

A Slave to Whatever Has Mastered You

by Alexander Riley

Metaracism: How Systemic Racism Devastates Black Lives—and How We Break Free, Tricia Rose, Basic Books, 2024, pp. 288, \$30 hardcover.

The concepts of “structure” and “system” are among the more amorphous and abstract in the social sciences. They are used frequently and diversely, and often by writers who do not trouble themselves to carefully define them. You can find writers in sociology, for example, talking about structure as the overall abstract scaffolding of positions in a social hierarchy, or as institutions such as marriage, or as a relational grid of various subgroups in a society. Sociologists will also discuss systems at a range of equally diverse levels and perspective: social systems, cultural systems, organizational systems, and world systems are a few examples.

However commonly one runs into these categories in social science discussion, it must be admitted that we are not working at the level of science when we endeavor to use them as mechanisms for explaining why things happen as they do in a given human society.

Notwithstanding the abundant efforts to theoretically elaborate these concepts with greater precision, there still exists basically nothing in the way of a coherent and empirically testable theoretical framework for understanding and predicting what goes on in human societies when “structure” or “system” is seen as the cause of human action.

At best, structural theories give us a kind of *Gestalt*, an imprecise hermeneutical lens for visualizing a society as a unified entity or a composite of distinct functional units. When we want to try to calculate causes and effects, we are always impelled to look at the level of the micro, that is, at the actions of the elements that make up human societies—human beings themselves.

But if intellectually respectable efforts to refine these concepts into something more usable do exist, the literature on structural and systemic racism—which now includes yet another of the unhelpful neologisms unserious

sociologists often invent to try to convince you of their seriousness, *metaracism*—is not part of that serious effort. The total payload of approaches like Tricia Rose’s can be found in a single and wholly scientifically unsustainable explanatory move. Rose moves, with no accompanying argument, from the existence of different parts of a society—its educational institutions, its economy, its criminal justice apparatus—to claims about the manner in which all of these parts function seamlessly together as the cause that produces racial disparities. She thinks she has proven the existence of a causal racist system simply by observing that blacks perform differently—typically worse—than whites in many of the separate parts of the social system.

But structure is only one side of the theoretical binary that motivates social science. The other side is agency, the ability of individuals to negotiate through an existing social order in ways that are not identical, a result of their freedom to make independent decisions and to act differently. Even if Rose had carefully demonstrated a systemic imperative in American society that pushes toward black disparity (and she emphatically has not done this), she would need to show how and to what degree that system is capable of achieving those ends despite action on the part of the individuals in the system to avoid those ends. Any careful structural or systemic theory—and certainly any such theory that is not claiming full determinism—recognizes there is always some degree of agency available in any

structure or system, however much it is informed and bounded by parameters.

Rose devotes a chapter each to two of the most publicized recent cases of purported racial injustice, those of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown. A walk-through of these chapters, and at the manner in which she ineptly attempts to massage their cases out into claims about systemic causes, demonstrates the flimsiness of this book’s case.

‘No Chance Encounter’: Metaracism and the Trayvon Martin Case

As the case is now more than a decade in our rearview mirror, we do well to refresh our memories on its important factual elements. George Zimmerman, a volunteer security guard at the Retreat at Twin Lakes in Sanford, Florida who in February 2012 shot and killed Trayvon Martin, testified that he had witnessed Martin, a stranger in the gated community, walking slowly in the rain and looking suspiciously at houses. He called 911 and began following Martin, but turned back toward his car after the 911 operator advised him not to follow the suspect. Martin then surprised Zimmerman as the latter was walking toward his car and punched him in the face. He was slamming Zimmerman’s head against the sidewalk when Zimmerman managed to shoot him. Forensic evidence supported Zimmerman’s account of Martin straddling him as he lay prone on the ground at the time Zimmerman shot him. Zimmerman bore wounds on his nose and back of his

head that were consistent with his testimony.

Rose engages in a long discussion of how racial tensions had been recently heightened in the Retreat at Twin Lakes. The percentage of the population that was black had risen in recent years to its highest point, nearly 20 percent. This rise in the black population there had been accompanied by a rise in burglaries in the neighborhood. Rose downplays the role of the increase in crime in the confrontation between Zimmerman and Martin. She cites a paper in a law review that refers to another source (a book by NBC news analyst Lisa Bloom) that claimed “only 7% ... of the reported [recent break-ins and attempted break-ins] were confirmed to have involved Black males.” These numbers imply, according to Rose, that any policing and neighborhood watch efforts that would understand young black men like Martin as potential threats here are motivated only by factually unsupported racial bias.

But tracing down the actual facts that Rose purports to be citing here is informative concerning the reliability of her claims about empirical evidence. The law review article she cites claims: “[O]nly two of the neighborhood’s 44 burglaries, attempted break-ins, and suspected break-ins were confirmed to have involved black males.”¹ Work through the logic of these data and you see how the law review author and Rose are manipulating them to insinuate something (low black participation in such offenses) that is not a legitimate conclusion from them. Thirty-six of the

forty-four incidents were “attempted” or “suspected break-ins” for which there was no information about the identities of the suspects. We do not know how many of these burglaries were committed by a black male, though national statistics on black participation in such crimes shows them participating in them at disproportionately high rates.

