

# MARGINALIZATION OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS IN THE SOCIAL SPHERE OF US SOCIETY

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## ***Abstract***

*This article deals with the marginalization of African-Americans in the social sphere of US society. It will discuss some general social implications of persisting racial inequalities within the society, as well as specific institutions such as the prison system and residential segregation. Those systems, directly and indirectly uphold the marginal position of African-Americans in US society. The reality continues to persist that the US remains a highly unequal society for its different races, and this article is concerned with investigating why this is so.*

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Substantial parts of this article have been adapted from the author's master's thesis written on marginalization of African-Americans within all spheres of society.

## **INTRODUCTION**

“No race can grow fat... that feeds on the crumbs that fall from the tables of others” (Mitchell 2004: 241).

One fourth of African-Americans fall below the poverty line and continue to live in poverty in the US today (Mauk and Oakland 2005: 239). More than half of African-American children in the United States are living in poverty (Jennings 1997: 6). One apparent question that arises from merely looking at these figures is the following: How is this depressing picture of the poverty of a single race possible in a developed, wealthy and ‘superpower’ nation as the United States?

This article will discuss the marginalization of African-Americans in US society in the social sphere. The article will mostly focus on the continuation of marginalization rather than its historical origins, as those factors only give a limited explanation for its persistence in the present day. However, a short overview of some of the main occurrences in terms of historical foundations are necessary for an increased understanding of racial relations in the US.

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In contemporary US society, one of the main problems continues to be the unequal social standing of racial minorities as compared to the white inhabitants. Although a wealthy and prosperous nation, it is unfortunately the whites who enjoy an disproportional share of privileges. The United States even has the highest inequality of income and wealth of any 'rich' nation (Brown 2005: 42). One of the main oppressed groups, while composing a large percentage of the country's population, and being one of its historically oldest minority groups, are African-Americans. Yet, African-Americans have yet to enjoy full social, economic and political equality in comparison to white citizens of the country.

Although other minority groups, such as Latinos, also continue to suffer from discrimination, African-American communities tend to bear a more severe burden in terms of absolute numbers and proportions of families affected in any given community (Jennings 1997: 2). The proportions of poverty amongst African-Americans are extremely high and poverty still is a harsh reality for many African-Americans today. The 'American Dream' can therefore be argued to have bypassed a great majority of the African-American population. However, neoconservatives have portrayed 'other others' such as Asian-Americans and some Latinos, as 'model minorities,' achieving values distinguishing them from the African-American underclass (Winant 2004: 59).

As white citizens become more satisfied in being able to achieve the American Dream and believe in its transference to African-Americans, the latter become more doubtful whether the dream is realizable for them (Brown 2005: 37). This is, in the first instance, a consequence of an unequal starting position and furthermore prevailing American values that play an important role in difficulties facing African-Americans. These American values continue to portray and believe that despite someone's race, place of residence and economic status, hard work will enable a person to move up the social ladder and establish a better life (Barnes 2004: 40). However, the validity of this assertion has to be questioned and in a lot of instances seems to be used to blame African-Americans living in poverty as exhibiting a lack of motivation and being lazy.

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African-Americans have become more visible and have gained increasing opportunities in economic, political and social spheres in the last few decades. From a situation in which the lack of civil rights legislation left African-Americans relatively segregated and excluded from the dominant society, currently the same rights apply to all people, no matter what race or gender. Although this sounds very promising, it is however not as positive and inclusive as it might appear. The same conditions and rights might apply and transcend races, but without the conditions, investments, and inclusion to support this upward mobility, it seems a rather impossible task to achieve. However, although increasing opportunities and inclusion indicates a positive move forward in terms of opportunities, it has unfortunately had its negative consequences as well. As a consequence of the increasing visibility of African-Americans on the national scene and the wave of political unrest that took place in the sixties, significant negative attention and more negative perceptions of African-Americans have arisen (Pulido 2006: 45). As people became more resentful towards and afraid of African-Americans, other people of colour got the benefit of the doubt, as resentment towards those groups was decreasing (Pulido 2006: 45).

