PART TWO  
HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES  

African Americans

From the earliest settlement to the present, the principal racial division in American society has been between white and black, between those of European ancestry and those whose ancestral origins can be traced to the African continent. From the arrival of the first African at Jamestown in 1619 to the present, the meanings attributed to the physical traits of black people have been more important than all other racial divisions in American society; no other minority group has experienced discrimination so intense, pervasive, and enduring as have African Americans. African Americans were enslaved for more than two centuries, and although more than a century has passed since slavery was legally abolished, the rationale for slavery that emphasized the racial and cultural differences between blacks and whites persists to this day.

By 1998 numbering more than 34 million—nearly 13 percent of the total American population—African Americans have been the largest racial minority in American society since the eighteenth century. Today their numbers total more than the entire population of Canada or of the Scandinavian countries of Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Iceland combined. Only Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Zaire have larger black populations than the United States has. Moreover, the black population of the United States is expected to double in the first half of the twenty-first century, reaching 62 million, or about one-sixth of the American population, by 2050 [Day 1993].

In Article 7, "The Declining Significance of Race," William Julius Wilson distinguishes among three major periods or stages of black-white relations in American history: preindustrial, industrial, and modern industrial. Let us review briefly here the African American experience during the first two of these three periods. (We will examine the racial dynamics of the most recent period, the modern industrial stage, in Part 4.)

Slavery: The "Peculiar Institution"

During the preindustrial period, a plantation economy dominated and defined the lives of black people, the most important aspect of which was the institution of slavery. Slavery is a system of social relations in which some persons are involuntarily placed in perpetual servitude, are defined as property, and are denied rights generally given to other members of the society. Throughout human history, many societies have limited the freedom and rights of particular classes of people. Other systems of servile status, such as serfdom, debt bondage, and indentureship, have involved some degree of unfreedom and rightlessness. What distinguishes these statuses from slavery is therefore not absolute. "Slaves are [simply] the most deprived and oppressed class of serviles" [Noel 1972:5]. This definition of slavery is useful because it provides a standard against which social systems can be compared. In other words, if slavery is conceived as being located at the far end of a continuum ranging from absolute rightlessness, on the one hand, to absolute autonomy on the other, one may examine each case of oppression in terms of its location between the extremes on this continuum.

Slavery was not an American invention. It existed in ancient civilizations, was widespread throughout the Middle Ages, and was practiced legally until 1962 on the Arabian peninsula; and it remains today, unofficially, in countries such as the Sudan.
and Mauritania. For example, in 1996, in response to a United Nations report of "an alarming increase... in cases of slavery, slave trade, and forced labor" and to subsequent denials of these charges by Sudanese officials and by Reverend Louis Farrakhan, head of the Nation of Islam, two Baltimore Sun reporters journeyed illegally to the Sudan, where they bought two Dinka boys for $500 each from an Arab trader and returned them to their families, from whom they had been kidnapped (Lewthwaite and Kan 1996). Similarly, although slavery was formally abolished in Mauritania in 1961, it remained so widespread that in 1980 the country's president once again proclaimed it illegal. However, because the law freeing slaves specified that masters should be compensated for the loss of their property, the practice has persisted virtually unchanged to this day. As a woman whose ancestors had for generations been held in similar bondage recently reported to a New York Times reporter, "God created me to be a slave, just as he created a camel to be a camel" (Burkett 1997:56).

Even though there was a surge of historical interest in the institution of American slavery, especially during the 1970s and 1980s (Elkins 1959; Davis 1966, 1975; Genovese 1974; Gutman 1976; Yetman 1970, 1984; Blassingame 1972; Rawick 1972; Fogel and Engerman 1974; Levine 1977; Parish 1989), there has been a relative dearth of attention to comparisons of the wide range of forms of unfreedom that have existed throughout human history and that persist today. As we suggested earlier, examining the institution of slavery in the United States raises questions not only of its similarities to and differences from other slave systems, but also about what constitutes unfreedom itself and, thus, about the more general question of the nature and effects of institutional regimentation and exploitation. The implications of an analysis of slavery in America could be used to examine the dynamics of other total institutions (Goffman 1961) and other dominant-subordinate relationships (serfdom, caste systems, debt bondage, racial or ethnic ghettos, and various aboriginal reservation systems) that have not yet been considered in these terms.

