# Issue Conclusion: Sociology, Political Inequality, and Democracy Beyond 2020[1]

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*The articles in this special issue all contribute to a broader and richer understanding of racial and gender politics. They help reveal how racialized and gendered barriers to political participation reflect and reproduce intersecting racialized and gendered systems of domination. In doing so, they provide insights that can be applied to uncover political processes, cultivate political praxis, and draw our awareness to empowering modes of social and political transformation. Given all this, I propose a renewed sociology of political inequality that focuses on advancing democracy. This agenda includes (1) emphasizing the state of democracy over the state of political party competition, (2) highlighting how democratizing social change happens at various levels, (3) developing and practicing empirically grounded public advocacy, (4) seeing social and political structures are interconnected, and (5) employing sociology in the service of democracy.*

## INTRODUCTION

At the time of this publication, the 2020 U.S. presidential election lurks around the corner. It looms over the nation, threatening a potential slide into deeper political, social, economic, and environmental catastrophe while also revealing new opportunities to build mass movements for democracy, racial and gender equality, and social progress. In that vein, this special issue has sought to unearth relevant insights and perspectives. The introduction puts forth four aims of this issue: to examine how racialized and gendered meanings and structures interact with political outcomes, to identify some explanatory causal mechanisms, to examine issues of generalizability and prediction, and finally and most relevant to my concluding remarks, to set the agenda for future scholarship and practice.

## REFLECTING ON THESE 2020 VISIONS: FORESIGHT, HINDSIGHT, OR INSIGHT?

All of the pieces in this special issue contribute to a broader and richer understanding of racial and gender politics. But do these contributions provide *foresight*, whereby we can anticipate the political future? Given the limitations of prediction, they may instead serve yet another function. Do they instead provide *hindsight* by helping us better understand the social and historical forces that led to this

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moment? Indeed, these are valid and useful ways of applying these articles. They help us understand the past and the future. However, I would like to propose an alternative approach. The articles contained within this volume provide *insight* that can be broadly applied to uncover political processes, cultivate political praxis, and draw our awareness to empowering modes of social and political transformation.

In the first article, "The Crisis of Masculinity for Gendered Democracies: Before, During, and After Trump," Myra Marx Ferree analyzes an emergent contemporary form of racialized hegemonic masculinity. The ongoing gendering of democracy and the influence of dominant gendered performances of self in the social and political system is well documented. Ferree notes that gender operates "as a glue" that "attaches the identifications of individuals, each with their own masculinity, femininity, sexuality and nationality, to the postures leaders display, consciously or not, in the theater of democratic politics." This powerful analysis of the gendered (and racialized) heart of American liberal democracy extends to the 2020 field. Clearly, since 2016, it has become political and sociological conventional wisdom that in a political system still dominated by white capitalist men and their interests, Donald Trump's continued appeals to dominant forms of whiteness and masculinity help him maintain power.

However, Ferree implores us to consider how matters of racialized hegemonic masculinity in our political system extend beyond Trump. These contexts also shape the gender and racial politics of electability among Democratic presidential hopefuls. Ferree points out that "competing for the elusive 'center,' the Democratic Party has an interest in showing its 'ability to lead,' which translates into performative loyalty to racialized hegemonic masculinity, even when the party accepts partnership premises in its policy and inclusive representation among its candidates." This tension between the fealty to hegemonic forms of racialized and gendered identity and social praxis seen and the goal of advocacy and representation for racialized and gendered communities remains a crucial dynamic shaping struggles for racial and gender justice through electoral politics.

In "Antiblackness as a Logic for Anti-Immigrant Resentment: Evidence from California," Cristina Mora and Tianna Paschel examine survey data in California to investigate the relationship between antiblack racial attitudes and resentment against immigrants. Antiblackness and anti-immigrant politics suffuse the history and present of U.S. politics. Politicians and political operatives of both major parties have successfully appealed to, amplified, radicalized, and mobilized these sentiments, often in tandem, in order to attain and maintain power. Yet, as Mora and Paschel point out, the relationship between these two modes of prejudice remain obscured, despite cases that suggest a connection.

