




2022

The Sociohistorically Situated and Structurally Central Nature of Race: Toward an Analytic of Research regarding Race and Racism

Rolf Straubhaar

Texas State University - San Marcos, straubhaar@txstate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/jec>

 Part of the [Education Commons](#), [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#), [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Social Justice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Straubhaar, Rolf (2022) "The Sociohistorically Situated and Structurally Central Nature of Race: Toward an Analytic of Research regarding Race and Racism," *Journal of Educational Controversy*. Vol. 15: No. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/jec/vol15/iss1/1>

This Article in Response to Controversy is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-reviewed Journals at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Educational Controversy by an authorized editor of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

The Sociohistorically Situated and Structurally Central Nature of Race: Toward an Analytic of Research regarding Race and Racism

Cover Page Footnote

Particular thanks to Agustin Laó-Montes for his guidance and mentorship through the development of the ideas in this article.

The Sociohistorically Situated and Structurally Central Nature of Race: Toward an Analytic of Research regarding Race and Racism

Abstract: In a response to Wacquant's (1997) call for "an analytic of racial domination" (p. 230) to theorize about race and racism, this conceptual article puts forward one such analytic. This analytic is based principally on the continued centrality of race in society, the recognition that racism is always shaped by particular sociohistorical factors, and the importance of documenting racism's contextual intersectionality with class, gender and other elements of social structure through academic inquiry focused on both discourse and measurable action as data for racial analysis.

Key Words: Theoretical analytic, structural racism, sociohistorical contextuality, intersectionality

Sociologist Loïc Wacquant (1997) sounds a call for what he refers to as "an analytic of racial domination" (p. 230), or a set of categories meant to organize the various ways in which racial domination is enacted. Given the continued salience and controversy surrounding race-centric analysis and discussion in North American public education, particularly with the flurry of *anti-critical race theory* bills that passed state legislatures in the last few years, in this article I put forward one such analytic for use in educational research, highlighting a number of theoretical terms and ideas which I find particularly illuminating for analysis involving race, racism, and critical race theory. While there is excellent work continuously published on this topic in the educational literature, I will here focus on several touchstone texts from the larger field of sociology whose salience and relevance for racial analysis continue to this day. Specifically, in this analytic, I focus on (a) the continued structural centrality of race; (b) the need to recognize the particular sociohistorical factors shaping racism in any given context; and (c) the importance of both discourse and measurable action as data for racial analysis.

The Structural Centrality of Race in Education

Firstly, the notion of the centrality of race in any discussion of social structure and history pervades the work of Stuart Hall (1980), Howard Winant (2001), David Theo Goldberg (2002) and Joe Feagin (2006). Hall asserts that race is "intrinsic" (p. 55) to social organization. Winant argues that race has a permanent position of "centrality" (p. 3) in any discussion of modernity or the modern

world. Goldberg argues that race is central to any discussion of the organization of the state (p. 2), and to Feagin, it is the structural and society-wide nature of racism that makes it central of any discussion of social structure. This point may seem overly simple, but the assertion of the centrality of race seems necessary given the lack of discussion thereof among social scientists who are not explicitly scholars of race and racial theory.

One of the reasons the centrality of race must be asserted is that through such an assertion, the case for the structural nature of racism is facilitated. In the face of dominant discourses that dismiss the continuing importance of racism, Bonilla-Silva (2001) decisively asserts that “racism should be conceptualized in structural terms” (p. 11), as “dominant races” maintain a “structure to reproduce their systemic advantages” (p. 22). He strongly echoes a number of prominent voices in sociology, such as Bourdieu and Wacquant, in noting the presence of social reproduction as an explanatory framework for the variable socioeconomic status of different racial groups.

Feagin (2006) similarly asserts that racism extends beyond individual prejudice and bigotry and is instead “a material, social, and ideological reality” (p. xiii, 2) that undergirds the primary institutions and founding documents of this country and extends to all aspects of day-to-day life for both Black and White folks in America. Though his underlying argument for systemic racism is in many ways similar to Bonilla-Silva's (2001) notion of structural racism, Feagin's rationale for why such a theory is needed is more clearly explained. He also much more clearly describes the forms of structural reproduction of race than Bonilla-Silva, providing explanatory frameworks for how racial hegemony is reinforced at the national, community and familial level.

At the community level, Feagin (2006) describes how White youth under slavery and segregation were taught by example to taunt and harass Black folks (p. 163), particularly (though not exclusively) in the South. At the familial level, he points explicitly to how the “color line” and general racial attitudes are passed intergenerationally (Feagin, pp. 41, 169-170), stating generally that “we

human beings have a distinctive ability to acquire much knowledge from our parents and other predecessors and to pass that acquired knowledge down to the succeeding generations” (p. 187). This level of explanation regarding the mechanisms by which systemic racism is reproduced was largely absent from Bonilla-Silva (2001), and its inclusion made Feagin's argument much more internally consistent.

This assertion that racism is structural in nature does not hold much meaning unless racism is defined. The potential definition of race has two parts to it: the definition of those aspects of racism that can be considered universal, and an exploration of those aspects of racism that are contextually bound. With regards to the definition of racism as a universal, a number of authors provide useful definitions. Balibar and Wallerstein (1991) define racism as a “true social phenomenon” articulated around the stigmatization of otherness (p. 17). This definition makes two key points: that racism is based around a pejorative view of the other, and that this pejorative, stigmatized view is a social creation. Bonilla-Silva (2001) defines racism similarly as discrimination against people of color, though, as previously noted, he further asserts that all such racial discrimination is structural in nature (p. 11).

