

Review - Racism without Racists

Written by Shayla C. Nunnally

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SHAYLA C. NUNNALLY, JAN 8 2013

Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism & Racial Inequality in Contemporary America

By: Eduardo Bonilla-Silva

Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2010

Color-Blind Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era: The Significance of Whites' Racial Attitudes

Bonilla-Silva makes clear for us that in post-Civil Rights era America (or *Amerikkka*, as he also calls it, to reference the racist proclamations of the organization, the Ku Klux Klan), race still matters, and even more emphatically, racism still negatively affects the quality of life and life experiences of racial and ethnic minorities. We might ask, "How is this possible, given the legal enhancements to protect racial and ethnic minorities' equal access to public accommodations (Civil Rights Act of 1964), voting (Voting Rights Act of 1965), and housing (Fair Housing Act of 1968)?" In fact, Bonilla-Silva offers two similarly-related inquiries to introduce us to the focus of his text, and he situates his analyses within a frame that interrogates the role of whiteness in American society: "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 contradiction between their professed color blindness and the United

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States' color-coded inequality? (2)"

More generally, Bonilla-Silva submits that racism is possible in contemporary America because of racialized structural barriers that are beneficial to whites, yet discriminating against racial and ethnic minorities. While his book extensively cites studies that document contemporary discriminatory practices in various realms of racial and ethnic minorities' lives—some of which include education, housing, loan practices, and public spaces—this, however, is not the focus of his research. Rather, he draws our attention to the roles that whites' racial attitudes play in ongoing, less overt racism that also exculpates them from addressing racial inequality. More broadly, these attitudes allow whites to dismiss modern-day racism (structural and personal experiences of minority groups) and allow them to cast reported racial discrimination experiences of minorities as illusive and baseless gripes that could not possibly happen in a post-1960s "era of equality." In this sense, whites' perceived realities do not match those of non-whites, who often report personal experiences of discrimination. Moreover, given trends in various socioeconomic and structural analyses of inequality in America, reality airs on the side of confirming that racism continues to occur, and the perceptions of discrimination often expressed by racial and ethnic minorities are well-founded.

For Bonilla-Silva, a "differing realities" thesis among whites versus non-whites would be under-theorized, as his research, more pointedly, turns to mapping the fabric of whites' attitudes about race and racism. He also centers his discussion about racial change and fighting structural barriers in America on ways to pivot whites' racial attitudes away from white privilege and discriminatory, sociopolitical and economic stratification. Thus, Bonilla-Silva's book goes into rich, theoretical and data-driven details about what constitutes the bundled attitudes, perspectives, and outlooks of white racial attitudes—what he refers to as an "ideology of race." Namely, this ideology is constitutive of *color-blind racism*, and in his view, it has, does, and will continue to shape American society unless whites' attitudes about race change.

Bonilla-Silva argues that color-blind racism appeared in post-1960s America in response to the passage of 1960s civil rights legislation because whites felt that, with the legal protection against racial discrimination, discrimination no longer occurs. In order to understand how color-blind racism operates today, he encourages us to keep three key terms in mind, *race* (with several socially-constructed groups), *racial structure* (with societal practices and relations embedded in white supremacy), and *racial ideology* (with attitudes and frameworks that sustain a white supremacist status quo). Evoking his focus on racial ideology, Bonilla-Silva provides four central frames of *color-blind racism*, which is *the* ideology that he posits obfuscates whites' acceptance of contemporary racism—(1) liberalism (markets are open to all and do not discriminate) (2) naturalization (people "naturally" segregate themselves from other racial groups) (3) cultural racism (minorities participate in self-defeating behavior) and (4) minimization of racism (racism is no longer prevalent to address, specifically).

Social Scientific Contributions: Theory and Methods

Bonilla-Silva's work is theoretically and evidentially important because it uses both quantitative and qualitative data to illustrate what (and *how*) themes constitute color-blind racism. He uses data from the 1998 Detroit Area-Study and a localized convenience sample of students, the 1997 Survey of Social Attitudes of College Students (from a large Midwestern university, a large southern university, and a medium-sized West Coast university) to highlight whites' attitudes about race and their subscription to color-blind racism frames. While it would be great to have seen these data compiled from a national survey of whites, as Bonilla-Silva notes, the results on whites' racial attitudes mirror many such attitudes in large, national surveys. Even with limitations for generalizability in his data, the results denote evidence of color-blind racism that beg additional research as far as the extent of their prevalence in American society, in general. Nevertheless, his study elucidates that color-blind racism *exists*.

