

# Race and Racism: Perspectives from Bahá'í Theology and Critical Sociology

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*It is hoped that all the Bahá'í students will . . . be led to investigate and analyse the principles of the Faith and to correlate them with the modern aspects of philosophy and science.*

*Every intelligent and thoughtful young Bahá'í should always approach the Cause in this way, for therein lies the very essence of the principle of independent investigation of truth.*

— Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 6 August 1933.

## *Abstract*

What is race? What is racism? How do they relate, especially as they pertain to Bahá'í teachings on both racial accord and prejudice? There have been nearly eighty years of social scientific advancement on, and illumination of, these issues since Shoghi Effendi wrote in *The Advent of Divine Justice* that “racial prejudice” is the “most vital and challenging issue confronting the Bahá'í community at the present stage of its evolution” (33–34). Accordingly, I review the concepts of race and racism based on the latest social sci-

entific understanding of them in order to better understand their definition and operation and to delineate their relation to one another. I then consider how these concepts are used in the Writings of the Central Figures and Institution of the Bahá'í Faith and attempt to correlate them with modern social scientific knowledge in order to provide a more nuanced and accurate understanding of them, which in turn may assist with better applications of the Bahá'í teachings to contemporary public discourse.

## *Resumé*

Qu'est-ce que la race? Qu'est-ce que le racisme? Quel est le lien entre ces deux concepts, en particulier dans les enseignements bahá'ís sur l'harmonie raciale et les préjugés? Près de quatre vingts ans de progrès socioscientifiques sont venus éclairer ces questions depuis que Shoghi Effendi a déclaré dans *L'Avènement de la justice divine* que le « préjugé racial » est « le problème le plus vital et le plus brûlant que la communauté bahá'íe doit affronter au stade actuel de son évolution. » (p. 47). Je passe donc en revue les concepts de race et de racisme à la lumière des plus récentes perspectives socioscientifiques à l'égard de ces deux concepts, afin de mieux en comprendre la nature et le fonctionnement et d'en définir l'interrelation. J'examine ensuite comment ces concepts sont utilisés dans les écrits des figures centrales et de l'institution suprême de la foi bahá'íe, et je tente de les mettre en corrélation avec les connaissances socioscientifiques modernes. J'espère ainsi apporter une compréhension plus nuancée et plus exacte de ces concepts, ce qui pourrait aider à mieux appliquer les enseignements bahá'ís au discours public contemporain.

*Resumen*

¿Qué es la raza? ¿Qué es el racismo? ¿Cómo se relacionan, especialmente en lo que respecta a las enseñanzas bahá'ís sobre la unidad racial y los prejuicios? Han pasado casi 80 años de adelanto de la ciencia social y la iluminación de estos temas desde que Shoghi Effendi escribió en el Advenimiento de la Justicia Divina que el “prejuicio racial” es el “tema más vital y desafiante que confronta a la comunidad bahá'ís en la etapa actual de su evolución” (33–34). En consecuencia, repaso los conceptos de raza y racismo basados en la más reciente comprensión de la teoría de la ciencia social para comprender mejor su definición y operación y para delinear su relación entre sí mismos. Entonces considero cómo estos conceptos se utilizan en los Escritos de las Figuras Centrales y de la Institución de la Fe Bahá'í e intento correlacionarlos con el conocimiento de la ciencia social moderna con el fin de proporcionar una comprensión más matizada y precisa de ellos, que a su vez puede ayudar con mejores aplicaciones de las enseñanzas bahá'ís al discurso público contemporáneo.

## INTRODUCTION

Largely recognized as one of the core principles of the Bahá'í Faith, the “condemnation of all forms of prejudice, whether religious, racial, class, and national” stands paramount, particularly within North American Bahá'í communities (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 281). In the speeches and Writings of the Central Figures and Institution of the Bahá'í Faith, there are varied references to “race,”

“racial,” and “racial prejudice.”<sup>1</sup> Moreover, a number of statements by various Bahá'í bodies and individuals emphasize racialized issues, as can be seen in J. E. Esslemont's *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* (1937), Glenford E. Mitchell's “The Most Challenging Issue: Teaching Negroes” (1967), the statement by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States titled “The Vision of Race Unity: America's Most Challenging Issue” (1991), the Bahá'í International Community's publication of *Bahá'u'lláh* (1992), a statement by the Bahá'í International Community titled *Turning Point for All Nations* (1995), and the Universal House of Justice's publication of *Century of Light* (2001).

The animating thread woven throughout these statements is the absolute rejection of racial prejudices, for they stand as a supreme hindrance to the achievement of peace, civilization, and equitable material values and spiritual virtues. For instance, while in Paris, France, in 1911, 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave a talk in which He stated:

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1 For example, the search feature in the *Bahá'í Reference Library* reveals frequent mentions of these terms. For “race,” Bahá'u'lláh, N=29; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, N=128; Shoghi Effendi, N=12; and the Universal House of Justice, N=115. For “racial,” 'Abdu'l-Bahá, N=60; Shoghi Effendi, N=32; and the Universal House of Justice, N=24. For “racialism,” Shoghi Effendi, N=6. And for “racism,” the Universal House of Justice, N=7.

All prejudices, whether of religion, race, politics or nation, must be renounced, for these prejudices have caused the world's sickness. It is a grave malady which, unless arrested, is capable of causing the destruction of the whole human race. Every ruinous war, with its terrible bloodshed and misery, has been caused by one or other of these prejudices. (*Paris Talks* 146)

While the principle evoked is precise (the universal abolition of prejudice), the very terms under discussion (i.e., “race” or “racial prejudice”) are rarely defined and are relatively fresh on the historical scene, given that the English terms “racism” and “race” first appeared in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1902 and 1910, respectively.<sup>2</sup>

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2 The English word *race* (from the Old French word *rasse* [1512] and tracing further back to the Latin word *gens*, meaning “clan, stock, or people”) was first introduced in a 1508 poem by William Dunbar in which he refers to a series of kings descended from one another. The term developed over the next four hundred years and did not possess the denotative consensus of today (as divisions of humankind) until the 1910 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*). Furthermore, these words were (and still are) connotatively complicated given the social and political exigencies. For example, the *OED* attributes the first recorded utterance of the word *racism* to a 1902 statement by Richard Henry Pratt (best known as the founder and superintendent of the Carlisle Indian

Moreover, both the connotations (the various social overtones, cultural implications, and affective meanings) as well as the denotations (the explicit or referential meanings of the terms) require that the reader rely on inference and personal interpretation.

These issues gesture toward important questions. When reading these Bahá'í texts, what is meant by “race” or by characterizing something as “racial”? What do “racial prejudice,” “racial discrimination,” and/or “racism” mean? And how do they relate? There have been nearly eighty years of social scientific advancement on, and illumination of, these concepts since Shoghi Effendi wrote in *The Advent of Divine Justice* that “racial prejudice” is the “most vital and challenging issue confronting the Bahá'í community at the present stage of its evolution” (33–34). Accordingly, in Section I, I review the historical development of “race” concept. In Section

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Industrial School): “Segregating any class or race of people apart from the rest of the people kills the progress of the segregated people or makes their growth very slow. Association of races and classes is necessary to destroy racism and classism” (qtd. in Barrows 134). Yet he advocated for what many consider a “racist” policy toward North American Indigenous people, stating that “[a] great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one.... I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man” (Pratt 260).

II, I provide an overview of and attempt to correlate the Bahá'í theological<sup>3</sup> and sociological views on "race."<sup>4</sup> In Sections III and IV (which mirror Sections I and II), I first survey the concept of racism and then compare the Bahá'í theological and sociological understandings of it. In Section V, I offer a sociological understanding of how the concepts of race and racism are inextricably intertwined in five key dimensions: ideologies, institutions, interests, identities, and interactions, what I have elsewhere called the "Five I's" (Hughey, "The Five I's" 857–71).

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3 Note the message from the Universal House of Justice dated 22 October 1996 that contains a memorandum from the Research Department regarding the authenticity of certain texts and documents, such as 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* and *Paris Talks*, whereby it is made clear that portions of these texts have not yet been authenticated.

4 "Shoghi Effendi has for years urged the Bahá'ís (who asked his advice, and in general also) to study history, economics, sociology, etc., in order to be *au courant* with all the progressive movements and thoughts being put forth today, and so that they could correlate these to the Bahá'í teachings. What he wants the Bahá'ís to do is to study more, not to study less. The more general knowledge, scientific and otherwise, they possess, the better. Likewise he is constantly urging them to really study the Bahá'í teachings more deeply" (Letter dated 5 July 1947 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, qtd. in *A Compilation on Scholarship* 18).

## SECTION I WHAT IS "RACE"?

### THE ABSENCE OF "RACE" IN ANTIQUITY

The modern concept of race did not exist in the ancient world. For example, although Egyptian societies in the 1300s BCE recognized the diverse appearances of people from the Mediterranean regions, they made no claims to a "racial" definition of superiority or inferiority (Gossett 334; McCoskey 4; Snowden 63). This is not to say that ancient Egyptians were blind to difference; they linked various physical characteristics (such as height and hair color) with personal and moral qualities. These understandings, however, morphed over time depending on who was in power. For example, when lighter-skinned Egyptians were in power, most Egyptians referred to darker-skinned people as "evil." But when darker ancient Egyptians were in power, most came to call people of lighter complexion "pale" and "degraded" (Gossett 4). Similarly, ancient Greeks and Romans drew distinctions among groups such as Gauls, Celts, and Germanic tribes. Nevertheless, the defining characteristics of language, religion, and philosophy were key to how boundaries were drawn between groups and how these groups were understood relative to one another. None of these features provided a foundation for a fixed categorical system we would today call "race" (McCoskey 2).

While ancient societies did not hold ideas comparable to modern notions of

“race,” important seeds were planted that would later spout into racialized concepts. For instance, some ancient Greek philosophers discussed the possible benefits that society might derive from certain forms of eugenics—systematic breeding, sterilization, or killing to decrease the occurrence of undesirable characteristics. In *The Republic*, Plato writes that:

the best men must have sex with the best women as frequently as possible, while the opposite is true of the most inferior men and women . . . if our herd is to be of the highest possible quality, the former’s offspring must be reared but not the latter’s. And this must all be brought about without being noticed by anyone except the rulers. (459)

Additionally, the kingdom of Sparta engaged in a form of state-sponsored eugenics in which a committee would examine each newborn child. If the newborn was found unhealthy or deformed, it was thrown into a ravine, having been judged as nonessential to the nation-state. These atrocities were rationalized through a belief that the people conquered and raised under a particular nation-state, regardless of skin color, hair texture, etc., were superior to others. As the historian Frank M. Snowden Jr. notes in *Before Color Prejudice*, “ancient society was one that for all its faults and failures never made color the basis for judging a man” (63).

What did emerge from this time were hierarchies that had to be increasingly rationalized across ever-diversifying and globally conscious peoples. Philosophers like Aristotle, Plato, Plotinus, and Proclus ranked humans against one another in a hierarchy that became known as the “Great Chain of Being.” All of creation was understood as a top-down system with a Higher Power at the top; angels, demons, and various types of humans (such as kings, nobles, and then “common” folks) in the middle; and then wild animals, domesticated animals, trees, smaller plants, and finally, minerals at the bottom. It was this stratification system that would be seized upon and manipulated to rationalize and legitimate the concept of “race.”

For example, during the European medieval period (roughly the fifth to the fifteenth century CE), classical ideas about differences among humans met with new philosophical and religious traditions (in particular, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). Some Judeo-Christian interpretations of the Old Testament indicate that humanity is descended from the three sons of Noah—Shem, Ham, and Japheth—who in turn produced three distinct races: Semitic (Asiatic people), Hamitic (African people), and Japhetic (Indo-European people) (Swift and Mammoser 3). Moreover, some people, like Leo Africanus, the great traveler and protégé of Pope Leo X, wrote that “Negro Africans” were descended from Ham and were wrongdoers who should be enslaved (qtd. in Pory xcii–xciv).

