

Joe R. Feagin: The Social Science Voice of Systemic Racism Theory

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More than anyone else it has been Joe R. Feagin who over the past few decades has amplified and crystalized within American social science the message that is rooted in both the history and daily experiences of African Americans and other racially oppressed peoples. That simple, but heavily resisted, declaration is *racism is systemic!*

As an exploration of Feagin's contribution to systemic racism theory this article has two goals. I begin by discussing his influence on me and my development as an intellectual committed to the advancement of racism studies and its requisite racism theory. Then using the arguments I articulate in my book, *Conceptualizing Racism: Breaking the Chains of Racially Accommodative Language*, I make visible the sociohistoric context of Feagin's efforts to keep and expand the large and robust conceptualization of systemic racism, after African Americans forced it into the national discourse about race relations through their civil rights and black power movements of the 1960s.¹ As you will see, Feagin has dedicated much of his adult life to keeping that perspective alive, and more

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than any single scholar, it is he who is responsible for both its successes and failures.

FEAGIN'S INFLUENCE ON MY LIFE AND WORK

In the prologue to *Conceptualizing Racism* I stress that social science is autobiographical in that it ultimately reveals more about the social location, experiences, and ideology of the scholar who does that work than about the particular phenomenon he or she chooses to study.² This is definitely the case for Feagin, myself, and his influence on my intellectual growth and development. As you will see, for me to say that Joe Feagin has had a profound impact on my thinking and scholarship is, as the expression goes, a bit of an understatement.

I first met Feagin when I was a young, recently tenured professor at Temple University, who was stressed out, approaching burnout, and beginning the "Angry Black Man" stage of my academic career. That anger was fueled by my belief that in accommodating myself in so many ways, big and small, to the bastions of white power of academia and professional sociology, I had begun to lose sight of who I actually was and what I was really about. In an autobiographical essay published more than two and a half decades ago I recalled my graduate school years at Tulane University, where I confined myself to the relatively safe dissertation topic of African American fathers under the heading "The Tulane Years: 'Ain't Misbehavin' and the 'Invisible Man.'" In another section of the article, "The 'Phantom' Goes to Philadelphia," I recalled the intense alienation and pain of my Temple University years, where for far too long I misrepresented myself as a "safe Negro" impressed with the radical façade of the European American sociologists who hired and later tenured me.³

The North Philadelphia Conference and Paper

A year after I earned tenure I allowed myself, Temple's token African American sociologist, to get roped into coordinating a conference on the low-income African American community of North Philadelphia as part of that university's 1985 centennial year celebrations. My scholarly contribution to that conference was a presentation and paper on North Philadelphia some two decades after its 1964 urban unrest, which at that time I was still uncritical enough as a career-focused applied social scientist to call a "riot." With that project I was moving away from my

previous relatively safe focus on African American families and male gender roles into what for me, both as a scholar and an activist, was uncharted waters. I needed help, and Joe Feagin, who was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1973 for his co-authored book, *Ghetto Revolts*, was just the person to whom I needed to talk. So when I decided to refine that paper and submit it to a journal for publication I contacted Feagin and set up a meeting with him at the upcoming annual conference of the American Sociological Association. In addition to providing me with useful advice on doing community-focused research, Professor Feagin encouraged me to go out and do the study he apparently sensed I really wanted to do. It was as if he saw where I was going long before I did, as I shed my skin as a cautious applied sociologist for that of someone who was slowly transforming himself into a radical intellectual.⁴

My next contact with Feagin had a profound impact on me by helping to spark the biggest career controversy of my life, one that demolished any pretense I might otherwise ever again have been able to muster at being “a reasonable Negro.” That interaction did not come until nearly a decade later when I attended a talk titled “White Racism and the Civil Rights Agenda” he gave at the University of Connecticut, where I was now employed. Feagin’s presentation was so well attended that extra chairs had to be brought out, and despite its provocative title it was well received, with no controversy. I had no idea at the time that his talk would accelerate a series of events that nearly destroyed my career, as they rescued my soul from the hellish depths of the inauthenticity and alienation of extreme careerism.

A few years prior to Feagin’s talk, a department colleague of mine asked whether I would consider teaching the course Prejudice and Discrimination. I told him that I might like to teach something related to that topic but I saw some real limitations to teaching a course under that title. I did not like its framing, which I thought was much too small to encompass systemic racism and was too focused on the social psychology of individuals. Moreover, my colleague complained that students were increasingly pressuring him to focus more on prejudice and discrimination issues other than his own primary concern about race and ethnic relations. I also informed him that because race and ethnic relations was not my specialty area I would need some time to think about and develop the course I would teach. At that time I was doing research for my *Impossible Democracy* book—a study that analyzed professional turf battles among sociologists, social workers, and others involved

in crafting the ideas for the program precursors of the War on Poverty Community Action Programs. My interest in that project was spurred by my experience as a graduate student in psychology who, like other African American graduate students at the University of Michigan at that time, was apprehensive about all of the riot studies being done and especially about the people who were doing them. That experience left me with a set of critical questions about social scientists; questions like: Who are these people? What do they do? For whom? How? Why? and With what consequences? With that obsession with the uses of social science I could not simply think, teach, and write within the dominant acceptable racial discourse of American social science.⁵ Driven by those experiences, influences, concerns, and commitments I decided to do the unthinkable: teach a course titled White Racism.

