The Structure of Racism in Color-Blind, “Post-Racial” America

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Abstract
In this article, I describe the racial order of America in the post–Civil Rights era. First, I discuss what racism is all about and emphasize the centrality of conceiving the phenomenon in a structural way. Second, I argue that the “new racism,” or the set of mostly subtle, institutional, and seemingly nonracial mechanisms and practices that comprise the racial regime of “post-racial” America, has all but replaced the old Jim Crow order. Third, I describe the racial ideology of color-blind racism and its component parts (i.e., frames, style, and racial stories) and contend that, like the racial order, this new ideology is slippery and has a “beyond race” character. Fourth, I explain that the Obama moment is part of the new racism, color-blind period and justify my claim empirically. I conclude this essay pondering if people of color will wake up and realize that the new, more “civil” way of maintaining and justifying racial things is a more formidable way of maintaining racial domination.

Keywords
structure, color-blind racism, post-racial

Introduction
My career has been strange to say the least. Although over the last 8 to 10 years, things have been relatively good for me, I did not get much love for years. In fact, the ruling sociological elite labeled me early on as a “race man” because of the stand I took on an American Sociological Association dispute and this labeling, I learned later, seriously affected my career. But all Goliaths eventually meet their Davids, and thankfully, as in

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all systems of domination, the “wretched of the (in this case, sociological) earth are more numerous and can produce victories despite Goliaths’ might.” In my case, after years of punishment (and, again, I was unaware of some of it until years later), a few good things began happening for me. I was elected to American Sociological Association Council, landed a job at Duke University, won several major awards, and wrote a very successful and influential book. And now am honored that some colleagues decided to put together this special issue on “The Mechanisms of Color-Blind Racism and the Racialized Social System” to highlight the significance of some of my work.3

Since this issue is on my work, I want to give readers a synopsis of my theoretical claims. Along the way I will also add a few wrinkles about the limitations of my theorization on racial matters as well as the limitations of some other colleagues who have worked in developing racial theory in the past 30 years. To accomplish this task, I will do the following. First, recap my take on racism as no discussion on race can work unless we agree on the fact that it is “racism” that creates and maintains “race”; the real issue (in the Lacanian sense of the word) is not race but racism as “[r]acism is what hurts” (Mitchell, 2012, p. 17). Second, highlight the general characteristics of the racial regime that emerged in the late 1960s to early 1970s, which I have referred to in my work as the “New Racism.” Third, briefly explain the nature of color-blind racism, or the dominant racial ideology of the post–Civil Rights era. And last, explain how all these things form “the structure of racism” and venture a few hypotheses on how racism is working and will likely work in our new, “post-racial” climate.

What Is Racism?

I remain critical of the casual, common sense way most social scientists treat categories such as “racism” and “race” (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, 2008). Much like the population at large, social scientists use these terms as if they were self-evident. We regard racism as the belief that some people are better than others because of their race and conceive “race,” the presumed foundation of all racial woes in the world, as primarily a biological or cultural category easy to read through marks in the body (phenotype) or the cultural practices of groups.4 But this conceptual mapping is ahistorical (why do we have racism in the first place and why do we still have it today?) and self-serving (White social scientists believe they are beyond race as they do not subscribe to crass prejudicial views about racial minority groups; Bonilla-Silva & Baiocchi, 2008). Racism is the product of racial domination projects (e.g., colonialism, slavery, labor migration, etc.), and once this form of social organization emerged in human history, it became embedded in societies (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Robinson, 2000). Racism produced (and continues to produce) “races” out of peoples who were not so before, whether one is thinking of the various nationalities and peoples from Europe who shed (somewhat) their regional, tribal, and local identities and slowly became “White” (Jacobson, 1999; Painter, 2010); the aboriginal peoples of the Americas who became “Indian” (Forbes, 1993); or the multiple ethnic and tribal groups from the African continent who became “Black” (Wright, 2004). This is the foundation for the now-accepted claim by most
social scientists that race is a “socially constructed” category or the “weaving of disparate elements into a complex and shifting totality” (Mitchell, 2012, p. 17).