And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. And he said, "Cursed be Canaan [son of Ham]; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren." And he said, "Blessed be the LORD God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant." (Genesis 9:24–27 KJV)

Early Torah and biblical texts never mention Ham's color. Yet over time, Ham was increasingly thought of as having dark skin. In fact, the explanation that black Africans, as the "sons of Ham," were cursed or possibly "blackened" by their sins was advanced only occasionally during the Middle Ages. By the period of colonialism, however, the notion that Africans were descendants of the cursed Ham served as a rather common excuse to justify the African slave trade and the European colonialism of Africa (Sanders 525–29).

#### THE SEEDS OF "RACE"

As the Middle Ages gave way to early European colonialization, the modern concept of "race" began to take shape. Race-based thinking came about during the process of European exploration, conquest, and colonization of nearly the entire globe, as groups from different continents interacted and the developing scientific

community sought to classify these human differences as naturally derived. A series of key military victories by European Christians in the 1300s and 1400s coincided with the "discovery" and colonization of the Americas. As various European powers began to colonize new lands and use them for profit generation, models of labor and forced servitude began to be mapped onto arbitrarily selected phenotypical differences of people.

For instance, in 1441 Prince Henry the Navigator traveled to West Africa and traded for gold and ten Africans, which marked one of the first documented instances of Europeans trading in African slavery over the seas. Prince Henry then recruited Gomes Eanes de Zurara to write a book to glorify slave-trading as a Christian civilizing mission. By 1453, de Zurara published *Chronica do Descobrimento e Conquista da Guiné* (later published in an abridged English version as *Conquests and Discoveries of Henry the Navigator*), which was a hagiography of Prince Henry that depicted African ethnicities as a monolithic group that was "bestial" and "barbaric" (qtd. in Sweet 5). The book was well received among the Portuguese elite, and its ideas about African or "Negro" bestiality, as naturally befitting conditions of enslavement, were translated and exported. Thus, the beginnings of racialization itself spread, such as within Spain's system of "encomienda," by which the Spanish Crown granted colonists in the Americas the right to demand tribute and forced labor from



Native inhabitants. Equivalent to the feudal system in Medieval Europe, which was based on status and power inequities between Europeans, the *encomienda* system was attached to arbitrarily selected physical differences between Europeans and America's Indigenous people. Just after Columbus's fourth and final voyage in 1503, the Spanish and Portuguese were already bringing African slaves to the Caribbean and Central American nations to replace American Indians in the gold mines and in the planting fields.

Racial discrimination—a system denoting one's place in the labor-economic system as well as the overall social order—was quickly solidifying around slavery. The legal historian Cheryl Harris writes:

Although the early colonists were cognizant of race, racial lines were neither consistently nor sharply delineated among or within all social groups. Captured Africans sold in the Americas were distinguished from the population of indentured or bond servants—"unfree" white labor—but it was not an irrefutable presumption that all Africans were "slaves" or that slavery was the only appropriate status for them. The distinction between African and white indentured labor grew, however, as decreasing terms of service were introduced for white bond servants. Simultaneously, the demand for labor intensified, resulting in a greater reliance on

African labor and a rapid increase in the number of Africans imported into the colonies. (1716–17)

For example, slavery in the Americas was increasingly understood as exclusively comprising Africans or "Negroes." Slowly, African-based slavery was legally, economically, and socially recognized as both normal and natural. By the 1630s, personal wills, inventories, deeds, and other documents show that it was customary to hold Africans and African Americans in a form of life service. In 1639, the British colonies passed a law that "all persons except Negroes are to be with Arms and Ammunition" (qtd. in Hening 226). Importantly, one year later, in 1640, three indentured servants ran away, and their differential treatment shows the beginning of a race system based on differing standards and privileges. The *Executive Journal of the Council of Colonial Virginia* from 9 July 1640 states:

the court doth therefore order that the three servants shall receive the punishment of whipping and to have thirty stripes apiece. One called Victor, a dutchman, the other a Scotchman called James Gregory, shall first serve out their times with their master according to their indentures and one whole year apiece after the time of their service is Expired . . . the third being a Negro named John Punch shall serve his said master and his assigns for the time of his natural Life here or elsewhere. (11; emphasis added)

John Punch is the first documented African who was enslaved in the Americas for life.<sup>5</sup> The differential treatment of the “Dutchman,” the “Scotchman,” and the “Negro” demonstrate how slavery reified the “race” concept in legal and social practices. By 1662, slavery was recognized in the statutory law of the British colonies as a biologically conferred status: the legal principle of *partus sequitur ventrem* meant that any child born to a slave mother would also be a slave. By 1670, the British colonies racialized slavery, recognizing “racial” categories of people and passing a law that neither “Negroes” nor “Indians” could have “white” indentured servants.

In 1684 (just twenty-two years after slavery was officially recognized by the British as a system connected to biology), the French physician François Bernier published *Nouvelle division de la terre par les différents espèces ou races qui l'habitent* (*New division of Earth by the different species or races which inhabit it*), which contains what is possibly the first grouping of various peoples into “races.” Bernier categorized people into four groups: Europeans, Africans, Asians, and Lapps. He developed these four categories based on his interpretation of differences in features such as skin color, lip size and

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5 Ironically, John Punch's eleventh-generation grandson is Barack Obama, descended not through his Kenyan and “black” father but through his American and “white” mother, Stanley Ann Dunham (Stolberg A9).

shape, hair texture, skull angle, smell, and intellect.

As race-based slavery took hold in the late 1600s and early 1700s, the terms “peoples,” “nations,” “types,” “varieties,” and “species” were slowly replaced by the term “race.” And “race” began to take on a legal status that was reflected in the development of labor relations, economics, and slavery in the European colonies. Namely, the racialization of differing peoples depended on the subordination of Africans for labor, the expulsion of Natives for land, and the creation of social, political, and economic privileges for Europeans, who slowly became recognized as “white”<sup>6</sup> (Allen 1994 6–7).

#### “RACE” TAKES ROOT

In the eighteenth century, the

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6 Historian Theodore Allen tracks the emergence of the racial category of “white” vis-à-vis African slavery. He gives one example of an English ship captain named Richard Jobson. Jobson made a trading voyage to Africa in 1620–1621 but refused to engage in human trafficking because the English “were a people who did not deal in any such commodities, neither did we buy or sell one another or any that had our own shapes” (Jobson 112). When a local slave trader insisted that it was the custom to sell Africans “to white men,” Jobson replied “they [i.e., “white men”] were another kinde of people from us” (Jobson 112). The example illumines how in the 1620s there was not yet a hegemonic conflation of “English” people with “white” people.



burgeoning concept of “race,” being legally bound up with labor and freedom, depended on the two dominant cultural logics and ways of “common-sense” thinking: religion and science. Before the European Enlightenment period, most moral, legal, and social problems were answered through the authority of the clergy. As scientific thinking rose in prominence and could correctly predict and explain variation in phenomena, the dominance of the clergy was threatened. The concept of “race” was further refined in this battle between religious and scientific dominance.

At first, the chief European paradigm for explaining human difference was couched in Old Testament theology. As Carl Degler (71–73) makes known in *In Search of Human Nature*, some biblical interpretations led to the benign conclusion that human variation was the result of environmental factors over time (climate or diet, for example) and that all people shared a common ancestor in Adam and Eve, a theory known as “monogenesis.” Other views encompassed the belief that there were separate points of human origin for different racial groups, known as “polygenesis,” or that select non-European groups were divinely designated as inferior. Polygenesis was also expressed as “co-Adamism”—a belief that there was more than one Adam and that God created different races of humanity at different places across the earth. For example, the Italian theologian Giordano Bruno (1548–1600) argued that no one could

rationally accept that European Jews and Ethiopians had the same ancestry. And Scottish philosopher Henry Home (1696–1782), who did not believe that the environment, climate, or state of society could account for physical differences, argued in *Sketches on the History of Man* that God had created different races in separate regions.

But as science began to displace religion as the central authority for knowledge acquisition and truth verification, scientists would use evidence and reason to argue for both monogenesis and polygenesis. These scientific debates took off after 1735 when the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus published *Systemae Naturae*. Differing from François Bernier’s groups of Europeans, Africans, Asians, and Lapps, Linnaeus proposed four subcategories and behaviors of humans: *Europæus albus* (ruled by law and custom), *Americanus rubescens* (ruled by habit), *Asiaticus fuscus* (ruled by belief), and *Africanus niger* (ruled by impulse). Even though Linnaeus saw Africans as primitive and Europeans as civilized, he was a proponent of monogenesis. In fact, Linnaeus saw humans and animals (especially monkeys) as being under the same category of “anthropomorpha,” meaning “manlike.” This upset many religious thinkers, who saw humans as divine creations who were always biologically distinct from the animal realm. Nevertheless, Linnaeus’s ideas shaped the future of research in natural history, particularly his classification system of the “three kingdoms”: *Regnum Animale*, *Regnum Vegetabile*,

and *Regnum Lapideum* (the Animal, Vegetable, and Mineral Kingdoms).

Other scientists such as Christoph Meiners (1747–1810), Johann Georg Adam Forster (1754–1794), and Julien-Joseph Virey (1775–1846), as well as a new school of Enlightenment philosophers such as Voltaire (1694–1778), advocated polygenesis. Voltaire was a harsh critic of monogenesis, writing most sarcastically in 1769 that:

It is a serious question among them whether the Africans are descended from monkeys or whether the monkeys come from them. Our wise men have said that man was created in the image of God. Now here is a lovely image of the Divine Maker: a flat and black nose with little or hardly any intelligence. A time will doubtless come when these animals will know how to cultivate the land well, beautify their houses and gardens, and know the paths of the stars: one needs time for everything. (183)

Regardless of whether one believed in monogenesis or polygenesis, the categorization and ranking of racial groups—which was then seen as an important scientific enterprise—laid the foundation for racial essentialism and biological determinism. For instance, Petrus Camper (1722–1789), a Dutch physician and zoologist, believed that the various races held essentially different qualities of beauty due to their “facial angles” (Camper

argued that Europeans had angles of 80°; “Orientals,” 70°; and blacks, 60°). These debates over exactly what was meant by “race” raged into the middle of the nineteenth century, when the Babi and Bahá'í Faiths emerged. And both Bahá'í theological and sociological proclamations regarding “race” would move forward, sometimes in tandem, even as some strands of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sociological theory were still mired in racial essentialism and biological determinism.

## SECTION II BAHÁ'Í THEOLOGICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF “RACE”

### THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RACE

The now accepted sociological paradigm of “social constructionism,”<sup>7</sup>

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7 A buzzword in and of itself, the term “social construction” is often used but rarely defined. In short, it refers to how people come to form and agree upon understandings about how the world works, which then provides a basis for shared assumptions about reality. For those looking for a more detailed explanation, “social constructionism” emerged from the paradigms of both “symbolic interactionism” and “phenomenology,” which was first (and arguably best) articulated in Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s *The Social Construction of Reality*. In it the authors argue against a

especially as applied to race, finds agreement in the Bahá'í Writings. For instance, during His 1911 visit to the Theosophical Society in Paris, 'Abdu'l-Bahá outlined eleven principles of the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and highlighted the fifth principle as the "Abolition of Prejudices," stating:

The whole world must be looked upon as one single country, all the nations as one nation, all men as belonging to one race. *Religions, races, and nations are all divisions of man's making only, and are necessary only in his thought*, before God there are neither Persians, Arabs, French nor English; God is God for all, and to Him all creation is one. We must obey God, and strive to follow Him by leaving all our prejudices and bringing about peace on earth. (*Paris Talks* 127; emphasis added)

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positivist view in which concepts such as "race" exist outside of perception. Rather, they contend that concepts and language do not mirror reality but are constitutive of it. Berger and Luckmann write: "A sign [has the] explicit intention to serve as an index of subjective meanings . . . . Language is capable of becoming the objective repository of vast accumulations of meaning and experience, which it can then preserve in time and transmit to following generations. . . . Language also typifies experiences, allowing me to subsume them under broad categories in terms of which they have meaning not only to myself but also to my fellowmen" (35–39).

