’Connor, who patiently and proficiently transformed a mass of inserts and crossed-out words into a cleanly typed and complete manuscript. Twice.

There is another group of people to whom I am indebted. Without their warmth and support I could not have written a book. They are my family – immediate and extended: Saul Wellman, Vickie and Henry Shein, Joan Acker, Marguerite Adams, Mike and Vera Baylin, Ron and Susan Bloom, Betty Bonham, Beth and Steve Deutsch, Kris Dymond, Hardy Frye, Barbara and Dick Hill, George Hill, Jeff Lustig, Pat Mazzeo, Suzy Nelson, Frank Soracco, Buddy Stein, all the Takagis.

I wish there was some way I could implicate each of the people I have mentioned in whatever mistakes might follow, but, because I have probably ignored their advice on crucial issues, that would not be fair to them. I therefore reluctantly accept full responsibility for whatever shortcomings the reader may find.

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David T. Wellman

Berkeley, California  
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