But what kind of social organization is racism? What kind of social form produces the social groups we know as “races”? I have argued that racism should be conceived in materialist rather than idealist fashion. That is, that racism is above anything, about practices and behaviors that produce a racial structure—a network of social relations at social, political, economic, and ideological levels that shapes the life chances of the various races. This structure is responsible for the production and reproduction of systemic racial advantages for some (the dominant racial group) and disadvantages for others (the subordinated races). Thus, racism as a form of social organization places subjects in common social locations. As subjects face similar experiences, they develop a consciousness, a sense of “us” versus “them” (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, p. 62; see also Jenkins, 1997). This is why I stated in my American Sociological Review (hereafter ASR) piece that “(a)fter the process of attaching meaning to a ‘people’ is instituted, race becomes a real category of group association and identity” (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, p. 472). In this sense, racism and races have a material foundation. Races are indeed invented social categories, but they are socially real and reenacted in the everyday life in encounters in all sorts of situations and spaces. Again, as I pointed out in the original piece:

Although the content of racial categories changes over time through manifold processes and struggles, race is not a secondary category of group association. The meaning of black and white, the “racial formation,” changes within the larger racial structure. (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, p. 472)

The mutability and even instability of the category “race” is not unique to this category as all social categories (e.g., gender, class, etc.) are socially rather than biologically real (McIntosh, 2013); hence, they all are subject to change. To be clear, although race is a socially produced classification scheme (e.g., who is Black, White, Indian, or anything changes over time and varies from society to society), races are meaningful categories because as W. I. Thomas and Dorothy Thomas stated a long time ago, they are “real in their consequences” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 571).

All these elements were foundational to my alternative interpretation of racism, which I labeled the racialized social system approach, the term I used to refer to “societies in which economic, political, social, and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories or races” (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, p. 37). I called for analysts studying racialized societies to spend less time studying the racial attitudes of people and more examining the “specific mechanisms, practices, and social relations that produce and reproduce racial inequality at all levels” (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, p. 48). This was the essence of my 1997 ASR article and my restatement in 1999 (Bonilla-Silva, 1999), but in retrospect, I wish I had spent more time explaining that racism as “ideology” is also material and consequential. But at the time I wrote my piece, I felt the need to emphasize the material aspects of racism as the mainstream was (and still is) focusing almost all its attention on the psychology of
racism, that is, on the study of prejudice. Like Marx and Engels, I regret the one-sidedness in my earlier work, but hope that my later work on racial ideology—both theoretical and empirical (see Note 7)—is evidence of my belief of the centrality, and indeed, materiality of ideology in the making of race in our lives.

Why do I say that racism as ideology is also material and consequential? Because ideology, racial or otherwise, is intrinsically connected to domination as Marx and Engels (1975) argued in *The German Ideology*. Ideology is a material force and consequential as we are all “interpellated” by it (Althusser, 1972); without “racial ideology” or racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2001), Europeans could not have conquered, enslaved, and exploited people based on the claim that some people are different (better) than others (Hall, 1997). And racialized societies could not survive without the existence of a dominant racial ideology, as it fulfills five vital social functions: (1) accounting for the existence of racial inequality; (2) providing basic rules on engagement in interracial interactions; (3) furnishing the basis for actors’ racial subjectivity; (4) shaping and influencing the views of dominated actors; and (5) by claiming universality, hiding the fact of racial domination—that is, hiding the fact that a racial order is in place that benefits a racial group (for details on each of these functions, see Chapter 3 in my book *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Right Era*).

Hence, racial ideology, one may say, is co-constitutive of all racial domination projects. The prejudice of individuals is not, and can never be, the basis for maintaining racial inequality; without an ideology to justify and enable racial projects, racial domination would not be possible at all. This is because variations on the level and kind of prejudice among the individuals in a population would produce randomness in racial outcomes and, hence, domination would be contingent; the fact that racial domination is reproduced in everyday life in (mostly) consistent fashion reflects the fact that (most) actors follow the “path of least resistance” (Johnson, 2006) and behave as expected. Of course, not all actors comply with the rules of engagement and follow the racial etiquette of a society, which is why social control strategies and sanctions against transgressors are always part of any racial order. But it is because some actors do not play the game that the system is ultimately unstable and subject to change (I will say bit more on this later in this article).

**The New Racism**

Since the late 1970s, most race scholars and activists have had a hard time articulating a coherent case for *how* race matters. Although we have plenty of data showing race inequality, we do not have a strong position to explain why this is the case. Those who rely on the racism-as-prejudice view (the majority of social scientists) have to contend with the systematic decline in Whites’ old-fashioned prejudice (Schuman, 1997). If prejudice is declining, how can they explain the contemporary level of racial inequality and the Black–White attitudinal divide on so many race-related matters? Those who rely on the racism-as-discrimination view have to contend with the fact that old-fashioned, Jim Crow–type discrimination has been waning for years. Although we can point to a new type of prejudice, as Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith (1997), Sears (1988),
Bonilla-Silva (1994), and others do, and to a new type of discrimination, we lack a place to pin these new developments as we can no longer legitimately claim we live in Jim Crow America. This means that we lack a claim about the existence of a racial regime in post–Civil Rights America that is responsible for the prevailing racial ideology and practices. Lacking this systemic claim, our efforts to explain racial matters in the contemporary period seem like Don Quixote fighting windmills and leave those who believe that we have, for the most part, reached racial Nirvana look like Sancho—as “objective” commentators stating facts about race in contemporary America.