My White Racism Course

It seemed like all hell had broken loose when I submitted a special topics course proposal to my college's curriculum and courses committee for what was normally their pro forma approval. After the committee tabled the course twice I sought the advice of Paul Bock, a retired Chinese American engineering professor, who became a civil rights activist after an incident on campus during which a group of students of Asian descent were attacked and the university administration tried to stifle their complaints. Professor Bock advised me to go public with my concerns about what seemed to be the stifling of my academic freedom. When I did so the local media showed no interest in the issue and instead asked me to contact them *if* the course was approved. That, not my academic freedom complaint, would be the real story for them. When the White Racism special topics course was finally approved, the media lined up outside my tiny office and the controversy continued for years with most of the criticism coming in the form of personal attacks against me as a "black" racial bigot who obviously did not like "white" people. That was a very different reaction compared to what Feagin, a European American professor, received when he lectured about white racism on the campus of the University of Connecticut a year earlier.⁶ Professor Feagin's impact can be seen not only in my decision to teach the course, but also in how I chose to teach it. In a nutshell the course is taught from a systemic racism perspective. That perspective is evident in the first three sentences of the course's description in its syllabus where

I note that “*systemic white racism*” is the “*central and enduring social structure around which the United States and other modern societies are organized and evolve*” that maintains the privilege of the “‘*white*’ *socially dominant racialized group*.” Or more simply put, I define racism as a highly organized system of “race”-justified oppression. In that course I also stress the systemic nature of racism when I challenge the popular racism-evasive denial tactic that “white racism” is no more a problem than “black racism” by making clear the distinction between systemic white racism and racial bigotry. I quote Feagin, Hernán Vera, and Pinar Batur who, in their *White Racism* book that I have used in the course, state that “there is no black racism because there is no centuries-old system of racialized subordination and discrimination designed by African Americans that excludes white Americans from full participation in the rights, privileges, and benefits of this society.”⁷

After the controversy over my White Racism course I was treated as a pariah by some of my professional, university, and departmental colleagues. Once again Feagin supported me when I needed it most with his clear recognition of my evolution into a radical “scholar-activist,” that even I was not fully aware of at the time. His description and analysis of the course controversy in the *Liberation Sociology* book he co-authored with Hernán Vera (and later with Kimberley Ducey) allowed me to more clearly see that the conflict I was still experiencing years after that curriculum battle was not personal but was a political struggle for liberation sociology, for which I chose to fight in my capacity as an “organic intellectual.” And more importantly, *Liberation Sociology* made clear the potential of that successful collective struggle to serve as a model for anti-racist curriculum challenges elsewhere.⁸ Professor Feagin’s continued support is also evident in my book publications.

Feagin’s Support of Welfare Racism

My academic career suffered a major publication drought as my work in collecting, transcribing, and cataloging data for two book projects on the War on Poverty Community Action Programs was put on hold for eight years to focus on what would become one of my most important scholarly accomplishments, my co-authored book, *Welfare Racism*. Once again, Joe Feagin’s hand could be seen there in important ways. For example, in addition to the book’s overall systemic racism approach, our multidimensional definition of welfare racism as “the organization

of racialized public assistance attitudes, policy making, and administrative practices” drew upon Feagin, Vera, and Batur’s definition of white racism as “the *socially organized set of practices, attitudes, and ideas that deny African Americans and other people of color the privileges, dignity, opportunities, freedoms, and rewards that this nation offers to white Americans.*” (emphasis in the original)⁹ And, as has so often been the case for me, Feagin helped launch that book with an enthusiastic back-cover endorsement that began with the word “Bravo.”

Feagin’s Influence on The Urban Racial State

One of the major goals of my book, *The Urban Racial State*, is to meet a challenge Feagin issued in his *The New Urban Paradigm*. In it, he called on scholars to bridge what he saw as the huge conceptual gap between two of his major interests, racism studies and urban sociology, by placing racism at the center of what he complained was the normally power- and racism-evasive urban sociology.¹⁰ I did so by crafting an urban racial state conceptual framework for the analysis of urban racial politics that often requires the skillful management of race relations. That set of analytical concepts makes clear the dialectics between social structure and human agency by revealing the hands at the throttle of the racial mechanisms of urban politics. The book’s case histories also demonstrate the usefulness of Feagin’s conceptualization of racial framing and counter-framing for analyses of racial battles for control of cities.¹¹ As usual, Professor Feagin’s help was much more than intellectual and inspirational. He published *The Urban Racial State* as part of the Perspectives on a Multiracial America series he edits for Rowman & Littlefield.

