




VIRTUAL ISSUE INTRODUCTION

Virtual Issue: Race in the United States in *Social Science History*

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The idea for a special [virtual issue](#) of *Social Science History* (*SSH*) focused on race had its genesis during the 2021 meeting of the journal's editorial board. Appropriately, the theme for the Social Science History Association's meeting that year was "Crisis, Conjunctures, Turning Points," and the conference had been organized as a hybrid event in response to the constraints and exigencies of the public health crisis occasioned by the coronavirus pandemic. While the pandemic had radically transformed some aspects of our personal and professional lives, it had visibly and deeply reinforced others.

At the time of our meeting, we were a year into the nation's latest "racial reckoning," focusing renewed attention on the structural nature of racial inequities in the United States and their long historical legacies in US culture and institutions. Although often described as having been precipitated by an incident of police violence, the public protests demanding that American institutions take full stock of their complicity in sustaining structures of racial inequality had been building for nearly a decade, fueled by not only the crisis in policing, but also battles over historical monuments, rising anti-immigrant sentiment, and violent attacks committed against a range of minoritized groups.

Our general aim in assembling this issue was to curate for *SSH*'s readers a collection of the journal's articles that might best represent some of the different ways that social science historians have understood, analyzed, and tried to offer insights about race. On a deeper level it was our goal, in keeping with the Social Science History Association's intellectual mission, to try and make sense of the present racial conjuncture – to perhaps find among the journal's previously published articles some analytic tools that might prove useful for understanding the current state of racial dynamics and their relation to the overlapping and not unconnected political crisis of a shift toward right-wing authoritarian populism and the economic crisis of deepening inequality under late-stage neoliberal capitalism.

To find a population of research articles and presidential addresses from which to select such representative pieces, we scoured the journal's electronic archives, dating back to its debut issue in Fall 1976, for relevant keywords such as "race," "racism," or

“racial.” Despite the global nature of racial inequality and parallel calls for “racial reckoning” in Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America, our concern with understanding racial dynamics in the United States prompted a decision to focus on gathering those pieces that analyzed the history of race in the US context. From this group of articles, we each assembled a list of favorite pieces and in a virtual meeting compared our selections in hopes of finding areas of agreement and possible areas of focus. Our group of scholars reflect the broader differences and similarities of the Social Science History Association: while we are from different disciplines, a common interest in historical processes creates connections and conversations among us. We do not claim that the selections we present here necessarily include all of the best articles that the journal has published over the decades; there are many other worthy ones that we could just as well have included, and we urge interested readers to explore the journal’s voluminous [offerings](#) on their own. Rather, we offer them as a broadly representative sample of the various themes, methods, approaches, and disciplinary perspectives that make social science history such a stimulating and necessary pursuit.

Our subsequent discussions of the journal’s published articles on race revealed both well-covered areas of study as well as important gaps. While our decision to limit our selections to analyses of the US narrowed the scope of inquiry, it also revealed that very few of the journal’s published articles analyzed race outside of the US context. Of those dealing with US racial dynamics, the majority focused on the continental United States and on African Americans. This was particularly striking given the expansion in the 1980s and 1990s of a vast body of historical scholarship on Latine, Indigenous, Asian, and Pacific Islander populations in the United States and its territories. This pointed to the need to encourage article submissions on a range of racialized populations and in a diverse range of global settings and to think about how we might respond to the 2022 call by past SSHA president Julian Go (2024), in his presidential speech, to address the roots of racial inequality in colonialism and imperialism more fully.

We also found markedly few published pieces that substantively addressed health as an axis of racial inequality in the United States. Freshly reminded of how a public health crisis can both disrupt everyday life while deepening existing patterns of inequality and creating new ones, we concluded that this too would be an area that demands further attention among submissions.

We organized the articles in this issue into six sections. These sections were not preordained but arose organically out of the reviewing, reading, and selection process. While we divided the articles by section, we also note that many themes cut across these sections: race, of course, cuts across them all, but other articles addressing such issues as social analysis and social policy are also relevant to more than one section. We further arranged the articles in each section in temporal order to emphasize the shifts in methodological innovations and generational debates across time. We discuss them in this introduction, however, in substantive order.

The first section of selected articles offers an overview of some of the journal’s most important interventions into the general scholarly discussion about race. These three broad conceptual essays, in different ways, make a case for race as a foundational, constitutive subject for social science history. Two are by sociologists and one by a political scientist (who was trained as a historian), so they represent

some of the association's disciplinary and intellectual range. Interestingly, they are all from the same era, suggesting that perhaps they were responding to common intellectual currents or problems in social science history as broadly understood at that moment. Ira Katznelson's 1999 presidential address provides a historical overview of W. E. B. Du Bois's writing and research on race, asserting his centrality both to this area of study and to American social science more broadly. Marking an important demographic shift in the United States and supporting Du Bois's assertion about the durability of the American color line in the face of social change, Silvia Pedraza's article, published in 2000, identifies themes in US social science research on Latine populations, a group that by 2000 had become the nation's largest group identified as a minority. Addressing both the cultural-linguistic turn in the social sciences and the critical intervention of intersectionality, Evelyn Nakano Glenn's (1998) piece introduces important dimensions to the analysis of race by considering its deep and abiding links with gender and class.