'Abdu'l-Bahá makes it clear that the concept of "races" is based on subjective and artificial categories rather than objectively extant types. Moreover, He emphasizes that the race concept has become necessary only within humanity's "thought," that is, in the intersubjectively shared ways that people agree to split and lump the world's people into socially meaningful groups.<sup>8</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá later expounded on this point during His visit to the United States the next year. Fittingly, His elucidation of the conceptual division of "races" was delivered on 20 April 1912 at Hull House, a settlement home for immigrants (often "othered" by ethnic differences) on the West Side of Chicago, Illinois. Importantly, Hull House was co-founded by Ellen Gates Starr and Jane Addams, the latter of whom is considered an important figure of the Chicago school of sociology and the only formal sociologist to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.<sup>9</sup> While

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8 This point dovetails with Berger and Luckmann's thesis that everyday "reality" is made up of intersubjective shared understandings about the world, whereby people have varied experiences but always come back to an agreed-upon understanding of what the "real" is: "Compared to the reality of everyday life, other realities appear as finite provinces of meaning, enclaves within the paramount reality marked by circumscribed meanings and modes of experience" (25).

9 Addams taught courses through the Extension Division of the University of

visiting Hull House, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated:

In the human kingdom itself there are points of contact, properties common to all mankind; likewise, there are points of distinction which separate race from race, individual from individual. If the points of contact, which are the common properties of humanity, overcome the peculiar points of distinction, unity is assured. On the other hand, if the points of differentiation overcome the points of agreement, disunion and weakness result. One of the important questions which affect the unity and the solidarity of mankind is the fellowship and equality of the white and colored races. Between these two races certain points of agreement and points of distinction exist which warrant just and mutual consideration. The points of contact are many; for in the material or physical plane of being, both are constituted alike and exist under the same law of growth and bodily

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Chicago and was offered a graduate faculty position by Albion Small, then chair of the Department of Sociology. Addams declined the offer in order to maintain her work with Hull House and the Extension Division, through which she felt she could better teach adults who did not have the money or credentials to otherwise attend prestigious institutions such as the University of Chicago (Deegan 9–11).

development. Furthermore, both live and move in the plane of the senses and are endowed with human intelligence. (*Promulgation* 67–68)

'Abdu'l-Bahá makes clear that there are “points of distinction which separate race from race,” yet in recalling His earlier point that “[r]eligions, races, and nations are all divisions of man’s making only, and are necessary only in his thought,” we must understand these distinctions as arbitrary—and as sociologists put it, “socially constructed”—especially given His emphasis on the “common properties of humanity” which can assure “unity” (*Promulgation* 67; *Paris Talks* 127). Additionally, He signals a distinction based on socially derived racial inequality in the United States by drawing attention to “white” and “colored races,” similarly noted by the sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois just nine years earlier in *The Souls of Black Folk*: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea” (4). Across that social distinction, 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes that in the “material or physical plane of being,” the “races” are “constituted alike” and exist under the same law of growth and bodily development (*Promulgation* 68). He concludes the point by stating:

In fact numerous points of partnership and agreement exist

between the two races; whereas the one point of distinction is that of color. Shall this, the least of all distinctions, be allowed to separate you as races and individuals? In physical bodies, in the law of growth, in sense endowment, intelligence, patriotism, language, citizenship, civilization and religion you are one and the same. A single point of distinction exists—that of racial color. God is not pleased with—neither should any reasonable or intelligent man be willing to recognize—inequality in the races because of this distinction. (*Promulgation* 68)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s point is threefold: first, “race” is a socially created categorical system; second, racial social order has no basis in the common properties of humanity; and third, any use of the socially created racial order to create or legitimate inequality is not only unreasonable and logically untenable—it is displeasing to the Divine.

Weeks later, this time at a meeting of the International Peace Forum at Grace Methodist Episcopal Church on West 104<sup>th</sup> Street in New York City, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá once again interrogated the fallacious and illusory concept of “race,” this time focusing on the dangers of the concept and positing racial thinking as a causal variable in dissension and war:

Other wars are caused by purely imaginary racial differences; for humanity is one kind, one

race and progeny, inhabiting the same globe. In the creative plan there is no racial distinction and separation such as Frenchman, Englishman, American, German, Italian or Spaniard; all belong to one household. These boundaries and distinctions are human and artificial, not natural and original. (*Promulgation* 118)

Again, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reiterates that “race” is “purely imaginary” and emphasizes both the biological and divine unity of humankind in stating that “humanity is one kind, one race and progeny . . . [i]n the creative plan there is no racial distinction” (*Promulgation* 118). Speaking to the current race-based logic and conventions of the time, in which “whiteness” was constructed in a narrow fashion and excluded even many groups now encompassed within it today, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá referred to different “races” by way of national distinctions, mentioning “Frenchman, Englishman, American, German, Italian or Spaniard” (*Promulgation* 118).<sup>10</sup> That is, in the early twentieth century, only certain members of the “English”—those who laid claim to “Anglo-Saxon” descent—were

10 Consider that in the 1910 US census, there were only seven racial categories: “White,” “Black,” “Mulatto,” “Other,” “Indian,” “Chinese,” and “Japanese.” By 1920, the racial choices available on the US census increased to ten with the addition of “Filipino,” “Korean,” and “Hindu” (U.S. Census Bureau).

considered truly “white.” It was not until World War I, a mere few years after ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s visit to the United States, that “Americanness” began to take on a racialized conflation with whiteness. This was largely due to Nativist xenophobia on the part of American political leaders (which led to the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and the Immigration Act of 1924)<sup>11</sup> as well as the popularity of best-selling racist tracts such as Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), which stoked fears of the “extinction” of native-born Americans via immigration, racial intermixing, and lack of “race-consciousness” due to the failure to base new racial classifications on genetics rather than religion, language, or nationality.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá continued, employing metaphors of the biological similarities of humanity, which in hindsight were deeply prophetic of how the “race” concept would unfold in the following years:

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11 The Immigration Act of 1924 (also known as the Johnson-Reed Act, which included the National Origins Act and Asian Exclusion Act) was a law that limited the annual number of immigrants to 2 percent of the number of people from that country who were already living in the United States as of the 1890 census. This was a reduction from the already low bar established by the Emergency Quota Act of 1921, which set the cap at 3 percent based on the number of people from that country who were already living in the United States as of the 1910 census.

All mankind are the fruits of one tree, flowers of the same garden, waves of one sea. In the animal kingdom no such distinction and separation are observed. The sheep of the East and the sheep of the West would associate peacefully. The Oriental flock would not look surprised as if saying, “These are sheep of the Occident; they do not belong to our country.” All would gather in harmony and enjoy the same pasture without evidence of local or racial distinction. The birds of different countries mingle in friendliness. We find these virtues in the animal kingdom. Shall man deprive himself of these virtues? Man is endowed with superior reasoning power and the faculty of perception; he is the manifestation of divine bestowals. Shall racial ideas prevail and obscure the creative purpose of unity in his kingdom? Shall he say, “I am a German,” “I am a Frenchman” or an “Englishman” and declare war because of this imaginary and human distinction? God forbid! This earth is one household and the native land of all humanity; therefore, the human race should ignore distinctions and boundaries which are artificial and conducive to disagreement and hostility. (*Promulgation* 118)

Humanity did not ignore these “artificial” distinctions but rather doubled down. But before going forward, it is



necessary to investigate backward. For in the half century preceding 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words, the foundation for the academic and scientific racism of the twentieth century was laid.

Inspired in part from Darwin's notion of natural selection proposed in *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and Joseph Arthur, Comte de Gobineau's *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1853)—a book that argued that "Aryans" were superior to other races and that Europe represented the best of what was left from the ancient world—sociologist Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Biology* (1864) advanced the notion of "survival of the fittest." Spencer argued that global society was naturally arranged with Africans at the lowest end and Europeans at the highest and that Africans would either have to evolve or become extinct, an approach that became known as "Social Darwinism." Drawing on the ideas of Social Darwinism, Francis Galton (a relative of Charles Darwin) argued that the same techniques for animal breeding should be applied to humans, eventually calling this new science "eugenics" in 1883. Galton believed that scientists should categorize the world by race and guide the selective breeding of "superior" races so that the inferior races would die out. Key to eugenic science, and the policies that supported it, was concern over racial "miscegenation" (reproduction between people of different races). Proponents of eugenics feared that racial mixing would dilute the purity and superiority of whites and thus

result in the decline of civilization. Hence, measuring the racial purity of people, or how much one was "mixed" from different races—known as "hyposescent" or the "one-drop rule"—became important scientific and political questions of the day.

For instance, in 1904 the Carnegie Institution established the Station for Experimental Evolution at Cold Spring Harbor, New York. Commonly known as Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, it housed the Eugenics Records Office (ERO) and was directed by Charles B. Davenport and Harry H. Laughlin. Davenport and Laughlin were prominent scientists who argued that Nordic immigrants from England and Germany were the most biologically superior people on the planet and that inferior races should not reproduce. Together, Davenport and Laughlin advocated sterilization and helped put Galton's ideas about eugenics into practice.

Between 1910 and 1939, the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory served as both an academic and a policy think tank that would influence racist scholarship and legislation. In 1913, Laughlin published a paper used by various states to justify the legal sterilization of the "socially inadequate" (5). A decade later, numerous American states had forcibly sterilized over three thousand people—mostly the overwhelmingly poor or nonwhite. For instance, Laughlin's paper was used to write Virginia's Eugenic Sterilization Act of 1924 (which was upheld by the US Supreme Court case of *Buck v. Bell* in

1927). The Virginia law stated that “heredity plays an important part in the transmission of insanity, idiocy, imbecility, epilepsy and crime” and thus the reproduction of “defective persons” was “a menace to society” (qtd. in Smith and Nelson 15). Moreover, ERO research helped state legislators create the Oregon Board of Eugenics in 1917, which resulted in the forced sterilization of more than 2,600 Oregon residents between 1917 to 1981 (Paul 80–90).

Moreover, the race-based research from the ERO helped inform German scientists, who would use those ideas for developing *Rassenhygiene* (“racial hygiene basics”) against anyone not “Aryan” during the Nazi regime and World War II. While the ERO helped usher in a particularly violent era of scientific racism, by 1935 its work was reviewed and found to rely on erroneous methods and assumptions. In late 1939, funding from the Carnegie Institution was withdrawn and the ERO closed. However, the logic employed—based on incomplete and ideological misinterpretations of Mendelian inheritance, Darwinian winnowing, and, in later years, genetic and genomic research—did not disappear with the ERO.

Bahá'í teachings at the time stood in opposition to both the erroneous scientific logic of racial eugenics and the extension of that logic to law and policy. In 1909 (the year before the ERO would begin eugenics research) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote to the first African American Bahá'í, Louis George

Gregory, and invited him to visit Egypt, where ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was residing at the time, and then to visit with Him in the Bahá'í holy places in Ottoman Palestine (what is now Israel). The letter reads, in part:

I hope that thou mayest become . . . the means whereby the white and colored people shall close their eyes to racial differences and behold the reality of humanity, that is the universal truth which is the oneness of the kingdom of the human race. . . . Rely as much as thou canst on the True One, and be thou resigned to the Will of God, so that like unto a candle thou mayest be enkindled in the world of humanity and like unto a star thou mayest shine and gleam from the Horizon of Reality and become the cause of the guidance of both races. (qtd. in Venters 32)

And in a 1910 letter to another Bahá'í, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes: “If it be possible, gather together these two races, black and white, into one Assembly, and put such love into their hearts that they shall not only unite but even intermarry. Be sure that the result of this will abolish differences and disputes between black and white. Moreover, by the Will of God, may it be so. This is a great service to humanity” (*Bahá'í World Faith* 359). Bahá'í teachings emphasize the fundamental unity of the human species.