The connection between antiblackness and anti-immigrant resentment enables modes of political and social oppression and politics of solidarity among African American and the diverse immigrant groups racialized as nonwhite. This insight opens the door to illuminate processes of racialization and othering and particularly, "the precise mechanisms through which these relationships are happening." Moreover, these biases and resentments deserve attention for how they influence not just voting but also patterns of outreach, mobilization, and, coalition formation through the political process.

Andrew Perrin and Mosi Ifatunji provide empirical insights on the relationship between political and racial identities, voting practices, and a deeply racialized Trump policy—the proposed wall along the U.S.-Mexico border. The "border wall" proposal became a touchstone of the Trump campaign and administration and a symbol of racist and nationalist politics of immigration reliant on dehumanization, criminalization, and exclusion. The "border wall" phenomenon represents both the violent ethnonationalism of the political movement that thrust Trump into the White House and the unique political dynamics of the 2016 election. As Anderson (2019) notes,

> Donald Trump's plan to build a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border did not come from security analysts following years of study or through evidence that a wall would reduce illegal immigration. Amazingly, for something so central to the current U.S. president, the wall came about as a "mnemonic device" thought up by a pair of political consultants to remind Donald Trump to talk about illegal immigration.

The "wall" is not just a physical barrier or a simultaneously inhumane and ineffective effort at reducing rates of undocumented migrants entering the country. It is primarily a polarizing symbol of racialized anti-immigrant sentiment. This symbol, coalesced in the phrase "build the wall," has echoed throughout the nation from political rallies to middle schools (Wallace and LaMotte 2016).

Accordingly, Perrin and Ifatunji find that support for the border wall came to signify a larger political agenda that promotes inequality and inclusion in a particular voting bloc working to advance an exclusive vision of dominant racialized and gendered interests. Moreover, black respondents did not express the same connection between group threat and support for the border wall. Similarly to Mora and Paschel, they suggest that a sense of group interests and ethnic competition refracted through dominant white racial identities and racist ideology manifests in such anti-immigrant resentment. Perrin and Ifatunji point out that the border wall proposal became a proxy for "identification with Trump" and thus resulted in "quick changes in policy positions during and since the 2016 election." Through the formation of coalitions and a new political identity (as Trump supporters), this racialized specter of group threat was raised and signified.

Bilal Sekou's "The Limits of Black Politics in the Post–Civil Rights Era" draws on political theory and history to critique the pluralist assumption that "the mobilization of blacks for electoral politics alone will inevitably translate into opportunities to influence the making of public policy." Noting the maintenance of efforts at voter suppression and political exclusion that have blunted the electoral impact of black political interests, Sekou's thesis points to the rise of the Black Power movement and the resulting reactions and political realignment as a key factor in shifting black politics in form and strategy from centralizing protest politics to electoral politics.

Despite its cultural association with radicalism, Sekou argues the rise of black power as a slogan and strategy became translated into reformist goals to place black people in positions of power as a means of racial justice. This became the primary mode of political engagement over collective action toward more fundamental sociopolitical revolutions. Moreover, the implications for this trajectory and

political stratagem in the context of white backlash and the 2016 election suggest the need to rethink the pluralist approach to the empowerment of black people through electoral politics.

Sekou predicts, based on these factors, the reelection of Donald J. Trump. While all attempts at prediction are difficult, I would like to caution against the perception that this is inevitable. In my reading of Sekou's analysis, it is also possible that the backlash to Trump's election catalyzed an emerging return to protest politics and organizing outside of the mainstream political apparatus due to frustration with the limitations of the elite-dominated political system. These dynamics could therefore also potentiate a multiracial and gender inclusive solidarity movement that serves as an effective counterweight in the 2020 election. At the very least, such movements, emboldened by growing awareness of these limitations, could continue to gestate and come to fruition in the future.

The limitations of traditional electoral politics to deliver social transformations are certainly of prescient concern to those now drawing their attention, hopes, and anxieties toward the outcome of the 2020 presidential election. Consider, for instance, the Democratic Party's public and arguably largely symbolic co-optation of the Black Lives Matter movement during the 2016 election. The Black Lives Matter organization responded by pointing out that the party had not actually made a substantive effort to adapt its policies and practices, arguing "the Democratic Party, like the Republican and all political parties, have historically attempted to control or contain Black people's efforts to liberate ourselves" (Byrnes 2015).