Feagin’s Influence on Conceptualizing Racism

Conceptualizing Racism: Breaking the Chains of Racially Accommodative Language is my book that is most revealing of who I am as a person and as an activist sociologist. While acknowledging that systemic racism theory is grossly underdeveloped in its specification of the structures, processes, and mechanisms of racial oppression, I use Feagin’s conceptualization of systemic racism as both a template with which to expose the limitations of more racism-evasive race relations theories and as theory work, which if it is to achieve its promise must be more fully fleshed out. Once again, Feagin was supportive of this book, through

both his back-cover endorsement and the publication in the *Racism Review* blog of an essay I wrote on the then recent racial language battles over the Black Lives Matter movement, which I also used to plug the book.¹²

In *Conceptualizing Racism* I developed a set of analytical tools with which to examine how American social science, as a part of the larger white power structure, uses *racially accommodative language* in the stifling of straightforward and honest discourse and analysis of systemic racism. In that book I introduce the concept of *linguistic racial accommodation* to describe that racial censoring process, and advocate that anti-racist scholars and activists muster the courage to engage in what I refer to as *linguistic racial confrontation*, to challenge the racial status quo in both the social sciences and the larger societies of which they are a part. To those ends I identified the following dozen language-centered racism denial practices that sustain linguistic racial accommodation and its faulty conceptualizations of racism, *conceptual: colonization, conflation, extenuation, idealism, inflation, minimization, misdirection, non-definition, obfuscation, realism, rejection, and underdevelopment*.¹³

Using those language-centered racism denial practices I then examined various conceptualizations of “race”, race relations, and racism during different historical periods of American society and its social sciences. I found that *conceptual misdirection* away from racial oppression to the assumed biological inferiority of the racially oppressed provided the ideological justification of white supremacy from 1850 through 1919, when racial control was enforced intensively both during and for decades after the abolition of slavery. In the 1920s racist ideology shifted to the *conceptual extenuation* of Robert Park and other scholars, which assumed that no change in race relations was needed because the nation’s racial issues would eventually work themselves out with inevitable, forthcoming, macro-level social transformations in the society. I then showed how the 1930s witnessed a shift to a *conceptual realism* ideology, embodied in caste theory, that “accepted the racial status quo as a given – a set of social arrangements that could not and should not be changed.” In the 1940s Gunnar Myrdal articulated a *conceptual idealism* ideology that no major enacted changes were needed because a reduction in racial prejudice was inevitable as the nation naturally moved in the direction more congruent with its egalitarian ideals, whereas some Marxist scholars engaged in *conceptual conflation* and *colonization* by reducing race relations to but a part of an assumed to be much larger and more important

class struggle that would be won by the working classes with their coming class revolution.¹⁴

By the 1950s the civil rights movement was well within sight for anyone who cared to look, but remained largely invisible to American sociology, which failed to predict its emergence as it followed the lead of psychology in its largely ahistorical and conceptually minimalist view of race relations as little more than prejudice. While there were some efforts by largely marginalized social scientists in the 1960s and 1970s to catch up with the civil rights movement by articulating the large and robust definition of racism as institutionalized or systemic, that period was brief and “suffered from not only *conceptual underdevelopment* but also *conceptual minimization*, *extenuation* of racism to assumed larger social forces and trends, *conflation* with social class issues, *colonization*, and *obfuscation* through the use of terminology that was so vague as to be meaningless.” (emphasis in original) Reflecting the white backlash of the 1970s, William J. Wilson’s influential *The Declining Significance of Race* was infected by *conceptual: misdirection*, *colonization*, *conflation*, *obfuscation*, *rejection* of racism and racial oppressed specific terminology, *minimization*, and *underdevelopment*. From the 1980s to the present, as American social science has become increasingly sophisticated in its increasingly color-blind, language-centered, racism denial tactics, neither their numbers nor their intensity have diminished, “with the practices of *conceptual misdirection*, *minimization*, and *underdevelopment* now all being prominent, and with *conceptual colonization*, *rejection*, and *obfuscation* still having their impact.”¹⁵ (emphasis in original)

Professor Feagin is also the series editor for a book I am currently writing titled, *Killing African Americans: Police and Vigilante Violence as a Racial Control Mechanism* that was also highly influenced by his systemic racism theory work.

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE: BRINGING FEAGIN TO THE UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT

One of my most painful disappointments as a sociologist was my unsuccessful attempt to have Feagin offered a position at the University of Connecticut where I am currently employed. As I mentioned earlier, Feagin co-authored a book that was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. He had also written scores of other books and even more articles including those published in the discipline’s top referred journals like *American Sociological Review*, the *American Journal of Sociology*, *Social Forces*, *Social Problems*, and the *Annual Review of Sociology*. Indeed, Feagin was a past

president of the American Sociological Association, had a stellar reputation for mentoring both graduate students and professional colleagues, and was widely regarded as the world's leading racism scholar. But none of that was enough to qualify him for a faculty position in the sociology department of the University of Connecticut. That recruitment effort was blocked by intense opposition from most of the European American men in the department, many of whom did quantitative research, who tended to dismiss Feagin's work as largely propaganda and not up to their scholarly standards. Perhaps because it hurt too much for me to accept the possibility that they killed such an opportunity to enhance the department's national reputation through actions that were simply racially reactionary I considered another possibility. Consistent with the Freudian notion of penis envy, much of their opposition to his hiring may have been due to the infectious spread of a severe case of curriculum vitae angst driven by the fact that Feagin, who had probably published more books than all of them combined, clearly had the biggest one. That opposition was led by a department head who shortly after the publication of *Welfare Racism*, a book that went on to win five book awards, sparked controversy by articulating a vision of the department that did not include Racism and Ethnic Group Relations, the name that members of the specialty within the department had given to the area that substituted the word "racism" for "race"—a change which he refused to acknowledge or accept. Things got so crazy after I proposed recruiting Feagin to the University of Connecticut that instead of discussing and deciding what was in essence a personnel matter in a department meeting, as is usually the case, it was actually done online, a move that by law placed that decision-making process at a state university into the public record. Because such data on the normally secret world of faculty hiring was too rare and important to be ignored, I placed a hard copy of those emails in the university archives in a set of papers under my name that I had delivered there years earlier to document the opposition to my White Racism course. Perhaps a better repository for those emails would have been the Ripley's Believe It or Not! Museum in New York's Times Square.