White supremacy, although denied by many to even exist or persist in the twenty first century, can still be found as one of the causal factors of African-American oppression in an era in which opportunities, in real terms, are increasing for the African-American population. Large numbers of white Americans continue to, directly or indirectly, act on principles of white supremacy. Ishmael Reed, a well known and respected scholar in African-American studies, continues to argue that the culture of aggression towards African-Americans has remained much the same in recent years (Reed: 2003). Although his argument of the similarities between the defences of slavery and today's arguments to justify African-American inferiority are quite radical, it gives an important reason for discussing and investigating the position and treatment of African-Americans in current American society. Other scholars mention that racism is definitely alive in the United States, although more subtle and in more indirect forms portrayed than in the past (Brown 2005: 17).

Because of the limited scope of this article, the focus will be on the social sphere of society. However, the author very well realizes this is not a complete portrayal

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of the marginalization of African-Americans. However, this article will attempt to give an insight into some institutions and perceptions in society that ensure the maintenance of exclusion and marginalization of African-Americans. The complete thesis this article is extracted from however does provide a more complete overview of historical factors and economic and political spheres, due to the extensive nature of this work. Therefore, for a more complete picture it is advisable to read the thesis as a complement to this article.

The main research question guiding this article will be:

- Why do African-Americans continue to be marginalized (and excluded) in the social sphere, in the specific case of US society?

The article will draw upon Foucault, as this scholar is investigating power relations within society, its invisibility from time to time and the development of power becoming more effective in its ingrained nature in structures rendering a solely top-down and authoritative form of power no longer necessary.

The article will be outlined as following: first of all, a short historical overview will be given, followed by empirical data on the marginalization of African-Americans. The subsequent part will be an analysis, critically investigating the implications and understandings of the data investigated. The last part will be a short conclusion to the article.

## **Short historical overview for an increased understanding of the foundations of racial relations in the US**

### **Slavery**

One of the most important events underlying a conceptual understanding of racial oppression in the US is that of slavery. Slavery of African-Americans led to greater freedom for poor whites, though maintaining an economic structure that would continue to keep the latter poor. Therefore, from the very start of race-relations history in the US, white society has needed African-Americans in terms of performing undesirable employment for the benefit of whites. Slavery was such a engrained element in early American society that it was codified in law by the

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1750s and even some of the earliest presidents such as Washington and Jefferson owned slaves themselves. From as early as this time, and onwards, African-Americans have always been fighting for freedom as a collective, while 'whiteness' was perceived in this context as some sort of exclusive, individual property (Marable 2002: 3).

### The Civil War (1861-1865)

Race lay so deeply as a core cause of the American Civil War and acted as such a divisionary issue that it served as a deterrent for reconciliation. However, the Civil War has been romanticized as a type of demarcation point for emergent American nationalism, in which devotees to this principle, no matter the race, united in solidarity. It was in reality however, as argued by some, a tragedy in US history (Blight 2001: 18). It was the war that ended slavery, with a large measure of racial issues at its forefront; therefore, the romanticized image of the war seems rather inappropriate. In the years and decades after the war, the lines of racial division became extremely clear once again (Blight 2001: 4). On the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Civil War, the exclusion of African-American veterans from attending the celebrations was a clear sign of the real state of race relations (Blight 2001:9).

### Civil Rights Legislation and Onwards

Civil rights legislation, from the 1970's onwards, did not make any substantial effort for wealth redistribution along racial lines, or to foster widespread cultural reorientation addressing race and racism (Winant 2004: 21). Racial injustice, from that time onwards, was mainly seen as attributable solely to prejudiced attitudes (Winant 2004: 41). Prejudice can, however, be seen as an almost unavoidable outcome of social patterns and social relations. Therefore, acknowledging prejudice as the major force behind racial injustices reflects the intransigence of entrenched attitudes. In the same vein, it is argued that discrimination is a structural element of US society (Winant 2004: 42). Furthermore, with formal equality being achieved, many politicians argued the struggle for civil rights to be irrelevant.

The policy outcome was that integration was the proper way to tackle racial injustice. This focus on integration downplayed addressing race issues directly; the

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suppression of white supremacist notions and rejection of race consciousness amongst African-Americans was a consequence. The majority of whites had little or no sense of the unique race consciousness of African-Americans; race consciousness amongst whites was only present amongst white supremacists, and, in this manifestation, it was denounced as an evil. Wherever the militant forms of Black Nationalism emerged, this caused great anxiety and turmoil amongst whites, and only confirmed the beliefs decrying (radical) nationalism as an evil (Crenshaw et al. 1995: 149). Thus integration is argued to have indirectly and directly led to the neglect and lack of commitment to the vitality of African-American communities.