While in Egypt, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá raised the topic of interracial marriage with

Gregory, telling him, “If you have any influence to get the races to intermarry, it will be very valuable. Such unions will beget very strong and beautiful children. If you wish, I will reveal a Tablet in regard to the wiping out of racial difference” (Gregory 15). Two years later, when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá visited the United States, Gregory arranged two speaking engagements for Him in Washington, DC, on 23 April 2012: a noon talk at Rankin Chapel at Howard University and an evening talk to the Bethel Literary and Historical Association at the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church. During the former, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stated:

Today I am most happy, for I see here a gathering of the servants of God. I see white and black sitting together. There are no whites and blacks before God. All colors are one, and that is the color of servitude to God . . . . The world of humanity, too, is like a garden, and humankind are like the many-colored flowers. Therefore, different colors constitute an adornment. In the same way, there are many colors in the realm of animals. Doves are of many colors; nevertheless, they live in utmost harmony. They never look at color; instead, they look at the species. How often white doves fly with black ones. In the same way, other birds and varicolored animals never look at color; they look at the species. (*Promulgation* 44)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá distinguishes between race as “color” and race as species, making clear that there was no species differentiation in humanity, a statement that flew in the face of the burgeoning scientific ideas concerning race in the early 1900s. In the talk at the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reiterated His argument about the oneness of humanity and the absence of racial difference by outlining the importance of intellectual investigation and research whose goal is the recognition and promulgation of that truth:

All blessings are divine in origin, but none can be compared with this power of intellectual investigation and research, which is an eternal gift producing fruits of unending delight. Man is ever partaking of these fruits. All other blessings are temporary; this is an everlasting possession . . . . We must use these powers in establishing the oneness of the world of humanity, appreciate these virtues by accomplishing the unity of whites and blacks, devote this divine intelligence to the perfecting of amity and accord among all branches of the human family so that under the protection and providence of God the East and West may hold each other’s hands and become as lovers. Then will mankind be as one nation, one race and kind—as waves of one ocean. Although these waves may differ in form and shape, they are waves of the same sea. (*Promulgation* 51)

These words were further emphasized that day at a luncheon in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's honor. Two Bahá'ís (Ali Kuli Khan, who was *chargé d'affaires* of the Persian Legation, and his wife, Florence Breed Khan) hosted approximately fifteen socially prominent guests at their home, on which occasion 'Abdu'l-Bahá defied the convention of racial segregation, which, at the time, was practiced by many Bahá'ís. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá took His place at the head of the table, He looked at the white and Persian faces in the room and then stood up to ask, "Where is Mr. [Louis] Gregory? Bring Mr. Gregory" (Parsons 33). The Khans hastily retrieved Mr. Gregory, who had escorted 'Abdu'l-Bahá to their home and was about to leave. Mr. Gregory entered the room and upon 'Abdu'l-Bahá's request was seated to His immediate right, the seat of honor (Parsons 33).

During His 1912 visit to the United States, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was adamant that His talks be open to people of all races, a demand that often ran against the Jim Crow laws and practices of racial segregation in public venues. For instance, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was scheduled to speak at the Great Northern Hotel (now Le Parker Meridien) in New York City, but the manager vehemently refused to allow African Americans on the property (Zarqání 404–06). In response, 'Abdu'l-Bahá hosted a different banquet and talk the following day at the home of the Kinneys in which many of the whites served the African Americans, causing 'Abdu'l-Bahá to note, "Today you have shown the

Commandments of the Blessed Beauty in your actions and have acted according to the teaching of the Supreme Pen" (Zarqání 407).

In addition to opposition to segregation and the conceptual frameworks of racial essentialism and biological determinism, Bahá'í teachings directly confronted the miscegenation laws. On His trip to America in 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá brought along a Bahá'í Londoner, Louisa Mathew, who had become acquainted with Gregory in 1910 when they were both visiting 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Egypt. It appears that 'Abdu'l-Bahá played the role of matchmaker for the two, and while visiting Dublin, New Hampshire, in August 1912, He announced their engagement. They were married later that year. The promotion of inter-racial marriage was reiterated by Shoghi Effendi in subsequent years:

Casting away once and for all the fallacious doctrine of racial superiority, with all its attendant evils, confusion, and miseries, and welcoming and encouraging the intermixture of races, and tearing down the barriers that now divide them, they should each endeavor, day and night, to fulfill their particular responsibilities in the common task which so urgently faces them. (qtd. in *Compilation of Compilations* 39–40)

Bahá'í promotion of interracial marriage ran contrary to much of the current thinking concerning "race

mixing” as well as many state laws against interracial marriage that were not invalidated until the US Supreme Court case of *Loving v. Virginia* (1967).

The Bahá'í teachings on the biological poverty of the race concept have been proven valid by modern scientific advances, especially the mapping of the human genome in 2000. Still, modern scientific racism continues to link race, genes, and life outcomes and relies on the twin pillars of racial essentialism and biological determinism, even as current biological and sociological thought have rejected these two tenants.<sup>12</sup> Biological determinism and racial essentialism posit the biological reality of race along with the contention that different racial groups possess different traits and characteristics that, in turn, result in racially varied social outcomes. These logics continue to guide interpretations of genetics and genomics to support erroneous notions of race (Byrd and Hughey 8–11).

The current era has witnessed a resurgent discussion of how similar or different certain groupings of human populations are to one another, how our supposed “racial” histories are either connected or separated, and the likelihood of whether a certain racial group is to inherit disease or hold certain levels of intelligence (Bliss 16, 190–99; Lynch and Condit 128–32;

Wailoo, Nelson, and Lee 49, 86, 259). Assumptions about racial difference allow people to reduce the vast diversity of genetic differences into four, five, or even forty-five racial groups.

For example, some contend that there are genetic clusters that can be correlated with certain racial groups and, thus, “race” is a marker of genetic variants in the polymorphic versions of a gene, better known as alleles (Gabriel 43–46). However, *Homo sapiens* share nearly all of their DNA in common, and the vast majority of genetic variation occurs within, not across, human populations that we might socially call a “race” (Duster4–5). As W. Carson Byrd and I write:

Put more simply, there is on average more genetic variation within a socially constructed racial category (such as “white”) than between two people from two socially constructed racial categories (such as “white” and “black”). Although it is quite possible to classify geographically defined populations on the basis of clusters of various genetic material, those clusters do not align with many of the social racial categories that we possess; nor do they take into account that there is no consensus on the definition of “race,” or the count of how many “races” supposedly exist, or that these definitions and arguments have changed over time, or that these categories vary by national and cultural context. (11)

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<sup>12</sup> See Stephen Jay Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man*, Joseph Graves Jr.'s *The Emperor's New Clothes*, Ann Morning's *The Nature of Race*, and Tukufu Zuberi's *Thicker than Blood*.

Moreover, it is not possible to use race as a proxy for a supposed ancestral or continental origin to either test for individual diagnoses of disease or responses to drugs. As Michael J. Fine, Said A. Ibrahim, and Stephen B. Thomas write:

Race is not useful for distinguishing polygenic phenotypes such as height, let alone complex diseases where there is little evidence that specific susceptibility-gene variants occur more frequently in different populations. Evidence that genes, not to mention relevant combinations of gene variants, substantially influence susceptibility to complex disease is very limited, making it impossible to predict the risk or outcomes of common disease on the basis of genotype. Opponents of the use of a biological definition of race believe that the immediate benefits of genomics are greatly overstated because it is impossible for race to provide the sensitivity and specificity needed to characterize DNA sequence variation for the purpose of guiding preventive or therapeutic medicine. (2125)

This is not to cast out the baby with the bathwater. Both sociologists and biologists alike do not deny that clusters of human populations may be more likely to carry particular genetic information. But human genetic clusters hold an infinitesimal, if not zero, correlation with race. What we call

“race” is an arbitrary constellation of phenotypic traits; racial categories are more like astrological classifications than objective and self-identifiable classes.

As I and Devon R. Goss write, “The search for these genetic clusters—in the age of genomic research—is more an artifact of scientists’ beliefs than an objective finding through unbiased research methodology” (150). Take, for instance, a recent article in *Sociological Theory* by Shiao et al. that asserts “the existence of genetic clusters consistent with certain racial classifications as well as the validity of the genomic research that has identified the clusters” (67). The problem with the analysis is that the findings can be consistent with any racial classification scheme one wishes to “discover.” As Morning writes in her response to this piece:

First, although it is true that geneticists have sought to infer clusters within the global population, the statistical groupings that result are not so much “natural,” objective subpopulations that scientists simply “discover” as they are collectives that analysts construct. As their makers readily admit, the number and content of such clusters depend on a variety of assumptions, including those that contribute to the shaping of the genetic data sets used. Second, few participants in the scientific debate about population structure seem to find “race” a useful analytical tool,



let alone equate it with statistically derived, DNA-based clusters. (“Does Genomics” 203)

That is, if we believe in five racial groups, we can “find” five clusters of genetic material to match, just like if we believe there to be fifty racial groups, we can likewise “find” fifty clusters of genetic patterns (Hughey and Goss 190–93).

As sociologists Karen E. Fields and Barbara Fields put it, “Anyone who continues to believe in race as a physical attribute of individuals, despite the now commonplace disclaimers of biologists and geneticists, might as well also believe that Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the tooth fairy are real, and that the earth stands still while the sun moves” (113). Even Craig Venter, one of the first scientists to map the human genome, has stated that “the concept of race has no genetic or scientific basis” (qtd. in Wiess and Gillis A1). The creation of “racial” groups depends on arbitrarily selected and defined phenotypes and genetic clusters, as well as behaviors, beliefs, customs, and many other random criteria we use as evidence for a particular “race” (Bliss 113–20; Morning 2011 148–49). Put more succinctly, race is a biological fiction with a social function.

#### THE “SOCIAL FACT” OF RACE

Even though race is not biologically real, it remains an agreed-upon social construction—a “social fact”—because it is treated real socially it holds

materially real consequences.<sup>13</sup> While some think of race as a biological essence and others think of race as merely a deception, the truth is somewhere in the middle. “Race” is simply a concept that signifies the division of the human species according to physical characteristics we believe are inherited, such as skin color, facial features, and hair texture, but which also can include other abstract traits, such as intelligence or morality. This association between characteristics and traits is not valid. Nevertheless, people believe it is real—it thus has a social reality. Because we believe in the reality of race, it produces real effects on people who are thought of as “black,” “white,” “Latino,” “Asian,” etc.

Because race is constantly being made and remade, it is important to think of it not as a noun (a static and unchanging thing), but as a verb (an action or occurrence) (see the section below on the five dimensions of “race”). If we take the approach that race is a verb, we will keep in mind that race is always in the process of being assigned. In this sense, when we see “race,” what we actually are witnessing is a snapshot of racialization. Racialization is the process of ascribing racial meanings to a relationship, social practice, or group; it

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13 This idea is also expressed by what sociologists call the Thomas theorem, which was formulated by Dorothy and William Thomas in 1928: “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (572).

often occurs when one group wishes to dominate another (Omi and Winant 36–42). Some believe certain racial groups are more intelligent, more hardworking, or possess better values than other racial groups. Accordingly, race shapes the way that some people relate to each other and gestures toward the notion of “racism.”