Thus slavery and slave trading were well established among European and African peoples by the late-fifteenth century, when Columbus's encounter with the Americas triggered a dramatic expansion of European exploration, expansion, and colonization. However, the slave trade from Africa to the Western Hemisphere from the mid-1400s to the 1800s resulted in a system of exploitation that dwarfed the forms of slavery developed in Africa. The introduction of national monarchies and the growing industrial and commercial revolutions in the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries acted as catalysts for the development of Western slave systems, in which slave labor became an indispensable component of European expansion and settlement of the New World. Between twelve to fifteen million people were uprooted in a forced migration unparalleled in human history. By the mid-nineteenth century, the United States had become the world's leading slave power, but slave systems had penetrated societies throughout South and Central America and the Caribbean.

Despite a history of slavery that preceded European settlement of the New World and some similarities to other slave systems in the Americas, the slave system that emerged in the United States was the outcome of a process that developed primarily in this country. Earlier we used Noel's (1972) model of the development of ethnic stratification to describe the process whereby Indian-European equality at their initial contacts was eventually transformed into a system of vast inequalities between them. We return to Noel's model, which emphasizes three conditions—ethnocentrism, com-
petition, and differences in power—to examine the manner in which the system of racial stratification emerged in what is now the United States.

Anglo-American attitudes toward Africans had their origins in late sixteenth-century Elizabethan England, an era during which England had begun to expand its power and domination throughout the world. World exploration and colonial expansion brought the English into increasing contact with African peoples. From the beginning, these contacts were marked by extreme ethnocentrism on the part of the English. Because Africans had vastly different customs, languages, religious practices, and skin color, they were viewed negatively by the English.

In the English mainland colonies in America, some blacks initially held the same legal status—indentured servant—as certain whites and Indians. Upon completion of a stipulated period of service (usually seven years), indentured servants were entitled to the rights of free persons. Although blacks initially possessed a similar legal status with white indentured servants, by the 1660s the slave status, with its assumption of lifetime hereditary service, had evolved, and whatever ambiguity of status had previously existed for African peoples had now vanished. Thereafter the status of slave became reserved almost exclusively for blacks, and whites came to think of blacks primarily as slaves.

Ethnocentrism alone would not have resulted in blacks' being placed in a slave status. As Cornell points out in his analysis of the development of the minority statuses of Indians and African Americans (Article 8, “Land, Labour, and Group Formation”), the English need for land and for labor, respectively, undergirded their relationships with these two different categories of peoples. Whereas the desire for land led to competition with native peoples, cheap and abundant labor was essential if the English were to develop a dynamic plantation economy in the New World. The English turned to the vast labor supply that was to be found on the African continent and to the trade in enforced labor that was already flourishing by the time the English began to establish their mainland colonies in the seventeenth century.

Slavery was, above all, a power relationship. Had the English not possessed greater power in the form of superior weaponry, naval technology, and products with which to induce some Africans to assist them in enslaving other blacks, the system could not have developed. In other words, if one group had not possessed superior power, it would have been impossible to create a system of social inequality based on race alone. The Africans who were imported to the British colonies were doubly disadvantaged. Of all the groups (such as other English, Irish, and American Indians) whom the English had employed in the role of indentured servants, Africans were culturally and physically most alien and thus the object of greatest ethnocentrism. Equally critical, however, was that Africans were also the most defenseless and powerless. Africans had been forcibly uprooted from their own land, separated from family, kin, and tribe, and transported to a new and strange continent where they were thrown together with other Africans from a great diversity of ethnic backgrounds. This diversity undermined the unity or social solidarity upon which they might have collectively drawn to resist.

By contrast, because American Indians retained their tribal organizations and posed a substantial political and military threat to the colonies, they were less vulnerable to white domination as slaves. Indian slaves were also much more difficult to retain because, being familiar with the terrain, they could escape relatively easily and
be reunited with their own peoples. Finally, because trade with Indian nations was important to local economies, Native Americans possessed power to discourage wholesale enslavement of their people to a far greater degree than did blacks. Though they were exploited, excluded, and sometimes decimated in contacts with European civilization, Indians always maneuvered from a position of strength which Africans, devoid of tribal unity, unaccustomed to the environment, and relatively defenseless, never enjoyed* [Noel 1972:148]. Blacks were enslaved primarily because they provided a labor supply crucial to an emerging American economy, were culturally and physically distinct from the English, and, most important, possessed few resources with which to resist the imposition of the slave status by whites.

*Slavery and Caste*

However, if one closely examines the dynamics of black-white relations throughout the American experience, it is problematic whether slavery alone was the most critical feature in defining the enduring social inequalities that have characterized the status of African Americans. Crucial to an understanding of the dynamics of black-white relations in the United States is a racial distinction; slaves in the United States were subjected to racial discrimination as well as legal servitude. The most distinctive feature of black-white relations in the United States was not slavery, per se, but that blacks—slave or free—occupied a lower caste status as well. American slaves had to contend with the sanctions and effects of two inferior statuses—slave and lower-caste member—that were mutually reinforcing. Unlike the situation in many other slave societies, manumission (granting of freedom) of slaves in the United States was extremely difficult, and blacks who were free could not anticipate participation in the society on an equal basis.

