

Howard Schuman, **Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations**. 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA HUP.

Response by David Eagle

The authors purport to offer an unbiased description in the changes in white and black attitudes towards race. Their goal is to allow the reader to make their own conclusions about the “facts” (vii). However, this book is hardly neutral; it consistently diminishes the presence of racism in attitudinal change. I argue that the reason behind the reticence to name racism is that they are attempting to sound “informed” but still gain support from conservatives and “cultural deficiency” theorists. Abigail Thernstrom, a conservative critic of race-based theories, gives an endorsement of the book on the back cover; she wrote a scathing review of the first edition (1986). The authors indicate that the Moynihan report has “more recently been seen...as having identified an important social trend” (31). However, the four peer-reviewed sociology articles on the report between 1985-1997 revealed were unanimous in their criticism (Brownfield 1987; Dickson 1993; Ruiz and Cumming 1993; Willie 1993). The authors praise Wilson and speak of Anderson’s *new* contribution to race studies: how “perceived dangerousness [of black males] has become important to the public identity of many local black men” (42-43). These are not new arguments, they stretch at least to Du Bois’s, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899). So, while on the surface this appears to be a neutral, data-driven study, there are strong indications that it is not.

While the authors often understate the presence of racism in their results, in discussing other dynamics they freely make bold interpretive claims. For instance, a major argument of the first edition of the book was that for whites, the gap between the principle and implementation of egalitarianism reveals racism; they have revised this conclusion to be “somewhat less fundamental” (193). They say that because blacks also evidence the same gap, it cannot easily be labeled racism (276). The authors fail to entertain that the gap in blacks and whites could exist

for different reasons. For example, in blacks, it could stem from an awareness of the power of race to thwart attempts at integration. Had the authors explored white behaviors directly, they could have strengthened the connection between the liberalization of white views on race and a new form of racism. As Berry and Bonilla-Silva conclude, “the language of universalism and minimization of racism allow most whites to communicate their views about affirmative action using rhetorical strategies that *seem* reasonable and moral” but actually reveal a new kind of racism (2007). In chapter four, they state “being [a white] female hinders...racial integration” (235). However, in the 1992 census it is reported that in 67% of the black/white couples, the *wife* is white, versus 33% of husbands. This speaks strongly in favor of white female gender *enhancing* integration (US Census Bureau 1998). The authors also argue that the reason middle class blacks are more negative of race relations than the lower class is that “middle class blacks are exposed to [more?] numerous forms of discrimination,” especially racial profiling by police (277). However as Wu et al. (2009) point out, poor blacks have substantially more negative views of the police. There is strong reason to believe that poor blacks experience discrimination far more frequently than the middle class.

On the policy side, at the end of the book the authors throw up their hands and say, “exactly how the black underclass can escape form its present cycle of poverty, crime and hopelessness is unclear...” (327). However, they do have a more concrete proposal, which is because most whites do not accept racism as an explanation for racial inequality, only “race neutral” policies will succeed. I reach the opposite conclusion from this study – policies to enhance the situation of blacks must be implemented *in spite of* white disapproval.

References

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