Bahá'í teachings align with the sociological thesis that race is a social fact born from both agentic quests to rationalize oppression and domination as well as human habits (individually unconscious or group-level activities) that unintentionally promote human division and inequality. Consider 'Abdu'l-Bahá's historical rendering of the Jewish people as a “race” constituted by “slavery” that He offered in a speech delivered on 25 September 1912 in Denver, Colorado:

When He [Moses] appeared, all the contemporaneous nations rejected Him. Notwithstanding this, single and alone He promulgated the divine teachings and liberated a nation from the lowest condition of degradation and bondage. The people of Israel were ignorant, lowly, debased in morals—a race of slaves under burdensome oppression. Moses led them out of captivity and brought them to the Holy Land. (*Promulgation* 340)

In this same vein, 'Abdu'l-Bahá advances what could be read as a controversial statement if not understood in the context of His larger point.

Speaking again of the Jewish people, He attributes divine education and social uplift as the factors that constitute a “racial supremacy” among Jews:

From this review of the history of the Jewish people we learn that the foundation of the religion of God laid by Moses was the cause of their eternal honor and national prestige, the animating impulse of their advancement and racial supremacy and the source of that excellence which will always command the respect and reverence of those who understand their peculiar destiny and outcome. (*Promulgation* 364)

'Abdu'l-Bahá's point was not that there were either biological or cultural factors inherent in the Jewish people. Rather, He stipulated that the combination of the Divine effulgence of Moses's teachings and obedience to those teachings allowed for their social advancement to, at the time, outpace other social groups not bound together by oppression and faithfulness to the Abrahamic Covenant.

Shoghi Effendi further elucidated 'Abdu'l-Bahá's argument in 1938. He reasoned that the divisions of race would be erased as members of humankind became “interwoven” in adherence to the most recent Faith proclaimed by the Manifestation of God for that day. In quoting 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi drew attention to the relationship of equality and unity:

This crusade, which embraces all the races, all the republics, classes and denominations of the entire Western Hemisphere, arise, and, circumstances permitting, direct in particular the attention, and win eventually the unqualified adherence, of the Negro, the Indian, the Eskimo, and Jewish races to his Faith . . . . A blending of these highly differentiated elements of the human race, harmoniously interwoven into the fabric of an all-embracing Bahá'í fraternity . . . . "I hope," is the wish expressed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "that ye may cause that downtrodden race [Negro] to become glorious, and to be joined with the white race to serve the world of man with the utmost sincerity, faithfulness, love and purity." "One of the important questions," He also has written, "which affect the unity and the solidarity of mankind is the fellowship and equality of the white and colored races." (*Advent* 54–55)

Shoghi Effendi appeared to contend that religious unity would serve as a catalyst for the elimination of racial hierarchy, given that separation and inequality constitute both the dominant meanings of, and locations for, white and nonwhite (or "colored") racial groups in the social order.

In "A Warning about the Shortcomings of North Americans" in *The Advent of Divine Justice* (1938)—itself a manifesto cautioning that the Bahá'ís of the United States and

Canada must acquire three spiritual prerequisites: "moral rectitude," "absolute chastity," and "complete freedom from prejudice"—Shoghi Effendi again emphasized the "social factness" of race instead of taking a racially essentialist or biological determinist stance:

To contend that the innate worthiness, the high moral standard, the political aptitude, and social attainments of any race or nation is the reason for the appearance in its midst of any of these Divine Luminaries would be an absolute perversion of historical facts, and would amount to a complete repudiation of the undoubted interpretation placed upon them, so clearly and emphatically, by both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. (16)

He contextualized his argument about the social factness of race by referencing how the supposedly high social status of any people or "race" (even those from which Messengers of God appear) is neither natural nor divine in origin. Moreover, the assumed high status of "racial superiority, political capacity, or spiritual virtue" attributed to a group or race is betrayed by the fact that the specific unfoldment of progressive revelation take place among people who are marked by "abasement" and "misery." He continues:

How great, then, must be the challenge to those who, belonging

to such races and nations, and having responded to the call which these Prophets have raised, to unreservedly recognize and courageously testify to this indubitable truth, that not by reason of any racial superiority, political capacity, or spiritual virtue which a race or nation might possess, but rather as a direct consequence of its crying needs, its lamentable degeneracy, and irremediable perversity, has the Prophet of God chosen to appear in its midst, and with it as a lever has lifted the entire human race to a higher and nobler plane of life and conduct. For it is precisely under such circumstances, and by such means that the Prophets have, from time immemorial, chosen and were able to demonstrate their redemptive power to raise from the depths of abasement and of misery, the people of their own race and nation, empowering them to transmit in turn to other races and nations the saving grace and the energizing influence of their Revelation. (*Advent* 17–18)

Undoubtedly, both the sociological and Bahá'í theological stance on race, in general, or the “racial superiority, political capacity, or spiritual virtue” of a race in specific, is that neither can be understood to be culturally or biologically essential nor divinely innate. Rather, the two paradigms indicate that “race” exists as a social reality (“social fact”) because varied peoples

exercise social forms of domination, ability, and morality and use race to rationalize their activities. The realization that “race” is recognized and treated as a real form of human variation and marker of natural inequality is a clear indication of the necessity to understand the hot-button concept of racism.

### SECTION III WHAT IS RACISM?

#### PREJUDICE, DISCRIMINATION, AND RACISM

Many people mistakenly use the words *prejudice*, *discrimination*, and *racism* interchangeably. I will differentiate these terms as follows. Prejudice is an opinion about a person or group before interacting with them. Literally, we “pre-judge.” Gordon Allport, the famous sociologist of prejudice and race relations, once wrote that prejudice could be defined as a “feeling, favorable or unfavorable, toward a person or thing, prior to, or not based on, actual experience” (6). Regardless of racial group, anyone can hold such an attitude, and most people demonstrate some form of racial prejudice every day (Essed 11–26).

When social scientists first began to study prejudice, many assumed it was “human nature” and claimed there was a biological basis for prejudice. By the 1930s, scientists began to examine prejudice not as a foregone conclusion, but as a disorder that could be cured. For instance, Allport claimed that

when different racial groups had (1) equal status, (2) common goals, (3) cooperation, (4) support of law and customs, and (5) frequent personal interactions, prejudice would lessen or even disappear. By the 1970s, research began to focus on the processes by which people become prejudiced. One finding was that many people develop prejudice based on both positive feelings for their own racial group and negative feelings for another racial group (Sidanius, Pratto, and Bobo 476–78). By the 2010s, scholars found that many still possess “negative racial feelings and beliefs . . . of which they are unaware or which they try to dissociate from their nonprejudiced self-images” (Dovidio and Gaertner 3).

Prejudice is an individual attitude or opinion. By contrast, discrimination is an action that denies equal treatment, full social participation, or civil or human rights to certain racial groups or individuals. Many cognitive scientists assert that discrimination often occurs because of prejudice, whereas social scientists often emphasize the external factors that produce discriminatory patterns. Hence, racial discrimination includes direct or indirect, overt or subtle, and either internally or externally derived actions that limit the opportunities or resources available to a person or group. Racial discrimination actively treats people differently on the basis of either real or perceived racial differences. For example, Jim Crow laws and policies in the United States, which were enacted between the end of the Reconstruction period

in 1877 and the beginning of the civil rights movement in the 1950s, maintained racial segregation in all public facilities. In South Africa, the apartheid system (literally “the state of being apart”) mandated racial segregation from 1948 to 1994. In India, the caste system of social stratification continues to separate communities of people into groups that have varying levels of status and resources. And in Malaysia, ethnic Indians and Chinese experience race-based discrimination. Because discrimination can also occur without a specific or purposeful intention or prejudice, many efforts for racial justice focus on the inequality of outcomes as a form of discrimination.

Racism is a systemic and patterned set of mass beliefs and practices whereby resources and power are unequally distributed to different groups. It is a “highly organized system of ‘race’-based group privilege that operates at every level of society” (Cazenave and Maddern 42). The word itself derives from the combination of the word *race* with *ism*, a suffix that denotes a practice, state, doctrine, condition, or what we can otherwise understand as a *system*. Hence, racism is a systemic, rather than an individual-level, phenomenon.

#### RACISM AS A SOCIAL SYSTEM

If we recall the earlier discussion about how race as an illusory “social fact” produces real racial effects, the sociologist (and president of the American Sociological Association in

2017-18) Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, in *Racism without Racists*, states:

When race emerged in human history, it formed a social structure (a racialized social system) that awarded systemic privileges to Europeans (the peoples who became “white”) over non-Europeans (the peoples who became “nonwhite”). Racialized social systems, or white supremacy, for short, became global and affected all societies where Europeans extended their reach. I therefore conceive a society’s racial structure as the totality of the social relations and practices that reinforce white privilege. Accordingly, the task of analysts interested in studying racial structures is to uncover the particular social, economic, political, social control, and ideological mechanisms responsible for the reproduction of racial privilege in a society. (9)

Without an understanding of racism as operating beyond the scope of either good or bad intentions or “antiracist” or “racist” people,<sup>14</sup> we will blind ourselves to racial inequality or how we can have, in the words of Bonilla-Silva, “racism without racists.” After all, Western societies often possess a fetish for binaries. And when it comes to the hot-button topic of race, these opposites seem all the more

useful. We often make sense of racial conflict by searching for the quintessentially “good” and “bad” thoughts, intentions, or people involved.

Such lumping and splitting is nothing new. Scholars have long noted the framing of absolute rights and wrongs when it comes to racial identity and racism. Sociologist Jack Niemonen remarked that we often “paint a picture of social reality in which battle lines are drawn, the enemy identified, and the victims sympathetically portrayed . . . [distinguishing] between ‘good’ whites and ‘bad’ whites” (166). Again, Bonilla-Silva makes the point that scholars can impose their worldview in their evaluation of data: “Hunting for ‘racists’ is the sport of choice of those who practice the ‘clinical approach’ to race relations—the careful separation of good and bad, tolerant and intolerant Americans” (15). And in the aftermath of the 2008 election of Barack Obama, journalist Tim Wise wrote: “While it may be tempting . . . to seek to create a dichotomy whereby the ‘bad whites’ are the ones who voted against the black guy, while the ‘good whites’ are the ones who voted for him, such a dualism is more than a little simplistic” (84).

The racist/antiracist duality is partially the result of the dissemination of simplistic explanations of racism. For example, in “Discrimination and National Welfare,” the famous Columbia University sociologist Robert K. Merton advanced a theory of racial prejudice and discrimination. Merton argued that prejudice and discrimination

14 For more on this, see Matthew W. Hughey’s *White Bound*.



were two separate forms of racial animus and were themselves dichotomous variables. This theory permitted four “types” of people: (1) the “All-Weather Liberal” (the unprejudiced non-discriminator), (2) the “Fair-Weather Liberal” (the unprejudiced discriminator), (3) the “Fair-Weather Illiberal” (the prejudiced non-discriminator), and (4) the “All-Weather Illiberal” (the prejudiced discriminator). For example, one could be prejudiced without discriminating (for instance, a white manager who *believes* African Americans are inferior employees but who still treats people equally). And one could discriminate without a prejudicial belief in racial inferiority (say, the white manager who *believes* in racial equality but refuses to hire African Americans for fear of white reprisal by harming his business or refusing to patronize it) (Hughey 65–80).

Such parsing out of the good people (the “All-Weather Liberal”) and the bad people (the “All-Weather Illiberal”) has saturated our culture and has turned many a layperson into self-professed experts of racism and race. In this model, racism belongs to the realm of either behavior (discrimination) or thoughts (prejudice) and manifests as little more than a person choosing racism or being coerced into it. With this understanding in play, we proceed to divide the world into those who are “sick” with this disease and those who are the “healthy,” i.e., anti- or non-racist.

This explanation simply will not do. It fails to acknowledge or explain how

people believe that understandings of the natural or cultural dysfunctions among people of color are widespread and even accepted as “common sense” (Bonilla-Silva 10–11). It does not account for how the average white person lives in a 78 percent white neighborhood (Glaeser and Vigdor, 5–7). This model does not address why the median wealth of white households is twenty times that of black households and eighteen times that of Hispanic households (Kochar, Fry, and Taylor). This paradigm cannot tell us why whites are much less likely to be racially profiled and arrested than people of color (Center for Constitutional Rights). And this paradigm certainly fails to explain why whites *with* criminal records receive more favorable treatment in their search for employment than blacks *without* criminal records (Pager, 957–60).