## **Data on the marginalization of African-Americans within social spheres and aspects of society**

This section will discuss the social factors, data and issues involved in the oppression of African-Americans in contemporary US society. This discussion will be mainly limited to the timeframe from the early 1990s until the present, although since the deterioration of racial relations has accelerated since the era of the civil rights movement, this article will also encompass a more general overview than strictly keeping to the timeframe mentioned above. First of all, a general overview of differences in perceptions and persistent prejudices will be given. Thereafter, some specific institutions and structures highly integrated in the oppression of African-Americans, such as housing, health care and the prison system, will be discussed in brief. The significance of those sectors and their treatment of African-Americans is considerable, and therefore will be discussed at length to provide a fuller scope investigating the marginalization of African-Americans.

### **General social implications**

#### **Differences In Perception Between African-Americans And Whites In Terms Of Life Quality And Opportunity In The United States**

Polls show the scepticism of white Americans to the claim that racism is the cause that holds African-Americans back from upward mobility. Almost two-thirds of whites are satisfied with the treatment of African-Americans in society. However, on the other hand, almost two-thirds of African-Americans are dissatisfied with the treatment of society in general and whites specifically towards African-Americans (Brown 2004: 1491). To continue in the same manner, African-Americans were four times more likely to be dissatisfied with treatment in the workplace, neighbourhood shops and other similar places (Brown 2004: 1491). 47% of African-Americans believe themselves to have received an unfair treatment in one out of five situations over the last month (Brown 2004: 1492). These grand differences between the perceptions of the respective treatment members of these two racial groups receive leads one to conclude that the two are

living on different planets. Similar results can be observed when investigating perceptions of treatment on a neighbourhood scale: 64% of whites argued that African-Americans are treated the same in the community as whites are treated, whereas only 44% of African-Americans concurred (Benjamin 2005: 18).

### Prejudice And Passivity Persisting

Unfortunately, prejudice towards African-Americans is only increasing, accompanied by a stagnating picture of the development of African-Americans and their communities in terms of educational achievement, job availability and housing (Jennings 1997: 4). Whereas most white Americans claim to show good will towards African-American people, a recent study still showed there existed major prejudices concerning the character of African-Americans: 34% agreed in interviews that ‘most blacks’ were lazy and 52% thought that ‘most blacks’ are aggressive and violent (Brown 2005: 41). Without a doubt, this continuing stigmatization of an entire race based on stereotypes of group attributes highly impairs African-Americans to develop their talents and makes it extremely difficult to be successful in the eyes of mainstream white Americans.

The passive attitude of white suburbanites can be shown when comparing figures of those agreeing that more should be done to help inner-city people living in poverty, on which three-quarters of the interviewed agreed. However, on the other hand, almost three-quarters disagreed that their suburb should work harder to become racially integrated (Brown 2005: 41). Therefore, it can be argued that white Americans are much more enthusiastic about the idea of racial equality than the policies that are meant to bring it about (Kinder& Sanders 1996: 7).

A prejudice also persists whereby observations gleaned from extensively concentrating on the unemployed and poor African-American underclass are generalized as indicative of the broad sweep of African-Americans across American society. However, inherent in concentrating on the underclass is the possibility to avoid having to acknowledge discriminatory and racist practices and policies (Fainstein& Campbell 2002: 172). This unconscious and conscious system of upholding privileges for whites can be identified in the following statement about white citizens (in the US): “Privilege, to us, is like water to the



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fish: invisible precisely because we can not imagine life without it” (Hartman 2006: 4).

## **Social implications caused by specific institutions and systems**

### **Prison System**

The prison system in the United States is locking up more people yearly than that of any other nation in the world, ahead of countries such as China. A further fact of US prisons is their disproportionate African-American population. African-Americans are indeed the largest group incarcerated in US prisons, constituting 46.5% of the male inmates (Million & Free 2003: 44). Some observers interpret these figures to argue that race is the focal point in policies concerning the prison system (Middlemass 2006: 1). This extremely grim picture has been investigated by many scholars to determine whether the American penal system constitutes a legitimized control system over minority people or whether, in fact, African-Americans commit more crimes. However, the conclusion is that there are major proportional discrepancies between the severity of the crimes committed by African-Americans and the extreme burden of the prison sentences by which they are punished. Policies tailored towards putting more African-American people, and especially males, in prison are seen by some to be a grand scenario to control and limit African-American communities in terms of activities and development (Jennings 1997: 5).