But what about those actors and organizations that are less touted than the mainstream political players but much more agile and responsive? Drawing on practical knowledge and scholarly evidence, Jonathan Martin analyzes the possibilities of progressive third parties in the United States as an instrument for marginalized groups to attain greater influence and equality. Overall, Martin's analysis examines the challenges faced by Greens, Socialists, and Labor political organizations in "creating a socially diverse new party, one that is not largely dominated by white middle-class people, unlike many leftist groups."

The role of grassroots political organizations in U.S. politics remains underexamined by sociologists. Key social reforms benefiting women and people of color have been advanced by such parties, but the present moment demands a new investigation. There exist severe limitations of the contemporary Democratic Party to respond to the interests and concerns of everyday people, particularly those adversely impacted by capitalism, gender oppression, and structural racism. Given these barriers for advancing a truly emancipatory political agenda through the party due to the influence of corporations and dominant group interests, this topic could not have greater prescience.

The lacking presence of a powerful and progressive political party on issues of racial and gender inequalities in the United States suggests an opening for a new political organizations and actors to emerge, seize a portion of the electorate concerned with these issues, and influence the political agenda. Martin argues that "the more specific problem is how to effectively combine a strong progressive populist message, highlighting the common and multifaceted exploitation of ordinary Americans by economic elites, with a significant focus on nonclass oppressions."

I would like to further suggest that this is not simply a matter of messaging but also the practices that organizations use to mobilize and organize groups who are politically disempowered by structures of gender and racial inequality. It is difficult to predict whether this opportunity will be actualized by progressives and whether it takes place through minor or major parties. It depends on the strategies pursued by political actors in relation to the opportunities and constraints of the political structure. From this vantage point, it is precisely those practices and strategies that deserve close attention from sociologists.

Our political system is not only unequal but entwined with the ubiquitous mass media processes that play an increasing role in rationalizing or contesting these inequalities. Our media is politicized and our politics are mediated. In "Fake News Is Real: The Significance and Sources of Disbelief in Mainstream Media in Trump's America," Taeku Lee and Christian Hosam, examine the growing disbelief in the validity of the political reporting of mainstream media and the consolidation of this disbelief among Trump-supporting conservatives.

The trajectory of the term *fake news* provides an astounding example of these connections and their implications. Lee and Hosam point out that the connotation of this term has shifted due to its increased association with the Trump administration's attempts to dismiss media reports of corruption, bigotry, and dysfunction from "the colloquial, common understanding prior to November 2016" referencing "verifiably false information spread through media institutions." Much like how Perrin and Ifatunji found that support for the border wall correlated with support for the Trump administration's agenda and policy positions across a host of issues, disbelief in the validity of mainstream news reporting corresponds to attitudes that, in alignment with the administration's positions, support the maintenance of entrenched social inequalities.

By revealing the impacts of voters' identification with in-group signifiers such as the "border wall" and or depictions of the mainstream media as a public enemy, these studies demonstrate the rapid coalescence of a political bloc around support for practices and policies that maintain white capitalist men's social and political domination. They provide a disturbing glimpse into how the 2016 presidential election provided opportunities for political articulation that altered existing political coalitions, identities, and perceptions of group interests (see De Leon, Desai, and Tuğal 2015). How such processes will play out in the 2020 election remains to be seen but deserves close attention, particularly given the rise of an insurgent populist grassroots progressive political movement since 2016.

Continuing the trend of focusing on the role of the media in political processes, Bianca González-Lesser, in "Searching for the 'Sleeping Giant': Racialized News Coverage of Latinos Pre-2020 Election," examines how major U.S. newspapers frame the role of Latinos in the political process. Media narratives about Latinos depict them as a potential savior for the Democratic Party, downplay their barriers to political participation, and present them as a monolithic panethnic group solely concerned with immigration. This media framing thus misidentifies their diverse interests and modes of political engagement. In revealing these trends, González-Lesser demonstrates that through its impact on outreach and the distribution of

dominant understandings of the interests and contexts of racial and ethnic groups, mass media plays a major role in the process of political articulation.

