Comment on "Stratification and Political Economy" by William Darity and David McMillon
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Darity and McMillon's contribution (2025) examines an argument advanced in both academic and popular discourse: that "racism is bad for everyone." It is "bad" because it harms not only its targets, but also those who perpetuate it. More specifically, white people discriminate at their own peril, engaging in "self-sabotage"(Chetty et al. 2020; Cook 2004; Hsieh et al. 2019; Johnson 2019; McGhee 2022). From the perspective of stratification economics, however, such behavior is rational because white Americans are invested in their higher status and in fact extract meaningful rents from racism. Solutions to the "self-sabotage," therefore, require incentives to outweigh these profound benefits. Incentive-free accounts cannot surmount whites' attachment to the "bad" racial status quo.

I very much enjoyed reading the paper and considering the claim that "racism is bad for everyone," an argument rarely advanced in mainstream American politics – the domain I study as a public opinion scholar. In that vein, I provide these comments as a political scientist focused on racial attitudes and their application to white Americans' public opinion on policy and politicians. The predominant approach in this subfield draws on a social-psychological perspective, assuming, for the most part, only a faint connection between instrumental concerns and political preferences (Hopkins 2018; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Kinder and Sears 1981). This perspective, which tends to downplay the role of rationality, informs my comment below. Still, I believe it supplements and enhances Darity and McMillon's arguments. And so I offer my comment in the spirit of enriching the discussion with complementary insights from related fields.

Contemporary conversations about shifting demographics in the United States often focus on projections that white Americans will become a racial minority by 2045 (Frey 2018). Recent research in political science and psychology has considered the impact of these conversations on white Americans' politics. Even with their numerical and social status objectively intact, the mere threat of change increases white Americans' propensity to identify with the Republican Party (Craig and Richeson 2014), which has long been associated with supporting the racial status quo (Carmines and Stimson 1989). Similarly, when white Americans perceive racial discrimination against their group, this erodes their confidence in American institutions, such as elections (Filindra, Kaplan, and Manning 2023). White Americans can both mourn status deterioration while also denying they are the high-status group. Knowles and colleagues (2014) find that those white Americans who disavow their privilege are more likely to exhibit insensitivity and inaction regarding racial inequality, relative to those who do not. In sum, the research suggests that white Americans' assessment of their relative status extends beyond mere acknowledgment of demographic facts, seeping into their political identities and ideas. Notably, these effects persist even when untethered from any actual status loss.

If this is the case, even the most appealing incentives may not be able to overcome status threat. Several implications follow. First, the theory of loss aversion suggests that individuals are especially sensitive to perceptions of loss, more so than accounts that emphasize maintenance of the status quo or potential gains (Kahneman and Tversky 1979). When white Americans perceive their status as threatened, they may be unusually attentive and invested, beyond what might be considered reasonable or rational. Macropolitical conditions can stoke these fears. When social and political change seems overwhelming in speed or scale, people may look to a strong leader who will restore normalcy and stifle dissent: a profile of leadership that aligns with systems of authoritarianism (Stenner 2005). Once in power, such leaders have strong incentives to stoke fear and inflame threat to maintain their political advantage. None of these outcomes discredit the relationship between status protection and self-sabotage; they suggest that self-sabotage may be endemic, because it need not be linked to objective status at all.

Since political scientists fixate on political outcomes, permit me to raise another relevant angle from our literature: the study of political elites. Policymakers are often associated with introducing inefficiency into models. Here, I'll provide some color on how this could play out in this particular issue. Political elites will likely introduce distortions into citizens' assessments of potential payoffs. This could be deliberate. Policymakers could just opt out of distributing the benefit, even if they were legally required to do so, a process called bureaucratic disentitlement (Bovens, Goodin, and Schillemans 2014; Hannah-Jones 2015; Lipsky 1984). In describing payoffs, politicians, especially white politicians, often invoke racial animus either implicitly (Mendelberg 2001) or explicitly (Valentino, Neuner, and Vandenbroek 2018) because it is politically advantageous to do so. Black politicians can do this too (Stephens-Dougan 2020). But the distortions could be unintentional, too. White citizens often assign a host of stereotypes to Black politicians and policymakers, including the notion that they will be beholden to their own racial group (Hajnal 2006; Reeves 1997; Stephens-Dougan 2020). This may spur racial threat, further deteriorating any perceived incentives.

