

The racist theory of “color blind racism”: Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s *Racism without Racists*

Andrea Peters
7 November 2023

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the publication of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. Now in its sixth edition, the book has been central to the development and dissemination of the racist outlook that currently dominates academia, much of the media and significant sections of the political establishment in the United States. It is assigned reading in social science courses across the country and is cited by the thousands in the social sciences.

The book’s overarching argument—that all white people benefit from racial privilege and that the most insidious white racists are those who deny this supposed reality—is foundational to Critical Race Theory and contributes to claims put forward by figures like Nikole Hannah-Jones in the 1619 Project, Ibram X. Kendi in *Stamped from the Beginning*, and Robin DiAngelo in *White Fragility*.

In 2018, its author, a distinguished professor of sociology at Duke University, was the president of the American Sociological Association (ASA). Bonilla-Silva sits on the editorial board of the pseudo-socialist publishing house, Haymarket Books.

According to Bonilla-Silva, the Civil Rights movement and the end of the Jim Crow era did nothing to fundamentally change race relations in the US. Rather, a “New Racism” has emerged in which “Whites” try to hide their prejudice by pretending that they, as well as American society, are “color blind.”

This new racism, Bonilla-Silva posits, is every bit as powerful and destructive as that which undergirded slavery and Jim Crow. He writes: “Today more sophisticated, subtle, seemingly non-racial practices have replaced the brutal tactics of racial domination of the past as the *primary* instruments for maintaining White privilege. Yet these practices are as effective as the old ones in preserving the racial status quo” (p. 38, emphasis in the original).

He argues that not only is racism “systemic,” it—not class—defines the entire social structure because through race “some people receive benefits from the system while others do not” (p. 21). Somehow whites are both unconscious of their inner racism and yet still conscious of the benefits they receive.

Bonilla-Silva writes: “Whites as a racial group have had an interest throughout history in keeping things as they are, thus opposing changes to the racial order by exhibiting ‘white rage’ or ‘whitelash,’ whereas people of color have struggled against the system” (p. 21).

With this formulation, Bonilla-Silva replaces class with race as the driving force of history. It is not workers and the laboring masses who are exploited by capitalist ownership of the means of production, but all blacks who are exploited by white “ownership” of skin privilege. In short, Bonilla-Silva’s theory of society is one in which races are pitted against one another “throughout history.”

Given his racial theory of history and society, it may come as a surprise that the sociologist insists his argument to be Marxist and materialist. His claim is false. Bonilla-Silva has so little interest in class inequality that the word “capitalism” does not merit a mention in the book’s index. He brings to new lows the more than 125-year quest of sociologists to find any explanation of capitalist society other than that first elaborated by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the mid-19th century.

Bonilla-Silva’s writing is characterized by a lack of interest in history. In a 366-page book alleging to be about America’s racial structure, the author devotes four-and-a-half pages to the historical origins of racism in the US, a subject to which we shall return.

And even within the limited confines of academic sociology, his work is unserious. Despite making no analysis of any country other than the US, Bonilla-Silva claims, “All modern societies are racialized” (p. 20). With regards to the US, he ignores every factor other than race that shapes its complex social fabric—generation, geography, industry, workplace, family background, education, etc.

At times, Bonilla-Silva’s ignorance of social reality is simply risible. He equates—evidently in seriousness—present social reality to a famous 1950s American television comedy depicting an idyllic middle-class family, which, even in its own time, was seriously distorted. “The average White person,” Bonilla-Silva writes, “participates in the system by simply having a ‘(White) *Leave It to Beaver*’ life that oils the wheels of the racial regime” (p. 34).

To prove his theory about universal “color-blind racism,” Bonilla-Silva analyzes a mere 125 in-depth interviews from the 1997 Survey of Social Attitudes of College Students (SSACS) and the 1998 Detroit Area Study (DAS). The data are now 25 years old.

All of the interviews from the SSACS were with “Whites,” such that one cannot determine whether the views expressed were shared by blacks and other minorities. Worse, the SSACS was based on a convenience sample—in other words, participants were recruited on the basis of ease. It is a basic rule of social scientific research that convenience samples are not representative of the broader population and findings based on these samples cannot be ascribed to the broader population. Bonilla-Silva admits this in his book on page 13, but then proceeds to do it anyway. For well over 300 tedious pages Bonilla-Silva attributes *every* position he identifies in these 25-year-old interviews to all “Whites” in the US—about 192 million people, according to the latest census.

What we have here is one man’s impressions about some other people’s impressions, all spinning around a pre-determined, circular argument; racism is universal and therefore it can be seen everywhere, and we know it is universal because it can be seen everywhere.

