



Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America

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Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's acclaimed *Racism without Racists* documents how, beneath our contemporary conversation about race, there lies a full-blown arsenal of arguments, phrases, and stories that whites use to account for--and ultimately justify--racial inequalities. The fifth edition of this provocative book makes clear that color blind racism is as insidious now as ever. It features new material on our current racial climate, including the Black Lives Matter movement; a significantly revised chapter that examines the Obama presidency, the 2016 election, and Trump's presidency; and a new chapter addressing what readers can do to confront racism--both personally and on a larger structural level.

Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America Details

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From Reader Review Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America for online ebook

Andrea says

A very interesting book, and one that almost feels as though it's telling you things you already know...and of course it is. It's documenting how many whites understand their reality and justify it, so if you've spent any time awake and alive in the world, much of this will sound very familiar. But I think it's good to bring a critical academic eye to it, though at times I felt it was stating the obvious -- an unfair criticism as I'm sure to many folks, all of this is far from obvious.

He himself gives a rather brilliant paragraph summary of the point:

How is it possible to have this tremendous degree of racial inequality in a country where most whites claim that race is no longer relevant? More important, how do whites explain the apparent contradiction between their professed color blindness and the United States' color-coded inequality? In this book I attempt to answer both of these questions. I contend that whites have developed powerful explanations which have ultimately become justifications for contemporary racial inequality that exculpate them from any responsibility for the status of people of color. These explanations emanate from a new racial ideology that I label colorblind racism. This ideology, which acquired cohesiveness and dominance in the late 1960s, explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics. Whereas Jim Crow racism explained blacks' social standing as the result of their biological and moral inferiority, color-blind racism avoids such facile arguments. Instead, whites rationalize minorities' contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and blacks' imputed cultural limitations.

He is clear about how he defines his foundational terms. Race is socially constructed and subject to change, yet produces real effects on those racialized as 'black' or 'white'. The second term is 'racial structure', the "the totality of the social relations and practices that reinforce white privilege. Accordingly, the task of analysts interested in studying racial structures is to uncover the particular social, economic, political, social control, and ideological mechanisms responsible for the reproduction of racial privilege in a society." And the third term is ideology: "the racially based frameworks used by actors to explain and justify (dominant race) or challenge (subordinate race or races) the racial status quo. Although all the races in a racialized social system have the capacity of developing these frameworks, the frameworks of the dominant race tend to become the master frameworks upon which all racial actors ground (for or against) their ideological positions."

He further breaks down how you can analyse racial ideology through its three components: common frames, style, and racial stories. This I find quite a useful and very practical breakdown, though I feel that there is surely other levels to analysing ideology...I feel I should know what more there is, be able to articulate it, but I'll leave that for the moment as I don't feel articulate at all about it. Perhaps it's in his oblique references to Gramsci, or at least reliance on his thought, without delving into its complexity. He writes:

And because the group life of the various racially defined groups is based on hierarchy and domination, the ruling ideology expresses as "common sense" the interests of the dominant race, while oppositional ideologies attempt to challenge that common sense by providing alternative frames, ideas, and stories based on the experiences of subordinated races.

He doesn't often quote directly or cite Hall either, but he's definitely here, especially in considering the flexible nature of such ideologies, the way we wield them quite unconsciously, and the reality that they are rarely internally consistent and not to be demolished by pure logic alone.

I think this is a good foundational book on how a majority of whites think. There is an outline of the four major frames:

- *abstract liberalism* - "involves using ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g., "equal opportunity," the idea that force should not be used to achieve social policy) and economic liberalism (e.g., choice, individualism) in an abstract manner to explain racial matters. By framing race-related issues in the language of liberalism, whites can appear "reasonable" and even "moral," while opposing almost all practical approaches to deal with de facto racial inequality."
- "*Naturalization* is a frame that allows whites to explain away racial phenomena by suggesting they are natural occurrences. For example, whites can claim "segregation" is natural because people from all backgrounds "gravitate toward likeness."
- "*Cultural racism* is a frame that relies on culturally based arguments such as "Mexicans do not put much emphasis on education" or "blacks have too many babies" to explain the standing of minorities in society."
- "*Minimization of racism* is a frame that suggests discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities' life chances ('It's better now than in the past' or 'there is discrimination, but there are plenty of jobs out there.