For about 20 years, I have been claiming that the end of Jim Crow racism did not mean the end of systemic racism. I have argued that the virtual end of Jim Crow in the 1970s did not mean the “end of racism” (D’Souza, 1995) or even the “declining significance of race” (Wilson, 1978). Instead, I claim that slowly but surely a new system emerged that I labeled the “new racism.”12 By this I mean the system or racial structure characteristic of the post–Civil Rights era comprised the following elements: (1) the increasingly covert nature of racial discourse and practices, (2) the avoidance of direct racial terminology, (3) the elaboration of a racial political agenda that eschews direct racial references, (4) the subtle character of most mechanisms to reproduce racial privilege, and (5) the rearticulation of some racial practices of the past (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). This system emerged because of four main reasons, namely, (1) Blacks (the main focus of the racial order until the 1960s) moved out of the South making the principal tactics of social control no longer useful; (2) the Soviet Union used in international forums the way minorities were treated to challenge the United States’ self-description as a beacon of democracy; (3) enlightened capitalists, frightened by the civil rights movement and race riots, supported changing the way racial business was conducted; and (4) the social protests by Blacks, Chicanos, American Indians, and other minority groups demanded change.

In this new racism, Blacks and Whites remain mostly separate and unequal in many areas of social life. Here, I only illustrate new racism “discrimination”13 in the areas of housing and the economy although similar practices have been documented in other venues and areas of life (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011). First, in terms of housing, residential segregation nowadays is almost as pronounced as in the past (Massey & Denton, 1993) even though some of the segregation is not even captured by the indices we use (Bonilla-Silva & Baiocchi, 2008). The practices associated with residential segregation during the Jim Crow period are currently illegal (Picca & Feagin, 2007), yet segregation persists because discrimination in the housing and lending markets remains. Blacks and Latinos experience discrimination in forms such as steering by realtors, receiving a disproportional number of subprime loans net of their credit worthiness, and being given differential information about the availability of housing units.14 These practices illustrate new style discrimination because all of them are hard to detect and even harder to label “racial.” We know about all of them mostly because of audit studies and not due to reports from the victims of discrimination. In fact, most of the minority participants in these studies did not even realize they had experienced discrimination until they compared notes with their White counterparts!
The growth of the Black middle class is commonly cited as evidence of post-racialism, although even this segment still experiences discrimination in their everyday lives (Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Wingfield, 2013). However, the “Black majority” (Marable, 1983) has not advanced much. They still face obstacles entering the labor market, in their wage earnings, and in occupational mobility. Blacks earn less than Whites at every educational level (Day & Newburger, 2002) and remain overrepresented among unskilled workers (Pomer, 1986; Waddoups, 1991) while still being underrepresented in managerial positions. The primary reason for this state of affairs is occupational race-typing and the new kind of invisible employer discrimination documented by researchers such as William Julius Wilson (1997) and Devah Pager (2007; Pager & Quillian, 2005).

On the wealth front, Blacks and Latinos fared the worst during the recent financial crisis (Lui, 2006; Taylor, Kochhar, Fry, Velasco, & Motel, 2011) exacerbating the gap already present (e.g., Blacks used to have 1/10th the net worth of whites [Oliver & Shapiro, 2006] and now have 1/20th). According to a recent Current Population Report, in 2010, 13% of Whites were poor compared to 27.4% of Blacks and 26.5% of Latinos. Black average income decreased to $32,229 in 2011, a loss of $6,000. While Whites’ incomes also decreased, they still earned on average $20,000 more than Blacks. While focusing only on income convergence, like many social scientists do, masks the serious trends affecting minority populations, many of whom are unemployed or underemployed. The overall unemployment rate in October 2012 was 7.9%, yet Whites’ unemployment was 7%, while Latinos was 10% and Blacks 14.3%. These income differences can be attributed to unequal levels of educational attainment, as well as lesser rates of return to Blacks for their education and labor-market experience, and their concentration in the South. Furthermore, in the job search process, Blacks are left behind because they are closed out of informal networks and they are commonly screened out by tests that do not measure much (see Chapter 4 in my White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era [2001]).