The second section tackles the question of race, place, and space. Not surprisingly, in one way or the other, most of these essays deal with the Great Migration of Black Americans from South to North, and largely from rural to urban places, over the course of the twentieth century, particularly in waves during and after the two world wars. This has been a consistent and fertile object of study for SSH scholars. At the same time, these articles highlight the range of methods and approaches to issues of space, migration, and the constitution of the racial structure of American society over time, including historical demography, urban sociology, GIS analysis, and econometrics. This section, then, also demonstrates the conceptual and methodological development of SSH as an interdisciplinary journal over time. Hyun Hae Bae and Lance Freeman (2021) provided an overview of the Great Migration by looking at varying levels of residential segregation at the beginning of the process and showing how it increased over time. Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck (1990) reexamined the causes of the Great Migration, arguing that the role of racial violence needed to be emphasized. Townsend Price-Spratlen (2008) looked at the other side of this process by arguing that Black migrants were drawn to locations with vibrant and large Black communities. Katherine J. Curtis White (2005) also looked at some of the outcomes of migration, and in particular, for women. She showed that Black women migrants were more likely to be employed than White women, but that White women had higher-status jobs. Finally, Amy E. Hillier's (2005) article is not directly related to the Great Migration per se, but it shows how racial segregation was created and sustained in the face of demographic change in the mid-twentieth century, in this case in Philadelphia. Thus, it shows indirectly how the Great Migration did not erase, but in fact, helped to create residential segregation.

The third section explores a range of approaches to understanding race as a structure of power and domination over time in US society, again highlighting a range of methodological and disciplinary approaches. Racialization was, and is, a means of social control, and this section explores various mechanisms by which such control is constructed and sustained. Timothy Shortell's (2004) article shows how Black people envisioned abolition as a way to create a positive identity as US citizens, that is, a positive statement about what free Blacks would become. In doing so, however, they echoed other antebellum social discourses of the nascent

commercial elite. Joseph Gerteis's (2003) article argues that White Populists and Black Republicans saw mutual interest in cooperation for strategic reasons, but that the alliance collapsed because of interracial competition. Lisa D. Cook, Trevon D. Logan, and John M. Parman (2018) showed how interracial violence was linked to segregation: greater segregation was associated with higher levels of lynching of Black residents. We did not find many examples of racialization involving other than Black-White power relations in *SSH*. As Pedraza (2000) noted, and we emphasize here, we see a need to move beyond marking "Black" as synonymous with race. Still, two articles stand out in this regard. Jonathan Obert (2021) showed how the US state extended its power through federal policing that asserted White supremacy in the Indian Territories, where "outlaws" of mixed or ambiguous descent were seen as synonymous with banditry. Lauren L. Basson's (2005) article shows how European-American policy makers and political observers exercised political domination over Indigenous Hawaiians through racist policies that on the one hand espoused inclusive universalistic principles but at the same time attempted to limit Indigenous political participation. Surprisingly, and in contrast with other contemporaneous racialized power plays elsewhere in the US, a relatively liberal suffrage qualification was adopted through political compromise.

In section four, the connecting theme is race as an axis of inequality in US society, economy, politics, and policy, and its interaction with other dimensions of stratification, again highlighting a range of methodological tools and disciplinary approaches. Two articles give useful summaries of major trends. Sarah K. Bruch, Aaron J. Rosenthal, and Joe Soss (2019) provided a broad overview of inequality from 1940 to 2010. They showed that this period was marked by both the relative stability of racial exclusion (as defined by limits on group access to societal institutions and relations) and a relative decline in racial subordination (the relative placement of groups within institutions and relations). This period was also marked by a consolidation of national trends and an erosion of subnational (state-level) ones. John Brueggemann (2002) showed the contradictory effects of the New Deal of the 1930s. While the policies were, in part, a step towards a racially inclusive society reflecting the government officials' sense of responsibility toward all its citizens, including the Black population, at the same time, the legislative record continued to be racialized and discriminatory, actively excluding and subjugating Black citizens in arenas such as welfare policies. The other three articles in this section consider processes that can produce or contribute to the persistence of inequality. Siddharth Chandra and Angela Williams Foster (2005) showed that inequality – measured as the wage gap between Black and White workers – was a major driver of social unrest in the 1960s. Tatishe M. Nteta (2014) found that Black persons' views of immigrants in the past and present are remarkably similar: Black Americans expressed support for restrictive immigration policies as well as negative views of new immigrants, but at a lower level than White Americans. These views among Black Americans seem to be explained by perceptions of competition in the labor force and other arenas that could negatively affect their already precarious status. Jessica Trounstein (2015) argued that economically and racially homogenous urban communities invested more in public goods (e.g., parks, roads, schools, and public safety) than did diverse ones. Thus, as racial diversity and income inequality increased, so did the number of

private security guards and White children enrolled in private schools, as a larger proportion of Whites' security and education needs were provided by the private sector. This trend increased inequality and stratification over time.