PREJUDICE AND INSTITUTIONAL DISCRIMINATION: FEAGIN'S 1960s AND 1970s SCHOLARSHIP

Joe Feagin's formative years as a racism-focused social scientist occurred from the mid-1960s through the late 1970s, when American race relations see-sawed between the increasing urgency and militancy of the civil

rights and black power movements to the highly institutionalized legacy of the white racial backlash. Although Feagin completed his Ph.D. in sociology at Harvard in 1966, during the peak of African American insurgency, it was toward the end of the 1970s, as the white backlash was becoming institutionalized in American politics and social science, that he came into his own as a racism-focused scholar.¹⁶ By that time Feagin had become so radicalized by the African American freedom struggle that the rightward shifting political winds pushing American social science did not faze him.

Feagin's Work on Prejudice

As a graduate student at Harvard, Feagin was introduced to the sociology of African Americans through a course he took from Thomas Pettigrew and was exposed to the social psychology of prejudice from lectures by psychologist Gordon Allport. Allport's influence, and sociology's own concern at that time with socially contextualizing prejudice, could be seen in the fact that the first two journal articles listed on Feagin's curriculum vitae, in 1964 and 1965, focused on prejudice.¹⁷

As the civil rights movement became more militant and entered into its black power phase, Feagin became radical. Much of that radicalization process occurred while he was employed at the University of California at Riverside (1966–1970) where he was exposed to the writings of Karl Marx and other radicals. That process continued at the University of Texas at Austin where his understanding of racial oppression was deepened by his exposure to the scholarship of radical African American intellectuals and activists, including W. E. B. DuBois and Oliver C. Cox. While at the University of Texas, Feagin's growing concern with African American insurgency manifested itself in his Pulitzer Prize award nominated co-authored book with Harlan Hahn, *Ghetto Revolts: The Politics of Violence in American Cities*.¹⁸ Another influence that helped free Feagin from the largely still racism-blind disciplinary boundaries of professional sociology was the year (1974–1975) he spent away from academia as a Scholar-in-Residence with the US Commission on Civil Rights where, with his ideas expanded further by the influence of radical African American, Latino/a, and feminist scholars, and by the more practical needs of government bureaucrats and lawyers to define and track discrimination, he crafted his ideas about the institutionalized nature of racism and sexism.¹⁹

The Feagins: Conceptualizing Institutional Racism

Reflecting what I have referred to as the bipolar political nature of the 1970s, with both its racially insurgent and counter-insurgent scholarship, in 1978, the same year William J. Wilson's *The Declining Significance of Race* was published, Joe Feagin and his co-author and wife, Clairece Booher Feagin, published their book, *Discrimination American Style: Institutional Racism and Sexism*, one of his earliest excursions into what would evolve into his perspective on systemic racism.

That previous year Joe Feagin explicated his understanding of institutionalized racism in an article he published titled "Indirect Institutionalized Discrimination," in which he introduced the analytical typology and key concepts around which *Discrimination American Style*, and much of his other work on institutionalized and systemic racism, is organized. In stressing both the systemic and cumulative nature of racial oppression he concluded that it is huge because it entails "the interaction between direct and indirect discrimination, and between discrimination in various institutional sectors" which "takes on a complex form which can be termed 'systemic discrimination' or the 'web of discrimination.'" That is, "oppression can be interlocking and cumulative, involving many institutional sectors at the same point in time."²⁰ In brief, Joe Feagin's typology explains racism as not only a highly structured phenomenon, but a very dynamic process as well.

What makes Feagin's contributions to the systemic racism perspective so audacious and significant is that they did not come under the safe cover of the civil rights movement. Following the lead of Wilson, foundations, and the disciplines' most prestigious journals, this was a time when, in response to white backlash, other scholars were shrinking their conceptualization of race relations back to its pre-civil rights movement size with the focus, once again, largely not on racial oppression but on what has historically been conceptualized as the country's "Negro problem." Like Wilson, Joe Feagin and Clairece Booher Feagin were very much aware that the nation was experiencing a white backlash, but unlike Wilson they chose to be out of sync with the changing racial times. The very first line of the preface to *Discrimination American Style* reads "as this goes to press, concern over discrimination against non-white minorities and women has receded substantially into the background. The publicly expressed concern of the 1960s over such matters seems to have evaporated. The current public concern is over the treatment of white males in 'affirmative action' programs."²¹