To benefit from the richness that qualitative data can bear on the "language" of color-blind racism, Bonilla-Silva also draws randomized samples of respondents from these two surveys in order to interview them in-depthly about race and to illustrate color-blind racism's constructs. Via the interviews, he anticipates uncovering the "linguistic manners" and "rhetorical strategies" of *race talk*, or as the subtitle of Chapter 3 aptly references, "How to Talk Nasty about Minorities without Sounding Racist." That is, strategically, as Bonilla-Silva puts it, whites have learned how not to sound explicitly racist as the rhetoric of times past may have sounded. Outright usage of racial epithets or old-

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fashioned stereotypes about racial groups is contemporarily and normatively inappropriate. Therefore, coded, implicit language that often evokes old-fashioned, racial stereotyping or that forgoes the possibility of modern-day discrimination, now, reigns supreme. To this effect, color-blindness has a communicative style.

For comparison purposes, he uses the qualitative data to distinguish how whites' attitudes differed from blacks' in thinking about racial discrimination and about the status of racial and ethnic minorities; yet, as he also finds, some blacks (very minimally so) join whites in subscribing to color-blind racism constructs. Bonilla-Silva sees this as evidence of how prevalent the color-blind frames are for which the entire society can become socialized about race in America, even to the adverse interests of racial and ethnic minorities, themselves. Person-to-person, these frames also become socialized through personal, racial storytelling that whites relay to other whites about race and the disadvantages that the "fortunes" of non-whites bring to them personally. In this sense, testimonies and discourses become the foundations for racial knowledge that whites act upon and, consequently, reify racism in practice. Non-whites, thus, become "the problem," meanwhile whites ignore, the *white habitus* (as Bonilla-Silva calls it), or the environmentally-privileged, isolating, and self-constructed contexts that they proliferate and that they contribute to as far as the segregatory and discriminatory experiences that non-whites have. As Bonilla-Silva claims, all whites are not the fictive, "Archie Bunkers," who offend non-whites and make life uncomfortable for them. In addition, there are white, racial progressives, who, in his eyes, possess the seeds of attitudinal and practical change that can assist America in moving away from its racial status quo. But, what plagues Bonilla-Silva greatly is the prospect for an America that remains racially-stratified but in new ways that re-categorize racial and ethnic groups along the black-white continuum, leading to what he calls the "Latin Americanization" of America.

Mapping the Latin Americanization of U.S. Politics: How Players Will (Should) Play the Game

Similar to Latin American fashion, he predicts that America will be divided into three groups that will form along the black-white continuum, with a buffer group in the middle, a group that is still a racial or ethnic minority group but that has the opportunity to become "whitened" and garner the status of "honorary whites," situating itself between whites (at the top) and blacks (at the bottom) Thus, in his vision, America will comprise *whites*, *honorary whites*, and *collective black* groups, which negatively, will still relate to one another in a racially-hierarchical and discriminatory way and will continue to dismiss the significance of race and obstruct the redress of racism.

In this *third* edition of the book, Bonilla-Silva provides a discussion about the role of the 2008 presidential election in race and American politics. He characterizes the 2008 presidential campaign and candidacy of former, Senator Barack Obama as evidence of America's shift towards Latin Americanization. For example, Obama, himself, is bi-racial (the progeny of a white American mother and black, continental-African father), his campaign and presidency have attempted to avoid placing race-related issues or policies in the limelight, and they also have attempted to avoid addressing such issues respective to the disproportionate circumstances of racial and ethnic minority groups. In sum, as Bonilla-Silva and others have noted (e.g., political scientist, Andra Gillespie), Obama has participated heavily in *deracialization politics*, or the political practice of downplaying race, often used strategically to appeal to white voters. To the disadvantage of racial and ethnic minorities, their respective issues can become de-mobilized on political agendas. Bonilla-Silva warns against such politics and the role they can play in obliterating the redress of race-specific issues. He feels that with the exclusion of such politics and even race-cognizant data, we lose the nuances of racial and ethnic minorities' legitimate political perspectives and issues.