For style he relies on a much more traditional discourse analysis, but one which really resonates with my own interviews of people when it turns to the subject of race. Here is the list:

First, I document whites' avoidance of direct racial language to expressing their racial views. Second, I analyze the central "semantic moves" (see below) whites use as verbal parachutes to avoid dangerous discussions or to save face. Third, I examine the role of projection in whites' racial discourse. Fourth, I show the role of diminutives in colorblind race talk. Finally, I show how incursions into forbidden issues produce almost total incoherence in many whites.

And of course storytelling, story telling has been all the rage, and though in my growing up story telling meant lying, I still think it's a key concept though I could wish for a different name. He found four major story lines, though there were variations and combinations: "The major racial story lines of the post-Civil Rights era are "The past is the past," "I did not own slaves," "If (other ethnic groups) have made it, how come blacks have not?," and "I did not get a (job or promotion) because of a black man."

His results chime with experience as well...I never did think academics and educated people were necessarily any less racist, just better at not being obvious, and definitely better at rationalising it. They don't even have the excuse that poor people do, of being at the bottom of the heap fighting for every scrap. But Bonilla-Silve found in fact, that it is working class white women who are the most likely to be non or even anti-racist. They are the most able to empathise and to understand what other races go through and to be able to see

through the rhetoric of colour-blindness. I would have said myself that geography is very important here, that is an aspect that is mostly missing here in an intentional sense. He notes that segregation allows whites to sequester themselves, and that negative stereotypes grow stronger the more segregated whites are. In terms of breaking down these stereotypes, growing up in mixed neighborhoods tends to help. I liked that he also looked at Black opinions and style, though again it is hardly surprising that most don't use the dominant frames, styles and stories, but that some of the frames, particularly that of liberalism, do have some traction.

This is a foundational book in terms of what people actually think, how they frame and understand things. I'm more excited about why, how this connects to the success or failure of struggle, the building up and tearing down of social structures and etc, but that complements work like this perfectly. And I liked that Bonilla-Silva is trying to think of how we improve things, change our world. He gives a list of 5 ways which I quite like:

1. because color blindness has tainted their views, it is of cardinal importance that activists in the new movement educate the black masses on the nuances of color blindness.
2. we need to nurture a large cohort of antiracist whites to begin challenging color-blind nonsense from within.
3. for researchers and activists alike to provide counter-ideological arguments to each of the frames of color-blind racism.
4. we need to undress whites' claims of color blindness before a huge mirror. That mirror must reflect the myriad facts of contemporary whiteness, such as whites living in white neighborhoods, sending their kids to white schools, associating primarily with whites, and having almost all their primary relationships with whites
5. whiteness must be challenged wherever it exists; regardless of the social organization in which whiteness manifests itself (universities, corporations, schools, neighborhoods, churches), those committed to racial equality must develop a personal practice to challenge it.
6. the most important strategy for fighting "new racism" practices and the ideology of color blindness is to become militant once again. Changes in systems of domination and their accompanying ideologies are never accomplished by racial dialogues-the notion of "Can we all just get along?" or "workshops on racism"-through education, or through "moral reform"²³ alone. What is needed to slay modern-day racism is a new, in-your-face, fight-the-power civil rights movement, a new movement to spark change, to challenge not just color-blind whites but also minority folks who have become content with the crumbs they receive from past struggles. This new civil rights movement, as I have mentioned elsewhere,²⁴ must have at the core of its agenda the struggle for equality of results. Progressives cannot continue fighting for "equality of opportunity" when true equality cannot be achieved that way. It is time to demand equality now

I am unfamiliar with sociological methods and such so I don't know if I can rate this on the Robustness of his Research but I do think this is a pretty comprehensive survey analysis of Word Tricks White People Use ("I don't see color!")

I also appreciate that he got Straight To The Point about eg it was almost like the New Jim Crow but more roarily upset (NJC was like sad-can-you-believe-this and Bonilla-Silva is like SAD CAN YOU BELIEVE THIS!!)