Much of Joe Feagin's earliest work on contextualizing prejudice and institutionalizing discrimination entailed his challenge to the dominant tendency within American social science toward the conceptual minimization of race relations to prejudice and bigotry. Feagin also found it necessary to challenge the prevailing conceptual extenuation of Robert Park and others that racial prejudice was largely a relic of the past that would dissolve as African Americans were fully assimilated into American society. Although these critiques of the conceptual weaknesses of the dominant race relations paradigm were essential in establishing the foundation for what would later become Feagin's conceptualization of institutionalized and systemic racism, unfortunately his attempt—alongside Clairece Booher Feagin—in *Discrimination American Style* to develop a general theory of discrimination followed in the tradition of sociologists not focusing directly and explicitly on racism, with its attendant problem of the conceptual conflation, in this case of racism with sexism.²²

Following the lead of the African American civil rights activist Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture) and political scientist Charles Hamilton, the Feagins distinguished between the overt discrimination of individuals and small groups of people and the often covert discrimination of institutions.²³ They were, however, able to go into much greater analytical detail by using Joe Feagin's conceptualization of a four-fold typology of discrimination based on the two dimensions of scale and intent (i.e., as I noted in *Conceptualizing Racism*, “the extent of its embeddedness within larger organizations and the extent to which discrimination is intentional”). These four types of discrimination are isolate discrimination, small-group discrimination, direct institutionalized discrimination, and indirect institutionalized discrimination.²⁴

Isolate discrimination is the type of discrimination that is smallest in scale and intentional. Here, the Feagins refer to the intentional acts of individuals against members of a racially or gender subordinated group that are not condoned by the larger society. An example is a racially bigoted real estate agent who steers African American clients to homes only within racially segregated African American neighborhoods. Although small-group discrimination also entails that same level of intent, its actions are carried out by more than one, but a small number of people. An example is a group of racially bigoted youth who write racist bigoted graffiti that makes it clear that people of color are not welcome in their neighborhood. On the other hand, if there is a written or otherwise widely understood racial covenant that expresses the intent of the

existing members of a neighborhood to exclude people of color, this is an example of direct institutionalized discrimination. Finally, even in neighborhoods where there is no overt intent to keep people of color out, existing rental and home purchasing practices such as the location of listings, real estate agency venues, and reliance on word of mouth information about available listings may result in indirect institutionalized discrimination.²⁵

According to the Feagins, indirect institutionalized discrimination may also manifest itself in two more distant forms: side-effect discrimination and past-in-present discrimination. It is with these concepts that he expands his institutionalized racism theory closer to a theory of systemic racism. By side-effect indirect institutionalized discrimination the Feagins mean the negative impact that intentional racial discrimination within one institutional setting has on the racially oppressed in another. For example, because of housing discrimination parents must send their children to highly segregated poor quality inner-city schools, which in turn limits the children's ability to find employment that provides a living wage for themselves and their own children. By past-in-present indirect institutionalized discrimination the Feagins refer to the impact of past intentional discrimination on what is widely seen as outcomes that appear to have nothing to do with racial discrimination. For example, due to the housing discrimination and its resultant reduced educational and employment opportunities her parents faced, a young adult has little or no family wealth she can use to provide a down payment on a house in a racially integrated neighborhood with good opportunities for her children. In this way the concept of past-in-present indirect institutionalized discrimination not only suggests that racism is systemic in its structure, but also shines analytical light on how racial oppression reproduces itself by making clear that its effects are cumulative, not just for individuals at a given point in time, but across generations.²⁶

SYSTEMIC RACISM THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE: FEAGIN'S 1980s TO 2000s SCHOLARSHIP

In 1980, two years after the first edition of *Discrimination American Style* was published, and what was the beginning of the very racially divisive Reagan presidency era of US history, which further institutionalized the white racial backlash within American politics, Joe Feagin co-authored an important article on institutionalized discrimination.

In that article Feagin and Douglas Eckberg attempted to flesh out still more of the details of institutionalized racism and to place them within their larger social and historical context. For example, in a section of that article titled “The Larger Context,” they stress that “the various patterns of discrimination ultimately reside within the larger context of a regional or national social system.” Finally, in locating that current larger milieu within its historical context they state that “the joint effect of discrimination across institutional sectors is substantial because the US societal system is racially discriminatory in its age-old foundations.”²⁷

In my *Conceptualizing Racism* book I note that if we conceptualize a social system as comprising all of a society’s interrelated and overlapping institutions and other social entities only a small jump is needed to take us from an institutional to a systemic racism perspective.²⁸ And as I noted in the previous section, Feagin had already begun his journey into the systemic racism theory arena in the late 1970s and the early 1980s with his conceptualizations of side-effect and past-in-present indirect institutionalized racism, and the further fleshing out of the mechanisms of prejudice and discrimination, by placing them within both their immediate organizational and larger social and historical contexts.

Unfortunately the theory work that was badly needed to delineate the structures, processes, and mechanisms of institutionalized and systemic racism went largely undone during the next two decades. In line with the by then highly institutionalized white backlash, more mainstream sociologists like William J. Wilson, Michael Omi, Howard Winant, and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva helped shrink the large and robust theory of racism, that had been thrust into the national discourse by African American social protest, back to its pre-civil rights movement size.²⁹

As I note in *Conceptualizing Racism*, the institutionalized racism theoretical perspective suffered the fate of conceptual inflation by those who abused its “notion that racism was institutionalized and impersonal ... to engage in the conceptual slothfulness of simply accusing institutions of being racist because they yielded racially disparate outcomes, without the hard work of specifying the machinery through which such racial inequality is actually generated and produced.” By allowing its advocates to essentially claim that, as Robert Blauner put it, “everything and every place is racist,” it lost an essential requirement of any definition, the ability to effectively delimit. Consequently, for all practical purposes, if everything is racist, nothing is racism. I also noted that the concept of institutionalized racism suffered from what appeared to be conceptual

inflation not because, as Blauner argued, it was too large but because its inner workings were too conceptually underdeveloped to specify the relationship between human agency and social structure by identifying the hands working its throttle.³⁰ The same fate could await the systemic racism perspective, which ironically was provided a relatively safe haven for those decades by gaining widespread acceptance among anti-racists outside of the social sciences.