Simply put, this approach fails to get us beyond the individual “racist” and individual bad thoughts or “attitudes.” It cannot account for white supremacy within our discourses, neighborhoods, patterns of wealth accumulation, criminal justice system, and labor markets. By throwing the label of “racist” at one individual or group at the expense of another (“They are racists, but we are not.”), we treat racism as atypical, instead of centering our attention on the normal, benign, and banal social relations that reproduce racial inequities, most often in the form of white dominance. The dominant ways we make meaning of human difference (“race”) and

structural inequalities (“racism”) are intertwined and co-constitutive.

Albert Memmi’s now classic *Racism* draws attention to this paradox: “There is a strange kind of enigma associated with the problem of racism. No one, almost no one, wishes to see themselves as racist; still, racism persists, real and tenacious” (3). “Racism” has become such an ugly word that even dyed-in-the-wool racist groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, now shun the term “racist” in order to market their ideology as more palatable.<sup>15</sup> A 2002 statement to the world’s religious leaders, the Universal House of Justice emphasizes the now universal stigma of the word *racism*:

Racial and ethnic prejudices have been subjected to equally summary treatment by historical processes that have little patience left for such pretensions. Here, rejection of the past has been especially decisive. Racism is now tainted by its association with the horrors of the twentieth century

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15 For example, a December 2016 story in the *Chicago Tribune* recounted statements by Don Black, Klansman and operator of a popular white supremacist website (Stormfront.org): “White supremacy is a legitimate term, though not usually applicable as used by the media. I think it’s popular as a term of derision because of the implied unfairness, and, like ‘racism,’ it’s got that ‘hiss’ (and, like ‘hate’ and ‘racism,’ frequently ‘spewed’ in headlines)” (“KKK Disavows White Supremacist Label”).

to the degree that it has taken on something of the character of a spiritual disease.

More recently, writer and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates has emphasized that the idea that:

America has lots of racism but few actual racists is not a new one. Philip Dray titled his seminal history of lynching *At the Hands of Persons Unknown* because most “investigations” of lynchings in the South turned up no actual lynchers. Both David Duke and George Wallace insisted that they weren’t racists. That’s because in the popular vocabulary, the racist is not so much an actual person but a monster, an outcast thug who leads the lynch mob and keeps *Mein Kampf* in his back pocket. (n.p.)

How does this understanding of “racism,” as a larger social system rather than an individual attitude, fit into both current Bahá’í theological and critical sociological paradigms?

#### SECTION IV BAHÁ’Í THEOLOGICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF “RACISM”

There appears to be a joint focus on the causes of racial inequality in the Bahá’í Writings. On the one hand, there is a focus on people to fight their own racial prejudices individually. In a

speech given on 13 November 1911 in Paris, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá remarked that “[a]ll prejudices, whether of religion, race, politics or nation, must be renounced, for these prejudices have caused the world’s sickness. It is a grave malady which, unless arrested, is capable of causing the destruction of the whole human race. Every ruinous war, with its terrible bloodshed and misery, has been caused by one or other of these prejudices” (*Paris Talks* 146). This important point was underscored by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá just moments later:

The deplorable wars going on in these days are caused by the fanatical religious hatred of one people for another, or the prejudices of race or color. Until all these barriers erected by prejudice are swept away, it is not possible for humanity to be at peace. For this reason Bahá’u’lláh has said, “These Prejudices are destructive to mankind.” (*Paris Talks* 147–48)

And in *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, individual-level prejudices are framed as the “breeding ground” of larger tragedies, while the “root cause of prejudice” is understood as the “blind imitation of the past” (247). Moreover, as mentioned above, Shoghi Effendi expounded upon the key role of individual-level racial prejudice in causing dysfunction at the societal level by stating: “As to racial prejudice, the corrosion of which, for well-nigh a century, has bitten into the fiber, and attacked the whole social structure

of American society, it should be regarded as constituting the most vital and challenging issue confronting the Bahá’í community at the present stage of its evolution” (*Advent* 33).

In terms of racial discrimination, there may seem to be relatively few explicit references in the Bahá’í authoritative texts. However, implicit—and in many instances explicit—in all discussions about the unity of humankind is the abolition of racial prejudices and distinctions together with prejudices of any other sort. Shoghi Effendi makes clear that not even the “slightest discrimination” should be employed, even if that should result in hostility or obstruction from “any individual, class or institution”:

In the matter of teaching, as repeatedly and emphatically stated, particularly in his “Advent of Divine Justice,” the Guardian does not wish the believers to make the slightest discrimination, even though this may result in provoking opposition or criticism from any individual, class or institution. The Call of Bahá’u’lláh, being universal, should be addressed with equal force to all the peoples, classes and nations of the world, irrespective of any religious, racial, political or class distinction or difference. (*Directives* 73)

And on the other hand, questions of racial inequality are framed as meso- and macro-level phenomena that stem from, and reproduce because of, social factors

external to the individual. For instance, the concept of racial discrimination, as briefly referenced in the Bahá'í Writings, is not used in an abstract fashion to denote individual-level prejudicial actions. Rather, it is directly connected to historically entrenched inequalities, asymmetrical demographics, and representational democratic praxis. In that vein, Bahá'í elections use a form of "affirmative action"<sup>16</sup> to protect the "minority"<sup>17</sup> from discrimination. Hence,

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16 The term "affirmative action" was first used in the United States in a March 1961 executive order from John F. Kennedy (#10925). The order stated that all government contractors must "take *affirmative action* to ensure that applicants are employed and that employees are treated during employment without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin" (emphasis added). The rationale for affirmative action is to promote future opportunities, address existing discrimination, and help compensate from past discrimination in order to ensure equal opportunities and representation. Many other countries use similar forms of affirmative action, such as the 1988 Employment Equality Act, No. 55, in South Africa; the policy of "reservation" of seats in legislatures, government jobs, and higher educational institutions for marginalized castes and classes in India; and the rule in Norway that public stock company boards must be represented by 40 percent of either gender in order to mitigate against gender discrimination.

17 "The House of Justice has asked us to explain that it is not always possible for

"discrimination not against, but rather in favor of the minority" is not *ipso facto* "discrimination," but a remedy as contextualized by the past, present, and future of social, demographic, and power inequities:

To discriminate against any race, on the ground of its being socially backward, politically immature, and numerically in a minority, is a flagrant violation of the spirit that animates the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh . . . . If any discrimination is at all to be tolerated, it should be a discrimination not against, but rather in favor of the minority, be it racial or otherwise. (Shoghi Effendi, *Directives* 35)

Shoghi Effendi continues by delineating the principle behind such "discrimination . . . in favor of the minority," empathizing the "first and inescapable obligation" of Bahá'ís is to cultivate, embolden, and protect "minorities":

Unlike the nations and peoples of the earth, be they of the East or of the West, democratic or authoritarian, communist or capitalist,

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a National Spiritual Assembly to define exactly what constitutes a minority for its area of jurisdiction as a whole. This principle is one which needs to be applied by the friends in each separate situation in light of the conditions there and, in applying it, the believers should recall the reason behind the principle" (qtd. in Universal House of Justice, "Compilations").

whether belonging to the Old World or the New, who either ignore, trample upon, or extirpate, the racial, religious, or political minorities within the sphere of their jurisdiction, every organized community enlisted under the banner of Bahá'u'lláh should feel it to be its first and inescapable obligation to nurture, encourage, and safeguard every minority belonging to any faith, race, class, or nation within it. (*Directives* 35)

The brief, albeit powerful, references to the past, present, and future likelihood of patterned discrimination against racial “minorities” indicates a Bahá'í theological recognition of the systemic operation of race and racial inequality—what we have previously defined as “racism.”

An October 1985 message from the Universal House of Justice explicitly calls “racism” an “evil.” The supreme Bahá'í administrative body emphasizes the maliciousness of racism and underscores that racism functions as more than a mere prejudicial attitude; it is also a social “practice” that holds varied deleterious effects:

Racism, one of the most baneful and persistent evils, is a major barrier to peace. Its practice perpetrates too outrageous a violation of the dignity of human beings to be countenanced under any pretext. Racism retards the unfoldment of the boundless potentialities of its victims, corrupts

its perpetrators, and blights human progress. Recognition of the oneness of mankind, implemented by appropriate legal measures, must be universally upheld if this problem is to be overcome.

Moreover, the Universal House of Justice's emphasis on the “appropriate legal measures” further solidifies the point that “racism” is a socially systemic problem that must be addressed via local, district, national, and international governmental policy and law. This stance reflects a profoundly sociological understanding of “racism,” whereby human behavior is largely influenced by external social forces, such as law. Take, for example, Martin Luther King Jr. (trained in both sociology and theology), who stated in 1962: “It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me, but it can stop him from lynching me, and I think that's pretty important.” Hence, to stifle the “practice” of racism, one must enact laws that both collectively incentivize and moralize the practice of the “oneness of mankind” rather than merely assume that either ignorance or cognitive prejudices drive “racism” (which itself is a non-empirically verifiable assumption) and that education or antiracist ideas will either automatically, or through concerted effort, dislodge the operation of racism. Simply put, human behavior follows external structures (albeit, not determinately). If those structures address and delimit the practice of racism, then over time, human behavior will begin to

refrain from those practices.

Consider the message from the Universal House of Justice, sent in 1992 to the Bahá'ís of the world. In emphasizing the progression of Bahá'í initiatives and even the “near approach of the Lesser Peace,”<sup>18</sup> the Universal House of Justice outlines the “simultaneous recrudescence of countervailing forces” and notes that “[t]he concomitant rise of racism in many regions has become a matter of serious global concern.” In this vein, “racism” is a multi-regional social force that varies in style and magnitude, rather than an individual occurrence of a prejudicial attitude. This point is further accentuated in the aforementioned April 2002 Universal House of Justice letter addressed to the world’s religious leaders. The message emphasizes how “racism”—due in part to the tragedies of the Holocaust and the historical uncovering of prior genocides and enslavements around the world—has become a stigma with which few wish to associate. Still, the Universal House of Justice argues that “racism” exists as both an “social” attitude (rather than individual attitude) and as a “blight on the lives of a significant segment of humankind”:

While surviving as a social attitude in many parts of the world—and as a blight on the

lives of a significant segment of humankind—racial prejudice has become so universally condemned in principle that no body of people can any longer safely allow themselves to be identified with it.

The social attitude, what we might call an “ideology,” alongside the multivariate ways that racism manifests in different locales and functions in distinctive registers, necessitates a more robust understanding of the intertwined systemic relationship between “race” and “racism.”

Bahá'í teachings signal that without profound focus on the varied aspects of social life, racial equality cannot be attained. As the Bahá'í International Community’s statement “The Spiritual Basis of Equality” suggests, “Equality is facilitated by a social environment that encourages and actively supports this principle as a necessary ingredient of life.” While some steps toward racial equality have been made over the past two centuries, there have been both major retreats from, and stubborn resistance to, achieving racial equality, which sociologist Orlando Patterson has called the “homeostatic principle of the entire system of racial domination” (480). Inequality is squelched in one place, only to arise with renewed vigor in another area. Hence, notions of “progress” can be illusory without attention to racism. The Universal House of Justice’s 1996 letter emphasized that social action must occur simultaneously among micro-, meso-,

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<sup>18</sup> The “Lesser Peace” is a term that describes a political peace established by the nations of the world. See Babak Bahador and Nazila Ghanea’s *Processes of the Lesser Peace*.



and macro-levels of society:

The individual alone exercises those capacities which include the ability to take initiative, to seize opportunities, to form friendships, to interact personally with others, to build relationships, to win the cooperation of others in common service to the Faith and to society . . . . The institutions must rise to a new stage in the exercise of their responsibilities as channels of divine guidance, planners of the teaching work, developers of human resources, builders of communities, and loving shepherds of the multitudes . . . . A community is, of course, more than the sum of its membership; it is a comprehensive unit of civilization composed of individuals, families and institutions that are originators and encouragers of systems, agencies and organizations working together with a common purpose for the welfare of people both within and beyond its own borders; it is a composition of diverse, interacting participants that are achieving unity in an unremitting quest for spiritual and social progress.<sup>19</sup>

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19 The Universal House of Justice makes the profoundly sociological point that societies (in their words, “communities”) are “more than the sum of [their] membership,” or as Émile Durkheim would put it, “society as *sui generis*” (a thing of its own kind), or more plainly put, “society

From this excerpt, we recognize the necessity to ground the pursuit of justice in a comprehensive framework of micro (“individual”), meso (“institutional”), and macro (“community”) domains in which each is integral but also interdependent.