To conclude, my argument in this section is that racial inequality is still produced in a systematic way (i.e., there is still a racial structure in America), but that the dominant practices that produce it are no longer overt, seem almost invisible, and are seemingly nonracial. Accordingly, given the character of contemporary discrimination, people of color must bring along a White friend to go shopping (Schreer, Smith, & Thomas, 2009), get a loan (Pager & Shepherd, 2008), drive a car (Walker, Spohn, & DeLone, 2000), or walk in the streets (Coviello & Persico, 2013) to prove discrimination! In addition, the new (racial) order of things has placed the community of scholars and activists fighting against racism at a disadvantage as most still focus their attention on Jim Crow–type events (Pinkney, 1984). What we need is to understand that since the new system works differently, we need to change our research focus and even our politics or else our efforts will become increasingly irrelevant (Bonilla-Silva, 2013).

The (White) Color of Color-Blindness

Alongside this “new racism,” a new dominant racial ideology emerged that I have labeled as “color-blind racism”—other scholars have called this new prejudice
laissez-faire racism (Boo et al., 1997), competitive racism (Essed, 1991), or symbolic racism (Kinder & Sanders, 1996). This ideology is as smooth and seemingly nonracial as the typical practices of the new racism period. By color-blind racism I refer to the racial ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2013) based on the superficial extension of the principles of liberalism\textsuperscript{18} to racial matters that results in “raceless” explanations for all sort of race-related affairs. Accordingly, if Whites wish to explain (justify) the existence of school segregation in a so-called “post-racial” nation, they claim it is a matter of choice (“people should send their kids to the schools they choose”). If the matter in question is residential segregation, Whites proclaim that people should live wherever they want and that segregation is sometimes by choice; that is, that people want to “self-segregate”\textsuperscript{19} and that no one should force anyone to do what they do not want to do. Thus Whites’ explanations are ultimately justifications for our current racial situation as they see no reason for any kind of intervention to even ameliorate the extent of racial inequality. However, Whites’ contemporary racial discourse makes them “look good” as they no longer sound “racist.” In what follows, I define and illustrate, with one example, the three central elements of this ideology, namely, its frames, style, and racial stories.

The frames of an ideology are its dominant themes, and I call them frames because they operate as a one-way road—once respondents invoke them, one can predict with certainty where they will go. The central frames of color-blind racism are “minimization of racism,” “cultural racism,” “naturalization,” and “abstract liberalism.” Abstract liberalism is the core frame of this ideology and incorporates the notion of liberalism in an abstract and decontextualized manner. By employing this frame, Whites appear “reasonable” and “moral” while opposing all kinds of interventions to deal with racial inequality. For example, Lynn, a human resources manager in her early 50s, explains her views on the lack of integration since \textit{Brown v. Board of Education} as follows:

\begin{quote}
I don’t and that’s another one. \textit{I do not believe in busing}. The reason I don’t believe in busing, you know, I said I don’t. I didn’t encourage my children to play with the neighborhood kids. I still felt that going to school in your community was key to developing a child’s sense of community and I still believe that. One of the reasons, another reason I moved from where I was [was] that I didn’t want my children to be bused. I didn’t want to have them got on a bus, especially me working. So I don’t that that is an answer. I think the answer is education and helping people learn to make a life for themselves and, you know, any type of social program that interacts, that provides interaction between races I think is excellent. But I’m just not a busing person. (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, p. 82)
\end{quote}

Lynn supports education and interaction between the races, but supports neighborhood schools. This seems reasonable, yet does not align with support for policies to ensure that neighborhoods throughout America are diverse, which in turn would guarantee integrated schools and greater opportunity for all the children to interact (Frankenberg & Jacobson, 2011). Like other Whites, Lynn provided an \textit{abstract} view on integration without establishing a path that would create increased interactions among racial groups.
Hence, her laissez faire view on neighborhoods leads her to oppose the only effective program we have in place to address school segregation—busing.

The second component of color-blind racism is its style or the peculiar linguistic manners and rhetorical strategies (or race talk) of this ideology. The stylistic components of color-blind racism showcase the slippery and often subtle language of the post–Civil rights era. Whites avoid direct racist language to express their racial views, employ “semantic moves” to avoid discussions, project their own views to implicate the minority party, and become close to incoherent when discussing forbidden issues or racially sensitive matters (for a detailed discussion of each, see Chapter 4 in Racism Without Racists [2013]). Here I illustrate a semantic move—phrases used to buffer comments that make them not seem racist such as “I am not a racist” or “Some of my best friends are Black.” For example, Rhonda, a part-time employee in a jewelry store, inserted a semantic move to describe why Blacks are worse off than Whites.