Of course, all of this presumes that policymakers would pronounce racism as bad for everyone – a highly improbable scenario. Even in the summer of 2021, when addressing Black suffering was high on white Americans' political agenda, political communication on this topic was filtered through a predictably partisan lens (Reny and Newman 2021) and proved largely fleeting (Chudy and Jefferson 2021; Nguyen et al. 2021). If such moments - when a divided country is in temporary agreement over racism's harms – do not yield a political narrative that racism is bad for everyone, it seems unlikely that one would ever emerge. Models do not need to describe reality to provide valuable insight; even so, the research on contemporary racial politics presents a largely barren landscape for the claim that "racism is bad for everyone" to take root.

Emotion, or affect, may seem to have no role in a theory that defines racism as a "set of beliefs, behaviors, and institutions sustained by rational (or boundedly rational) incentives." However, several points in the manuscript reminded me of the literature on political emotions and their relevance, even within the framework of rationality. For example, the authors discuss a "rational

attention to positional payoffs," whereby white people prioritize relative status even if it requires economic sacrifice. Citizens cannot and do not pay attention to all political issues; elites and the media guide them to the relevant ones (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). This process can also be catalyzed by fear. Brader (2006) finds that citizens who are afraid often seek new information that is often congruent with their initial points of view. Once this information is identified and reviewed, it can increase the salience of related information stored in memory, which may stoke more fear. In other words, emotion and attention become fused in a perpetuating cycle. Whereas citizens' attention to other political topics may wax and wane, it may be harder to dislodge when bound up in fear, over group displacement, or decline.

Anger is another emotion with important political consequences – specifically mobilization. Anger spurs action across political issues and events (Valentino et al. 2011), but has special force in shaping white Americans' opinions on racial matters. Research by Banks and colleagues (Banks 2014; Banks and Valentino 2012) has found that when anger interacts with anti-Black animus, this can spur costly behavior, which further deepens or entrenches white Americans' commitment to racist beliefs and practices. In short, the constellation of emotions white Americans typically feel about race - namely, fear and anger - are not mere ephemera, but result in concrete political preferences and action. This does not make racism irrational or less rational, but instead might provide insight into why white Americans' commitment to racism, through policy, discrimination, violence, or other means, is especially deep and steadfast.

Darity and McMillon convincingly make the argument that white people prefer material self-sabotage. As a final note, it is worth considering what might happen if they came to oppose it instead. Assume that a non-trivial portion of white Americans committed, for whatever reason, to opt out of the self-sabotage. Racism may persist, however, due to several coordination issues. It may be difficult to detect group preferences when those white people who are most vocal and active about race are, as the previous paragraph suggests, driven by anger and racial animosity. Thus, the first white people to opt out of self-sabotage would do so amid disapproval from other group members. They might reasonably assume that other white people would not follow their lead; as first movers, they could incur significant costs, such as social ostracism, loss of relative status, and material benefits. Institutions or social movements could help mitigate these problems, but white Americans lack mechanisms to credibly commit to and coordinate simultaneous action on advancing racial justice (Chudy 2024).

In conclusion, this paper represents an important contribution to the study of racism and its consequences. The idea that "racism is bad for everyone" is not one that, as far as I know, has entered mainstream political discourse. Indeed, the contemporary political landscape provides ample examples of white politicians profiting from explicitly racist campaigns and messaging (Christiani 2023; Valentino, Neuner, and Vandenbroek 2018). But I can see why this point of view offers a tempting, but limited, perspective and leads to the erroneous diagnosis of white self-sabotage. I am convinced by Darity and McMillon's emphasis on incentive-based remedies and think the work I

summarize here only underscores how vast these incentives must be. Their work opens several avenues for future research across disciplines. Even if the political tides were to shift, as they sometimes do, the argument and framework presented in their contribution will remain a valuable resource for both scholars and practitioners.

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