Even with the eight burglaries, we are not told by the article’s author how many of them yielded arrests, and so it is not clear that we know the racial identities of all eight of these cases. All we know is that two of eight burglaries at Twin Lakes are confirmed to have been committed by a black perp. But that’s already 25 percent of official burglaries, which is higher than the black percentage of the population there. Everything that we know about race and street crime (blacks commit it at disproportionately high rates) leads us to the reasonable suspicion that if we had more information about the racial identities of other suspects in these cases, the black percentage might well grow still more.

Rose also believes that Stand Your Ground laws have “legitimized ... racially motivated murders of unarmed black people ... at staggeringly high rates” (105). The only piece of evidence to which she refers in support of this claim is a PBS Frontline program that cited an Urban Institute Justice Policy Center study. This study looked at all single shooter, single victim stranger homicides between 2005 and 2009.² Rose reproduces a chart from the study that shows that of this set of homicides,

white-on-black killings were more likely than others to be ruled as justified, and this was especially so in Stand Your Ground states.

What Rose does not tell her readers is that the very PBS program she is citing and the study on which it is based deny that these data prove racial bias. “[T]he figures don’t yet prove bias,” the PBS report notes, because “[a]s [the study’s author] points out, the data doesn’t [sic] show the circumstances behind the killings, for example whether the people who were shot were involved in home invasions or in a confrontation on the street.” These figures on which homicides are determined to be justified tell us nothing about any purported systemic racism because there is no control for the details of the homicides. What if (as is reasonably predictable from crime rates by racial group) many more of the white-on-black shootings involve e.g., a victim who is illegally inside the home of the shooter, or in his driveway and breaking into his car, and more of the black-on-white shootings involve obviously harder to legally justify use of violence by the shooter as in, e.g., the two had a verbal disagreement at a bar and one pulled out a gun and opened fire?

Rose attempts to turn the evidence of Martin’s serious misbehavior at school and related suspensions into still more discovery of systemic racism. Rose claims there is evidence that blacks do not misbehave more than whites in school. A lone study is cited as support for this claim.³ But that study relies on self-reporting of misbehavior by

subjects. There is evidence that typical self-reporting surveys do not accurately capture racial differences in misbehavior and criminal offense. A landmark study on this discrepancy endeavored with great methodological care to explore and correct for possible causes of this discrepancy, and its authors managed to discover failures of sensitivity in widely used methods of self-reporting.⁴ One of the central problems is that the small number of individuals who offend at very high rates, and who frequently radically misrepresent the frequency of their offending when they self-report, skews heavily black. They are easily missed in small surveys and even when surveyed they can be counted on to misrepresent their offending. This small number of heavy offenders is a methodological issue that has to be carefully teased out of the data. Once it is controlled for, self-reporting and official statistics reveal the same racial disparity in offending.

The study Rose cites here has other, still more significant problems than its failure to deal with this methodological problem. For, buried in its text is the acknowledgement that blacks had significantly higher rates of involvement in the most serious form of school misbehavior, which is fighting. Whites self-reported alcohol use and smoking in schools at rates higher than blacks, but who would not recognize which of two hypothetical students—one of whom drinks a beer in the locker room, the other of whom engages in fistfights at school—presents an objectively greater threat to safety in a school and which

of the two is more justifiably suspended as a threat to the schooling environment? Even self-reporting data give a justification for higher black suspension rates, for they demonstrate that blacks are more predisposed to engage in misbehaviors that pose harm to other students rather than misbehaviors that are much more limited in their negative effects to other students.

‘Manner of Walking Along Roadway’: Metaracism and the Michael Brown Case

The bare bones facts of this case are as follows: Michael Brown, 18, and a friend, Dorian Johnson, 22, both black, were walking in the middle of a street and blocking traffic in Ferguson, Missouri when police officer Darren Wilson, arrived in his cruiser and ordered them to the sidewalk. Brown responded by attacking Wilson through the open window of his cruiser and attempted to take Wilson’s sidearm. The pistol was fired during the struggle and Brown was hit in the hand. He and Johnson fled as Wilson exited and demanded they stop. Brown then charged Wilson, who fired in self-defense, hitting him six times and fatally wounding him. A grand jury corroborated all the major details of Wilson’s account of the event. A Department of Justice investigation of the matter (under President Obama’s Attorney General, Eric Holder) subsequently affirmed all the major findings of the grand jury. Wilson was not charged, and the DOJ did not pursue any civil rights charges against him.

As in the Martin chapter, Rose does not linger over the micro-details of the case. It is worth emphasizing just how overwhelmingly consistent both the grand jury and the DOJ findings were in demonstrating Brown’s culpability and the reasonableness of Wilson’s response to his aggression. Both forensic evidence and voluminous eyewitness accounts were in agreement with Wilson’s account. Most of the eyewitnesses who corroborated Wilson’s story were black. One, an elderly black man, told police emphatically he “would have shot that fucking boy too.”

