

# (Re)applying the Radical Tradition of Sociology to Anti-Racism: Utopia, Hope and Anti-Racism

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## **Abstract**

The unique role sociology has played in offering hope and visions for a future is well documented. From Marx's critique of capitalism to liberation sociology, the discipline has offered visions of the future relying on empirical research and theoretical analysis. While some of this work has been done by anti-racist scholars, the discipline has been slower to offer hope for ethnic minorities who face racism in their day-to-day lives. In this article, I explain the role sociology has played and must continue to play to better offer hope for racialised bodies. By understanding White supremacy and racism as foundational to our modern world, I argue that sociology has a lot to offer when it comes to framing anti-racist futures. I also use my own doctorate research as an example of how qualitative, narrative-based research can contribute to the development of an anti-racist future and offer hope to racialised bodies.

**Keywords:** racism; hope; critique; anti-racism

## **Introduction**

Our contemporary social moment is characterised by the overt expression of racist far-right politics, an exacerbating climate crisis, the rolling back of hard-fought political and social rights, and a growing economic crisis which has seen wealth increase at the top 1% and pushed the poor further into desperation. For some, the lived experience of our contemporary societies is characterised by hopelessness, precarity, anxiety and depression. Literature and media (Blake, 2023; Ngwenya et al, 2021; Tonkus et al., 2022) across parts of the world have detailed that some people feel anxious, depressed and hopeless. Writing for CNBC, Abigail Johnson Hess (2021) notes that 51% of young Americans say they feel down, depressed or hopeless and Bradley Blankenship (2022) of the *Global Times* writes that war, COVID-19 and climate change have contributed to feelings of distress and depression. In Aotearoa New Zealand, Eliesha Foon, writing for Radio New Zealand, notes that poor mental health has increased in the past decade, resulting in a “silent pandemic of psychological distress” (Foon, 2020). Feelings of hopelessness are characteristic of the various crises faced by people in our contemporary society. For ethnic minorities across the globe, already existing feelings of hopelessness are exacerbated by and exist in addition to racism, discrimination and ethnic generational trauma. There are numerous psychological effects of racism on ethnic minorities including depression and anxiety as well as physical health effects such as diabetes. Exposure to racism is a common experience for ethnic minorities in settler-colonial countries like Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, and former imperial countries like the United Kingdom (UK) or France. Ethnic minorities experience racism in addition to the crises of contemporary society, making hopelessness a cultural and ethnic phenomenon, too.

This article focuses on the role of sociology and sociologists in offering hope in the context of the racialised experiences of ethnic minorities. In the sociological tradition, hope is characterised by utopic understandings of radicalism and social change, though it has been slower to apply these principles to

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anti-racism. For social theorists like Charles W. Mills (1997), White supremacy is a fundamental organisational feature of the modern world which shapes and influences social interaction, institutions and social change through racism. In Mills's words, "White supremacy is the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today" (p. 1). By understanding and explaining White supremacist racism as foundational to the modern world, sociology can better framework hope for ethnic minorities. Therefore, I argue that if sociology is to offer hope to ethnic minorities, it must follow the lead of anti-racist social scientists that have addressed racism and White supremacy effectively, detailing its systemic and institutional nature. If sociology is to take its radical and transformational tradition seriously, it must effectively apply its utopic visions for a better racial future for ethnic minorities.

This article comprises three sections. First, I discuss how hope has featured with anti-racist literature and movements. Second, I discuss the role sociology has played, currently plays and can continue to play in the production of hope for ethnic minorities. And third, I discuss my own doctorate research in producing hope in an anti-racist context. In this third section, I discuss how my method, research questions and analysis is anti-racist and thus offers hope for ethnic minorities, with a specific focus on Africans. The article finishes with a conclusion that explains how anti-racist research within sociology fits into a broader history of sociological radicalism and utopic aspirations.