Moreover, González-Lesser employs this case study to theorize the ethnoracial politics of mobilization as a crucial factor that will shape the 2020 election. Given that "surface-level targeting of Latino voters in a monolithic fashion . . . will be unsuccessful in actually impacting the voter turnout," the analysis offers insights into more effective modes of political praxis. The mass political mobilization of people of color, particularly those who face barriers to participation, is not only possible but vital to real democracy. Toward that end, sociologists must grapple with the task of theorizing how a multiracial and gender inclusive coalition that takes seriously the material needs and political concerns of diverse groups can effectively mobilize.

And finally, Corey Fields and Shelby Newman provide further depth and context on the nexus between social injustice, politics, and media representation in "Covering the Dawsons: Racial Variation in Newspaper Framing of Urban Crime." Through examining media reporting on a case of arson related to a dispute over drug dealing being reported to the police, which killed a black family in Baltimore, they reveal that newspapers with white audiences focused on the horror of the crime itself and implied the personal responsibility of the assailant. In contrast, a newspaper with a predominantly black audience "called attention to governmental failures, structural inequalities, and disparate access to state resources" and "positioned the family as part of a wider of community of African Americans who are victims of slack policing, racial discrimination, and negligent social policy."

They find that, moreover, the narrative advanced by those newspapers with white audiences aligned with the policy agenda of public officials while the black newspaper's assessments were largely ignored. As we turn to a new election, sociologists must further examine the nexus of racial and gender politics and mass media. We must also use our insights to raise awareness and influence public policy so that it is more responsive to those who experience complex inequalities.

## CENTERING POLITICAL INEQUALITY AND CULTIVATING PRAXIS

Political participation is shaped by an individual's context in racialized and gendered structural, interactional, and cultural-symbolic dynamics. Racial and gendered domination are foundational and taken for granted (eternalized and naturalized) aspects of American society including the state (Epstein 1988; Feagin 2001; Glenn 2002). The United States has an extensive history of racialized and gendered barriers to political participation that reflect and reproduce intersecting racialized and gendered systems of domination. With that in mind, I wish to reinvigorate a sociology of political inequality that focuses on advancing democracy.

I would like to pose an agenda for moving toward a sociology concerned with fundamental questions of democracy amid entrenched and intersecting racialized and gendered political inequalities. The sociological production of insights for praxis must become a task of central focus beyond the development of foresight for predictions or hindsight for explaining outcomes. Indeed, the prediction and

explanation of political outcomes can be a space for analysts to improve their understanding of social processes. Yet, without identifying mechanisms for social transformation and practices to actualize them, our analyses of politics can become fatalistic and disempowering. Whether we see the role of social scientists as merely to reveal how society operates or as crucial actors in the endeavor to improve it, we must nonetheless recognize the social impacts of our agendas.

Whether we acknowledge it, sociologists do not create knowledge for its own sake. Our research and ideas are irrelevant if they cannot inform public debates, influence institutional and social practices, and improve public policies. Moreover, regardless of our intentions, data, once produced and interpreted, has social and political effects. For instance, survey data may suggest that certain candidates have momentum, which influences the public narrative about their campaigns. In an examination of the 2012 Republican primaries, Palazzolo and McGowen (2020) found that "candidates with above-average momentum receive more positive media coverage," and that this is especially the case for insurgent candidates. Moreover, members of the public who are convinced one candidate will achieve a large and decisive victory are less likely to vote (Westwood, Messing, and Lelkes 2020).

The point is that influential predictions and estimations of probability impact political behavior. This influence must be taken seriously by both scholars and public commentators. Recent works, including some in this issue, strive to understand these effects and focus more on the political impacts of the interpretation and use of statistical information such as descriptions of ethnoracial demographics (e.g., Rodríguez-Muñiz 2019). Future works should consider the multifaceted collective interpretive process that runs through the political system, mass media organizations, and the public sphere to form a grand narrative or consensus about political outcomes and how those assumptions rationalize forms of political action.

Consider the 2020 Iowa Caucus of the Democratic Party primaries in February 2020. Due to technical glitches and disorganization within the national- and state-level DNC, the results of the caucus, often considered an important first litmus tests, were delayed in their release by days (New York Times 2020). This unusual dearth of information provided candidates with an opportunity to frame themselves as victors, to release and emphasize nonofficial numbers, or to downplay the results entirely. The results then slowly trickled in. While the internal polling data from several campaigns indicated that Sanders had won the primary, the pace of the results and the formal structure of the primary meant that with just 71% of the precincts reported, and a heavy amplification of those rural areas with less voters, Buttigieg was reported as having a narrow lead (New York Times 2020).

