

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on April 5, 2022, the following tribute to the life and service of the late James Sidanius was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

## **JAMES SIDANIUS**

BORN: December 11, 1945

DIED: June 29, 2021

Jim Sidanius was as surprised as anyone at the way things turned out. He wrote that he “began life as a black, man-child of a single mother living in some of the most impoverished sections of New York City in the late 1940’s” who could hardly have imagined that someday he would be a widely recognized scholar in the fields of social and political psychology.

At the age of 16, Jim was arrested and severely beaten by police for what he called “the crime of having a White girlfriend.” The experience had a lasting impact: “I was transformed from a rather milk-toast liberal into an angry and resentful Black radical.” He graduated from the City College of the City University of New York in 1968 and entered the graduate program in clinical psychology at New York University, but after just two years, in what he described as “an attempt to escape the ever present and soul poisoning effects of American racism,” he went into self-imposed exile in Sweden. He became a Swedish citizen, enrolled at the University of Stockholm, and in 1977 received his Ph.D. in the emerging field of political psychology.

When Jim returned to the U.S. in 1983, he decided to re-acquaint himself with American culture by driving from New York City to Los Angeles. During that journey he was “struck by the degree to which the system of American Apartheid had softened, and only rarely expressed itself with the level of severity and brutality of which the system of Jim Crow is clearly capable.” And yet, he observed, “the overall structure of American racism was still very much dedicated to the same socio-political project that had driven (me) to escape America some thirteen years earlier, namely White supremacy.”

Understanding the origins and consequences of that socio-political project became Jim’s life’s work. He held positions at University of Stockholm, Carnegie Mellon University, University of Texas–Austin, New York University, and University of California–Los Angeles, before being appointed in 2006 as the John Lindsley Professor of Psychology in Memory of William James in the Department of Psychology and the Department of African and African American Studies at Harvard University. He was the winner of the Harold Lasswell Award for distinguished scientific contribution in the field of political psychology from the International

Society of Political Psychology, the Career Contribution Award from the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, the Scientific Impact Award from the Society of Experimental Social Psychology, the Gordon Allport Intergroup Relations Prize and the Distinguished Scientific Award for the Applications of Psychology from the American Psychological Association, and the William James Fellow Award from the Association for Psychological Science for a “lifetime of significant intellectual contributions to the basic science of psychology.” He was an elected member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the International Society of Political Psychology named the Jim Sidanius Early Career Achievement Award in his honor.

Jim’s seven books and more than 150 chapters and research articles were an attempt to answer a single question: Why are systems of oppression so remarkably difficult to eliminate? His answer was the brilliantly original, multi-disciplinary work for which he was best known: social dominance theory (SDT), which offers a general model of the competition for power that gives rise to group-based hierarchies, whose replacement or persistence depends on the balance of hierarchy-enhancing and hierarchy-attenuating forces, such as social institutions, personal ideologies, and “legitimizing myths.”

One of Jim’s key empirical discoveries was that although different ideologies offer different ways of justifying the social and economic inequalities that pervade human societies, the people who embrace one ideology tend also to embrace the others. Jim suggested that individuals have different levels of a stable trait that he called social dominance orientation (SDO), and he designed an instrument to measure it. His research showed that an individual’s SDO predicts their social and political attitudes on a range of issues and behaviors, from juror decision-making to career choice. In the last decades of his life, Jim began to focus more closely on the evolutionary origins of social dominance, ultimately concluding that racism and sexism have different origins: racism arises when coalitions of males compete for resources and sexism arises when males seek to control the reproductive capacity of females. Taken in sum, Jim’s work provides a courageous and complex answer to the question that drove him to become a social scientist.

By its very nature, scientific research becomes obsolete, and the more vital the field, the more quickly that happens. Jim’s research will someday meet that common fate. His enduring legacy will be the large number of adoring students he trained and nurtured. Never has there been a more doting mentor or more dedicated teacher. Jim routinely taught more courses at Harvard than were required of him simply because his mathematical ability and statistical expertise were so rare and the need for them so pressing. He was especially drawn to students who, like his younger self, worried that science might not have a place for them, and he delighted in proving them wrong. If there was a place for a Black man from humble beginnings who wore clogs and a Red Sox cap everywhere he went, whose passions were Renaissance choral music and fast cars, and who could explain the nuances of structural equation modeling in Swedish, then surely there was a place for everyone. Today, many of

Jim's students are leaders in the field and professors at distinguished universities, including our own. Leonardo da Vinci once wrote, "Poor is the pupil who does not surpass his master," but surpassing Jim Sidanius is and will always be too much to ask of anyone.

Respectfully submitted,

Mahzarin Banaji  
Mina Cikara  
Steven Pinker  
Daniel Gilbert, Chair

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This essay benefitted from brief biographies written by Professor John Jost of New York University and Professor Christopher Federico of the University of Minnesota. Quotations are from an unpublished autobiographical essay kindly provided by Miriam Sidanius or from Sidanius, J., & Pratto, F. (2012). Social dominance theory. In P. A. M. Van Lange, A. W. Kruglanski, & E. T. Higgins (Eds.), *Handbook of theories of social psychology* (pp. 418–438). Sage Publications.