## Hope and anti-racism

In sociology, hope is grounded in a contemporary critique, vision of the future, and the subsequent pursuit of said future. For many thinkers, it serves a utopic function. In Ruth Levitas's *The Concept of Utopia*, she addresses the work of Ernst Bloch (1986) and writes a chapter called *Utopian Hope: Ernst Bloch and Reclaiming the Future* (Levitas, 1990). In it, she explains that Bloch's Marxism is concerned with change. For Bloch, utopia is wrapped up in dreams of a better life and viewed through a functional lens. For him, utopia is a force that propels individuals and societies forward, serving as inspiration to challenge the status quo and to work towards a better future. For oppressed peoples and anti-racists, the belief that there is a world beyond the now is essential. People will always fight for their own and others' liberation, and through the constant structuring and restructuring of colonial White supremacy, hope inspires a continued fight against oppression. In this sense, hope is a tool that has been used and continues to be used by countless peoples in refusing to accept the status quo and forge something better. This is not to dismiss the reality that for many people hope has been a falsehood, and many have given in to despair and found solace in it. It is more to say that, as a collective, looking for hope has served as a powerful tool to create change. Refusal to accept conditions viewed as 'natural' has been one of the reasons oppressed ethnic groups still fight to this day.

This Blochian view of hope and the future has been part of anti-racist movements, thinkers and literature throughout history. History is filled with hopeful critiques and action against established structures of racial oppression aimed at envisioning and creating a better future, including the anti-apartheid movement, civil rights movement in the United States, the Haitian revolution, various slave rebellions throughout history, and anti-imperialist movements (see, for example, Ciment, 2006; Gonzales, 2019; and Gordon, 2010). Odds that were and are insurmountable are partially overcome through the belief that oppression must end and a better future is possible. For these groups and movements, the belief and hope that a future different than what they were living in relied on the belief in their success. Although many individuals died and were systematically disabled from this vision, as a collective, oppressed racial minorities are still here, have fought for their futures, and continue to do so. The marches and calls for an end to systemic racism following the murder of George Floyd are testaments to the utopic vision of anti-racists. Hope helps people reclaim their own futures and for the generations to come. Contributing to these

movements has been sociology. Sociology has been a tool used by anti-racists to fight oppression and sociologists have already provided useful frameworks to resist racial oppression.

## **The role of sociology in hopeful anti-racism**

While hope has been fundamental to past and existing anti-racist movements, sociologists face the challenge of imagining a world that does not exist. In an interview by Johanne Jean-Pierre, Prudence Carter, 2021–2022 President-Elect of the American Sociological Association (ASA), explained that many sociologists who write about an equitable and anti-racist future have no models to base this world on. In a world where capitalism is the overarching model of normative economic and social relations, it is difficult to be confident in laying out a blueprint for a different world. Our contemporary world is one in which White supremacy is viewed as the dominant and only racial structure of the world, and conflict and empire are understood as the natural outcome of human complexity and society. In response, sociologists must use research to propose and action new and better worlds. Following in the tradition of C. Wright Mills, transformative sociology uses the sociological imagination to grasp and understand what our contemporary world is, but more importantly, like W. E. B. Du Bois and Jane Addams, use that imagination to envision a new world that can occur through empirical research, social activism, social action and policy sociology, among other methods (Feagin et al, 2016; Jean-Pierre & Carter, 2023).

One contribution of sociology in offering hope to ethnic minorities is by conducting empirical research that aims to critique contemporary racial structures, as well as understand and challenge racism. In sociological research, unpacking how racism functions, evolves and oppresses has been important work. Arun Kundnani (2023) argues that there are two major traditions of anti-racism. One, which he labels the “liberal tradition of anti-racism”, focuses more on individualistic understandings of racism and offers to solve it through more diversity training and representation nearer the top of already existing hierarchical structures. The other, Kundnani labels the “radical tradition of anti-racism”. He argues this tradition is rooted in an understanding of racism as structural and systemic. It is, therefore, dismantled through understanding and breaking down the structures and fundamentally altering the day-to-day function of social organisation. Instead of understanding racism, then, as a set of irrational beliefs solved by diversity training, racism is researched and understood as a social structure that fundamentally organises modern societies on the basis of White supremacy.