During the Clinton era alone, the prison population grew by 700.000, resulting in a total figure in recent years of 1.7 million African-Americans who, due to their incarceration, lost the right to vote (Marable 2002: 5). However, more and more it is argued that the essential role of the criminal justice system in recent years is to manage redundant labour and minority groups (Marable 2000: xxxvii). The reality is that some small-town villages in rural areas exploit free or low paid prison labour to accelerate the economy. Prisons are therefore nowadays seen as one of the most profitable growth industries.

Selective policies especially targeted at crimes committed in greater proportion amongst the African-American population, have resulted in harsher and longer sentences for African-Americans. Crack cocaine, more often used by African-Americans, is punished approximately 100 times as severely in terms of length of sentencing than the powdered form, preferred by white Americans. African-

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Americans only constitute 14% of all drug users, but as a result of those selective policies, make up 55% of all drug convictions and 75% of prison admissions amongst the category of drugs felonies (Marable 2002: 4). Little is however done in terms of treatment or prevention, leaving it rather obvious that the true agenda is that of controlling the problem than tackling the problem as such. To compound matters, the image of high rates of crime amongst African-Americans drives businesses away from African-American neighbourhoods, having severe implications on the economic as well as social conditions of all African-Americans in turn.

Prisons are furthermore usually situated in rural areas, far away from the cities of residence of the majority of African-American men. Statistics show that 98% of prison cells are located in white-dominated rural areas (Hartman 2006: 26). This results in further alienation from the family, and an increased feeling of failure in terms of involvement in the lives of their families. Political participation of African-Americans is highly diminished as well, as most states ban prisoners from voting (Hartman 2006: 26). The long-term result of this continuing trend of disproportionate imprisonment of African-American males will be hundreds of malfunctioning and poisoned communities (Middlemass 2006: 2). A highly disturbing fact is that more African-American men are in prison than are enrolled in higher education (Million& Free 2003: v). Furthermore, an African-American man has a one in four chance to be imprisoned during his lifetime, this compared to a figure of 1 in 23 for white males in the US (Million& Free 2003: 39).

### Housing segregation

Housing segregation, together with educational segregation, is one of the most severe systems of segregation in US society. “No group in the history of the United States has ever experienced a sustained high level of residential segregation that has been imposed on blacks in large American cities for the past fifty years” (Jennings 1997: 6). A poor, recently-immigrated Latino in Los Angeles, for example, is less segregated than some of the most affluent African-Americans (Brown 2005: 39). Housing segregation is therefore not limited to

African-Americans of the low socio-economic strata, but is argued to be the norm for those of all socio-economic classes in the US (Anderson 2004: 16).

Housing segregation reinforces inequalities, and even increases them. African-Americans' property, because of the highly segregated nature of separated neighbourhoods, has suffered devaluation by virtue of its lessened desirability, resulting in a decreased value compared to a similar housing structure in a predominantly white neighbourhood (Pulido 2006: 23). Already at a threshold of about 10 to 20% of African-American residents in a neighbourhood, whites' demand for the area will fall and, in the long term, prices will start stagnating and subsequently fall (Oliver and Shapiro 1995: 40). A further consequence is that uncertainty surrounding racial integration and falling prices compels many of the white population to move out of the neighbourhood. Housing segregation is furthermore kept intact by discrimination amongst real estate agents, in terms of only showing African-Americans a small proportion of available housing, and steering white Americans away from communities with significant amounts of people of colour. Mortgage agencies, furthermore, lend less to people of colour (Orfield 2005: 1754).

*Because of racial segregation, a significant share of African-American America is condemned to experience a social environment where poverty and joblessness are the norm, where a majority of children are born out of wedlock, where most families are on welfare, where educational failure prevails, and where social and physical deterioration abound (Massey & Denton 1993: 2).*

## Education

Education remains highly segregated. Earlier attempts at bussing African-American children into white neighbourhoods have significantly diminished due to resistance and inefficiency and a lack of showing the expected result. Since segregated schools have, under certain circumstances, been permitted since the mid 90s, the situation has only been deteriorating (Orfield et al. 1997: 5). American schools are, at present, argued to be more segregated than 30 years ago

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(Brown 2005: 17). This can be seen mainly as a lack of commitment to integration from mainstream society and politics. More than 80% of schools in which the students are predominantly African-American face concentrated poverty (Orfield et al. 1997: 5). The constraints continue as the US educational system is one of the most unequal of the industrialized world, basing its allocation of funding on the economic prosperity of a certain district. It is thereby a fact that the wealthiest 10% of school districts spend nearly ten times more than the poorest 10% in recent times. The argument of educational segregation being inherently unequal is therefore still surprisingly valid up to today.