The Department of Justice classified witnesses into two camps: 1) those whose testimony was internally consistent and squared with material evidence and would therefore have seemed reliable to a jury; and 2) those whose testimony was not consistent and/or otherwise marred by a clear failure to fit material evidence. They subdivided the first category into two further categories: those whose testimony inculpated Wilson, and those who gave evidence that exculpated him. *There were zero witnesses in the first subcategory of reliable witnesses.*

The chapter on Brown is titled “Manner of Walking Along Roadway.” Rose insinuates that penalties for walking in the street are targeted specifically at blacks. It is a distinct and harmless marker of youthful and especially black rebellion to walk in the middle of the street. Brown was stopped merely for “walking black,” and then other aspects of the metaracist system produced his death.

But even if one imagines Brown was singled out because of his race, and that Wilson would never have stopped him if he were white, we are still left trying to understand how a stop for such a minor level offense ended in the death of the suspect. Surely Michael Brown had some agency in that exchange. What if he and his friend had simply moved out of the street onto the sidewalk as requested? Rose might claim the metaracist system logic would still lead to an arrest in this scenario. Well, what if Brown had peaceably submitted and gotten into the squad car? Would the structural oppression of blacks in Ferguson somehow still have produced his death? Michael Brown did precisely the kinds of things in interacting with a police officer that are likely to lead to injury or death on the part of the suspect. But Rose's framework suggests she thinks he has no responsibility at all for having chosen to take the actions he took.

Rose also spends time in the chapter discussing Ferguson's rigorous system of municipal fines and fees that, in her analysis, kept blacks in a state of oppression through overzealous enforcement and escalating fines for delinquency. But here too, the question of black agency is not addressed.

Take this telling example from Ferguson. A group of black residents there brought a class action suit against the city in 2015, alleging that they were being unfairly targeted by a legal system biased against blacks. Keilee Fant was one of the lead plaintiffs. Ms. Fant had accrued dozens of parking tickets over

a twenty-year period that she had systematically failed to pay, and she was jailed many times during that period for failure to appear in court dates related to these charges. What kind of person accumulates dozens of parking violations knowing she does not have the funds to pay the fines, and then repeatedly does not appear for court dates at which she would have had the opportunity to present the case for the dismissal of the fines or plead for a hardship exemption, all while imagining that this will not have negative consequences when she subsequently interacts with police? The implication of Rose's analysis is that if we do not model our regime of fines and punishments in a way that accommodates people who are personally negligent and irresponsible, we are engaged in metaracism.

Metaracism as 'Unlearning': How to Avoid Seeing Reality and Thereby Enslave Yourself

Toward the book's conclusion, Rose tells the reader what is required to believe her narrative. A vast amount of what we take as knowledge, informed by our common sense and our own two eyes and ears has to be "unlearned," rejected, and replaced with the phantasms of Rose's imagination. "A great deal of energy," she tells us, "has gone into making systemic racism invisible." This almost mystical hiddenness is an essential element of its structural power. It is nowhere but everywhere, and we cannot elude it. And yet, somehow, Tricia

Rose has seen through it. Whence her remarkable agency, when others lack it so entirely?

Another curiosity about the argument: Systemic racism makes it impossible for blacks to exercise any free will in decision-making. For example, when they are reprimanded by police for walking in the street, the implication is that they are structurally required to attack the intervening officer and to be duly shot. Yet, in a mystery for the ages, blacks are presumed to be capable of exercising the will required to bracket all the untruth they have learned previously and replace it with the truth of metaracism and, presumably, engage in resistance to it.

One story Rose tells in the book gives away the whole game on metaracism and its insulting story about how terribly blacks have been harmed by these invisible shackles that she has invented. Rose gives an account of a black medical school dean who attended one of Rose's public talks. After the talk, he related to her that, after the death of his father, he had found among the dead man's files a denial letter for a G.I. Bill-related mortgage from half a century earlier. In morally charged prose, Rose describes her effort to comprehend the tremendous amount of harm this had inflicted on the family of the deceased man. This terrible, fatalistic, and inescapable narrative of systemic oppression is "his family's story ... the story of Black Americans ... our collective story" (220).

Yet she seems to have forgotten that she had just told us that the son of the man who received the denial letter is

the dean of a medical school. In 2023-24, medical school deans in the United States made a median annual salary of \$833,200. This then is precisely how much metaracism has affected this man's life. Who knows what greater heights he might have attained if only he had not been so awfully and unfairly burdened by malevolent structures and systems beyond his control? Rose somehow believes she has hit a home run for her "theory" with this story, when she has in fact gone to the plate without a bat and struck out looking on three pitches.

In The Second Epistle of Peter 2:19, the apostle writes that "[a] man is a slave to whatever has mastered him." The antiracist/systemic racism/metaracism cult refuses their own self-evident agency and that of the people they describe. It insists on eternal enslavement to the unfaltering, perverse belief, belied by voluminous evidence, in their own slavery. This cult is not only wrong; it is immoral.

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4. Delbert S. Elliott, Suzanne S. Ageton, "Reconciling Race and Class Differences in Self-Reported and Official Estimates of Delinquency," *American Sociological Review*, 45, no. 1, 1980, 95-110.