Although slavery represented the most extreme form of institutionalized inequality between black and white in America, Leon Litwack [1961] has pointed out that during the slavery era, the rights and privileges of free blacks also were severely circumscribed throughout the entire society; critical to the understanding of the dynamics of race relations in the United States is that even those African Americans who were free during the slavery era (more than one-tenth of the black population) did not have the same rights and privileges as whites and were not accepted into society on an equal basis. Oppression of African Americans was by no means restricted to the South or to slaveholders; throughout the North, too, the freedom, rights, and privileges of free blacks were severely curtailed. At no time did the words free person or freedom mean the same thing to blacks as to whites. In many states, barriers to voting were initiated for blacks at the same time that restrictions for whites were being liberalized or eliminated. Court testimony and the formation of legal contracts and lawsuits by African Americans were also forbidden in many states. Several states prohibited immigration; others required that blacks carry identification passes (as in South Africa under apartheid). Excluded from public schools, African Americans were generally denied the benefits of formal education. In addition to these officially imposed disabilities, blacks in most areas were subjected to ridicule, harassment, and occasional mob violence [Litwack 1961].

Thus, in contrast to slaves in many other societies, slaves in the United States were subject to racial as well as legal servitude. For example, although Brazilian slavery was racially based, the inferior status of the slave did not persist into freedom in
Brazil with anything near the tenacity that it did in the United States. "In Brazil the slave may have been feared, but the black man was not, whereas in the United States both the slave and the black man were feared. ... In the United States, slavery was always a means of organizing dangerous blacks as well as a way of organizing labor" (Degler 1971:89). Brazilians did not assume that a black person was a slave or that he or she would identify with slaves, an attitude that was in striking contrast to the perception in the United States. Brazilians used free blacks extensively as overseers, slave catchers, and slave dealers, a situation that would have been unthinkable in the United States. Brazilians also did not develop an elaborate racial justification for or defense of slavery. In sum, in Brazil, in contrast to the United States, a person's legal status (whether slave or free), not his or her racial identity, determined his or her standing in Brazilian society. In the United States, an individual's racial identity, not his or her legal status, was crucial.  

Therefore, the relegation of blacks to a lower caste status is of crucial importance, for it not only defined the experiences of both blacks and whites in the United States for the more than two-hundred years of slavery but also provided the basis for a system of social inequality that persisted long after the "peculiar institution" had been legally abolished in 1865. The most enduring feature of black-white relations in the United States has been that of caste.

The Aftermath of Slavery

Immediately after the Civil War, a period of fluid race relations occurred. Bolstered by passage of the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery; the 14th Amendment, which extended to former slaves the equal protection of the law; and the 15th Amendment, which guaranteed to them the right to vote, African Americans actively sought to realize the opportunities and responsibilities of their new status (Litwak 1979).

Nevertheless, the reality of caste persisted. Patterns of black-white relations formed under slavery did not automatically change after emancipation; race relations continued to be based on a rigid caste system. The roles of African Americans after their emancipation became well defined and tightly circumscribed. The new legal status conferred by emancipation and the Reconstruction Amendments did little to alter the patterns of social relations in the plantation South, or to promote the acquisition of new values, habits, and attitudes by either black or white. Former slaves were formally given liberty but not the means (that is, economic, political, educational, and social equality) to realize it. Through intimidation, violence, lynching, and terrorism, African Americans were kept in a subordinate status and subjected to systematic racial discrimination long after slavery had been legally abolished. Blacks remained largely unskilled and illiterate, most of them living lives of enforced dependence on the still-dominant whites. The result was a black peasantry dominated by an agricultural system that ensured dependence on the land and isolation from the main currents of American society.

Northern troops, which had occupied the South during the period of Reconstruction, were removed in 1877, and Southern whites then resorted to a wide range of devices to ensure the maintenance of white dominance. Blacks, who during Reconstruction had voted and held public office, were systematically disfranchised by a variety of mechanisms: white primary elections from which African Americans were
excluded; poll taxes (which were cumulative); "grandfather clauses," which restricted voting to those (and their descendants) who had been eligible to vote before the Civil War; and literacy requirements, which, because they were selectively enforced, restricted even the most educated and literate African Americans from exercising the constitutionally mandated right to vote. The effects of these efforts to disfranchise blacks were dramatic. For example, in 1896 over 130,000 blacks were registered to vote in Louisiana; by 1904 this number had dropped to 1,342 (Norton et al. 1982:459). Moreover, although the 14th Amendment, which was adopted in 1868, includes explicit provisions that states restricting black access to the franchise would have their Congressional representation reduced, those provisions were never enforced.