The candidates also employed different strategies in Iowa. The Buttigieg campaign relied heavily on the white and rural vote due to his appeals to midwestern values and centrism. Rural votes were reported first, giving the impression of an early lead. The Sanders campaign, however, organized satellite caucuses in Iowa among new voters with a focus on immigrant communities, young people, and workers (Grim 2020). As Nichols (2020) wrote, "Sanders closed the gap with votes from college campuses, mosques, and union halls, where newly organized and energized voters had his back." With political protests and grassroots organizing in the wake of the Trump election raising the profile and influence of people of color and

especially women of color, these dynamics are crucial to take seriously and understand (Chiu 2019).

Yet, as Sekou notes in this volume, demographic growth and increased civic engagement does not always translate to electoral influence. Our political system remains jam-packed with barriers and arrangements that bias outcomes in favor of dominant social groups. Consider the following:

> Women are the country's largest voting bloc, and women of color are the fastest-growing segment of that group. ... The troubling fact is that issues at the center of the lives of women of color rarely if ever take center stage in the political arena. Yet for them, having a consequential voice in our public policy discourse is not an abstraction; it is real, and the lack of it has direct and sometimes detrimental impacts on their world—their livelihoods, their bodies, their children, and their families. (Harris 2014:2)

Additionally, regardless of their party affiliation, political candidates routinely advertise their proximity to and affinity for women of color. The use of racial and gender inclusive imagery and branding does not always correspond with political mobilization and empowerment. For instance, two Muslim women dressed in hijabs, both supporters of Sanders, were unknowingly featured in advertisements put out by the Biden and Warren campaigns (Salam 2020). One of the women, Sabirah Mahmud, wrote on Twitter that she was "used as hijabi clout" for the Biden campaign (Salam 2020). These are likely unintentional misunderstandings. Yet, they demonstrate a tendency among major political actors toward engaging marginalized racial and gender groups as symbols rather than active participants. These examples contrast with the intentional mobilization of marginalized racial and ethnic communities in Iowa achieved by the Sanders campaign (Cannon 2020).

The above example is not enough to make generalizable claims about the strategies of these campaigns. But it suggests sociologists should pay keen attention, in the age of growing grassroots political organizing, to mobilization and outreach as a form of collective action that can impact the level and character of political inequality. If we truly want to understand the dilemmas and dynamics of democracy amid gendered and racialized political inequality, focusing on these distinct strategies of engagement, solidarity, and coalition building are crucial. If the Sanders campaign, or any political collective, is actually building a true multiracial, gender-inclusive coalition, it should spur deep interest among sociologists concerned with racial and gender equality. These practices have the capacity to restructure the political system and, through the process of political articulation, form new social and political blocs in ongoing struggles for power (see De Leon et al. 2015).

Predictions, given the saturation of polling and their media amplification, impact political outcomes as much as they actually describe them. They can reinforce the status quo and normalize the racialized and gendered barriers of political influence. Polling well indicates a level of viability and "electability" that gives voters license to vote for a particular candidate. It may also make certain outcomes seem like inevitable foregone conclusions and therefore have a suppressive effect. And importantly, predictions ignore the fact that social mechanisms and processes are fundamentally dynamic and continually influenced by the things that people are actually doing to impact political structures and outcomes.

Moreover, there are many more factors than voters' attitudes and psychological motivations that shape political outcomes. The very institutional structure and system of political representation in the United States shapes participation and outcomes. Examples of these barriers abound and range from policies and arrangements to localized practices. Some are simply the well-worn and taken-for-granted pathways of tradition. For example, the two first states in the primary process, Iowa and New Hampshire, are disproportionately white in comparison to the United States as a whole (United States Census Bureau 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). These contests which rely on appealing to predominantly white demographics, are crucial to shaping narratives of viability and momentum. Without the greater contextual information about the structural barriers and distortions of public will endemic to our current political system, a narrow focus on voter attitudes and outcome prediction alone provides inaccurate vantage points and incomplete resources for social change.