Well, I’m gonna be, you understand I’m, I’m [not] prejudice or racial or whatever. They’re always given the smut jobs because they would do it. Then they stopped, they stopped doing [them]. The welfare system got to be very, very easy. And I’m not saying all, there’s many, many white people on welfare that shouldn’t be. But if you take the percentage in the Tri-city country area, you will find that the majority are white, but all you see is the black people on welfare. But it’s a graduation up. Thirty years ago they started it and they continued it, and they continued it, and they continued it. And it was easier to collect welfare from the state rather than go out and get a job. Why work if, if they gonna, if the government’s going to take care of you? (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, p. 105)

Rhonda begins by stating that she is not prejudiced and then goes on to say she believes Blacks take advantage of the welfare system. This strategically managed proposition acts as a rhetorical shield allowing her to return to the disclaimer (“I’m [not] prejudice or racial or whatever”) if someone questions her views on race. Thus, Rhonda can say very negative things against Blacks yet claim that she is “not racist.”

Racial stories, another component of the color-blind racism ideology, provide a platform for Whites to narrate their views and experiences on race. These narratives are ideological because they are “collective” (Durkheim, 1912) or “social representations” (Moscovici, 1982) rather than individual productions. In Racism Without Racists, I identify three types of racial stories, namely, storylines, testimonies, and a residual, sui generis category (see Chapter 4 in Bonilla-Silva, 2013). I define storylines as “socially shared tales that are fable-like and incorporate a common scheme and working” (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, p. 124). The dominant storylines of color-blind racism are “The past is the past,” “I did not own any slaves,” “If Jews, Irish, and Italians made it, how come Blacks have not,” and “I did not get a job, or a promotion, or was not admitted to college because of a Black man.” These stories reflect people’s attempts to rationalize the racial order with material from their own lives.

An example of how Whites use these stories is Roland, an electrical engineer in his 40s, who used “The past is the past” storyline to oppose the idea of reparations.
I think they’ve gotten enough. I don’t think we need to pay them anything or I think as long as they are afforded opportunities and avail themselves to the opportunities like everybody else, I, I don’t know why we should give them any reparation for something that happened, you know. . . . I can’t, I can’t help what happened in the 1400s, the 1500s, or the 1600s, when the blacks were brought over here and put into slavery. I mean, I had no control over that, neither did you, so I don’t think we should do anything as far as reparations are concerned. (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, p. 129)

Roland insists in addressing racism as a matter of slavery, as if racism ended in this country in the 1860s. He conveniently ignores the 100 years of Jim Crow and neglects to address the preferential treatment Whites currently receive in jobs, housing, elections, and in almost every area of life (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich 2011). And his “I can’t help what happened in the 1400s” line of argument is bogus as all Whites, even if they did not participate in overt discriminatory practices, continue receiving the historical and contemporary wages of whiteness21 by virtue of being members of the White racial group. Roland’s historical amnesia allows him to vent animosity toward Blacks in a somewhat safe way.

Racism in Post-Racial America

The color-blind play that White America began acting out in the late 1970s and 1980s became a huge production with the election of a Black man to the White House. Since November 5 of 2008, many in the nation fell down the rabbit hole into “Wonderland.” They believed the election of Obama signified a change in our nation’s racial trajectory. I, on the other hand, argued then that his election was not a miracle but a deepening of the “new racism” (Bonilla-Silva & Ray, 2009).22 Racism in Obama’s America remains firmly in place while his post-racial stance and persona work to bolster the racial regime. I argued that racial domination may even work better in blackface.

Barack Obama, rather than representing “change we can believe in,” is a typical post–Civil Rights minority politician—a politician who (1) is electorally oriented, (2) is not the product of social movements, (3) joins the party of choice while in college, and (4) moves quickly through the party ranks (Gillespie, 2012). These politicians, if Republican, are antiminority conservatives like Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley, or Dr. Benjamin Carson, and if Democrat, espouse center-right politics like New Jersey Senator Corey Booker, former congressman and now MSNBC commentator Harold Ford, and San Antonio Mayor Julian Castro. All these politicians help produce an aura of post-racialism and, at the same time, preserve the “power structure of America” (Domhoff, 2013).

Obama’s case is illustrative. Soon after he became disenchanted with “community organizing” (he was a paid organizer), he began a concerted effort to move up the political system (Judis, 2008). After an initial failure in Illinois politics, he quickly realized that the name of the game was funding, and he got good at the game of securing support from rich folks at the home of Vernon Jordan (Street, 2009). Their support was crucial for his campaign to become a state senator and later for his campaign for
senator. Obama secured the endorsement of party donors through the intervention of Jordan, which explains why he was given a featured spot at the 2004 Democratic Party Convention. Therefore, his 2008 selection as the Democratic Party nominee for president was not as surprising as commentators thought as he had done the work to become a non–Jesse Jackson Black “light” politician.