I also think an analogous and slightly different version of his "racial frames" would apply to recent Chinese immigrants? although by his analysis it seems that education isn't really the factor that unblinds colorblinds but instead it's some ability to articulate and recognize the effects of ongoing discrimination in one's own life too. which is useful as in rhetorical kits but perhaps discomfoting because like the intersection of respectability and colorblindness?!?!?!?!?

predictions of a tri-racial society maybe ironically delayed not by progressive agitation but instead a bigly orange trash bag :(

@Kevin Wang, Willy Xiao, Meghan McKenzie what are your thoughts on your Eye Condition being appropriated by society etc. as a neutralizing political term that perpetuates white male hegemony please discuss thank you !!

Seven says

some of my best friends are books...lol...

Tressie Mcphd says

People are going to tell you that EBS's argument is tautological. That's not totally without merit but you have to understand that the interviews are with individuals but the argument is about culture. Culture arguments stay being tautological. LOL Hard to get around that. It's an important theoretical response to the social psych super micro analysis of racism that makes it seem as though everyone is a racist so no one is really a racist. Most importantly, EBS is a hoot to read. Third edition, 6th para of forward he basically thanks all his haters. It's one of the great academic gangsta moments of all time.

Gandi says

Does a decent job debunking racial prejudices of a seemingly color-blind nation aka US; on the flip side, this book is often repeating and polarising.

June 13, 2018

Brian says

Racism without Racists is a sociological study of why exactly it is that despite a sizeable portion of white people in America claiming that race doesn't even enter their thinking, or that they "don't see color," or that racism is in the past and things are better now, or some combination or variant of those arguments, any study of culture will reveal that there is still a huge gap between white and black people on household wealth, educational attainment, criminal conviction rate, rate of graduation, and so on. So, how is it that this occurs, and how do white people explain it when it's brought to their attention? Bonilla-Silva's argument is that there are four main strategies whites use:

- 1) **Abstract Racism.** This is using ostensibly-liberal language to frame racial issues such that whites can appear reasonable for opposing them. Saying that affirmative action is "reverse discrimination" and that it's unfair to use it to address past discrimination, for example, or claiming that segregation in housing or friendship groups can't be dealt with because it would interfere with people's free choice to live where they please or choose their associates.
- 2) **Naturalization.** This is the idea that current conditions exist because it's just the way they are or that it's a natural outcome. Segregated friendship groups are because people just prefer to associated with others that are "like them" rather than any deliberate policies or unconscious prejudice.
- 3) **Cultural Racism.** This takes a lot of the old language about biological realities of race and recasts it as a property of culture. It's not that black people are inherently lazy, it's that they have a culture of poverty that discourages hard work.
- 4) **Minimization of Racism.** This is claiming that racism existed in the past and had a great effect, but is no longer important in current times. Slavery existed and it was terrible, but I don't own slaves, so you can't blame me for anything. The past is the past.

It's actually a much more academic work than I expected it to be. When my wife recommended it to me she didn't say much about it, so I went in thinking it was going to be more of a mass-market explanation of contemporary racism--a sort of Brief History of Time for American social structures--but it's actually an analysis of two studies conducted on racial attitudes in Americans, one on adults in Detroit and one on college students. The book thus repeatedly refers to quotes from the surveyed individuals to illustrate its points, which are pretty enlightening.

One thing I found especially interesting was the notion of incoherence. Bonilla-Silva's argument is that when whites have to express their internalized prejudice in a color-blind fashion, they increasingly resort to verbal flailing that ends up becoming almost word salad. One example was a student asked about interracial marriage:

Interviewer: "So what do you think about people who are absolutely against it, you know, who want to keep the races pure or whatever?"

Scott: "I mean, I kind of, I feel that way also because I kind of, I don't know, I kinda wanna stay with my nationality in a way, you know. I think once, once you start breaking away, you start losing your own like deep home family values and in away, you get mixed emotions, you know. But then again, it's just like the old times are gone, you know it's all modern-day now. So really you[r] nationality really don't, shouldn't count. But then again, some people don't want to have so much blood within their family, within their name, you know. I know people that will not marry unless they're a hundred percent Italian. I got a couple of people who will not date anyone unless they're hundred percent Italian, so..."