## SECTION V

### THE INTERTWINED DIMENSIONS OF RACE AND RACISM: “THE FIVE I’S”

The discipline of sociology attempts to answer the problem of action and order, or why people do things (action) and why they do those things in a specific, observed form (order). When we consider how concepts like race and racism enter into analyzing action and order, analyses can quickly become muddled. To clarify the relationship between race and racism, it is necessary to outline a new approach.

First, consider the “effect of race.” We can easily observe vast disparities between racial groups—from educational levels and wealth attainment to morality and fertility rates. And if we recall that race is not so much a noun but a verb (see prior section, “The ‘Social Fact’ of Race”), then we can understand that “race” does not possess essential qualities that cause these disparities (what we call “racial essentialism”). Rather, when we view varying outcomes and inequality across

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is greater than the sum of its parts, for it has a unique reality” (Universal House of Justice, *Ridván 1996 Message*; Durkheim 1; Tucker 124).

racial groups, we do not observe an effect of race but a process of social domination *through* race (which we can call “racism”), which leads to the next point.

Second, some scholars view racism as driven by robust and dominant ideologies. Other view racism as the product of macro-institutional dynamics. And still many others understand racism as the result of particular forms of interactions. None of these perspectives is entirely wrong or right; each of these dynamics concurrently operates to create racial inequality. When we observe a particular racial outcome, we witness the unfoldment of a multidimensional process of domination in which some groups are afforded systematic advantages alongside others that are systematically disadvantaged.

Third, we must understand that the multidimensional activity of domination (racism) produces both the dominant *meanings* and structural *locations* of “race” *qua* racial groups and vice versa (Bonilla-Silva 9–11; Omi and Winant 56–58). That is, the relationship between “race” and “racism” is a feedback loop that operates across five key dimensions: ideologies, institutions, interests, identities, and interactions—what I call “The Five I’s” (Hughey, “The Five I’s” 857). This point calls for an extended example. Consider my favorite sport: basketball.

Invented in 1891 by Dr. James Naismith, the game quickly became popular. Public basketball courts were first established in dense urban cities in

the northeastern United States. Basketball courts are small and cheap to build, and the sport is cheap to play: all you need is a ball and a hoop. Hence, the kids growing up in these areas—mainly Jews who had landed in Jewish immigrant ghettos (and who were largely pushed out of their homelands by economic, social, and political exclusion and forced into these areas due to anti-Semitism and nativism)—were the primary players of basketball because of *location*. Soon, almost all Jewish neighborhoods in New York and Philadelphia (cities with the largest Jewish populations) had their own teams. And many Jews played basketball in the hopes of winning collegiate scholarships (Wade 19–21).

But also, the racial *meanings* of Jews were soon attached to basketball itself. Racist ideologies conveyed the notion that Jews were part of a separate race of intelligent, yet sneaky and devious people. Institutional and interactional segregation facilitated the proliferation of racial myths about Jews. Perceptions that Jews were in economic and political competition with whites pitted racial group interests against one another. By the 1930s, the *New York Daily News* wrote that basketball “places a premium on an alert, scheming mind, flashy trickiness, artful dodging” and that Jews were naturally better players because they had “God-given better balance and speed” (qtd. in Shapiro 88). In 1946, the first basket scored in professional basketball was by a Jewish player—Ozzie Schectman of the New York Knicks.

But by the 1950s, there was a mass migration of Jews to the suburbs, while the Great Migration brought southern African Americans to the same urban areas of Philadelphia and New York. Moreover, many Jews assimilated into whiteness thanks to the softening of the social boundaries of whiteness, which also drew in other groups previously deemed nonwhite like the Italians and the Irish (Brod-kin 16, 35; Guglielmo 32, 79; Ignatiev 1–8). Slowly, basketball became perceived as less “Jewish” and more “black.” Since the *location* of race with basketball changed, so did the *meanings*. The racial stereotypes of African Americans were applied to basketball. Many began to say that blacks had superior athletic abilities. For instance, an article in a 1971 issue of *Sports Illustrated* suggests that blacks were “the offspring of those who [were] physically and mentally tough enough to survive . . . simply bred for physical qualities” (Kane, 79).<sup>20</sup>

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20 This argument is well-rehearsed and has experienced a revival over recent years. Some assert that blacks possess a biological predisposition due to Darwinian winnowing during the Trans-Atlantic crossing and chattel slavery’s harsh conditions. However, considering all demographic categories, young adult black slaves experienced the highest mortality rates, and slave men died at about twice the rate of slave women (Klein; Graves). The evidence suggests that the social behavior of both slaves and slaveholders, rather than the supposed naturally

While the players involved in the sporting institution of basketball are racialized, varied ideologies, interactions, interests, and identities also racializes the players. For instance, years ago, successful players were assumed to be Jewish, whereas today success at basketball can “blacken” players and prompt racist terms like “wigger” (“white” plus “nigger”) or “wannabe” (as if the player “wants-to-be” black). For example, when white player Jason Williams joined the NBA and became a star for the Sacramento Kings, he was nicknamed “white chocolate” by Stephanie Shepard (the Kings media relations assistant), who said, “I came up with that name because of his style . . . . The way he does things with the ball is incredible to me. It reminds me of, like, schoolyard street ball when I go to Chicago” (qtd. in M. Wise).

If we observe any social domain over time, the people occupying that space racialize the institution, the dominant ideologies, their own and others’ identities, etc., while the institution, the ideologies, and their identities labor to re-racialize the people in that space.

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selected genetic physiology of black slaves, is a much better explanation for mortality rates. Despite biological and sociological evidence to the contrary, recent mainstream discussions collectively advance the proposition that black athletic success is the product of little more than genetic traits, which often reifies a “black brawn vs. white brains” dichotomy (see Hughey and Goss’s article for more information).

This feedback loop operates through five dimensions: first, race functions as an *ideology* (a shared belief system that contains dominant messages about different groups and that rationalizes and legitimates racial inequality); second, race has material roots as an *institution* (race structures one's position in a particular society and constrains and enables one's success in organizations and structures in society); third, race is an *interest* (racial categories shape the way people behave toward, and think along, individual and group lines to pursue, protect, and engage in conflict or cooperation over resources); fourth, race is an *identity* (a category in which one feels membership and social expectations to conform, with penalties/rewards for meeting those accountability obligations); and fifth, race is an *interaction* (the habitual practices, scripts, and shared expectations that afford people a blueprint that guides both intra- and interracial modes of interactional behavior between strangers, friends, and even in digital and virtual settings within an ever-media saturated world). While the "Five I's" cannot be entirely separated in empirical reality, I parse them out as a pedagogical heuristic. Once individually grasped, they can be synthesized to show how different dimensions of race are all related and are often simultaneously at play. In these five types, we again witness a unity of sociological and Bahá'í theological knowledge: "race" is a product of "racism" and the refusal to acknowledge a fundamental unity of humankind.

## IDEOLOGIES

An ideology is a shared, comprehensive system of beliefs, ideas, and ideals. Ideologies generally rationalize or legitimate some arrangement. We can think of race as having an ideological component because it is a set of beliefs that are collectively shared and are often understood as little more than common-sense descriptions of the world. These beliefs rationalize who belongs in what racial group, what traits or characteristics that racial group supposedly has naturally, and where in the social order and hierarchy that racial group supposedly belongs. Consider the remarks of 'Abdu'l-Bahá given in New York City in 1912 in which He questions the superfluous ideological component of race:

Man is endowed with superior reasoning power and the faculty of perception; he is the manifestation of divine bestowals. Shall racial ideas prevail and obscure the creative purpose of unity in his kingdom? Shall he say, "I am a German," "I am a Frenchman" or an "Englishman" and declare war because of this imaginary and human distinction? God forbid! This earth is one household and the native land of all humanity; therefore, the human race should ignore distinctions and boundaries which are artificial and conducive to disagreement and hostility. (*Promulgation* 114)

'Abdu'l-Bahá frequently highlighted the ideological dimension of race as "artificial" or illusory. For instance, in Paris in 1911, He employed a monogenesis argument in asserting that the "prejudice of race" was "an illusion, a superstition pure and simple! For God created us all of one race. There were no differences in the beginning, for we are all descendants of Adam . . . . In the sight of God there is no difference between the various races" (*Paris Talks* 148).

#### INSTITUTIONS

An institution is any persistent structure or social order that governs the behavior of a set of individuals in a specific community. Institutions have a distinct social purpose that mediates the expected rules of behavior; examples include law, the economy, education, employment, family, religion, sports, politics, mass media, the military and police, and health care. Access to and upward mobility within these institutions can significantly affect life chances and well-being—and that access and mobility varies by racial group. Many institutions can themselves become racialized or take on a racial reputation. Per the example above, many people associate sporting success with African Americans and likewise may come to associate educational success with whites or certain ethnic groups within the larger "Asian" race. However, such associations may be little more than stereotypes or assumptions that become important social facts: because

people treat that association as real, they come to expect it, which will influence the outcome, thereby engaging in a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In this vein, the 28 December 2010 letter from the Universal House of Justice, in citing Shoghi Effendi, delineates between the ideological and the institutional existence of race and racism:

He [Shoghi Effendi] went on to discuss at length the specific question of racial prejudice, "the corrosion of which," he indicated, had "bitten into the fibre, and attacked *the whole social structure of American society* [my emphasis]" and which, he asserted at the time, "should be regarded as constituting the most vital and challenging issue confronting the Bahá'í community at the present stage of its evolution."... While it is true that, at the level of public discourse, great strides have been taken in refuting the falsehoods that give rise to prejudice in whatever form, *it still permeates the structures of society and is systematically impressed on the individual consciousness.* (emphasis added)

The message makes the clear the point that discourse, on the one hand, and material inequality and practices of discrimination, on the other hand, should not be conflated.

## INTERESTS

Another important dimension of race is the concept of interests, or resources and goals. When groups organize, they may come to see certain interests as necessary, and they may perceive other groups as threats. They may consider themselves entitled while viewing others as undeserving. Some racial and ethnic groups pursue, protect, and engage in conflict or cooperation over interests. They may organize and lobby to influence legal or policy considerations directly or indirectly.

For example, recent research shows that white Americans are increasingly likely to believe that society is no longer biased against people of color, but that it has in fact become anti-white (Norton and Sommers 215). Moreover, current findings reveal that over time it is increasingly likely for whites to believe that decreases in perceived bias against blacks mean increases in bias against whites. Because of this belief, many whites strive to protect resources that they feel people of color are trying to take from them. Accordingly, while many whites support racial equality in the abstract, they oppose policies that implement racial equality (what some call the “principle-policy gap”) and actively oppose policies and laws they believe will hurt their chances as members of their particular racial group.