Yet racial integration alone will not lead to increased education for all if prejudice and unequal treatment continues. Teachers whose policy is to have lower expectations of African-American children (in some instances), and who propagate notions of good academic results being associated with 'acting white,' produce major constraints on the results of African-American children as a consequence.

### **Analysis Of The Social Circumstances And Explanations For The Continuation Of African-American Marginalization**

The following discussion will, first of all, analyze the more general social implications of race and racism within American society pertaining to the treatment of African-American citizens. It will be based on the data presented above, and theoretical elements that can, because of limited space, not be included in this article. However, the author hopes the analysis and explanation are sufficient to fully comprehend the implications and arguments without necessarily reading the entire thesis. It will address the discrepancies in the perception of white and African-American citizens on the treatment of African-Americans and the explanations for those differences. The analysis will continue by investigating the more specific societal spheres and aspects of African-American marginalization as discussed in the empirical data: the criminal justice system, education and housing in US society.

## General Social Implications For African-Americans In The US

African-Americans in the US have historically and continue to be consciously and unconsciously treated as *others* in US society, with all the resulting negative consequences. As adherents of critical race theory (CRT) have argued, this exclusion of an entire racial group has made it almost impossible for African-Americans to deny sharing a common reality and therefore strive towards a much more communal outlook than is the case among white American individuals (Delgado & Stefancic 2001: 164). It is argued that African-Americans have enabled the development and upwards mobility of white Americans and the former's marginalization continues to uplift society in periods of economic despair. However, this perception is threatening to white interests, and therefore attributes such as a faltering competitiveness in the economy and flagging interest in academic results are projected upon African-Americans to implicate them as themselves responsible for their dismal circumstances.

The dominant norms set forth as the societal standard are defined by those in power and might therefore not apply to people of different cultures, backgrounds and races. 'Different' is in most cases interpreted as 'deviant' and sometimes as 'inferior.' Historically, white Americans were made to believe that African-Americans were inferior, and although today it is less obviously presented as such, persists; that politicians have used African-Americans as scapegoats, that false images surrounding African-Americans have not been dispelled, continue to leave African-Americans outside mainstream society. It can clearly be seen that this perceived *truth* is perpetuated precisely because of its development and promotion by the white, dominant, mainstream spheres of society. Truth is what those in power portray it to be and what benefits the dominant group within a society, as in this case the white Americans (Cuff 2006: 273). The use of African-Americans for less desirable jobs and as a buffer in economic recession shows the continuous exploitation of African-Americans for the benefit of white US society. Therefore, an African-American is very well accepted as a clerk, but less so as a critic of the current status quo. The explanation is that the former is not very likely to question the US power structure, based on white interest, while the latter is. It can therefore be concluded that the clerk is more accepted as (s)he is more likely to stay within the boundaries of society in which white privilege can persist, while the critic is

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ascends too far up the social ladder and might challenge the unjust practices and systems of society as a whole.

Upward mobility for most other ethnicities and races can be explained by the fact that these were all, more or less, over time, integrated into the mainstream American society. As CRT scholars relate to this discussion, perceptions and relationships between and amongst different races have more to do with the interest of the white majority than idealistic goals as such (Delgado & Stefancic 2001: 13). In this context, Asians have been far better integrated and perceived exactly because of their similarities with whites in terms of high performance in education and seemingly better assimilation in society (disregarding for the moment that their better starting position in society played a role). Furthermore, historically, African-Americans can be seen as one of the racial groups at the ultimate bottom of the social ladder, this still having implications today in terms of persisting stigmatization, to the benefit of other more recently immigrated ethnic and racial groups. A lack of solidarity amongst different minority groups ensures the maintenance of white privileges. Furthermore, the continuous social stigmatization ensures that the white population will not to strive together with minority groups for increased social justice by tackling the accumulation of wealth at the top of the socio-economic heap. The continuous stigmatization of African-Americans ensures popular distraction from wealth inequalities as the rich get richer while companies cut employee benefits. This inequality has been historically created: the diversion of attention from wealthy landowners to the ever-to-blame slave is maintained even today. Therefore, it can be argued that Foucault's ideas of creating and maintaining *others* in society, as a social body left in total darkness, are surprisingly applicable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Bertani & Fontana 1997: 70).

