

Demos

# SOCIAL EXCLUSION

The Decisions and Dynamics that Drive Racism



by CONNIE M. RAZZA

## **About Dēmos**

Dēmos is a public policy organization working for an America where we all have an equal say in our democracy and an equal chance in our economy.

Our name means “the people.” It is the root word of democracy, and it reminds us that in America, the true source of our greatness is the diversity of our people. Our nation’s highest challenge is to create a democracy that truly empowers people of all backgrounds, so that we all have a say in setting the policies that shape opportunity and provide for our common future. To help America meet that challenge, Dēmos is working to reduce both political and economic inequality, deploying original research, advocacy, litigation, and strategic communications to create the America the people deserve.

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*This paper is the first in a series of short pieces from Dēmos concerning the dynamics of social exclusion and the relationship between individual instances of hostility towards people of color in the United States and how that hostility is powered by our policy choices. The series will consider how social exclusion affects different aspects of our nation's life (for instance, labor markets, education, criminal justice, and voting), and the important role that policy can play in repairing the harm that is being done.*



In recent months, more and more news stories have featured white people calling the police on black people. With unbearable regularity, footage of police attacking black people scrolls across our screens. The people who track such things report a precipitous increase in racist hate crimes. And, with even greater regularity, black people are telling each other—or choosing to forget—slights, aggression, and outright attacks that are part of their day-to-day lives. Each event has an impact on the people involved and its witnesses, but it is also part of a system of social exclusion that includes our laws, policies, and practices.

In this paper, I offer the framework of social exclusion for understanding the stakes involved in the range of incidents targeting African Americans that we are witnessing. While this paper particularly focuses on how social exclusion blocks black people from full participation and power in the United States, it presents a framework that can be useful for understanding how our policies and practices exclude other groups (for instance, immigrants, women, Muslims, or poor people).

### **The Dynamics of Social Exclusion**

Systemic **social exclusion** is distinct from our day-to-day experience of being blocked out. The concept sheds light on the intimate relationship between the “processes driving inequality, power relationships, and agency (*exclusion by whom?*)” and the many dimensions of disadvantage and deprivation (*exclusion from what?*). Further, it sheds light on how those different dimensions reinforce one another.<sup>1</sup>

Social deprivation, economic disadvantage, and democratic disqualification are interrelated and mutually reinforcing—but distinct—dimensions of

the overarching phenomenon of social exclusion. **Social deprivation** refers in part to a systemic denial of social capital, in which the loose social networks that lubricate one's daily life through "norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness"<sup>2</sup> are differently shaped and available depending on race, gender, and class. **Economic disadvantage** refers specifically to constraints on how groups of people are able to participate as workers, consumers, and owners. **Democratic disqualification** refers to the limits placed on the ability of certain citizens to have an equal say in the decisions of the nation or community.

The complex of rules that govern each of these dimensions of social exclusion are enforced through laws, government policies, and the rules of private entities; informal practices and relationships; by police, state-sanctioned private violence, and bureaucracies. These dimensions are mutually reinforcing. The history of social exclusion lays the groundwork for future social exclusion. So, economically and politically powerful people initially seeded racist ideas in order to justify the policies and power relationships of their time. When those ideas took root, they helped feed new policies that the powerful few developed, and so on. Even when people dismantle the policies, the pattern of social exclusion continues because of the foundation that was deliberately set. For example, a white shopper reproaches a black woman (in this case, me) for not providing adequate assistance in finding an item on the assumption that the latter is a store employee. This exchange is not merely an innocent mistake; the first shopper has exposed unspoken rules about *how* I, as a black woman, am supposed to be in that space (social deprivation). Those rules were not always unspoken, and are part of the legacy of laws segregating public places, housing, and access to robust work opportunities (economic disadvantage).

In this way, social deprivation is the disciplinarian of the trio. It draws the lines of who belongs—in the broad national community and in very particular places—and *how* they belong there. It deliberately deploys racist ideas to justify and naturalize social exclusion—economic disadvantage, democratic disqualification, and even further social deprivation—in order to distract the public from who is responsible for inequality. In his robust study of the history of anti-black, racist ideas, Ibram X. Kendi writes:

*Time and again, racist ideas have not been cooked up from the boiling pot of ignorance and hate. Time and again, powerful and brilliant men and women have produced racist ideas in order to justify the racist policies of their era, in order to redirect the blame for their era's racial disparities away from those policies and onto Black people.<sup>3</sup>*

**Social exclusion is not just a concept or a complex of rules. Social exclusion is a set of decisions and actions.** The economically and politically powerful few in the United States have deployed white supremacist and racist ideas to further

concentrate their wealth and power. They have deputized others—including people who are not white—to enforce the social exclusion of black people through simple and seemingly individual acts, as well as through sweeping rules. When a teacher, steeped in our culture of social exclusion, punishes a black student for the same sociable behavior she permits of his white schoolmate (social deprivation), she selectively implements certain policies that can set that student on a path to underperform academically<sup>4</sup> and economically (economic disadvantage). Or, when a white robber leverages his social capital to distract police for 5 months with claims that his black victims tried to rob him,<sup>5</sup> he is drawing on the same racist ideas of black criminality (social deprivation) that help naturalize the relegation of black men to lower rungs of the economic ladder (economic disadvantage) and the exclusion of people convicted of felonies from voting (democratic disqualification).