And to get elected, Obama and his team created a messianic campaign backed by the mainstream of the Democratic Party, raised more money than McCain even from Wall Street, endorsed center-right policies, and, more centrally, adopted a raceless political stance. This last component of his political outlook was (and still is) central as he needed to convince his White supporters that he was not going to be a Jesse Jackson or an Al Sharpton. This was why, during his campaign, he “threw under the bus” anyone who made him look too Black or too political such as his former pastor Reverend Jeremiah Wright, professors Bill Ayers and Rashid Khalidi, and even his wife Michelle, who disappeared from view when she was labeled as the “Angela Davis angry black woman” only to be reintroduced months later as a black Jackie Kennedy in the television show The View.

And 6 years later, we can judge the effects of his election. The basic socioeconomic status of Blacks and Latinos compared to Whites is much worse than before. Blacks and Latinos still have higher levels of unemployment, poverty, and, on average, earn around $20,000 less and have lost relative standing in the all-important wealth area—Blacks have today 1/20th the net worth of Whites and Latinos 1/12th (Kochhar, Fry, & Taylor, 2011). This is due to Obama’s reticence to carry out any race-based initiative in any area, a stand that he had discussed in his The Audacity of Hope (Obama, 2006). Furthermore, he defended this policy view when responding to reporter Andre Showell in a press conference 100 days into his administration about specific policies intended for minority communities.

So my general approach is that if the economy is strong, that will lift all boats as long as it’s is also supported by, for example, strategies around college affordability and job training, tax cuts for working families as opposed to the wealthiest that level the playing field and ensure bottom-up economic growth. And I’m confident that that will help the African-American community live out the American dream at the same time that it’s helping communities across the country.

Obama’s answer is reminiscent of the Reagan-era belief in “a high tide lifts all boats,” which has been shown to mostly benefit those at the top of the economic order (Coates, 2013) combined with some very modest liberal proposals (5 years into his Administration, he has not even begun to work on these proposals).

Obama continues to support U.S. imperial policies in Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. For example, in the latter, an agreement was signed with Afghan president Karzai, agreeing to the continued presence of U.S. troops until at least 2024. And many thought Obama would reverse “counter terrorist” policies implemented during the Bush administration, but after a brief period of reversal, he has become Bush-light—Guantanamo remains open and drone attacks have increased exponentially (five times more than Bush). Reports of electronic surveillance increases under
the Obama administration have also been highly publicized. Overall, his foreign policy is disconcerting for its abuse of executive and military powers. Domestically, he has compromised on his promise to tax the rich, and his health care reform did not provide the controlled costs and universal system that so many of us had hoped for. The financial reform bill, after the crisis of 2008-2009, failed to restrict Wall Street and corporations from creating a similar situation ripe for another economic meltdown. And he has done very little to repay Latino voters for taking him over the hump in 2008; there is still no immigration reform yet there have been more deportations, under Obama, than under any other president.

Last, Obama has shied away from anything to do with race. His cabinets have been whiter than Bush’s, and he failed to discuss widespread racial profiling in the Trayvon Martin case. Daniel Gillion (Kantor, 2012) found that in the first half of Obama’s term, the president said less about race than any other president since 1961. He also worked very hard to avoid seeming too Black, such as staying away from BET for the first 6 months of his presidency, and he has never seriously discussed race, particularly when dealing with the substance of his policies. Furthermore, his “race speech” in 2008 and his Morehouse Commencement Speech in 2013 clearly showcased the limits of his race analysis and race politics. First, he assumed in both speeches that racism is a moral problem that can be overcome through good will; second, he viewed racism as a two-way street (both Blacks and Whites can be racist, which removes from the equation the power differential between the groups); and last, he argued that we can “all just get along” without a structural solution. In the Morehouse speech, Obama spoke in Bill Cosby fashion about personal responsibility (“no more excuses”) and asked young Black men to step up to the plate. In short, he spoke to this Black audience like an average White man would.

Thus in Obama’s America, racism is alive and well but the space to fight it has been drastically reduced. Today, we witness an increase in traditional prejudice and hostility (Dietrich, in press; Parker & Barreto, 2013) combined with the belief that because we have a Black President, racism is on the decline. Accordingly, we now live an Alice in Wonderland racial reality where nothing is what it seems and where a Black man can do “the man’s” bidding (for my full analysis of the Obama phenomenon, see Chapter 10 in Racism Without Racists [2013]).