The scepticism of white Americans towards the idea that racism continues to be the cause for upward mobility is an obvious example of the truth being formed by what people choose to believe and what benefits them. This argument is identified in the discussion of CRT scholars of the normalized nature of racism, as seen to be a natural process, which makes it extremely difficult to address (Crenshaw et al. 1995: 133). The inherent nature of racism is not only in society, but also within individuals. The blind eye turned towards the details and negative impacts of

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racism on the daily lives of African-Americans, the lack of interaction of whites with African-Americans (resulting in the lack of a clear picture of the circumstances of African-Americans in the US), are just two examples of the power of the mainstream and its continuously biased truth. The discrepancies in figures on the perception of treatment of African-Americans, as shown in the previous section, clearly show the failure among whites to consider racism to be alive and ingrained within society as a whole. The extreme discrepancy regarding the perception of having been unjustly treated within the last month is an indicator, as mentioned above, that African-Americans and white Americans indeed seem to live on two different planets. Although the author does not take the figures as mentioned in the empirical overview of differences in perceptions as absolute truth, it does indicate that white Americans in this instance believe what they want to believe in order to avoid the reality of a persistently unequal social situation for African-Americans.

Rather, society (and individual attitudes) continues to believe and convince itself that the attitude and lack of upward mobility is somehow inherent in African-Americans themselves. As CRT scholars would argue, whites continue to believe that their better-off position in society must be attributable to something other than the mere social power and racial domination that most people of colour believe it to be (Crenshaw et al. 1995: 133). Stigmatizing African-Americans as a group seems to be an adequate example of this belief in a society that most whites argue to be free of racism and indeed colour blind. A recent study indicated that more than a third of whites continue to believe most African-Americans to be lazy and over half continue to believe most African-Americans to be violent and aggressive (Brown 2005: 41). As a consequence, the bias persists that somehow poverty is a result of the African-American lifestyle. This bias is very well explained, seen through the lens of Foucault's theories, in that discourses, perceptions and structures are creating negative images of African-Americans, precisely because they are not part of the white, mainstream, western standard (Cuff 2006: 265). It is surprising to see such stigmatization of the entire African-American race in a society that so highly values individual freedom, engages in positive discrimination, as through affirmative action, and yet is inherently unfair precisely for the same reason. It is therefore legitimate to use group attributes to negatively affect African-Americans, as this still to a large extent continues to benefit the



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majority of the white population. However, group attributes underlying affirmative action to benefit people of colour and African-Americans is not legitimized, exactly because it is believed to disadvantage the majority of whites. From this discussion it can be seen that a society that is argued to be based on individualism is visibly neglecting elements of individual treatment when entire strategies or systems are advantaging white Americans, or disadvantaging African-Americans. Although some argue the most overt forms of racism to have vanished, figures as the ones mentioned above clearly show the prejudice and racism that does continue to persist. However, as those forms are frowned upon when expressed in public, when asked, the large majority of Americans would argue to be in favour of racial integration and integrated neighbourhoods. However, most white Americans are not so enthusiastic any longer when it would be their own neighbourhood or school targeted for grand scale projects of integration and upward mobility for African-Americans.

However, even the embracement of racial stigmatized images of African-Americans themselves, such as loose girls and violent guys, as rapped about by African-Americans and others, have only deteriorated the situation of African-American youth. The dire situations in which some grow up, of poverty, disrupted families and violent neighbourhoods, make hope and achievement difficult terms to grasp and strive towards. Some now seemed to have embraced the widespread biases, as a justification for ill-performance and violence, while others use it as a defence-mechanism, divorcing themselves from any high hopes for what life may bring.

From the previous discussion, racism can clearly be seen to be a social construction. Such negative images and large discrepancies in equality of results are something very different than a result of biological traits, which some authors argue racism to be. Claims and beliefs of mainstream society that continue to persist, such as the lazy nature of African-Americans have nothing to do with biological traits but have, however, been defined as such by the dominant group in US society. Therefore, those arguing racism merely to be the exclusion of some based on biological traits, fail to understand the implications of racism as much more than that.

decision, and others surrounding African-Americans, are really made out of the consideration for the best interests and development of African-Americans and their communities, or rather to counter resistance and maintain privileges for white citizens.