Compare that to one of the black interviewees's answer:

Interviewer: "Did you ever have any white relationships?"

Joe: "No."

Interviewer: "Did you ever have any romantic interest in a white person?"

Joe: "No."

Interviewer: "And why would you think that is so?"

Joe: "My preference."

Or, to be fair, in the other direction:

Carla: "If you like it, I love it."

Bonilla-Silva says that this occurs because black people already know that racism is a real force in society, so they have no need to use the language of color-blindness and thus don't have any cognitive dissonance to overcome.

Counter to popular expectations, the survey results indicate that the whites who are least affected by color-blind racism are working-class white women. The book offers a two-fold explanation for this. The first is that they're more likely to work with black people due to having food sector or service jobs, and this exposure helps humanize what would otherwise be the distant Other. The second is that as women, they already experience societal discrimination, so it is easier for them to understand it as a force.

There's also a repeated point made that part of the reason whites can resort to color-blind racism as a argument is because they see all-white groups as "normal" due to growing up in mostly-white environments, living in white towns, attending white schools, and so on. This leads to e.g. complaints that they don't have any black friends because of "self-segregation," while not seeing that similar complaints could be made about their group of only or primarily white friends.

The end has some of predictions about the future of race in America. Bonilla-Silva think that we're likely to move toward a multi-tiered racial structure similar to Latin America, where instead of most race relations seen through the lens of white or black, there's a three-level grouping composed of whites, including some Eastern Europeans, some Asians, urban-dwelling Native Americans, and Arabs; "honorary whites," including most East Asians, white-appearing Latinos or multiracial people, and South Asians; and "the collective black," including dark-skinned Latinos, blacks, Africans, and Southeast Asians. This new order will diffuse racial tensions away from whites by focusing the anger of the collective black about racism toward honorary whites, who they will probably have more contact with, in much the way that a robust middle class prevents the poor from being angry at the rich. He also suggests that color-blind racism and the new racial dynamics might combine to make race a taboo subject, in much the way that claims of someone "playing the race card" is rhetorically deployed today, but on a society-wide scale.

I think the book is a little weak at times because despite Bonilla-Silva's initial notes that he is speaking of social structures and societal trends rather than examining the heart of any individual person, he occasionally resorts to moralistic language, including explicitly using the word "purity" to refer to people's degree of apparent prejudice. This is relatively minor, but Bonilla-Silva has a whole postscript dedicated to people accusing him of calling them racist, so I think it mars *Racism Without Racists* more than the word count it takes up would indicate. It may be hard to avoid, but since one of the solutions advocated at the end is education on the frames of color-blind racism and the challenging of "whiteness" as a social space, talking about purity is probably a bad way to go about that.

Some people are just oversensitive, though. Bonilla-Silva has a note near the end about how some people got as far as the single usage of the word "Amerikkka" in the intro--a word that occurs nowhere else in *Racism Without Racists*--and they immediately put the book down and fired off an email to him about how he obviously hates America. There's not much point in diluting the argument to appeal to those people because they'll never be convinced either way.

I suppose if there is any problem with the book, it's the same as the one with *The Republican Brain* or *Merchants of Doubt*--namely, that the people who most need to read it are those who are least likely to do so. There's no real way to get around that, though, and some truths are disturbing and uncomfortable no matter how they're presented.

Kyle says

I have a few qualms with this book. The biggest is that, although Bonilla-Silva claims that pathologizing the internalization of racist beliefs in moral terms is problematic, in areas of the book in which he measures subjects' responses via a standard of "purity," he does just that. Within his analysis, he also allows that the structural has an influence over the cultural but does not grant these concepts a reciprocal relationship. Otherwise quite insightful, however.