On this foundation, Bonilla-Silva claims that there are four “frames” of “color blind racism.” These are “abstract liberalism, naturalization,

cultural racism, and minimization of race” (p. 80). These frames are used by all “Whites,” as well as some misguided “Blacks,” to oppose affirmative action and other government policies, dismiss the reality of racial divisions, blame African Americans for social problems, minimize the significance of race, and blind themselves to ongoing discrimination.

Viewed through the funhouse mirror of Bonilla-Silva’s “frames,” anything anyone “White” says about race is *ipso facto* an expression of “color-blind racism.”

Some of his “findings” are absurd. For instance, Bonilla-Silva says a “a poor white woman in her fifties” from Detroit is a racist simply because she said she did not witness discrimination in her workplace. In an expression of his one-sided, inverted reality, Bonilla-Silva uses the quote below as evidence of the woman’s allegedly racist views.

“I don’t think it’s [racism] is as bad as it was. It probably needs improvement. What [society] needs is a knowledgeable crew and I think that is the truth there. I think that the work will have to be done up continually until we’re all one big happy family...It wouldn’t surprise me. My great-granddaughter might marry a Black, I don’t know. *I have no idea!*” (p. 119).

In Bonilla-Silva’s thinking, that the woman says racism is “not as bad as it was” is evidence of her racism. Even worse is her indifferent speculation that a future descendent “might” marry interracially.

When looking for manifestations of “cultural racism,” Bonilla-Silva focuses on Ann, a student. He complains that she expresses racist views, “in a gentler, at times even ‘compassionate’ way” (p. 95) because, when asked why blacks “fare worse than Whites academically,” she explains that it might have to do with the economic burdens facing single-parent families. This is racist because Ann is allegedly impugning blacks’ culture as having a higher rate of female-headed households, even though she says nothing of the sort.

A salesperson in Detroit provides an example of “How to Talk Nasty about Minorities without Sounding Racist.” The sales workers says that one of her friends was deservedly admitted to Harvard graduate school because he made up for poor test scores with “hard work.” In speaking admiringly about his efforts as opposed to his intellect, the saleswoman supposedly reveals herself to be a racist. Bonilla-Silva also implies that, because she did not provide the man’s name, she fabricated her friendship in an effort to make it look like she has black friends.

Mandy, a poor, working class Native American woman who has dated across racial lines, comes under attack because she says that there are some “very racist” people in her family. Bonilla-Silva warns that Mandy can never overcome such a debilitating upbringing. He writes, “Mandy’s associations with her family will continue to be a part of her social milieu, as few people can disassociate themselves totally from the important people in their lives.” Her past association with these racists, “imprints some of her views or actions whether she wants it to or not” (p. 178). Bonilla-Silva in fact condemns those who acknowledge racist views among family members. They are engaged in nothing more than “confession” and “self-absolution,” basic features of “color-blind racism.”

Bonilla-Silva attacks individuals, as well as data, that reveal that people have friendships, romantic relationships or family ties across “racial boundaries.” He is deeply hostile to all indications that people’s views on race have changed over the last several decades. The fact that 89 percent of the US population is open to or supportive of interracial marriage and that these unions account for at least 19 percent of all new marriages today does not matter because, according to Bonilla-Silva, the “discrepancy between how Whites answer questions on interracial marriage and what they do in practice suggests Whites are finally lining up more fully their answers with color-blind racism” (p. 49). In short, Bonilla-Silva insists that because people do not marry across racial lines as much as they indicate support for it, which with the US’ current population is a

demographic impossibility, they are racists.

Bonilla-Silva likewise dismisses data that show progress on residential desegregation. “US Census 2017 data indicate that residential segregation has declined for the fifth straight decade” (p. 44), he admits, with a drop happening in a total of 253 metropolitan areas. Yet Bonilla-Silva insists that the “physical closeness” revealed by this data has little significance because even integrated neighborhoods are “White spaces.”

One gets the picture. Nothing has changed. The gains of the Civil Rights movement were illusory. Anything to the contrary is dismissed or turned inside out.

Bonilla-Silva on affirmative action

Bonilla-Silva reveals a remarkable indifference to prejudice aimed at non-blacks. Of the eight interview subjects from Detroit who commented negatively on the racial atmosphere in their communities growing up, one was a Jewish woman who complained of antisemitism and another was a Dutch person who spoke of difficulties because of being a foreigner. Bonilla-Silva excluded these people’s comments from further consideration because they did not talk about *anti-black* racism or discrimination. Jews and foreigners should stay in their lane!