Within this research, it is important to understand that White supremacy and racism is a fundamental structure of modern societies and has been an ongoing process of colonial imperialism. Bonilla-Silva (2018) argues, for example, that the racial structure of the United States is and always has been White supremacy. Likewise, Feagin (2020) argues that the United States was founded upon systemic racial oppression and White supremacy characterised by the exploitation of Black labour and the theft of Indigenous land. He posits that this has produced structures and social organisation that upholds White supremacy through a racial hierarchy shaping everything from day-to-day interactions and access to education, healthcare and adequate housing, through to wealth accumulation. For Bonilla-Silva and Feagin, vital institutions, social and political norms, and organisations of modern society are structured by White supremacist racism that shapes their everyday function. This sociological research and critique of contemporary society is utopic in nature and follows the tradition of a radical anti-racism. Sociology can have a fundamental role in frameworking new and radical worlds beyond the now. This can be done through empirical research which informs policy suggestions and can be expressed through various mediums like conferences, public speeches or social media.

There are ways sociology can framework and communicate work beyond strict academic mediums. As a discipline, sociology has become much more engaged with public and policy life. X (formally known as Twitter) has a growing number of sociological accounts, with the International Sociological Association

(ISA) and the Sociological Association of Aotearoa New Zealand (SAANZ) both holding accounts. These pages share recently published work and analyses about current social and political issues as well as keep followers up to date with where to find further sociological information. Prudence Carter argues that one of the challenges of sociology is that many sociologists rely on discourse that is highly theoretical and full of jargon (Jean-Pierre & Carter, 2023). She explains that due to the backlash toward analyses and recognition of structural racism, sociologists must persist and strategise to continue the explanation and analyses of structural racism in accessible ways (p. 327). Sociologists must explain racism through different mediums, which can include both academic and non-academic spaces. This can help to provide language and frameworks for groups to use in their activism and resistance of racism. Sociology must also continue to push the envelope in generating new theories and innovative ways to understand and address racism. It is true that models of an anti-racist future do not exist and there are no models to exemplify what a society free of White supremacist imperialist capitalism looks like, but by standing on the shoulders of previous theorists, there are exciting opportunities to find out. Sociology must also reflect the worlds and lives of ethnic minorities if it is to be true to its radical tradition. Materially, ethnic minorities need access to educational facilities and be immersed in an education system that reflects them and their cultures. Sociology must advocate a restructuring of the tertiary education sector to greater reflect the anti-racist potential of the discipline.

## **My own research**

My own doctorate research focuses on African stories of racism within Wellington's rental sector. The research proposes to address the role of interpersonal, institutional and internalised racism in shaping Africans' rental experiences. As such, it is part of the larger story of African resistance and creating a life in spite of discriminatory barriers. Africans and the African diaspora have a long history of being oppressed, resisting oppression, and finding hope to continue asserting their rights and humanity. Africans have been part of slave rebellions (Childs, 2009; Iverson, 2021), asserted their rights and freedom during the decolonisation across the African continent (Cooper, 2008; Howe, 1966; Worger et al., 2000; Zuberi, 2015), established Haiti from a slave-led revolution (Gonzalez, 2019), and through Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress, maintained hope towards their long walk to freedom (Ciment, 2006; Mandela, 1994). Hope is a fitting place for individuals and groups who face mountainous challenges. The African continent and the African diaspora are overrepresented in rates of poverty and deprivation, with Africans being part of exploited labour across the world and facing various economic crises, resulting in poorer access to adequate housing, poorer education outcomes, and limited opportunities to turn education into meaningful employment. Despite these barriers, Africans and the diaspora continue to produce activists, academics, poets and others that advocate a different, better future for all Africans.