Final Words

Racism has always been systemic in our nation, but racial domination was structured differently during slavery than during Jim Crow, and since the late 1960s, the “new racism” regime developed as the way of reproducing White rule. The “new racism,” like all previous racial orders, has evolved, and today we are witnessing what Dylan Rodríguez (2010) calls a “multiracial White supremacy.” In this highest stage of White supremacy, a selected and vetted segment of the minority population participates fully in the political system, which legitimizes the order racially and otherwise. In this “defining moment,” to use one of Obama’s favorite phrases, racial rule is no longer accomplished in brutal, overt fashion yet racial rule remains in place through “smiling
discrimination” (Brooks 1990) and institutionalized, seemingly nonracial practices that maintain racial inequality. In the new America we live, a Black man is our President, a Puerto Rican woman is in the Supreme Court, but most people of color remain significantly behind Whites without much social protest on the horizon as Blacks and other minorities are still drunk with the Obama hope liquor topped off with a nationalist twist.

The mobilization of people of color is the key to challenge the emerging racial order. As I write this article, Michael Brown, a young Black male, was murdered by police officers in Ferguson, Missouri, and Civil Rights leaders, after a riotous rally, counseled the mostly minority community activists to “fight with dignity.” This call for civility is exactly what we do not need at this juncture. How many Trayvon Martins and Michael Browns do we need to understand that we must advocate strongly for “No Justice, No Peace?” If people of color and their allies remain passive and forget the wisdom of Frederick Douglas (“Power concedes nothing without demand”), racial domination will deepen and America will become Latin America-like (see Chapter 9 in Bonilla-Silva, 2013). America will claim to be a “racial democracy” and use Obama and other minority politicos in the system as evidence that “we live in the best of all possible worlds.” But in this beautiful America, much like in the Americas at large, people of color will remain at the bottom of the well. If, on the contrary, people of color wake up like Alice did at the end of the story and realize that the new racial order may be even more formidable than its predecessors, we may organize the social movement we desperately need to prevent the sedimentation of the new racism. Will we wake up and realize that the goal of generations was not having a Black man in the White House but achieving equality or will we remain content with a brother (and in the not so distant future, a sister) doing us in?

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Notes
1. This term gained acceptance in the 20th century and evolved from Du Bois’ arguments in the late 19th century in addresses to black organizations and in The Philadelphia Negro (1899) about the need for the “talented tenth” to help uplift the race (for a critique of this concept, see Carby, 1998). In the 1960s and 1970s, as sociology was forced by social unrest to open up its doors to Black sociologists, the term was used to designate those pioneers who “integrated” the discipline and defended what became known later as “Black sociology” (see Ladner, 1973).

2. The controversy happened in the late 1990s and it was about who should be the editor of the American Sociological Review. Interested parties can read the statement I issued
on the matter as Chair of the Section on Racial and Ethnic Minorities of the American Sociological Association. See Bonilla-Silva and Herring (1999).

3. I want to thank and acknowledge the three editors of this special issue, Professors Ashley W. Doane (Hartford), David G. Embrick (Loyola), and Matthew Hughey (Connecticut), for putting it together. I am grateful they saw merit in my work and on the value of doing a special issue on it. They are three outstanding race scholars whose work I admire and respect—I wrote a book with Professor Doane (Doane & Bonilla-Silva, 2003), have written several articles with Professor Embrick, and hope one day to collaborate with Professor Hughey, a young scholar who has already produced a significant body of work.

4. The recent book by Ann Morning (2011) shows that even those who regard race as a “social construction” do not seem to go far enough in examining, describing, and historicizing the construction. Without doing this, the claim of race being a construction is an empty one.

5. My analysis is materialist, but not class-reductionist. See Mills (2003) for a reconstruction of Marx’s notion of the material base of society.

6. In modernity, it is hard to find a society that is not racialized and that does not have a racial order. Perhaps, as world-system analysts Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (1991) have argued, racism is world-systemic.

7. Although some critics claim I do not take seriously prejudice or racial hostility, I pointed out in my original article that racial ideology is relatively autonomous and can have “pertinent effects” and that it is not a mere “‘superstructural’ phenomenon (a mere reflection of the racialized system) but becomes the organizational map that guides actions of racial actors in society” and “becomes as real as the racial relations it organizes” (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, p. 45). More significantly, in the original manuscript I submitted to ASR, I included a long section explaining what I meant by “racial ideology.” That piece appeared later as a chapter in my book White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era and as an article in the Journal of Political Ideologies (Bonilla-Silva, 2002). Last, my book Racism Without Racists is an examination of the dominant racial ideology of contemporary America, which I think is clear and convincing evidence that I take ideology seriously.