His dismissiveness toward other groups’ suffering is bound up with an overriding concern over ensuring racially based set-asides. Bonilla-Silva devotes significant time to attacking interviewees who are in some way critical of affirmative action. The university professor has a particular dislike for those who indicate preference for “equal opportunity.”

Genuine equality of opportunity is a progressive goal. But it would require leveling out the massive socioeconomic differences that are a hallmark of capitalism—precisely the reason it will never be realized under the profit system. Bonilla-Silva is not hostile to the phoniness of paeans to equality or “equal opportunity” in a capitalist society. He is hostile to the principle of equality itself. Thus, nowhere in his book does he propose a single policy aimed at addressing the social ills—poverty, homeless, drug addiction, food insecurity, etc.—plaguing a huge share of the population, including millions of minorities.

Bonilla-Silva wants affirmative action *because* of its capitalist, anti-egalitarian character. These policies rest on the assumption that there are not and cannot be enough good universities, well-paying jobs, and respected occupations for everyone. Some will be on the top, the majority will be on the bottom, and it is simply a question of determining who will go where and who will exploit whom, allowing for a proportionate share of minorities to do the exploiting.

The historical origins of affirmative action policies reveal their social content. In the aftermath of the urban uprisings of the late 1960s, a section of the American ruling class thought it necessary to cultivate a black elite in order to contain mass outrage over social inequality, bring a layer of minorities into the halls of power and privilege, and promote the deception that conditions for all blacks might improve with a redivision of a few top-end positions—in certain professions, at elite colleges, in politics, among the police, etc.

Affirmative action was the cornerstone of Republican President Richard Nixon’s program of “Black capitalism.” It coincided with the rise, after the collapse of the civil rights movement, of a petty bourgeois layer that was ready to do business with Nixon and whoever else would meet their needs. For the last 60 years, affirmative action policies have been paired with tax cuts for the rich and large-scale attacks on social programs by both Republicans and Democrats. These have achieved their intended result—a massive deterioration in the living standards of the working class and poor of all racial groups. When adjusted for inflation, auto workers’

wages today are half of what they were in the 1970s, for example.

While a sizable number of the interviews Bonilla-Silva uses are from people in the Detroit area, he tells the reader nothing about the city, whose history embodies this transformation. Detroit had been a center of post-war industrial growth, home to a growing working class African American population escaping Jim Crow, and locus of massive class battles that yielded significant gains for workers of all races. But as early as the mid-1960s, American capitalism, facing growing international competition and financially drained by the bloodletting in Vietnam, would cease delivering on its promises of social improvement. In 1967, an urban rebellion, fueled by African Americans' anger over miserable inner-city conditions, erupted. Over the coming decades, Detroit's decline was not arrested, but deepened, as the ruling class deindustrialized the region and worked to break social opposition.

By 1998, the year during which the interviews that Bonilla-Silva uses were conducted, Detroit had been wrecked by plant closures, wage cuts and the gutting of social services. The car companies, the bureaucrats in the United Auto Workers, and Detroit's first black mayor—Coleman Young (in office from 1974 until 1994)—oversaw the transformation of the city into one of the poorest, majority black, urban centers in America. Young's successor, Dennis Archer (1994-2002), also African American, continued to preside over Detroit's fall, funneling millions of dollars to the building of stadiums and casinos and the creation of an "empowerment zone." Meanwhile, city residents were crushed by poverty and every social ill imaginable. Kwame Kilpatrick, a black politician who followed Archer into office (2002-2008), was put in jail for fraud and racketeering.

Not only does Bonilla-Silva not mention any of this, he demands more of it. After insisting that because of the "New Racism" there are not enough African Americans in power, he argues that the biggest problem for those who have held office is that they have had "a very limited role in creating policy" (p. 55) because of "the decline of political machines." Because "political machines"—a term that commonly refers to corruption and nepotism in state institutions—"have been replaced by nonpartisan political structures, the likelihood of a Black mayor being able to use her position for distributing resources has been seriously eroded" (p. 55). Bring on Tammany Hall!

Bonilla-Silva and the origins of racism

As one might expect, in the interviews that Bonilla-Silva uses there are racist comments and sentiments. People say prejudiced, crude, insensitive and ignorant things. Some say that blacks do not work hard, others are comfortable with residential segregation, one individual recounts a very ugly joke. Racism and racial inequalities, while dwarfed by class inequalities and primarily the concern of the upper middle class, still persist. However, these facts themselves do not explain anything about either the origins or continued existence of racism or racial inequality.