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As the historical transformations in the treatment of African-Americans indicate,  
changes have indeed taken place in terms of treatment. However, as can be argued, changes in the treatment of African-Americans do not necessarily mean an

improvement, but rather a continuation of the deterioration of the situation (Cuff 2006: 260). Changes have been from the overt to a certain level of acceptance, that is however in most instances not nearly close to equal treatment or striving for it from the white Americans' point of view. Because of the less obvious nature of the discrimination and domination that is ingrained in perceptions and structures, it is more difficult to challenge and therefore the situation can only stagnate or deteriorate.

## **SPECIFIC INSTITUTIONS ROLE IN RACIAL OPPRESSION**

### **The Criminal Justice System: America's Prisons**

The American criminal justice system is one of the best and most obvious examples of America's unequal treatment of people of colour and especially African-Americans. In reference to Foucault's discussion, it is a system created to keep those *others* (read: African-Americans) in place through surveillance and regulation (Cuff 2006: 265). This type of regulation does not directly mean forcefully suppressing or rejecting the advancement of people, but rather inventing systems and structures that ensure those others in society, seen as deviants, to be kept in place. Interpreting Foucault in this specific situation means the American prison system is trying to regulate the otherness of African-Americans, not necessarily and directly because these have to be excluded. However, the system that has been established and the way it is maintained ensures that a large percentage of the African-Americans likely to form a threat to society, in terms of resistance and perceived danger, are regulated through locking them up in prisons. About 45% of the prison population are African-Americans, which is not a consequence of them excessively engaging in violence and crime as an entire racial group. The design of the system however, has ensured the result of locking up huge amounts of African-American males to be maintained. As the empirical evidence clearly shows, given the crimes and drug forms African-Americans are more likely to commit and possess, they are sentenced to a larger extent with sentences as much as 100 times longer than a had a white committed a comparable crime. This interwoven nature of power, categorized by Foucault as 'disciplinary power' is very effective, subtle and ingrained, and therefore, in general, extremely

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difficult to challenge (cf Cuff 2006: 266). However, as also discussed by CRT scholars, when objectively considering crime, crimes more often committed by whites, such as bribery and consumer fraud, are in real numbers causing more deaths and therefore a more significant threat (Delgado & Stefancic 2001: 114). This example shows the subjective nature of truth, as related to the power of the dominant to define it as the truth. The truth created by the disproportionate locking up of African-American men, that has even been increasing since the 1990s, however reinforces negative images such as African-American men being more violent, to be acceptable by the mainstream, and to be a justifiable argument for negative images surrounding African-Americans, exactly because society and politics make people believe it to be the truth, rather than a system invented to marginalize African-Americans for the benefit of white US society.

However, the prison system is another form of African-American exploitation as prisoners are used for cheap and free labour and therein majorly boosting the economy. This clearly indicates the continuous use and abuse of African-Americans for the advantages of whites. As discussed, the location of the prisons in white rural areas implies the alienation of the prisoners from the families and communities, and as a consequence further disrupts entire families and communities and ensures ensnarement in misery and poverty not only for the men but their entire communities.

The further increasing numbers of African-American men in jail between the 1980s and 1990s show that there is little to be joyous about in terms of racial equality. Therein, society is restricting rather than loosening its systems of control and surveillance to keep African-Americans in place and exclude them from many crucial parts of society such as economic, political and social participation. Therefore, an increasingly deteriorating situation in the African-American underclass and in real opportunities is a rather natural result of those systems and recent decisions which only further have limited and constrained upward mobility for African-Americans. Therefore, the prison system seems to create and directly and indirectly result in the further deterioration of African-Americans' circumstances.

## Housing And Educational Segregation

African-Americans are the only group as severely segregated in housing of any ethnic or racial group in the US. This clearly shows the initial binary consideration of race as related to good and bad, in terms of black and white. Segregation however transcends socio-economic positions and therefore gains in income or status will be reversed by the negative implications of housing and educational segregation. As segregation is argued to even increase inequalities, it becomes clear why segregation is one of the most effective tools in ensuring the continuous constraints on upward mobility for African-Americans, in terms of education as well as housing segregation. However, the ingrained nature of segregation, and its lesser visibility in terms of power structures make it difficult to challenge and drastically change. Housing segregation is however not just a phenomenon that accidentally evolved or is randomly maintained. Therefore, it is first of all important to analyze the origins, continuation and implications of housing segregation.

