

## *Racism without racists*

Reflections by David Eagle, November 15, 2009

In this book, Bonilla-Silva advances a new paradigm for the sociological study of racism advocated in an earlier article (1997) and attempts to use a structural/ideological interpretation of race to qualitatively study how racism manifests itself in two groups of interview participants. This book takes a neo-Marxist approach, focusing on racism as rooted in structure and ideology rather than merely in the attitudes of whites.

Methodologically, this study draws from interviews with college students and a group of randomly selected individuals from Detroit. This means that the generalizability of this study is difficult to assess. While I agree that many of the observations Bonilla-Silva makes reflect broader dynamics, the lack of southern and/or rural whites in these interviews may make whites seem more progressive than they may be in the aggregate. My guess is that racism is structured differently across regions. It would be helpful to create an account of racism that takes the spatial variation of the expression of racism seriously. However, I find his central point – that the new racism is “color-blind” and characterized by high levels of white ignorance about the material condition of blacks – compelling (Forman and Lewis 2006).

In a few places, I was left with unanswered questions. For instance, in chapter 5 Bonilla-Silva promises to show that white segregation has trapped whites in a “racial prison” (104). Being trapped in a “prison” implies that white segregation has had detrimental effects on whites, not simply that white segregation has negative effects on minority groups. At least on the surface it seems that white segregation has served

whites extremely well. It would be useful to explore the cost that whites bear for their segregationist behaviors. Also, Bonilla-Silva does not substantively report on how religion is mediating particular views on race. With several groups (white progressives and Archie Bunker whites), I wondered if religion played a role in their ideas. I was not completely satisfied with Bonilla-Silva's treatment of race and gender. He could have adopted a more explicit "identity politics" (Bernstein 2005) account of gender and race in explaining why white women are more likely to be progressives (145-146). In my view, race and gender combine to create unique identities. Whiteness combines with other markers of identity in highly non-uniform ways to differentially impact outcomes. This lack of an identity politics framing makes Bonilla-Silva far too positive about the class location of the white working class creating racial social solidarity (145). This may be true for women, but I question whether this is true for men. The year I spent working in a manufacturing facility in California suggested that white working class men inhabit a highly racist form of "white habitus."

Bonilla-Silva concludes his work by encouraging whites to adopt an explicitly anti-racist politic that challenges societal racist structures. This is no simple task as even anti-racist groups, especially those dominated by whites, can simply reorder group boundaries, and become "confessionals" for whites with little real impact on enduring structural inequalities (Hughey 2007). Because structural racism has bought whites such considerable resources, it is very hard to imagine that many whites would be willing to challenge white privilege to the extent that minorities would fair significantly better.

## References

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