Race functions through the pitting of groups against one another. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá made it clear that:

[e]very imperfect soul is self-centered and thinketh only of his own good. But as his thoughts expand a little he will begin to think of the welfare and comfort of his family. If his ideas still more widen, his concern will be the felicity of his fellow citizens; and if still they widen, he will be thinking of the glory of his land and of his race. But when ideas and views reach the utmost degree of expansion and attain the stage of perfection, then will he be interested in the exaltation of humankind. He will then be the well-wisher of all men and the seeker of the weal and prosperity of all lands. This is indicative of perfection. (*Selections* 68)

The point is again reiterated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His “Commentary on the Eleventh Chapter of Isaiah”: “Religious and sectarian antagonism, the hostility of races and peoples, and differences among nations will be eliminated. All men will adhere to one religion, will have one common faith, will be blended into one race and become a single people” (*Some Answered Questions* 12:7). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s point is that “race” is an artificial category that divides and pits people, otherwise of one purpose, against one another in the pursuit of specific ends.

## IDENTITIES

We can define identity as the distinctive characteristic belonging to



any given individual, or shared by all members of a particular social category or group. Racial identity, then, has to do with the membership one feels in a particular racial group, the sense of belonging one has, and how others feel about their fit in a racial group. We may ascribe a particular identity to ourselves, others may assign it to us, and/or we may think of our own racial identity by imagining how others might see us—what the sociologist Charles Horton Cooley called the “looking-glass self.” When we look at ourselves in the mirror, we: (1) imagine how we appear to others, (2) imagine what their judgment of that appearance will be, and (3) develop our identity through the imagined or actual judgments of others (Cooley, 183–4).

The sociological dimension of “race” as a salient identity is affirmed in an April 2002 letter from the Universal House of Justice to the world’s religious leaders: “Despite the continuing conflict and violence that darken the horizon, prejudices that once seemed inherent in the nature of the human species are everywhere giving way. Down with them come barriers that long divided the family of man into a Babel of incoherent identities of cultural, ethnic or national origin.” The Universal House of Justice affirms the notion that both prejudices and ethnic identities are neither essential or inherent parts of the self nor that they will continue to dominate the human landscape. Both the “conflict and violence” that helps

create, and stems from, racial and ethnic identity will one day give way.

However, racial and ethnic identities are emphasized as important social categories to be respected when they represent important cultural values and become the basis for attaining basic human and civil rights in the face of discrimination. For example, years prior, a letter from the Universal House of Justice responded to a query from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Canada regarding Indigenous people, stating, in part:

You have also raised a number of questions concerning the rights of indigenous people such as the Natives of Canada. It is quite clear that Native persons are fully entitled to all the human rights accorded to the majority population; for example, they should be guaranteed the full rights of citizenship, and all acts of discrimination against them, which may have developed over the years, should be eliminated. However, the freedom for indigenous people to exercise their rights carries with it the corollary need to recognize the rights of all others to the same expression. The implications for indigenous people also include: realization of the virtues of cross-cultural influences; appreciation of the values of other cultures as accruing to the wealth of human experience and the freedom of all to share in such values without necessarily

giving up their respective identities; avoidance of parochial attitudes which degenerate into ethnic and cultural prejudices; and, above all, appreciation of the necessity to maintain a global perspective within which the particulars of indigenous expression can find an enduring context.

The import of identity as a vehicle for the protection of unique cultural worldviews and values that would otherwise be assimilated or assumed under discrimination or oppression is always balanced against a perspective that would valorize racial and ethnic identity as a decontextualized ontological presence. In the Bahá'í Writings, the import of racial identity is always emphasized as an expression of the quest for justice and equality. For instance, in the introduction to the 1992 English publication of *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, the Universal House of Justice writes:

Our world has entered the dark heart of an age of fundamental change beyond anything in all of its tumultuous history. Its peoples, of whatever race, nation, or religion, are being challenged to subordinate all lesser loyalties and limiting identities to their oneness as citizens of a single planetary homeland. In Bahá'u'lláh's words: "the well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established." (11)

In this sense, racial identities are "lesser loyalties" and are necessarily "limiting" in the scope of the full social recognition of human unity and, as such, are more an expression of the means to an end, rather than the end in itself.

#### INTERACTIONS

Social interactions regularly occur between two or more individuals. These interactions are often habitual, patterned, scripted, governed by formal or informal rules, and become shared expectations or maps that help us navigate everyday encounters. In these interactions, people develop and then come to rely on shared meanings imposed on objects, events, and behaviors. The subjective meanings that we all give to things we encounter are important because they are not solitary meanings but must be shared and agreed on to a certain extent. We interpret one another's behavior in various interactions, and these interpretations form social bonds or conflict. These interpretations are what sociologists William and Dorothy Thomas called "the definition of the situation" (571–72). That is, we come to agree on what a particular behavior, idea, or thing is, what its value is, and what, where, when, why, and how that particular thing should act or be.

In terms of race, we often have very specific racialized interpretations about how we believe certain racial groups should behave, where they should live, how they should speak to one another, who they can date

or marry, what kind of clothes they should wear or music they should listen to, and so on. When someone deviates from that expected form of interaction, that person might be evaluated negatively or positively depending on the situation. For instance, sometimes people are thought of as being racially inauthentic, as when African Americans have been accused of “acting white.” In other instances, white people have been accused of being “wannabes” for dressing, talking, or acting in ways they believe other racial groups should interact.

The Bahá'í Writings on interracial interactions emphasize the import of prior power imbalances, historically entrenched injustices, and the weight of trust, invariable effort, and purity of motive in creating just and equitable interracial interactions. Take into consideration 'Abdu'l-Bahá's admonition that simple intraracial interactions, even if predicated on the best of intentions and altruism, fail to provide a common ground for unity:

it is evident that fraternity, love and kindness based upon family, native land, race or an attitude of altruism are neither sufficient nor permanent since all of them are limited, restricted and liable to change and disruption. For in the family there is discord and alienation; among sons of the same fatherland, strife and internecine warfare are witnessed; between those of a given race, hostility and hatred are frequent; and

even among the altruists, varying aspects of opinion and lack of unselfish devotion give little promise of permanent and indestructible unity among mankind. (*Promulgation* 391)

Hence, racial solidarity cannot serve as an unerring or adequate basis for just interactions. Rather, Bahá'ís are called upon to act with trust and kindness across the color line. 'Abdu'l-Bahá again states that “[t]he diversity in the human family should be the cause of love and harmony, as it is in music where many different notes blend together in the making of a perfect chord. If you meet those of different race and color from yourself, do not mistrust them and withdraw yourself into your shell of conventionalty, but rather be glad and show them kindness” (*Paris Talks* 53).

Yet, consideration and conviction are not enough, as the weight of racialized interactional scripts guide and structure how we relate to one another. In *The Advent of Divine Justice*, Shoghi Effendi is not vague on this point:

Let the white make a supreme effort in their resolve to contribute their share to the solution of this problem, to abandon once for all their usually inherent and at times subconscious sense of superiority, to correct their tendency towards revealing a patronizing attitude towards the members of the other race, to persuade them through their intimate, spontaneous

and informal association with them the genuineness of their friendship and the sincerity of their intentions, and to master their impatience of any lack of responsiveness on the part of a people who have received, for so long a period, such grievous and slow-healing wounds. (40)

These tendencies are born out of historical conditions. The “white race” is neither naturally predisposed or destined to hold these attitudes, while at the same time, a “subconscious sense of superiority” is, in the words of Shoghi Effendi, “usually inherent” due to ideological doctrines of racial superiority and structural barriers that divide and segregate the races. In the face of ideological and material hegemony that both creates and maintains white domination, it is no wonder that the beneficiaries of that social system (the “white race”) would hold a “usually inherent and at times subconscious sense of superiority” (*Advent* 40). Shoghi Effendi continues by addressing the other side of the color line: “Let the Negroes, through a corresponding effort on their part, show by every means in their power the warmth of their response, their readiness to forget the past, and their ability to wipe out every trace of suspicion that may still linger in their hearts and minds” (*Advent* 40). Hence, kind-heartedness, forgiveness, and reliant trust are necessary on the part of a people who, at the time of Shoghi Effendi’s writing, were only beginning

to emerge from the social system of *de jure* segregation and inequality known as Jim Crow.<sup>21</sup> Shoghi Effendi closes by stating:

Let neither [either “white” or “Negro”] think that the solution of so vast a problem is a matter that exclusively concerns the other. Let neither think that such a problem can either easily or immediately be resolved. Let neither think that they can wait confidently for the solution of this problem until the initiative has been taken, and the favorable circumstances created, by agencies that stand outside the orbit of their Faith. Let neither think that anything short of genuine love, extreme patience, true humility, consummate tact, sound initiative, mature wisdom, and deliberate, persistent, and prayerful effort, can succeed in blotting out the stain which this patent evil has left on the fair name of their common country. (*Advent* 40–41)<sup>22</sup>

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21 The publication of *The Advent of Divine Justice* (1938) occurred in the same year in which the first major US Supreme Court ruled against Jim Crow on the principle of equality. *Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada* (1938) held that states that provided a school to white students had to provide in-state education to blacks as well.

22 Shoghi Effendi also emphasizes that “an interracial fellowship completely purged from the curse of racial prejudice which stigmatizes the vast majority of its people” is the “weapon” that Bahá’ís “can

While forgiveness and humility are emphasized in the Bahá'í Writings, similar (if not greater) attention is directed toward justice, equality, and the elimination of racism. Importantly, interactions across the color line should not be interpreted outside the context of the other "I's"—particularly that of the institutional contexts which provide unequal meeting grounds of those interactions.

#### CONCLUSION

I have reviewed the historical development of race and racism; provided an overview of, and attempt to correlate, both the Bahá'í theological and sociological views on race and racism, and offered a robust sociological understanding of how these concepts are inextricably intertwined in five key dimensions. It should now be apparent that a scholarly understanding of race and racism cannot be obtained without giving attention to larger "structural" social forces external to the individual. The concept of "race" is a dynamic and ongoing multidimensional *social process* that often rationalizes and legitimates the (re)production of systemic inequality.

Furthermore, Bahá'í theology points us toward examining racial antipathy and racism as neither the

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and must wield" to "first to regenerate the inward life of their own community, and next to assail the long-standing evils that have entrenched themselves in the life of their nation" (*Advent* 41).

providence of ignorance nor individuals, but of social patterns of human interaction based in quests for power, resources, and/or status. Once these imperatives take hold in the aforementioned five dimensions, racial inequality, racism, and the mechanisms that sustain them can persist even with color-blind or good intentions. Moreover, Bahá'í theology emphasizes that the remedies to these patterns of racism, as a "pernicious and persistent evil," must therefore consist in the recognition of humanity's oneness via external social forces (BIC, "Combating Racism"). Such implementation must take place through "appropriate and universally upheld legal measures" that make the attainment of relatively equal *outcomes*, not liberally vague notions of equal *opportunities*, the principle goal and animating spirit (BIC, "Combating Racism"). Without relatively equal social domains, the potential to attain true unity and oneness will remain both fleeting and frustrating, resulting in continued chilling and frigid relations (from attitudes about white victimization to actual instances of "microaggressions")<sup>23</sup> and

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<sup>23</sup> Despite evidence to the contrary, feelings of "white victimization" have risen in recent years. A 2014 study by the Public Religion Research Institute found that 52 percent of whites agreed with the following statement: "Today discrimination against whites has become as big a problem as discrimination against blacks and other minorities" (Piacenza). And a 2011 study found that whites view racism "as

the repetition of more and more “long, hot summers”<sup>24</sup> (from Ferguson, Missouri, to Baltimore, Maryland).

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<sup>24</sup> The term “long, hot summer” was first used as a reference to the 159 race riots across the United States during the summer of 1967, in which over 76 people died and over 2,100 were injured (McLaughlin). The riots of 1967 led to the formation of the Lyndon B. Johnson’s “Kerner Commission” to investigate the causes of the riots. During this, the fiftieth anniversary of the riots (1967–2017), I dedicate this article to the lives lost in those rebellions.

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