My doctorate research aims to be anti-racist in analysis and methodology, and thus fit into the hopeful academic work laid out by some sociologists. The research endeavours to give voice to a marginalised group that is often neglected in an Aotearoa New Zealand context. It also aims to comment on the role of White supremacy and anti-Black racism and how this comes to bear on housing experiences. To understand these experiences, my study poses four primary questions:

1. What are the experiences of African renters in Wellington?
2. How do interpersonal, institutional and internalised racisms shape the rental experiences of Africans?
3. How do systems of racism operate to shape the geographical patterns and housing biographies of Wellington-based African renters?
4. What is revealed about the broader operations of institutional racism through observing these patterns and experiences?

Currently, there are few studies in the extant literature on housing research across Aotearoa New Zealand that have directly discussed racism. A study by Adele Norris and Gauri Nandedkar (Norris & Nandedkar, 2022) used a critical discourse analysis to examine how ethnicity and race are represented in New Zealand housing research published between 2013 and 2019. Their analysis found only one article from a sample of 103 that referenced the concepts of racism and institutional racism to explain institutional barriers that adversely affect ethnic minorities in the housing sector. Although Norris and Nandedkar's paper focused primarily on homeownership, it did identify a lack of research regarding migrant communities within scholarship. In her report *The People's Review of Renting*, written for the housing advocacy group Renters United, Howden-Chapman (2017) identified four major themes: 1) quality of housing issues, 2) limited options, 3) the struggles to create a stable home, and 4) powerlessness to challenge landlords. The report illuminated some major issues in renting across the country and identified individual stories of renters. However, it failed to represent and speak to the voices of ethnic minorities as in the study, 74% of the participants identified as Pākehā, 16% as Māori, 14% as European,<sup>1</sup> and 16% as Other ethnicities, made up predominantly of Pacific Peoples.<sup>2</sup> This is a misrepresentation of the rental population as there are lower homeownership rates among Māori and other minorities, which means these groups are more likely to be renting. By missing their stories, research is missing crucial racialised elements of renting in Aotearoa New Zealand. My research aims to address this gap and tell the stories of people affected by racism in their rental experiences.

The research also aims to be anti-racist in its methodology. I employ a counter-storytelling methodology that aims to tell the stories of historically marginalised peoples. *Counter-storytelling* is defined by Solórzano and Yosso (2002) as “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” (p. 32). The research aims to include and analyse the stories and narratives of African renters in Wellington through a counter-storytelling qualitative methodology, which has the potential to disrupt dominant narratives of housing experiences while providing a space for marginalised voices to be heard. Qualitative and counter-storytelling methods are important for ethnic minorities and Africans in particular as Africans have a contemporary and historical emphasis on cultural narratives rooted in the oral tradition. In Kudakwashe Tuwe's (2018) doctoral study analysing employment experiences of Africans in Aotearoa New Zealand, he incorporated four community group interviews consisting of six participants. Tuwe used what he terms the “African oral tradition of storytelling” and a group setting to express experiences and narratives of Aotearoa New Zealand-based Africans. Tuwe argues storytelling was more appropriate for African participants as collective oral traditions and storytelling are common among African communities. Qualitative storytelling serves two major functions for anti-racist research: first, it tells stories of groups whose stories are seldom told and roots knowledge in their voices, and second, it decentres European traditions of ethnography as occurring from the voice of the researcher.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the term Pākehā is commonly used to describe White New Zealanders of European descent, I assume that in this instance, Howden-Chapman has differentiated between Pākehā and migrant European communities and individuals. This is an important distinction within the housing/rental setting because even though displaying as ‘White’, migrant Europeans still experience differential treatment due to xenophobic attitudes.

<sup>2</sup> In Aotearoa New Zealand, it is common for people to have the option to identify with more than one ethnicity. This option was likely made available to the participants in Howden-Chapman's (2017) study, resulting in these numbers totalling more than 100%.