During that crucial period of 1980 through 2000 Feagin was largely pre-occupied with other work as he made important contributions in urban sociology and his other areas of interest, and as he established himself as a major textbook author. Unfortunately, from a theory development perspective, much of his time was spent in revising his popular textbooks, including five revisions of his race and relations textbook and the publication of five editions of his social problems textbook. Many of the other books Feagin published during this period and since have also been intended for a large audience, readers generally assumed by publishers not to have much interest in social theory. Moreover, relatively few of his articles were concerned with theory, with those that were tending to offer the reader a critical overview of race and ethnic relations and discrimination theories rather than new theory work. So, although Feagin did some useful theory work there and in his race and ethnic relations textbooks, much of his concern at that time, when his focus was specifically on racism, was with largely substantive topics like racism in education, global racism, and everyday racism. Consequently, the task of building systemic racism theory was largely pushed to the side. However, while there was not much theory work done on institutional and systemic racism during those two decades, Feagin increasingly used explicit systemic racism language, as was evident in the first (1995) edition of his co-authored *White Racism* book, which defines white racism as “a centuries-old system intentionally designed to exclude Americans of color from full participation in the economy, polity, and society.”³¹

Feagin’s current work focuses overwhelmingly on racism—racism conceptualized as a highly organized *system* of oppression. He now writes and talks very explicitly in the language of systemic racism. This is what Feagin had to say in a 2015 *New York Times* opinion blog interview about the need for social scientists to move beyond what I refer to as the conceptually minimalist view of racism to one that examines it from a systemic racism analytical lens:

Most mainstream social scientists dealing with racism issues have relied heavily on inadequate analytical concepts like prejudice, bias, stereotyping and intolerance. Such concepts are often useful, but were long ago crafted by white social scientists focusing on individual racial and ethnic issues, not on society's systemic racism. To fully understand racism in the US, one has to go to the centuries-old counter-system tradition of African-American analysts and other analysts of color who have done the most sustained and penetrating analyses of institutional and systemic racism.³²

Feagin makes the same point in his book *Racist America*, which was first published in 2000 and released in its third edition in 2014. In its first chapter, "Systemic Racism: A Comprehensive Perspective," he delineates the huge racial difference that has existed historically in the United States when it comes to the conceptualization of race relations, with European Americans tending to engage in what I refer to as conceptual minimization with their small, individual-centered conceptualizations like prejudice and stereotyping compared to African Americans working outside the restraints of professionalized sociology who have a long tradition of viewing racial oppression as being systemic. After rooting the systemic racism perspective in the writings of African American intellectuals like "Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Oliver Cox, [and] Kwame Ture," Feagin identifies its basic assumption to be that "white racism" is "centuries-long, deep-lying, institutionalized, and systemic."³³

In *Racist America* Feagin also directs attention to the often subtle and indirect discrimination "mechanisms" that allow systemic racism to reproduce itself, a focus that is essential to understanding the most sophisticated manifestations of contemporary racism. This is what he has to say in laying out his "inter-temporal perspective" on racial oppression, which can account for how "the *whole societal system* of racial inequality" (emphasis in original) is "reproduced as a whole":

For systemic racism to persist across many human generations, it must reproduce well and routinely the necessary socioeconomic conditions. These conditions include substantial control by whites of major economic resources and possession of the political, police, and ideological power to dominate subordinated groups. Systemic racism is perpetuated by social processes that reproduce not only racial inequality but also the fundamental racist relation – on the one hand, the racially oppressed, and on the other, the racial oppressors.³⁴

Although Professor Feagin's work on systemic racism has tended to focus on racism within the borders of the United States, he has also at times noted that systemic racism is not a phenomenon that respects national boundaries. For example, in their examination of both its historical roots in slavery and colonialism and its nearly worldwide contemporary branches, he and his co-authors note that, just as African American intellectuals and scholars revealed long ago, there exists an "international white-racist order." In their article "Racism in the Post-Colonial World: Colonial Expansion and the Globalization of Racism," Pinar Batur-VanderLippe and Feagin trace the worldwide spread of racism through capitalism, world religions, and racist science, and note that in today's internet-connected world racist attitudes, stereotypes, ideologies, sentiments, organizations, and actions are only a few keystrokes away. By placing systemic racism in a global perspective they also show how, although racism is rooted in the same global processes, it manifests itself differently in each nation.³⁵ This suggests that it is through nationally comparative research that we can best understand the common and unique structures and processes of systemic racism.