For hundreds of years, the capitalist class has sought every means possible to separate workers. In the aftermath of the American Civil War, for instance, Jim Crow was a conscious policy implemented to ensure that impoverished, newly freed blacks would not unify with poor southern whites. The ruling class, with the aid of the media, works constantly to pollute and poison popular consciousness, and to encourage backwardness and prejudice.

Today, both the fascistic Republican Party and the race-obsessed Democratic Party promote this in pursuit of their political agendas. Antisemitism and xenophobia, forms of discrimination which do not interest Bonilla-Silva, are embraced by the right wing. Meanwhile,

American liberalism, whose warmongering whips up hatred of "the Chinese" and "the Russians," simultaneously seeks to make "the white working class" responsible for the crimes the ruling class has committed. Racial ideology is promoted not out of strength or because it somehow channels the sentiments of the masses, but rather out of weakness and the mortal fear that the working class, ever-more integrated, ever-more international in character, will consciously unite.

For Bonilla-Silva, however, racism is universal and lodged in all "Whites" as a sort of eternal stain stretching back to "the late 15th century!" (p. 29, emphasis in the original), the Enlightenment (several of whose leading thinkers he identifies as racists) and slavery. Having emerged, "systemic racism" and race acquired a life of their own and became the driving force of history. Ever since, they have just sort of floated above society in the heavens, determining social relations on earth, more or less, in totality.

He writes: "The slavery practiced in the 'new world' was distinct from that of antiquity. The enslaved subjects were singled out 'racially' and incorporated as lesser beings with extremely limited rights. Consequently, the institutionalization of racialized labor in conjunction with the need for maintaining racial order in the conquered lands and its peoples, created both systemic racism and races ... *Once such distinction was made, and all parties became members of their respective racial teams, the lot was cast in history*, making it very hard for racialized actors to coalesce along other axes of potential unity (e.g., class or gender) or simply on their common humanity (p. 28, emphasis added)."

The final clause in this sentence is untrue. If one accepted this argument, one could not even describe, much less explain, the formative experiences of the last two hundred years—the destruction of slavery in the American South, the rise of the modern labor movement, the 1917 Russian Revolution. The masses have always, over and over, come to recognize their common oppression, abandon their prejudices and, inspired by progressive and socialist ideas, wage collective struggle.

However, Bonilla-Silva's lie is significant not just because it is historical falsification, but because it is a falsification in the service of covering up on what basis racism has been fought, will be fought, and will ultimately be destroyed. When the multinational working class of the Russian Empire came to power in 1917, smashing tsarism and capitalism simultaneously, it did so under the banner of socialist internationalism. The Bolshevik Party, which led that revolution, won the masses to its program because it rejected the dog-eat-dog national chauvinism that had overtaken the former socialist parties of Europe and led them to support the murder of worker by worker in the trenches of World War I.

Over the course of the decade following 1917, a massive effort was undertaken to overcome hundreds of years of tsarist subjugation of non-Russians. Laws immediately equalized workers' and peasants' status and rights regardless of nationality, wiping out thousands of discriminatory laws in one fell swoop. Resources were channeled to everything from providing education in native languages, to requiring political institutions to use the local tongue, to developing written forms of languages that had hitherto only existed in the spoken.

The newly born workers' state, beleaguered by economic backwardness, destroyed by war, pressed on all sides by the imperialist powers, and riven by social and political conflict, did not and could not achieve all its aims. When Joseph Stalin came to power in the late 1920s, betrayed the socialist revolution and butchered its leaders, Great Russian chauvinism resurged. But only the proletarian revolution sought to realize the end of prejudice, discrimination and socioeconomic inequality between "races" and "nations."

From all quarters, racism and nationalism have been and are promoted by those opposed to and terrified of losing their wealth and privilege to the forces of equality and socialist internationalism. Today's racialists do this in a particular form. They exaggerate the existence of racism within the

working class, lie about the origins of prejudice, falsify history and thereby seek to preempt the unification of the working class in struggle. Racialism is a weapon in the hands of the bourgeoisie.

Bonilla-Silva's anti-Marxism

Bonilla-Silva claims his argument in *Racism without Racists* is Marxist and materialist. To buttress this assertion, he makes reference to Marx's argument that the "ruling ideology" emerges from society's socioeconomic structure. Racism is the ideology, he argues, and it reflects underlying racial inequality, which constitutes the structure. But where did the racial inequality emerge from in the first place? His answer—racism. And what is now the foundation of society and the driving force of history? Racism.

Bonilla-Silva combines this obvious tautology with an inversion of Marx's understanding of the relationship between ideology (superstructure) and the socioeconomic foundations of society (base). Neither racism nor racial inequality are what constitutes capitalism. Rather, social reality is determined by one overriding factor—who owns the means of production and, thus, who lays claims to the profits produced by those who must work to survive. Racism is an ideological product of a social order rooted in class inequality in which capitalists of all stripes exploit workers of all colors.