Academically, the research offers hope in two ways. First, it is one of few studies based in Aotearoa New Zealand that focus on Africans; specifically, focusing on Africans in the rental sector. Currently, more than 60% of African households do not own or part own their property (Stats NZ, 2020), Africans are more likely than Pākehā and Europeans to be living in social housing and poorer conditions, and literature has detailed Africans face racism in their lives living in Aotearoa New Zealand. Secondly, the research aims to provide an avenue for future research. It aims to inspire future researchers to conduct further research that centres the voices of Africans in Aotearoa New Zealand.

For participants, this research has undergone a series of questioning and concerns guided by hope. Prior to taking part, some participants queried what the aims of the research were and what potential help it could bring to the members of Wellington's African community. While I cannot be certain of the outcomes of the research, I think their questioning points to the concerns of Africans in the Wellington region. It demonstrates their understanding of racism in their lives and the barriers they face to attaining and maintaining rental properties. It also demonstrates the desire for hope amongst Wellington's African community. Research has the potential to speak to these desires. While any research has the potential to be exploitative, the methodology I have chosen aims to highlight the voices of marginalised groups. By working collaboratively with marginalised communities, research can address their concerns and subsequently offer hope for a better future.

## Conclusion

Sociology has always been hopeful, transformative and utopic. From Marx's call for transformative sociology through to liberation sociology, sociology has long challenged the status quo and aimed to progress a better future for people. Contemporary society is characterised by various crises which contribute to feelings of hopelessness. Racism both exacerbates existing experiences of hopelessness and creates its own forms of subsequent depression and anxiety. Experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally have demonstrated experiences of racism are common amongst ethnic minorities and these experiences have negative effects on those at the receiving end of racism. Systemically, racism limits the accessibility of ethnic minorities to essential human needs like meaningful employment, housing and education. To combat these feelings of hopelessness, both systemically and psychologically, sociology has a lot of hopeful potential to offer. Sociology's tradition of transformation and resistance can contribute to the anti-racist battle against oppression. While sociology has demonstrated its hopeful and utopic nature, it has not applied it heavily to anti-racism. Understanding White supremacy and racism as a foundational ideology and concept of the modern world is essential to combating racism and subsequently offering hope through imagining a new world. Hope is fundamental to anti-racist movements, both past and present. As a discipline, sociology must find a way to reflect the lives and identities of ethnic minorities into the structure of universities and sociological learning, incorporate ethnic minority voices into the academic canon, and advocate making universities and other learning institutions more accessible. Since sociology is a tradition of radicalism, hope and change, anti-racism is a natural fit. Part of sociology's role of asking "So what?" and "Now what?" is a way of reclaiming hope. One of the criticisms of hope is that it is a frivolous pursuit, better left to the imaginations of children. Some thinkers even argue it should be abandoned in favour of pessimistic nihilism, while Slavoj Žižek argues that hope should be abandoned and instead hopelessness be embraced as a transformative tool (Boucher, 2020). While these arguments have their merits, abandoning hope is unhelpful to certain populations, especially ones that have overcome insurmountable hardships—specifically, Africans. Africans and the African diaspora have a long history of being oppressed, resisting oppression, and finding hope to continue a fight that asserts their rights. Sociology can reclaim hope for all peoples by offering people an understanding of what the problems are, the scale of the issues, and ways to create social change. Sociologists can, through their research, demonstrate what is possible and provide

frameworks for people to create change and to move the concept of hope away from criticisms of childlike naivety. Even though sociology can be a tradition of radicalism and some prolific sociologists have been anti-racist in their sociological imagination and practice, the discipline as a whole must pay closer attention to race and racism. Sociology, as a discipline, must engage deeper with the role racism has played in the formation of our contemporary societies. White supremacy and imperial colonisation have dramatically shaped local and global politics, the ideological structures that shape our social and political imaginations, and the disproportionate availability of resources between core and periphery nations.

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