Moreover, to ensure that white dominance would be perpetuated, a series of laws designed to maintain a strict caste system of black subordination and white dominance was enacted throughout the South during the last decade of the nineteenth and the first two decades of the twentieth century. Southern state legislatures enacted an extraordinary variety of state and municipal ordinances requiring racial separation and exclusion of African Americans from the legal, political, economic, and educational opportunities available to most other Americans. Virtually every aspect of contact between whites and blacks was legally regulated. The pervasiveness of the segregated system was signaled by a profusion of "Whites Only" and "Colored" signs that governed working conditions, public accommodations, state institutions, recreation, resorts, cemeteries, and housing.

It is important to emphasize that the racially segregated system of the South, which became known as "Jim Crow," was not simply a "natural" result of "traditional" relationships between black and white; rather, it was consciously created by whites to impose and maintain their political and economic power. During the 1950s and 1960s conservative resistance to the enactment of civil rights legislation to outlaw racial discrimination frequently invoked the argument that such legislation was unnecessary and inappropriate, and would be ineffective because "laws can't change the mores." Most who used this argument conveniently failed to recognize that the Jim Crow system itself had been constructed by the myriad number of discriminatory laws that had been enacted around the turn of the twentieth century.

In 1896 in the famous Plessy v. Ferguson decision, the United States Supreme Court provided judicial legitimation for the Jim Crow system, contending that

> the object of [Fourteenth Amendment's "equal protection clause"] was undoubtedly to enforce the absolute equality of the two races before the law, but in the nature of things it could not have been intended to abolish distinctions based upon color, or to enforce social, as distinguished from political equality, or a commingling of the two races upon terms unsatisfactory to either. (quoted in Kluger 1975:74)  

Therefore, the Court reasoned, racially separate facilities required by the state do not imply the superiority of one group and the inferiority of another. If blacks perceive the restrictions placed on them as implying a "badge of inferiority," it is solely because they interpret the restrictions that way. The result was that, so long as the facilities were equal, legal segregation could not be construed as discrimination and was therefore constitutional. The Plessy "separate but equal" doctrine would stand for more than half a century as the law of the land, during which time the barriers
of caste in virtually all arenas of American life—especially throughout the South—would be strengthened.

However, the Jim Crow system of racial segregation and the racial caste system on which it was based not only was supported by "legal" means but also was ultimately maintained through the use of force, violence, and intimidation, including lynching and terrorism. Between 1879 and 1909, more than 2,400 blacks were lynched throughout the South, often in response to white perceptions that they had violated "acceptable" patterns of deference expressed in terms of address, demeanor, and social relationships [the "etiquette of race relations"] (Norton et al. 1994:524).

As a result of these legal and extralegal sanctions, the subordinate and subservient status of African Americans in the South persisted long after slavery had been abolished. Writing in 1929, Charles S. Johnson, a pioneer African American sociologist, noted the continuity between the slave plantation and rural Macon County, Alabama, during the 1920s:

There have been retained only slightly modified most of the features of the plantation under the institution of slavery. . . . The Negro population of this section of Macon County has its own social heritage which, in a relatively complete isolation has had little chance for modification from without or within. Patterns of life, social codes, as well as social attitudes were set in the economy of slavery. The political and economic revolution through which they have passed has affected only slightly the social relationships of the community or the mores upon which these relations have been based. The strength and apparent permanence of this early cultural set have made it virtually impossible for new generations to escape the influence of the patterns of work and general social behavior transmitted by their elders. (Johnson 1934:16)

Similar reports noted the persistence of the slave plantation in many areas of the rural south well into the 1930s.

The Great Migration: From Plantation to Ghetto

In response to these oppressive conditions, after the turn of the twentieth century African Americans began to leave the South, a movement that has been called the Great Migration. For nearly a half century after Emancipation, the overwhelming majority of blacks lived in the South; in 1860, 92 percent lived there; and by 1910, this percentage had declined only slightly—to 89 percent. Although blacks migrated from east to west within the South during the late nineteenth century, the most noteworthy movement of African Americans out of the South was the "Exoduster Movement" of blacks to Kansas in the late 1870s. As Table 2 indicates, although there was a steady increase in black out-migration from the South after 1870, it was not until the 1910s that substantial numbers began to leave. Except for the 1930s, when the nation was locked in the throes of the Great Depression, these numbers increased in every decade until the 1960s, with the greatest numbers occurring during and after World War II.