The fifth section of the virtual issue explores race as a critical constitutive feature of working-class formation and the economic development of the United States, again from a variety of perspectives. Ronald Bailey's (1990) article appears as part of a multipart special issue on the transatlantic slave trade in *SSH* that spanned four issues of the journal in 1989 (Vol. 13, 4) and 1990 (Vol. 14, 1, 2, and 3) – clearly a research area that commanded a great deal of attention from the association and the journal at that time. These were critically important debates in which *SSH* authors were key participants. Bailey argued that while slavery per se was present only in the southern United States, the commercial and industrial activity related to the slave trade were key to industrialization across the country. Cotton produced by enslaved labor played a pivotal role in the expansion of interregional trade. Africa provided the majority of the enslaved population during European colonization. New England merchants were involved in the slave trade, and New England depended upon the slavery-based economies of the West Indies. Thus, the labor of enslaved persons was key to US industrialization. Warren C. Whately (1993) showed that strikebreaking by Black Americans was a relatively rare occurrence, and that it peaked during the height of Jim Crow segregation in the 1920s, when immigration from Europe was restricted. Whately also showed that the social cost to a Black strikebreaker in a Black community was lower than in a European-American community, and that these patterns were related to labor unions' histories of racial discrimination. Moon-Kie Jung (1999), in contrast, showed how an interracial working-class identity was formed in Hawai'i, not by the promotion of a color-blind ideology, but instead by directly addressing race-conscious practices in an effort to counter racial divisions, eliminate racist practices, and explicitly create a new interracial narrative of identity. Enobong Hannah Branch and Melissa E. Wooten (2012) looked at another aspect of labor – the labor of lower-status women who assisted higher-status women as domestic servants. This occupation was racialized over time, shifting from predominantly native White women, to immigrant White women, to Black women between 1880 and 1920. For White women, these domestic positions were generally a stage of life, but because of persistent discrimination, Black women had few options. Increased educational and occupational opportunities available to both categories of White women in the early 1900s left only Black women available for domestic work. White women racialized the occupation, suggesting that Black women were particularly suited for such work. These articles point out that the labor of racialized groups has been key to the US economy across time, in both highly visible and invisible ways.

Since we were discussing themes around which to build this special issue during the COVID pandemic, it seemed obvious that health was an important issue, especially amid extensive discussions of racial disparities in morbidity and mortality during the crisis. Alexandre I. R. White's 2018 article about pandemics in South Africa in 1901 (which we did not officially include here, as it is not focused on the United States as are the other articles) demonstrates to us that *SSH* scholars are on the cutting edge of research that is relevant to current events! We also noticed,

however, that there have been relatively few articles on the historical relationship between health and race, and we hope that our drawing together of these articles inspires more research. Chulhee Lee's (2009) article provides a nice overview of the health of the Black American population by considering differences in the mortality of Black Union soldiers during the US Civil War. Lee found that Black soldiers with lighter skin color, residence on a large plantation, or rural residence experienced lower mortality. Mariola Espinosa (2014) debunked the idea that the descendants of West and Central Africans had immunity or resistance to yellow fever. This work, it should be noted, critiques Kenneth F. Kiple and Virginia Kiple's article in volume 1 of *SSH* in 1977, which was the journal's very first article focusing on race – an interesting example of a debate developing across decades of the journal's publications. Sometimes race becomes disguised, for example, erroneously – as “natural” immunity to a disease. David T. Beito and Linda Royster Beito (2006) showed how the Afro-American Hospital in Mississippi provided health care to Black citizens during the Jim Crow era, when segregation made access difficult. Together, these articles help to highlight the ways that the Black population was susceptible to high health risks, but also the ways that these risks were mitigated, at least in part.

These *SSH* articles point to many of the factors that created racial disparities and maintain them today. Moreover, they offer accounts of how White (and other) populations use race to maintain power, such that racialized power relations become embedded and manifest in many areas including the social relations of residence and segregation, labor, and health systems, which are difficult to change. These power relations have been exercised through direct violence, such as lynching and policing, but also through more subtle and less visible forms of oppression, such as domestic labor. These articles in *SSH* strengthen the view that race, racialization, and racism – as critical race theory emphasizes – are explicit and implicit structural features of US society that have been built historically. They have even been reproduced through mechanisms of racialized domination during efforts to undermine them (e.g., the Great Migration, the establishment of Black health care, union organizing). Our review also shows how racially oppressed groups can demonstrate resilience, strength, and courage, for example, through interracial labor unions and the development of community health care. We hope that this collection of essays provides a critical and solemn look at past and present racist social institutions as investigated by contributors to *SSH*, hope for the future, and a keener awareness of how race operates in historical analyses and in present-day lives.

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