Consider also the caucus system, which suppresses the participation of marginalized groups and rewards those with adequate time and resources to physically participate with influence. The process in states like Iowa excludes "parents who don't have child care options; employees who work irregular schedules and can't take time off; and people with disabilities who may struggle to navigate a process that demands a lengthy amount of physical presence, often in a crowded room" (Summers 2020). These forms of exclusion map onto racialized and gender inequalities. For instance, black women in the United States are disproportionately employed in low-wage jobs and a majority are the primary source of income for their families, rendering active caucus participation much more difficult (DuMonthier, Childers, and Milli 2017).

## BEYOND 2020: A RETURN TO DEMOCRATIC SOCIOLOGY

In exploring the relationship between sociology and politics, the purpose of this special issue was not just to present some representative research findings but to also to shape the intellectual and political agenda of sociology. In that spirit, I want to conclude this conclusion by sketching out what a sociology of politics grounded in the principles of humanity, democracy, and equality would look like. I emphasize that our ultimate outcome of concern should be identifying how our social and political systems can produce greater democratic engagement and social change.

First, we should be more concerned with asking whether events, trends, and changes are conducive to a democratic society than if they are necessarily advantageous for the Democratic or Republican Party. These are not ideological assessments outside of the bounds of social science. Sociologists have long developed empirical information and theoretical explanations that help us understand how policies and practices actually impact people.

Second, another crucial sociological task is to understand how social change happens. Given the long-standing maintenance of systems of oppression, it makes sense that sociological studies often focus on the social reproduction unequal outcomes. But cases and mechanisms of effective social change through the political

system are also vital for charting new pathways and practices. Armed with that information, we can then outline a political sociology tethered to the goals of democratizing our political system and advancing political equality.

Third, now is the time for not just new research findings about racial and gender inequalities in the political system but also empirically grounded public advocacy. The existence of political inequality and its pernicious impacts on real living and breathing people is not a new or groundbreaking discovery. However, we must continue to bring awareness to how specific political practices, structures, and policies contribute to social anguish and domination or social liberation and equality. Throughout American history, white male upper-class citizens have been the primary (if not exclusive) wielders of political power. It is thus essential to more fully explore the racialized and gendered dynamics that relate to issues of political power, participation, influence, and exclusion.

Fourth, in addition to understanding racialized and gendered structures of domination, it is essential to grasp that these social structures are interconnected. This means understanding political inequality through a concerted consciousness of how multiple social systems affect individuals and groups (Collins 2000). There, thus, is an inherent interplay between not only difference but also the commonality that comes from shared experiences and social locations within the intersection of racialized and gendered systems of domination and oppression.

Fifth, sociologists are equipped with analytical skills and resources that can be used to return, with fresh eyes, to issues of deep concern to pathbreaking sociologists and social change agents such as Jane Addams and W. E. B. Du Bois. The crucial question is as follows: How can we advance democracy and diminish social and political inequalities through the sociological enterprise? The notion of democracy entails that public decision making should reflect the wisdom, experience, and concerns of impacted populations (Addams 1902; Du Bois 1920; Eliasoph 2013; Hart 2001). Democratic participation empowers marginalized people to better identify and act on group interests and creates more legitimate policy outcomes that truly reflect the concerns and interest of those impacted (Bachrach and Botwinick 1992; Young 1999).

In order to do so, we must free our sociological imaginations and consider alternative visions and possibilities. Merely describing the immense social suffering that has befallen marginalized people around the world due to the policies and practices of the powerful is not enough. We need to engage in a real focus on people's actions in the context of political life rife with both inequalities and democratic and transformative possibilities. There is a further need for interpretive political sociology centering the confluence of institutional arrangements, social practices, and power relations in political life and their implications for praxis.

Sociologists should pay close attention to the growing role of grassroots democratizing political movements, multiracial and gender inclusive coalitions, their pitfalls and possibilities, the structural and social contexts that they encounter, and how their strategies and habits contribute to various outcomes. The emergence of campaigns in the 2020 election that align with these goals deserve cautioned optimism and rigorous analysis. Equipped with these insights, we can draw awareness

to the retrenchment of racialized and gendered oppression in our political system and nurture the democratic and equalizing tendencies in our society and each other.

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