Moving primarily to Northern urban areas, African Americans congregated in urban ghettos, geographically defined residential areas to which minority groups are restricted. This migration out of the rural South and the transformation of African Americans from an essentially rural to a predominantly urban people has been one of the most momentous events in the African-American experience and one of the most important demographic shifts in American history. As noted before, in 1900 almost
TABLE 2  Black Out-Migration from the South, 1870-1970 (in thousands)

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<th>1870-80</th>
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<td></td>
<td>71</td>
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<td></td>
<td>174</td>
<td></td>
<td>197</td>
<td></td>
<td>525</td>
<td></td>
<td>877</td>
<td></td>
<td>398</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,468</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,473</td>
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<td>1,360</td>
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90 percent of the black population lived in the South; by 1990 the percentage in the South had declined to only 53 percent. In 1900 blacks were primarily rural residents, with only 23 percent living in urban areas. By 1996 nearly nine-tenths (86 percent) of the African American population lived in urban areas, indicating that blacks have become a more urbanized population than whites. Although a substantial portion of the increase in the number of urbanized African Americans was in the North, many lived in southern cities, such as Atlanta, Birmingham, New Orleans, Miami, and Houston as well. Between 1900 and 1996, the percentage of the Southern black population residing in metropolitan areas increased from 17 percent to 77 percent. Table 3 shows the percentage that blacks comprised in the major American cities for the years 1920, 1950, 1970, 1980, and 1990.


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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>39.8</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>27.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>39.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>San Diego</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>8.9</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>43.7</td>
<td>63.1</td>
<td>75.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dallas</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>29.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phoenix</td>
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<td>6.0</td>
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<td>4.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>San Antonio</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>6.7</td>
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*These were the ten largest cities in the United States in 1990.

$^*$Figures pertain to “nonwhite” population, of which over 90 percent was black.
The massive migration of African Americans out of the South transformed race relations in the United States. As Waldo Martin has written, "urbanization has nationalized the locus of African American life and culture" (Martin 1992:354).

Wilson has characterized the period from the late nineteenth century to the post–World War II era as the industrial period of race relations. His description of the transition from preindustrial to industrial parallels van den Berghe’s distinction between paternalistic race relations, which were characteristic of a plantation economy, and competitive race relations, which are found in an urban, industrial setting. In the industrial setting, competition for jobs generated considerable racial antagonism, tension, and conflict. (For a superb analysis of this conflict, see Tuttle 1972, especially Chapter 4.)

The Great Migration of African Americans out of the South ultimately proved to be one of the most important factors underlying the Black Protest Movement that swept the nation during the late 1950s and 1960s. Although discrimination against African Americans in education, employment, housing, and the administration of justice also prevailed in the North, a greater range of opportunities for blacks was available in northern urban areas than in the South. Especially after World War II, increasing numbers of African Americans obtained college educations and found employment in skilled and white-collar occupations. These changes expanded the African American middle class, which provided the primary source of leadership for the Black Protest Movement. The educated and articulate African American middle class played an especially important role in providing legal challenges to the southern Jim Crow system, which culminated in the Supreme Court’s 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision that segregated schools were inherently unequal and therefore unconstitutional. The Brown decision, which overturned the 1896 separate-but-equal doctrine, symbolized the beginning of an era in which the legal basis for the caste system would crumble. In Part 4, we will examine the changing status of African Americans during the post–World War II era, the period that Wilson has characterized as the modern industrial stage of American race relations.

**Hispanic Americans/Latinos**

Hispanic Americans constitute one of the largest and most rapidly growing ethnic categories in contemporary American society. During the 1980s the Hispanic or Latino population grew nearly five times faster than the rest of the population, and their rate of growth has declined only slightly during the 1990s. By 1998 the U.S. Census Bureau estimated the Hispanic population at nearly 30 million, or 11.1 percent of the total population. Recent projections suggest that the Latino population will surpass the African American population by 2010, and total nearly 90 million, or 22 percent of the population, by 2050 (Day 1993). This dramatic increase in the Hispanic population in the United States is the result of both higher Hispanic fertility rates and substantially increased rates of immigration from Latin America, especially from Mexico.

The recent growth of the Latino population has produced some dramatic changes in the ethnic composition of many American cities. By 1994 Hispanics outnumbered blacks in four of the nation’s ten largest cities—Los Angeles, Houston, Phoenix, and San Antonio, as well as such other major cities as Miami, El Paso, Pittsburgh, and San
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