All the "white privilege" in the world will not give a worker a single dollar from Delta Airlines' \$17.1 billion gross profit in 2022. This is not the basis upon which profit is claimed. The same is not true, however, of the 18 individuals who identify as "people of color" among the top 100 executive at that mega corporation. They will get plenty.

There are currently 1.79 million African American millionaires in the US. They make up 8 percent of all those in this privileged category, compared to 12 of the total population. This is the sort of "underrepresentation" that fires the anger of figures like Bonilla-Silva and Hannah-Jones. Nonetheless, the number of black millionaires and the size of their wealth is growing, along with the rest of the American elite.

On the flip side of this is the bottom 90 percent of the US population, which is also interracial. This overwhelming majority might be broken down into the following categories: Those who own not much, not enough, very little, nothing, and less than nothing. Bonilla-Silva does not acknowledge any of this because, if he did, he could not argue that either racism or racial inequality is the foundation of society nor that there is anything progressive about demanding more for "his own" kind.

Bonilla-Silva and the New Left

Bonilla-Silva is from a layer of academics trained in the phony Marxism pervasive in US universities from the 1960s onwards. His adviser at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Erik Olin Wright, was a leading figure of the New Left. An economic sociologist, Wright wrote extensively on class in post-war America. He is commonly associated with the concept of "contradictory class location." In a nutshell, he meant that segments of workers, based on their credentials and occupational status within the workplace, had become "exploiters" as well as being "exploited."

Wright's analysis belongs to that school of anti-Marxists who insisted a new managerial capitalism had emerged after World War II that rendered large portions of the "contradictory" working class no longer revolutionary. According to him, state bureaucrats, "who are less likely to

have their careers integrated with that of the capitalist class," as well as the intelligentsia, were the new rivals to rule by big business (p. 89 in *Classes* by Erik Olin Wright).

Notably, Wright developed his argument in the early to mid-1980s—that is precisely at that moment when two transformative processes happened at once. First, America's capitalists launched a savage campaign to roll back workers' living standards. One of their first targets, in 1981, was air traffic controllers—that is, workers who, on the basis of their credentials, pay and status, Wright would have classified as, in essence, "privileged" cogs in the capitalist machine.

Second, just a handful of years later the state bureaucrats and intellectuals that Wright identified as the new revolutionary opponents of capitalism initiated, under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, the wholesale liquidation of the USSR and all that remained of the conquests of the 1917 socialist revolution. In the 1990s the Communist Party bureaucracy finished its service to itself and global capitalism by becoming the post-Soviet world's new oligarchs and opening whole swaths of Eurasia to the predations of imperialism.

Like the academic "left" as a whole, Wright lost whatever little was left of his head. Having categorically rejected Leon Trotsky's insistence that Stalinists were not socialists but usurpers of working class power, he jumped onto the "socialism is dead" bandwagon. The particular form this took was a proposal to counter capitalism's depredations with "real utopias," by which Wright meant anything other than revolutionary socialism and any other social force than the international working class.

In a formal sense, Bonilla-Silva broke from his mentor when he rejected class in its entirety as relevant to understanding modern America. However, Bonilla-Silva's flight down the path of racialism is the logical outcome of the deeply anti-working-class, anti-Marxist milieu out of which he emerged.

Toward the conclusion of his book, Bonilla-Silva pays tribute to his mentor and lays out his own program for "utopia." Counseling his "White" readers to "never forget you are on the White team" (p. 238), Bonilla-Silva tells them they can seek redemption by supporting Black Lives Matter (now revealed as a money-laundering operation) and working to "deracialize your life."

"Read as much as you can on anti-racism and search for anti-racist organizations in your area," he advises. "Who are your friends and why? Where do you live? Whom do you trust? What organization do you belong to? What are the racial views of the people in your closest circles?" (p. 238), he asks. Work to combat "deep whiteness," he counsels.

This is a program for no one other than the self-obsessed upper middle class, who float about in the toxic miasma to which Bonilla-Silva contributes his dose of poison. In the acknowledgements at the start of his book, generally a place reserved for kind words for those who have helped the author, Bonilla-Silva threatens minority colleagues who do not agree with him. Referring to them as "Brown and Black snakes," he writes, "To those who have hurt me or try to hurt me, I want them to know that I keep all my receipts. I do so because I hope to get my money back and, more importantly, be able to reciprocate their uncalled attacks in some fashion."

Receipts, money, vengeance—this is the social type with which we are dealing.



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wws.org/contact