James says

DNF...

sad to say i thought this book relied entirely too much on other people's work/writing... not that there is anything wrong with extensive footnotes/bibliographical notes, i found the constant referencing of other work to be incredibly distracting and dissonant... in a much longer tome this level of quoting, etc. would be fine, but this book rolls in at under 400 pages, and that just didn't work for me... maybe i expected more originality, or maybe i need the same facts told in ways that are novel and interesting, not just repeated from other sources... there isn't much that's "news" in this type of book, i guess, so lacking a different approach to bringing the information to the reader, this book just comes across as dull... i would recommend looking for books that are written in the Critical Race Theory area, since facts and figures about Jim Crow and The Great Migration , etc. have been done better elsewhere, as have analysis of the Obama Presidency, Black Lives Matter, and Donald Trump/Tea Party/Republican Racists... i think these involve more investment than "token" additions in a revised edition of a old book...

Garren says

This is a fairly academic book, which means it goes heavy on the theoretical language at times and would alienate a general audience. Nor would it be a good pick to send to white people who tend to see things through the lens of the "colorblind racism" that's the focus of the book. I'd recommend it to people involved in activist work because the bulk of the book is about analyzing a series (two series, actually) of interviews with a bunch of people about racial issues. Patterns emerged which Bonilla-Silva then tags with useful terminology to identify their occurrence in the wild. This is especially useful for white activists who are likely to be using at least some problematic verbal and rhetorical behaviors themselves without being conscious of it, even if they are strongly opposed to racial injustices. That's much of the point of the book:

today's white supremacy is maintained by an army of small effects that are largely invisible to white people, making it more insidious than the old style of individual racism that everyone condemns.

Paige says

“One reason why, in general terms, whites and people of color cannot agree on racial matters is because they conceive terms such as ‘racism’ very differently,” writes Eduardo Bonilla-Silva in the excellent first chapter of his excellent book *Racism without Racists*. He continues, “Whereas for most whites racism is prejudice, for most people of color racism is systemic or institutionalized.” This is really the crux of his argument: in the post-Jim Crow racial order, prejudice is frowned upon by virtually everyone—even David Duke (former Grand Wizard of the KKK) claims that he’s not racist, merely “pro-white”—and yet the situation of black people as a whole has not improved much since the 1960s. This is the racism without racists of the title—that despite ostensibly good intentions and a lack of conscious bias, the racist legacy (segregation, anti-miscegenation, unequal schools, unequal housing, discrimination, police brutality, etc.) is still firmly in place. As Bonilla-Silva shows in interviews, many white racial progressives who are supportive of people of color in the abstract are either hesitant to support or even oppose any policies that would actually ameliorate the racist circumstances we find in our country.

This book is great. It’s obviously well-researched—the average number of footnotes for each chapter is 64, and chapters that don’t rely primarily on his studies/interviews have up to 191. I have highlighted passages on almost every single page of this book. For someone wanting to know what racism looks like in America today, or is dubious that it exists at all, this book is basically a one-stop resource to inform (this book, along with *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander, was assigned reading for a race & ethnic relations class I took last year).

Bonilla-Silva focuses the most on black-white relations “because blacks are still the racial antithesis of whites in the racial spectrum,” but he does examine other racial groups as well. The book is also about United States racial relations in particular, although there is a chapter where he briefly discusses Latin American race relations because he believes the US is heading toward a “triracial stratification system similar to that of many Latin American and Caribbean nations.” There is also an excellent chapter on why the Obama presidency does not herald the end of racism as many hoped, and another on the frames of “abstract liberalism” that people now couch their racism in rather than spewing out-and-out prejudicial statements.

The only blight on this book is that it does, unfortunately, contain some transphobia. I cringed when I read this: “Henrietta, a transsexual school teacher in his fifties...” Ouch. Maybe it stands out so starkly in contrast to the the rest of the book in which the author is so right on, but this purposeful misgendering was just not cool (also, does Henrietta identify as "transsexual," or is that the author's label?). As is perhaps evidenced by that example, the book is not particularly intersectional—but then, it never claimed to be, as it focuses on race specifically. At times the book can get a bit “academic,” but it isn’t of the dry sort, just the detailed.

