

## David R. James

For almost 23 of the almost 24 years I have been on the faculty of Indiana University, I have had the great good fortune to count David James among my colleagues. He has been to me a great friend, a wonderful collaborator, and a valued co-conspirator through all of these years.

At the tail end of the nineteenth century, W. E. B. DuBois famously remarked that “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line, the relation of the darker to the lighter races in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.” In 1944 Gunnar Myrdal, the Nobel Prize-winning Swedish economist, famously described “the Negro problem,” by which he meant white prejudice and discrimination against African Americans, as the great American dilemma. In some respects, one must see David James’ scholarly career as a response to these calls to understand the problem of race in America. Through his scholarship, we better understand the political processes that have produced racial segregation and racial inequality in American society.

At first blush, David James might seem an unlikely candidate to devote his scholarly career to the study of race and racial inequality. You only have to spend a few minutes in his company to come to understand that he is a son of the South. Not only do his speech patterns give it away; so does his proclivity for telling good stories. During David’s childhood and adolescent years in the rural Georgia of the 1940s and 1950s, the “color line” that regulated economic, political, and social life in the pre-Civil Rights Movement South was still firmly in place. People like David—white people, that is—were on one side of the line; blacks were on the other. Unlike most folks who grow up on the privileged side of any line that divides the haves from the have-nots, David has used his experiences of growing up on the side of the haves to reflect with great insight and sensitivity on the ways in which the politics of race systematically benefit folks like him at the same time as those politics systematically disadvantage African Americans. He has devoted his career to understanding the role of the state and formal political institutions in the original construction of that color line in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century South, and to the, unfortunately, only partial dismantling of the color line throughout the United States in the decades since Jim Crow was supposedly dispatched to the dustbin of history.

David did not take a straightforward path to the academy. The zigs and zags he took along the way to finding his true calling, however, made him the great scholar that he is. David took his undergraduate degree in electrical engineering from Georgia Tech in 1959. He then spent 10 years as an officer in the United States Navy, serving for some of those years as a commander of a nuclear sub. Neither “electrical engineer” nor “naval officer” is a typical element of the biography of a sociologist, especially one who studies patterns of racial inequality. David, however, turned these unlikely beginnings into sources of some of his greatest strengths as a social scientist. His engineering training is evident in his methodological rigor and precision. His background as a naval officer accounts, in my view, for his unwavering commitment to staying the course and to getting his work right.

But it took a quirk of fate to bring David to sociology and, ultimately, to us at IU. His naval duties took him to the University of Wisconsin in the early 1970s, where he saw the light, left the navy, and enrolled in graduate school in sociology. The result was a scholar who used painstaking and careful statistical techniques to ask really hard and really important questions. This combination is as wonderful as it is rare.

David’s early scholarship, with his mentor Karl Taeuber, analyzed the determinants of racial segregation in schools in the post-desegregation United States. He truly broke new ground, however, with his subsequent work on what he called the southern racial state, work that showed how the interests of white political elites became institutionalized in the very structure of southern states. Throughout his career he has demonstrated numerous ways in which the state has affected racial inequality. He has asked how political

boundaries among school districts permit and even exacerbate school segregation. Which patterns of local political control create or ameliorate racial inequalities in educational opportunities? Where is the interplay between color-blind and color-conscious policies in the political *creation* and public acceptance of persistent racial inequalities in contemporary America? In response he has published numerous articles in the leading journals of our discipline. His work has charted new directions in both political sociology and sociology of education.

David has taught me much over the years. His fingerprints are all over my work, sometimes in ways I cannot readily identify. But here is one I can: it is because of him that I study the politics of education and race. In turn, I hope that I have been true to his steadfast commitment to ask good questions, even if they are hard to answer.

There is one final holdover from David's first career as a naval officer that bears mention. It is David's commanding physical presence and booming voice, both of which often served to scare the living daylights out of graduate students who had not yet come to know and appreciate his wit, warmth, and generosity. It always amused me to see the fear that David could inspire, largely unintentionally, in graduate students, because I knew him as a gentle soul. He is the colleague on whom I most depended for regular doses of wit, warmth, and generosity, and with whom I could most easily share a good, deep laugh. I already mind that I can no longer pop next door to get a dose of his sociological insight or share with him a good laugh about, well, almost anything.

I wish David well in his well-earned retirement, just as I also look forward to reading the book he is writing on the rise and fall of the racial state in the United States and sharing with him many further good times in the years to come.

*Pamela Barnhouse Walters*