



Before We Embrace the Future: Assessing Where We've Been and Where We Are

Citation

Dawson, Michael C. and Lawrence D. Bobo. 2008. Before we embrace the future: Assessing where we've been and where we are. *Du Bois Review* 5, no. 2: 213-216.

Published Version

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X08080235>

Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:4724023>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Open Access Policy Articles, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#OAP>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

BEFORE WE EMBRACE THE FUTURE

Assessing Where We've Been, and Where We Are

Michael C. Dawson

Department of Political Science, University of Chicago

Lawrence D. Bobo

*Department of Sociology and of African and African American Studies,
Harvard University*

Barack Obama was elected president of the United States shortly before this issue of the *Du Bois Review* went to press. The historic nature of the 2008 presidential campaign was evident early in the process, particularly as it became clear that the Democratic Party would nominate either a woman or an African American as its standard-bearer. As scholars who have devoted our professional lives to studying the cancerous effect that racial disadvantage has on American society and politics, we are well aware of the profound hope that many place in the president-elect. We are also aware of the many pitfalls and challenges that await not only President Obama but the nation as well, whose citizens must sort out the new (and old) features of the nation's increasingly complex racial terrain. We devote the next two issues of the *Du Bois Review* (volume 6, numbers 1 and 2) to scholarship focused on the 2008 presidential campaign and the implications of that campaign going forward. In this issue we focus on research assessing where we have been and where we are regarding racial dynamics within the United States.

Our lead article highlights a racial dynamic that underscores why we are *not* entering a "postracial" age anytime soon, despite the historic election of the first Black president of the United States. Scott Akalis, Mahzarin Banaji, and Stephen Kosslyn demonstrate all too effectively why negative stereotypes toward Blacks and other marginalized racial and ethnic groups are likely to persist well into the future. The two experiments they describe convincingly indicate that community crime alerts about specific crimes involving Black criminals evoke hostile racial stereotypes about Blacks as a group. Equally disturbing, the experiments also indicate just *imagining* a crime being perpetrated by individual Blacks evokes negative racial stereo-

types for Blacks as a whole. This study further expands our knowledge of how pervasive the mechanisms are within this society that reproduce racial hostility toward Black Americans. Nancy Denton's insightful review essay critiques three important books on residential segregation, which collectively portray how racial stereotypes and prejudices interact with structural factors and public policy to produce and reproduce the high levels of residential segregation found in American cities. While the findings of some of the books that Denton reviews are slightly optimistic, the overall impression left by both Akalis et al. and Denton reinforces the view that there is a long road ahead before a postracial society is anywhere near being achieved.

A second set of articles emphasizes how race intersects with the economy. These articles are particularly timely given that the largest crisis facing the nation at the dawn of a new administration is a devastated national and global economy near total and brutal collapse. Robert Prash directs our attention to Du Bois's contributions in the field of economics and how they were, and continue to be, marginalized by social scientists in the academy. Du Bois was one of the first American social scientists to detail theoretically and empirically the devastating impact of a racial order, produced by the intersection of race and economics within the United States, which severely disadvantaged African Americans' economic status. Du Bois, in a number of works, examines how both the racist practices of the state and those found within White civil society served to distort economic markets and enforce Black economic disadvantage and subservience for much of American history. Du Bois himself, Prash reminds us, is a product of late-nineteenth-century German economic thought and practice. The German historical school of economics looked with suspicion upon the type of economic theory being developed in the English-speaking academy, which fetishized the individual and the market—a fetishization that is responsible in part for the market failures that currently bedevil the global economy. Catherine Paden alerts us to how competition between organizations, specifically the NAACP and SNCC, helped to increase the prominence that economic issues had in the agendas of both individual organizations and the movement. Black social movements have historically played a role in inserting the “interests of the poor” into national policy and political discourse. One suspects that grassroots efforts will once again be necessary if the interests of the most disadvantaged are to be represented and addressed in the current political and economic environment. Finally, Mitchell Brown examines the limitations that Marion Barry *structurally* faced in attempting to meet the needs of his constituents, and why he failed “to live up to [policy-related] expectations.” Given the constraints a local elected official faces when trying to reform policy and address the needs of the disadvantaged, it is sobering to consider the daunting strictures a president faces despite his tremendous power. While President Obama will not have to worry about the destructive effects on policy making that Marion Barry's personal demons caused, he still has to face structural constraints in the form of working with the business community, other branches of government (including members of his own party), and the most daunting economic crisis since the Great Depression.

Just as the previous set of articles center on the intersection of race and class, the following articles focus on the intersection of race and gender and how that intersection structures the racialized sexual politics of the past and the present. Jiannbin Lee Shiao and Mia Tuan's article on the dating history of Korean adoptees extends our knowledge on how dating patterns are shaped by and reflect our changing racial order. Who is considered a “suitable” partner is deeply shaped (while mediated by gender) by a racial hierarchy that still normalizes Whites. Anastasia Curwood's

article argues that pioneering sociologist E. Franklin Frazier's inability to champion gender equality, as he did racial equality, was based not only on a distrust of middle-class Black women but, more importantly, on a rejection of gender equality for women as well. Devastatingly, this rejection of women's equality, according to Curwood, would be reproduced in the academy across generations into the modern period under the guise of Frazier's attack on the matriarchal "nature" of Black social organization. This attack on supposed Black matriarchy was reproduced through the work of those such as Moynihan and came to dominate the debate about Black family structure. These articles jointly show that not only are our sexual practices and choices shaped by racial and gender hierarchies, but also our research is all too often affected by these same forces.

The struggle and mechanism through which racial and ethnic minorities attempt to assimilate (or not) in society is the topic of our last set of articles. Jason Shelton describes the complicated set of strategies Black parents use to socialize their children. A fundamental choice these parents face is whether/how to discuss race with their children. The parents' own embeddedness in Black cultural practices and racial belief systems affect the choice of strategies, and these strategies in turn have different consequences for the possibility and nature of assimilation into mainstream society. Rory Kramer's research complements Shelton's by showing how some non-profit organizations train economically disadvantaged youth to assimilate successfully into "elite private high schools." Combined, these articles help to demonstrate the multiple and diverse set of institutions and practices that are being used to aid the assimilation of disadvantaged and marginalized youth into the mainstream. Rahsaan Maxwell's research provides an international flavor by demonstrating what factors lead to differences between South Asian and Caribbean immigrants to Britain in how they view their prospects for incorporation. As in the United States, differential experiences and expectations can lead to various levels of optimism about the possibility of fully becoming incorporated as equal members of civil society and the polity.

The articles in this issue demonstrate what both specialists and astute lay observers have already concluded: this nation's racial hierarchies continue to strongly shape society, politics, the economy, and individuals' beliefs. Yet change is not only possible, it is also inevitable. The nature of the change that produced November's stunning electoral result and the nature of the potential change that the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States portends will be thoroughly explored in the forthcoming volume of the *Du Bois Review*.

Corresponding author: Professor Michael C. Dawson, Department of Political Science, 419 Pick Hall, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL 60637. E-mail: mc-dawson@uchicago.edu