Since his writing in 2010, it almost seems that Bonilla-Silva's predictions have become eerily more lucid and accurate. For one, the discourses about the re-election of President Barack Obama (Democrat) in 2012 have rested on the significance of Latinos' overwhelming electoral support for his candidacy over the candidacy of his competitor, the former, Governor Mitt Romney (Republican). These discourses also have centered the future of political party politics on the outreach that either of these two major parties can make to acquire (or retain) Latinos as a voting bloc, hence, evincing what might be an entrée towards the Latin Americanization of American politics.

Fitting the prediction that Bonilla-Silva describes, these post-2012 presidential election racial discourses also may have the unfortunate result of further distancing blacks from the representation and accountability of the two major parties and the American political system, more broadly, especially if their interests do not align neatly with Latinos'

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interests. As far as political parties, although Bonilla-Silva sees the Democratic Party as the most attractive party for the “progressive” politics that racial and ethnic minorities need, in his view, this party is not as “progressive” as it needs to be. Therefore, he argues that social movements can move racial and ethnic minorities toward more progressive issues and policy redresses, and racial and ethnic minority elites and masses should entertain this political strategy.

Color-Blind Racism: A New Racial Era or the Old-Fashioned Racial Hierarchy?

In sum, this book’s major contribution is that it focuses on whites’ racial attitudes (as actors in society and in institutions), which as he argues, help sustain structural discrimination because they focus on the behavior of racial and ethnic minorities in ways that “blame the victims” and not the perpetrators (discriminatory whites and institutional practices). As Bonilla-Silva states, “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 (2).” He also submits, “Much as Jim Crow racism served as the glue for defending a brutal and overt system of racial oppression in the pre-Civil Rights era, color-blind racism serves today as the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post-Civil Rights era (3).”

Although Bonilla-Silva’s book does not focus on the attitudes of white elites, who themselves may possess such color-blind racist attitudes about contemporary discrimination and thus implement decisions that disproportionately and discriminatorily affect racial and ethnic minorities, his work implies that elite-change in whites’ racial attitudes may form once color-blind racism loses prominence among whites en masse. Subsequently, from the ground-up, the white mass can perhaps propel white elites (via voting and policy preferences) to support reformative policies that are sensitive to addressing racial and ethnic disparities. White racial-attitudinal change is not futile, but rather achievable through whites’ commitment and education about the functioning color-blind racism in American society.

Bonilla-Silva explicitly states that he hopes this third edition of his book is the final one in his installations about color-blind racism in America. However, given the aptness of his predictions for the 2012 post-presidential election discourses (although, the candidate was not Governor Bobby Jindal of Louisiana, as he predicted), this just can not be the case. This book’s analyses call for a post-hoc, re-visitation of the color-blind racism and Latin-Americanization thesis and prediction, respectively. To this effect, we can only wait to hear how Bonilla-Silva will process the politics and results of the 2012 presidential election. Even more, we can only wait to hear how he will assess and predict the politics of whites and (predominately white) institutions in their attempts to retain their power (over racial and ethnic minorities) in the future. In the same vein of thought as Bonilla-Silva suggests in his newly added Chapter 9, “Will Racism Disappear in Obamerica? The Sweet (but Deadly) Enchantment of Colorblindness in Black Face,” we can not help but wonder, “Does color-blind racism reflect an ‘era’ of American societal relations relative to post-Civil Rights (1960s) through 2012 American society, and what is (if any) the future of American racial relations, discourses, frames, and practices, post-colorblindness? How do Latinos (and Asian Americans) perceive their role in the future of race and politics, especially with respect to the black-white dichotomy? (This enterprise warrants future studies by Bonilla-Silva or other social scientists.) Will American politics change racially, and will it form yet a new era of “racists” yet to be named and described theoretically? Simply put, this book leaves us wanting more explanations and theorization about race in contemporary and *future* America.

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Shayla C. Nunnally is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Connecticut. Dr. Nunnally specializes in public opinion and political behavior, race and politics, African American political behavior, and black political development.