Feagin elaborates on his systemic racism approach in his book, *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression*. While unfortunately, due to its largely substantive focus, the book fails to flesh out the mechanisms and processes of systemic racism needed to achieve the promise of its subtitle, it does provide us with some additional systemic racism language and concepts. For example, for Feagin systemic refers to "an organized societal whole with many interconnected elements." So by using the term systemic racism Feagin seeks to make clear that, as he puts it: "This white-generated and white-maintained oppression is far more than a matter of individual bigotry, for it has been from the beginning a material, social, and ideological reality. For a long period now, white oppression of Americans of color has been systemic – that is, it has been manifested in all major societal institutions."³⁶ Other than systemic racism, perhaps the most important concept Feagin features in his *Systemic Racism* book is his conceptualization of the white racial frame.

Feagin's White Racial Frame

One of the key requisites of an effective theory of systemic racism is that it not only explains how racism is structured and why it persists but also how it changes in response to various pressures, including challenges by

the racially oppressed. Such an explanation of systemic racism requires both an account of its *objective/materialist* dimension, the usual focus of systemic racism theory, and a closer examination of its more *subjective/cognitive* aspect. To that latter end Feagin deploys his conceptual work on racial frames. In *Systemic Racism* Feagin has this to say about what he refers to as the largely subjective, system-sustaining, white racial frame, which includes thoughts, feelings, language, and other symbols:

Central to the persistence of systemic racism has been the development of a commonplace white racial frame – that is, an organized set of racialized ideas, stereotypes, emotions, and inclinations to discriminate. This white racial frame generates closely associated, recurring, and habitual discriminatory actions. The frame and associated discriminatory actions are consciously or unconsciously expressed in the routine operation of racist institutions of this society.³⁷

Feagin's notion of the white racial frame can be viewed as an enlarged and more elaborate conceptualization of what earlier scholars have identified as the cognitive glue that bonds systems of oppression together – dominant ideologies. Those who, like Feagin, apply a dialectical perspective to how oppressive systems change also rely on the notion of challenging ideologies, or what Feagin refers to in his book *The White Racial Frame* as “counter” or “resistance frames.”³⁸ In *Conceptualizing Racism* I document how large and robust definitions of racism, like the widely held view by the racially oppressed that racism is systemic, are forced into the national discourse during times of successful challenges by the racially oppressed, whereas, during more normal times of linguistic racial accommodation, relatively tiny definitions of racism (e.g., as only attitudes, prejudices, ideologies, or various racial meanings) dominate.

WHAT REMAINS TO BE DONE: TOWARD A FULLER DEVELOPMENT OF SYSTEMIC RACISM THEORY

As I also note in *Conceptualizing Racism* the major limit of Feagin's conceptualization of systemic development is not that it is too large, but that its mechanisms and processes remain largely undeveloped. That is, too little has been done to “connect the dots” of how systemic racism works and why it persists. Among the important factors that must be accounted for in a definitive theory of systemic racism is the centrality

of white racial identity and ideology (and their mobilization) within the mechanisms of racial oppression. Indeed, in my White Racism course I define white racism as the organization of white racial identity in the acquisition and sustenance of white racial privilege. More is needed then to integrate into systemic racism theory the important new insights into racism that are being developed in the area of whiteness studies. Such an understanding of white racial identity, as an organizing principle of systemic racism, requires synthesizing and expanding upon both the micro and macro levels of analysis literature in racism studies and whiteness studies in a comprehensive exploration of the links between “race” as an ideological construct, white racial identity, and the various mechanisms of white racial privilege. Feagin’s conceptualization of systemic racism should also be more sensitive to the fact that not all forms of social organization are institutionally bound. A greater emphasis on white racial identity and ideology might, for example, lead him to re-examine his ideas regarding the extent to which discrimination by individuals can truly be viewed as being “isolate” or apparently extreme forms of discrimination by groups should be deemed “sporadic.” The new research on “everyday racism” by Feagin and others suggests that those types of discriminatory practices are more socially structured and supported than his discrimination typology suggests. Finally, more conceptual work is needed to increase our understanding of the workings of systemic racism as a global phenomenon that extends well beyond national boundaries.

Of course, despite the huge contributions Feagin has made in legitimizing and spreading the systemic racism perspective, its conceptual underdevelopment does not rest solely on his shoulders. All of us scholars who have used the systemic racism conceptual framework are responsible for its current state of underdevelopment and we all have the responsibility of carrying the work of Feagin and others forward. If we do not, despite its authenticity to the experiences of the racially oppressed and its great potential, systemic racism theory could well suffer the fate of the institutional racism perspective.

CONCLUSION

I began the chapter by bearing witness to Professor Feagin’s influence on my own development as a social science rooted intellectual. I then examined his decades of scholarship on systemic racism within the context of a highly racialized struggle between what I refer to as linguistic racial

accommodation and confrontation. As you have seen, such a perspective fits nicely in Feagin's own racial framing perspective, which enables us to better understand his courageous efforts to replace the tiny racially dominant and accommodative white racial framing of racism as mere prejudice, attitudes, ideologies, meanings, and bigoted behavior with a much larger and more robust systemic racism counter-frame congruent with the experiences, understandings, and struggles of African Americans and other people of color. Finally, using that linguistic racial accommodation and confrontation analytical lens I also identified what I consider to be the strengths and weaknesses of Feagin's systemic racism work, and where we need to go toward a more fully conceptualized understanding of systemic racism.