Overall this is a strong, well-argued, and really important book that I wish more people would read (or at least absorb the message of). I’ve been recommending it and referring to it in conversation over the past year before even finishing it. So tackling it one chapter a time is a fine way to read it; even reading one chapter would be worth it—and hey, look at that, the first chapter is available for free on Google Books :3

Rob says

Going into this I expected a fairly breezy mass market book, probably just from the presentation (being one of the few books at my school library not shelved as an intimidating blank hardcover helps.) But I was pleasantly surprised to see that this is actually an academic sociology book that's very meticulous about its research and evidence. It's definitely readable for anyone without a lot of that background, but you should know what you're getting into first. Bonilla-Silva gives a detailed description of the ideology of colour-blind racism and provides a lot of examples to back him up. A lot of his observations are very astute, and highlight things I've seen before but hadn't particularly paid attention to. In a lot of places this text challenges its audience to re-evaluate their view of racial issues. I'm also glad to see Bonilla-Silva isn't in the ranks of normally astute commentators madly in love with Obama.

The major problem with Bonilla-Silva's analysis is his narrow focus on issues like affirmative action and bussing as the be-all and end-all of peoples' racial beliefs. But even if you can be opposed to these things without being racist (and I think you can), the frames people use to argue against them are pretty suspect, and I think that's what this book is best at -- revealing the subconscious biases that shape the allegedly enlightened.

And if nothing else, it's great for pissing off white people, which is a plus in itself.

Geoffrey Gordon says

Many white Americans consider themselves "not racist," yet, by refusing to acknowledge how historical and contemporary forms of discrimination endow them with unearned advantages, and by believing in persistent racist tropes, they continue to support an unjust social order. Even before reading this book, I was frustrated by the mental contortions that so many white Americans perform in order to avoid acknowledging that discrimination -- past and present -- affects the life chances of minorities in America. Bonilla-Silva compellingly analyzes the frames and tropes that white Americans use to ignore or discount the presence of racism in modern society, and provides strong counter-arguments to those points, providing his reader with ammunition to counter common 'colorblind racist' arguments. Furthermore, he also makes a persuasive methodological argument about how the changing nature of racist beliefs require social scientists to adapt their survey techniques to the post-Jim Crow order. This is a vital book for understanding American politics and society.

Hilary says

I wish I could make this mandatory reading for everyone.

Drick says

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, professor of Sociology from Duke University, examines the linguistic patterns of

whites in an age of "color-blindness" with regard to race. Interestingly this book was written pre-Obama, but reflects much of the "colorblind racism" in public discourse since his election. For Bonilla-Silva, racism is not personal (that is prejudice) but is the result of structural and political practices that isolate whites from people of color in residence, education, and social interaction. As a white person who grew up in an all white community, and who raised my family in a predominantly white community, this book is sobering. Racism will not be addressed simply by "trying to get along" (ala Rodney King) but by a concerted effort to change our social and political and economic discourse. Bonilla-Silva lays out the challenge for generations to come on this perniciously troubling concern. In his final chapters he charts what he sees as the course forward, but that would require a companion book, which I hope he and others will work on

Lance Eaton says

In this updated edition (just after Trump's election), Bonilla-Silva explores how the blatant racism of yesteryear has been replaced with a racism that is best described as color-blind racism. Color-blind racism is grounded in the idea that if people claim they do not see skin color or to act overtly harsh towards people of color, they are not racists (like white supremacists) and therefore, their actions are motivated by something else (market values, evaluations of self, etc). Bonilla-Silva dumps that ideology on its head and shows exactly how color-blind racism perpetuates racism and white supremacy within the United States. Besides articulating historical and cultural contexts that create this situation, he breaks down two sociological studies that he conducted among white college students and working-class folks to unpack the ways in which racist assumptions are embedded in how they perceive of, discuss, and interact with people of color. Bonilla-Silva is a master in unpacking the assumptions present within how the subjects discuss race and tying it into the hypocrisies of color-blind racism and readers will appreciate this book that provides a language and pathway to articulating the problems of color-blind racism. Furthermore, Bonvilla-Silva's critical take on the Obama presidency and the election of Trump also prove helpful in understanding how much racism pervades the modern US culture.