Importantly, the racist appeals at the root of this social exclusion redirect blame not only for the era's racial disparities, but also for economic inequality overall. In the end, many of the policies that are sold through racist appeals to white people hurt working and poor people of all races, and benefit the already powerful and wealthy few.

### **Social Deprivation Justifies and Advances Policies that Exacerbate Economic Disadvantage and Democratic Disqualification**

Donald Trump's political ascendancy appears a reasonable marker for the increased racist hostilities we see across our news feeds. Candidate Trump encouraged violence at his rallies,<sup>6</sup> and President Trump encouraged violence by law enforcement officers.<sup>7</sup> Candidate Trump smeared Mexican immigrants as bringing crime and drugs<sup>8</sup> and called inner cities “hell.”<sup>9</sup> And, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center's annual census of hate groups, his candidacy energized the radical right and catalyzed an increase in the number of hate groups in the nation.<sup>10</sup>

But the reaction of political opponents to the election of Barack Obama provides an earlier salient marker in the recent rise of aggression against black people. One week after Obama's election, AP reported a spike in racist violence.<sup>11</sup> Nearly a year later, Rep. Wilson (R-SC) shouted “You lie!” as President Obama spoke to a joint session of Congress about health care legislation.<sup>12</sup> In 2011, Donald Trump joined the birther movement, questioning Obama's U.S. birth and, therefore, the legitimacy of his presidency.<sup>13</sup> Another reaction—by an ecosystem of conservative activists, strategists, and policymakers—was to invest heavily in passing laws that suppress the votes of the Obama coalition in particular. Obama's path to victory had been inclusive: More white voters supported him than had supported John Kerry, and he won by huge margins among people of color, women, and young voters. A historic turnout among black voters was a key ingredient in his win. In response, conservatives developed, campaigned for, and passed restrictive voter identification laws, which target black and Latino voters in particular. They made the argument for a solution to nearly non-existent “voter fraud” by leveraging an

asset they had developed over many decades, according to Carol Anderson: “The Southern Strategy’s long-term efforts to link the Democratic Party with blacks and to make African American synonymous with crime, thus made tying Democrats to widespread fraud a simple, logical leap.”<sup>14</sup>

Rising violence, breaking decorum, and suppressing votes are not equal levels of aggression. However, permission to breach civility allows for greater explicit hostility. And the social deprivation that allows any of these acts endorses policies that strip power from certain citizens, even at the cost of disqualifying and disadvantaging a greater set of citizens. For instance, restrictive voter identification laws will prevent some older white voters, who are more likely to vote for conservative candidates, from voting. However, voter ID laws will impact older, white voters substantially less frequently than they will disqualify voters of color and young voters, by design.

### **Social Deprivation Naturalizes Political and Economic Policies that Create Inequality**

Social deprivation can create distracting cover stories, which naturalize the inequalities created by policies that drive economic disadvantage and political disqualification. By misdirecting attention away from policies and practices that create inequality, the focus rests on individual behavior. For instance, when Rep. Wilson called out “You lie!” during President Obama’s speech to Congress,<sup>15</sup> debate swirled around how he had displayed an unusual departure from protocol and whether the disrespect for the President had been racially motivated.<sup>16</sup> However, despite some fact-checking of the outburst,<sup>17</sup> the event distracted attention from either the benefits that Obama’s health care proposal would offer millions of working Americans or the limits of the plan for addressing the health care needs of undocumented immigrants.