Of course, one chapter can only begin to acknowledge the contributions Feagin has made to our understanding of systemic racism generally and to the intellectual growth and development of a single scholar. Fortunately there are other articles in this collection that tell some of the many other stories of scholars whose lives and thinking Feagin has touched. Because a major goal of this collection on Joe Feagin is to honor him I will end this article by addressing one final issue.

How Can We Best Honor Joe Feagin?

While, as the most influential social science voice of systemic racism theory, Feagin's contributions to our understanding of systemic racism have been Herculean, the task of pushing the concept of systemic racism to the center of the racial discourse of the United States and other highly racialized nations requires an effort that is beyond the reach of a single extraordinarily committed and talented individual.

I hope that all of you who read this book will honor him in the way I think he would appreciate most. That is, by allowing your actions to in essence say, "Thank you Joe Feagin for passing the baton of systemic racism analysis and activism on to us. We will take it from here!"

NOTES

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2. Cazenave, *Conceptualizing Racism*, xiii.

3. Noël A. Cazenave, "From a Committed Achiever to a Radical Social Scientist: The Life Course Dialectics of a 'Marginal' Black American Sociologist," *The American Sociologist* 19, no. 4 (1998): 349, 351–352. doi:[10.1007/BF02691831](https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02691831).
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6. Noël A. Cazenave and Darlene Alvarez Maddern, "Defending the White Race: White Male Faculty Opposition to a 'White Racism' Course," *Race and Society* 2, no. 1 (2000): 25–50. doi:[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1090-9524\(00\)00003-6](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1090-9524(00)00003-6); Joe R. Feagin and Hernán Vera, *Liberation Sociology* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 155–161, 163–164; Stephen Steinberg, *Race Relations: A Critique* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 30; Noël A. Cazenave, "Teaching about Systemic White Racism," in *Teaching Race and Anti-Racism in Contemporary America: Adding Context to Colorblindness*, ed. Kristin Haltinner (Dordrecht Heidelberg: Springer, 2014); Cazenave, *Conceptualizing Racism: Breaking the Chains of Racially Accommodative Language* (Lanham, MD; Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), xvi–xviii.
7. Joe R. Feagin, Hernán Vera, and Pinar Batur, *White Racism: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 1995, 2001), 3.
8. Feagin and Vera, *Liberation Sociology*, 161, 163–164.
9. Kenneth J. Neubeck and Noël A. Cazenave, *Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card Against America's Poor* (New York, Routledge, 2001), 36, 217; Feagin, Vera, and Batur, *White Racism: The Basics*, 17.
10. Joe R. Feagin, *The New Urban Paradigm: Critical Perspectives on the City* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).
11. Noël A. Cazenave, *The Urban Racial State: Managing Race Relations in American Cities* (Lanham, MD; Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 16–17, 19, 34.
12. Noël A. Cazenave, "Black Lives Matter Versus All Lives Matter: Latest Racial Battle over Language," *Racism Review*, 15 September 2015, <http://www.racismreview.com/blog/2015/09/15/black-lives-matter-versus-all-lives-matter-latest-racial-battle-over-language/>.
13. Cazenave, *Conceptualizing Racism: Breaking the Chains of Racially Accommodative Language* (Lanham, MD; Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 24–25.
14. *Ibid.*, 42, 47, 190.
15. *Ibid.*, 191–192.

16. Joe R. Feagin, *Academic Vita*, 2013, <http://sociology.tamu.edu/documents/vitas/feagin.pdf>.
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22. Joe R. Feagin, "Indirect Institutionalized Discrimination: A Typological and Policy Analysis," *American Politics Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (1977): 179. Feagin and Feagin, *Discrimination American Style*, xi, 1–2; Cazenave, *Conceptualizing Racism*, 88–89. doi:[10.1177/1532673X7700500204](https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X7700500204);
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24. Feagin, "Indirect Institutionalized Discrimination"; Feagin and Feagin, *Discrimination American Style*, 34; Cazenave, *Conceptualizing Racism*, 89.
25. Feagin and Feagin, *Discrimination American Style*, 28–32; Cazenave, *Conceptualizing Racism*, 89.
26. Feagin and Feagin, *Discrimination American Style*, 32–33; Cazenave, *Conceptualizing Racism*, 90.
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28. Cazenave, *Conceptualizing Racism*, 73.
29. Ibid., 162.
30. Bob Blauner, "Talking Past Each Other: Black and White Languages of Race," *American Prospect*, (Summer 1992): 60; Cazenave, *Conceptualizing Racism*, 138.
31. Feagin, Vera, and Batur, *White Racism*, ix

32. George Yancey and Joe R. Feagin, "American Racism in the 'White Frame,'" *New York Times*, 27 July 2015, http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/07/27/american-racism-in-the-white-frame/?_r=0.
33. Joe R. Feagin, *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Future Reparations* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 1, 8–9.
34. *Ibid.*, 19.
35. *Ibid.*, 9, 261; Pinar Batur-VanderLippe, and Joe R. Feagin, "Racism in the Post-Colonial World: Colonial Expansion and the Globalization of Racism," *International Policy Review* 6, no. 1, 1996: 30–33.
36. Joe R. Feagin *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xiii, 8, 16.
37. *Ibid.*, 25.
38. Joe. R. Feagin, *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 18–19.

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