As can be argued, segregated housing is just another technique of controlling and keeping others in place, here utilizing Foucault's terminology. Interpreting Foucault's words, the housing segregation of African-Americans in highly neglected ghettos and poverty struck areas has led to regulation of those deviants being concentrated and them being restricted from entering white neighbourhoods and even white society, in terms of the job market as an example. As elimination of the entire group of African-Americans would not be feasible and negatively affect the benefits white society currently gains from African-Americans, and neither be morally acceptable in today's society, society developed another tool to separate the races to a large extent. Although some would argue segregation and formal separation to be elements of an historic past in the era of Jim Crow, segregation numbers in housing as well as education imply something quite different and a rather depressing picture continuing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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However, residential as well as educational segregation in American society has become normal phenomena, demonstrating the argument of CRT scholars of the normalized nature of racism in American society (Crenshaw et al. 1995: 133). This normal portrayal however has extremely dangerous consequences, as entire generations grow up to believe that there is nothing wrong with segregation (in most cases still implying inherently unequal) and that it must somehow be because of some interior elements or traits of African-Americans. Furthermore, many African-American children grow up in neighbourhoods where poverty and joblessness is the norm, obviously largely negatively affecting the self-images of those children and their hopes, dreams and beliefs. Residential segregation and the creation of ghettos has furthermore been an effective tool maintaining itself and deteriorating the conditions of African-Americans in those concentrated areas of increasing poverty, by the lack of public and private investments, moving away of employment and public services in the inner cities and the like. It appears to be again that upward mobility of African-Americans is not on the top of the agenda of mainstream white America.

In terms of educational segregation, it is questionable if racial integration was really in the best interest of African-Americans. Integrated schools even in recent years do not provide equal opportunities, attention and quality education to its white and African-American students. The educational system, in terms of assignment of teachers and funding, is evidently continuing the oppression of African-Americans and justifying the weaker performance of African-Americans not on identifiable facts as unequal opportunities, but blaming it on the disinterest and capability of studying of the African-American students. However, in a system like this children are inevitably learning little, even when making an effort and showing interest. Furthermore, the statements implying white students' presence as improving the quality of education for African-American children clearly shows the white supremacist ideology in action. As argued, the focus was rather on racial balance than the more important aim of quality education for African-Americans. It can furthermore rather be seen when investigated, that calls for educational integration seem rather to be a political strategy to hush African-American resistance and violence than intended to lead to meaningful and transformative adjustments and eventually equal opportunity and result for African-Americans in US society. The rising inequalities between African-

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Americans and white Americans in society as a whole only deteriorates education as a whole, as is the case when the funding system of education in the US is allocated according to economic prosperity.

Today, a shocking reality to hear is that schools are more segregated than 30 years ago, with more than 80% of African-American schools facing concentrated levels of poverty (Orfield 1997: 5). When understanding the US system of school funding depending on the economic prosperity of the district, it is sufficient to say that African-American schools are not only segregated but continue to be highly unequal. It is therefore not surprising that with limited resources and poor quality teaching, the students are performing in general below standards. However, lower educational quality and achievement will directly and indirectly again keep African-Americans in place, as those being able to only achieve lesser levels of education and find less prestigious jobs will, as a consequence, perpetuate for whites and unfortunately some African-Americans the biases and negative images surrounding African-American people. Furthermore, the draw back of affirmative action and the allowance of segregated and therefore unequal schools for African-Americans are clear indicators of the deteriorating situation for the African-American underclass and an increasingly difficult situation for middle class African-Americans, as society and its sociological structures seems in direct and indirect terms to further and further limit their opportunities and upward mobility.

## CONCLUSION

The article leads to the conclusion that racism's embedded nature in social structures, as well as attitudes and beliefs, continues to put African-Americans back in place. Racism in this ingrained nature has however become extremely difficult to tackle, as it is portrayed in a subtle and anonymous way, making it almost impossible to blame particular individuals. However, as Foucault argues, power is within everything, and as the power of the dominant, white and mainstream continues and will continue to overrule African-Americans, true equality is miles away. Significant change is needed in terms of tackling underlying causes of African-Americans' continuous bottom position in society,

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such as housing segregation and the criminal justice system. However, since the current Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama very well realizes this embedded nature and has been talking about tackling such institutions as the criminal justice system in direct terms, hope is on the horizon that he would become the President.

For a more complete overview and deeper understanding of African-American marginalization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the author advises the reader to read the thesis, which will go into depth in theoretical implications, political and economic issues, as well as will shortly discuss the possible implications of Barack Obama possibly becoming the next US President.



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