8. Engels wrote in 1890, “We had to stress this leading principle [the economic aspect] in the face of opponents who denied it, and we did not always have the time, space or opportunity to do justice to the other factors that interacted upon each other” (Marx & Engels 1975, Vol. 48, p. 36).

9. I define ideology in my work as “the broad mental and moral frameworks, or ‘grids,’ that social groups use to make sense of the world, to decide what is right and wrong, true or false, important or unimportant” (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, p. 62). For more, see Chapter 3 in my White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era (Bonilla-Silva, 2001).

10. No domination project can be organized around prejudice as such a foundation cannot guarantee systemic rewards for some and disadvantages for others. Thus, capitalism is not organized around elitism, patriarchy around the sexist views of men, and racism on the prejudice of Whites. And this is why I argue that racism is systemic and produces practices, behaviors, and mechanisms that are responsible for the reproduction of racial order.

11. I say “virtual end” as some localities and regions are still organized by a softer version of Jim Crow. This should not surprise us as changes in systems take years (in some cases, centuries) and often involve “articulations” of the old with the new (Henricks, Byrnes, & Brockett, 2014). On Jim Crow in contemporary America, see Pettigrew (1994), Loewen (1995), and Tillotson (2011).

12. When I wrote the first piece on this in the early 1990s, I was an assistant professor battling for tenure. I had to use terms that related to the discourse on race in America at the time,
but in retrospect, I should have used a different term. I probably should have labeled the new system as “post-racial racialism.”

13. I am using the term *discrimination*, but this term is losing significance as the reproduction of inequality is increasingly accomplished through practices that are less overt and many seemingly nonracial. I have advocated elsewhere (Hordge-Freeman, Mayorga, & Bonilla-Silva, 2011) dropping this term altogether and using instead the term *racial practices*.

18. Liberalism here refers to classical liberalism of the late 17th to early 18th century and not the neoliberal version that is used in contemporary political discourse. This said, classical liberalism was not “liberal” regarding people of color as they were not part of the “we the people” (Bonilla-Silva, 2008).
19. This is seemingly a clear contradiction to the mantra of color blindness, but ideologies need not be coherent as coherence limits their usefulness (Jackman, 1994).
20. For a full discussion of the various stylistic components of a racial ideology, see Chapter 3 in *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Bonilla-Silva, 2001).
22. In truth, Obama is but a reflection of a larger trend toward a new, middle-of-the-road, post-racial minority politician. On this I stated since 2008 that 

   By the early 1990s it was clear that both major political parties (but the Democratic party in particular) had learned from the perils of trying to incorporate veteran civil rights leaders such as Jesse Jackson. Regardless of the limitations of Jackson as a leader and of his “rainbow coalition” strategy of the 1980s, he and his coalition proved to be too much of a challenge to the “powers that be” (Marable, 1983). Hence, both parties and their corporate masters developed a new process for selecting and vetting minority politicians. After the Democratic Party co-opted civil rights leaders such as John Lewis, Andrew Young, and the like, they began manufacturing a new kind of minority politician (the Republican Party followed suit later). (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, pp. 260-261)

23. See DeNavas-Walt et al. (2012).
24. Critics of my work cite *My Brother’s Keeper* as a race-based initiative implemented by Obama, but this initiative focuses more on individual characteristics and strives to “fix” the cultural deficiencies of minority populations. Furthermore, this particular example can be further explained through my analysis of Obama’s Morehouse speech that I present later in this article.
27. See Sledge (2012).
28. For more on the rates of deportations, see Hugo Lopez and Gonzalez-Barrera (2013).
29. To view Obama’s second-term cabinet, see CNN (2012). And for commentary on what his cabinet should look like, see Allen (2008).
30. See Kantor (2012).
31. See Peter & Canellos (2008).
33. Reverend Al Sharpton made this statement and the President of the NAACP, Cornell William Brooks, stated that “sneaking around under the cover of darkness to steal, to loot, to burn down your neighborhood does not require courage” (“Al Sharpton in Missouri to Meet,” 2014).

References


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**Author Biography**

**Eduardo Bonilla-Silva** is Professor and Chair of the Sociology department at Duke University. Professor Bonilla-Silva gained visibility in the social sciences with his 1997 *American Sociological Review* article, “Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation,” where he challenged social analysts to interpret racial matters from a structural perspective rather than from the sterile prejudice perspective. Bonilla-Silva has received many awards, most notably, the 2007 Lewis Coser Award given by the Theory Section of the American Sociological Association for Theoretical-Agenda Setting and in 2011, the Cox-Johnson-Frazier Award given by the American Sociological Association “to an individual or individuals for their work in the intellectual traditions of the work of these three African American scholars.”