Social deprivation can also appear to shift responsibility from the policy decisions to individuals being deprived. As Beverly Daniel Tatum, author of *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, details, schools remain unequal as they continue to reflect the legacy of legal residential segregation by race and income:

*Certainly income matters when you are looking for housing. But we can’t overlook the way housing patterns have been shaped historically by policies and practices such as racially restrictive real estate covenants, racial steering by real estate agents, redlining of neighborhoods, and other discriminatory practices by mortgage lenders. That history includes the use by many White homeowners’ associations of physical threats and violence to keep people of color out of their neighborhoods. The legacy of these policies and practices lives on as past housing options enhance or impede the accumulation of home equity and eventually the intergenerational transmission of wealth. And though such policies are now illegal at the federal, state, and local levels, evidence suggests they haven’t been eliminated in practice.*

She then shows how that residential segregation results in both social deprivation and economic disadvantage; it “limits access to the social networks needed for successful employment and access to other important resources ... Because of residential segregation, economic and racial disadvantage are inextricably linked.” The differences in life experiences, resources, and treatment inhibits “cross-group interactions.” But, she argues, the simple question “Why are all the black kids sitting together?” naturalizes the inequalities and shifts the focus from policy decisions and policy makers onto the black students who live the results of those policies and practices.<sup>18</sup> Interrogating this “self“-segregation suggests that the social deprivation is consensual and obscures the costs to these students of being sorted in this way, as the framing takes as its starting point the cafeteria rather than the larger historical, political, and economic context in which all the students act. The narrative force of the question transforms the behavior of the black students—a response to a history of social exclusion—into the underlying limitation on reciprocity, trust, and leniency, and lack of access to resources, opportunities, and the networks and relationships that can provide future opportunities.

### **Policy: It Got Us In; It Can Get Us Out**

Social deprivation justifies and naturalizes the economic disadvantage and democratic disqualification that enable the politically and economically powerful few to further concentrate their power. States’ aggressive purges of voter rolls, closures of voting and registration sites, prohibitive voter ID restrictions, and systematic disenfranchisement of people with felony convictions contribute to limiting democratic voice for black communities. Gerrymandering and the outsized influence of money in politics further undermine black political power.<sup>19</sup> The result is a democracy that does not reflect the citizenry.<sup>20</sup> Ninety percent of elected officials in the country (from the county level up to Congress) are white, although only 63 percent of Americans are. These elected officials are overwhelmingly listening to the policy preferences of their large donors, which are very different from those of the average voter, and from black voters in particular. The distance between donors and everyone else can be seen in policies giving personhood to corporations, supporting private prisons, opposing raises to the minimum wage, and driving the recent tax restructuring to benefit the wealthy.<sup>21</sup> While many of these policies are sold using racist appeals, they often hurt working and poor people of all races, while benefiting the already powerful and wealthy few.

For example, so-called “right to work” laws “are designed to drain workers’ collective resources by requiring unions to provide representation to people who make no contribution to sustain the union.”<sup>22</sup> Today, working people across race face a 3-percent wage penalty in states with these laws, amounting to a loss of \$1500 a year for a typical individual working full-time all year.<sup>23</sup> When an oil industry lobbyist first coined the term “right to work” in 1936, seeking to protect profits, he explicitly and publicly appealed to white supremacist fears: “White women and

white men will be forced into organizations with black African apes whom they will have to call ‘brother’ or lose their jobs,” he agitated, as he targeted Southern states for passage.<sup>24</sup>

In fact, to pick up the metaphor from Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres, African Americans are often the canaries in the coal mine.<sup>25</sup> Voter identification laws cut out some older, white voters in their effort to target the Obama coalition. And so-called right-to-work laws depress the wages of white workers as well as black workers. So many of the racist policies justified and naturalized by social deprivation economically disadvantage and democratically disqualify white people as well. By attending to the gasping canary, the miner can save him or herself; and by boldly developing policies to repair the harm done to African Americans, we can build a more inclusive democracy and economy for all of us. In order to develop policies that serve the interest of the broad working class in this way and repair the harm done particularly to black people, policy designers should work closely with base-building organizations that have memberships in communities most affected by the policies. This engagement helps ensure that the definition of the problem reflects their experience and helps unearth the complex of policies and practices that will be solutions.

### Up Next

Trump’s bald appeal to white voters’ white identity as a comfort to their economic anxiety has been captivating. During the campaign and in office, Trump has wielded the economic anxiety of white people who could never hope to be as rich as he and appealed to them as part of *his* group, with a shared interest in holding onto the value of their whiteness. Indeed, his frequent outbursts of “Loser,”<sup>26</sup> his encouragement of hostility and violence to demonstrators at his rallies,<sup>27</sup> and his reluctance to condemn avowed white nationalists in Charlottesville<sup>28</sup> buoy his supporters’ sense of being *not*-losers. At the same time, Trump’s brash, entitled behavior—for instance, his assertion that he is “smart” because he avoided taxes<sup>29</sup> and his refusal to take responsibility either for sexually assaulting women or for bragging about it<sup>30</sup>—keeps this base of supporters in their place as not-winners. This tension between being not-losers and not-winners has been important to Trump’s ability to heighten the racial polarization in the nation.

The next brief paper in this series will consider the role of social exclusion in creating the will to move the detrimental policy changes that have been implemented or introduced under the Trump administration.

# Endnotes

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