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**Against Monotheorism:
Review of Sakamoto et al. (2026)**

Jason Manning, West Virginia University, USA. E-mail: jason.manning@mail.wvu.edu

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Sociologist Donald Black once spoke critically of unidimensional theory in social science – theory that attempts to explain the entirety of human behavior with a single factor. An extreme example of such “monotheorism” is classical Marxian theory, which explains all of human society and social evolution with ownership of the means of production (Black, 2000, pp. 354-355).

Classical Marxism is an extreme example because ownership of productive capital is only a subdimension of the distribution of material wealth – economic stratification. And economic stratification is itself only a subdimension of social stratification – often overlapping with, but not identical to, the distribution of other forms of social stature like prestige and authority.

Few in contemporary social science now wed themselves to Marx’s narrow conception of class as the sole determinant of social relations. But many continue to address human existence solely in terms of inequality – I once heard a colleague in sociology say something like “every course we offer is about inequality, that’s just what our field studies.” Their work is still unidimensional in the sense that it focuses entirely on the distribution of social status, ignoring other dimensions of social relations like intimacy, interdependence, and culture. And some take it further, following Marx into a narrow focus on a subdimension of inequality. But these days the variable of choice is rarely economic class – rather, it is race.

This appears to be the case with the *critical demography* approach as described by our authors. It takes the distinction between white and non-white to be the primary division of modern US society, as well as its main organizing feature. Whites are supreme and privileged; nonwhites are disadvantaged and oppressed. That is all ye know, and all ye need to know.

Race is certainly relevant to social stratification in the US, where chattel slavery led to the growth of a racial caste system. When the caste system was in effect during the era of Jim Crow laws in the American South, blacks Americans were expected to defer to their white neighbors, while white children were explicitly instructed not to use titles and honorifics toward blacks (see

generally Ayers, 1992, pp. 132-159). Blacks who were insufficiently deferential might even be punished with violence. Blacks in general were thus hierarchical subordinates to whites in general. Having lower average education and wealth, and being negatively stereotyped by whites, they also tended to be lower on other subdimensions of social status.

But even in the Deep South at the height of this caste system, not every single black was lower than every single white on every dimension of social status. A black man might earn a positive reputation among both white and black neighbors as a “deserving and peaceable citizen,” while a white person might be a notorious deviant (Senechal de la Roche 1997, p. 252). And while the caste system could make it dangerous for a black man to be too economically successful, there were certainly relatively prosperous blacks who owned land and homes, just as there were white vagrants without a penny to their name. Even within the confines of a strict hierarchy, these other status variations shaped behavior in both intraracial and interracial interactions (for the case of violence, see generally Senechal de la Roche 1996, 1997).

Thus, even in a time and place where we would expect race to have the tightest correlation with social status, using it as the sole measure of advantage or disadvantage produces an incomplete picture of reality. With the dismantling of the caste system, this is all the more so. A world with black millionaires, academy award winners, best-selling authors, Congressmen, cabinet members, four-star generals, Supreme Court Justices, and US Presidents might not be one of racial harmony and equality, but it is certainly not the world of Jim Crow.

Yet it’s become increasingly fashionable to treat racial categories as prime movers of social stratification. White privilege is taken as axiomatic, with little regard to the distribution of wealth and education within racial groupings, let alone consideration that advantage and disadvantage can be situational (Collins, 2000) – for instance, the advantage of a particular skin color when lost in a strange neighborhood in the dark of night varies from East St. Louis to rural West Virginia.

The *critical demography* approach, at least as described here, seems so self-evidently wrong-headed that it’s hard to work up too much enthusiasm even to argue against it. But the authors appear to be making a good faith attempt at intellectual engagement by investigating the interaction of socioeconomic class with racial and ethnic identity.

Our authors measure socioeconomic standing with educational attainment, hourly wages, poverty status, affluence, and household income. On their face, these are sound indicators of socioeconomic class. The authors measure race and ethnicity with granular questions allowing them to distinguish different subgroups of whites and look for socioeconomic variation between them. And, of course, they find it: The odds of being a high school drop-out, for instance, vary a lot between Cajuns and Swedes.

Comparing multivariate models, the authors find that a crude racial comparison generally fits the data less closely than their preferred model that takes account of ethnic subgroups and control variables like nativity, English proficiency, or metropolitan status.

To the extent I am skeptical of any part of this article, I worry that the authors tread close to the unidimensional error in their own way. Their discussion of social stratification focuses on the subdimension of material wealth, a matter of salaries and wages, with educational credentials mattering mostly for earning ability. But the rising class inequality they describe is part of a larger pattern in which the college-educated increasingly live their lives with few relational or cultural

ties to the less educated (Murray, 2013). Writing in the 1970s, Randall Collins (1979) already saw that education was welding the credentialed classes into a kind of “pseudoethnicity,” a distinct cultural group who, despite various national and racial origins, could easily recognize one another as the better sort of people. The authors cite early sociologist Max Weber’s conception of class as “market position,” but they would do well to recall his conception of “status honor” as something distinct from purely material wealth (Weber, 1964, p. 186).

I also think the authors would be better served in future efforts by giving more thought to the deeper relationships between their variables. For instance, education switches from being an outcome variable in one model to a control variable in another, with little discussion of it being both an indicator of status (a credential *is* a form of status, much like other titles and honors) and something that predicts and explains other forms of status (education, or at least a credential, helps one make money). To that we might add that educational attainment is capturing individual characteristics – intelligence, conscientiousness, ambition – that causally predict all forms of status attainment.

Along these lines, I would avoid saying the regression models in this study have “explanatory power.” It’s a common way of talking about such things, but misleading. The models here do not embody any general theory of status attainment – at least, not unless one thinks “Cajuns are more likely to drop out of school” is a general principle of social life. These ethnic categories – like the crude racial classifications they replace – are not really explaining variation. Rather, the models are *revealing* it – showing that the relationship of socioeconomic status and ethnicity is far more complex than recognized by those who can only see in black and white. While these models do not explain, they clearly show the need for better explanations.

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