The Sociohistorical Particularity of Racism

Drawing from these scholars, I argue that a working contemporary analytic of race and racism must assert that few universals can perhaps be made about racism at a global level: Rather, racism is socially created and perpetuated discrimination or stigmatization of the racial other. The particulars of how such discrimination or stigmatization plays out varies according to one's geographical, cultural, temporal, and spatial contexts, and it is this vagueness which has created quite a debate in the racial literature on the potential for a multiplicity of racisms.

Stoler (2002), Hall (1980) and Wacquant (1997) all discuss the potential for multiple forms of racism, or racisms. Hall identifies historical specificity as the root of multiple racisms, stating that racism is dependent on particular social structures and relations because “one cannot explain racism in

abstraction from other social relations” (p. 51). While Stoler recognizes this potential for context-specific racism and reviews a great deal of the literature arguing for the presence of multiple racisms, she also points out the presence of commonalities across racisms which seem unlikely to occur in a vacuum (p. 370), thus challenging scholars supporting multiple racisms to explain how such commonalities might arise if all racisms are independent and context-specific. In response, Wacquant challenges the continued viability of racism as a descriptive term at all, arguing that “to 'acknowledge that there is no single object but a plurality of 'racisms' presupposes that the category of racism retains a minimal coherence when that is no longer the case” (p. 230).

This potential for a multiplicity of racisms continues in the work of Hall (1980) and Winant (2001), who both make the case for the inextricable relationship of race to class, in the case of Hall, and modernity as a whole, in the case of Winant. Winant argues that race is central to any discussion of modernity, as “the racialization of the world is both the cause and consequence of modernity” (p. 3). In this assertion, one sees echoes of Hall's argument regarding the intrinsic links between race and class (p. 55-56). To Hall, the organization of labor in society is “not simply 'colored' by race: [It works] through race,” and as such “race is intrinsic to the manner in which the ... laboring classes are complexly constituted” (p. 55).

Similarly, Balibar and Wallerstein (1991) argue that racism is a chief driving force within the capitalist world economy. Racism in this sense is a key means of producing the greatest possible capital gains, “[maximizing] the accumulation of capital” while also “[minimizing] the costs of political disruption” (p. 33). By racially stigmatizing the working-class other, the capitalist is able to justify the economic degradation and oppression of that other for economic purposes.

In a sense, Winant's (2001) argument regarding the role of race in producing the modern world provides a potential explanatory origin for Hall's (1980) and Wallerstein's (1991) arguments regarding race and class: If race has been an integral part of modernity's creation and continuation, then race will

have intrinsic meaning with relation to the various integral aspects of modern society, including class. To make this argument, Winant traces the history of race through the modern age throughout the first part of his book.

In discussing the current state of affairs between race and the modern world in the second part of his book, Winant (2001) explicitly makes the same connection as Hall (1980), stating that “it is impossible fully to distinguish the effects of race and class” in the modern world (p. 306). As such, one cannot “[extrapolate] a common and universal structure to racism,” because racism cannot be abstracted from other social relations (Hall, p. 51). The strength of this assertion may undercut the overall argument, as elements of racism are clearly distinguishable and fit for independent discussion in many historical and cultural contexts; however, Hall's point is well taken that a full discussion of racism must include its intersections with class and other social structures.

A number of scholars use this framework of discussing race in its relations to class and culture to describe what is variably called “the new racism” (Bonilla-Silva, 2001), neo-racism (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991), born-again racism (Goldberg, 2009), hegemonic racism (Winant, 2001), color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2001), and racial neoliberalism (Goldberg, 2009), all similar terms meant to describe the forms of racism present in the contemporary Western world. All of these terms define current racism in part through contrast to previous systems of racism, particularly explicit white supremacy articulated through the 19th and early 20th century based on claims of superior Caucasian biology.

Winant (2001) most clearly delineates what he terms a *break* in racial thinking and racial social structure around World War II. In historically explaining race, Winant also extensively describes the historical development and evolution of certain forms of racism, particularly white supremacy. Winant describes two forms of white supremacy: The first is explicit, definitive of the “old world racial system,” which Winant theorizes as ending after World War II, during the “break” when legal, explicit

forms of geopolitical racism began to be eroded, such as apartheid and explicit segregation, in the wake of racial atrocities like the Holocaust (p. 135, 141). The second is implicit, and continues under the “new world racial system” (Winant, p. xiv), which sees itself as “beyond race” due to the eradication of legal forms of racism. However, Winant gives compelling evidence for the continuation of white supremacy, not as explicit domination, but as implicit hegemony (p. 293).

In Winant's (2001) view, because of the significant legal concessions made to racially marginal groups, White “mainstream” society has been able to incorporate its opposition by “repackaging itself as 'color-blind, pluralist, and meritocratic’” (p. 288), a strategy that allows for the preservation of racial hierarchy even more effectively than explicit white supremacy did (p. 35). In Omi and Winant's (1994) work, this hegemony is described as racial “common sense,” in that the “rules of racial classification” become so embedded within society that they seem naturalized (p. 60).

Goldberg (2009) continues this notion of current hegemonic white supremacy in his theoretical construct of racial neoliberalism. After defining antiracism as the struggle to work against racial inequality and antiracialism as the push to remove race as a category from social discourse and discussions of inequality, Goldberg (2009) notes how the success of antiracist struggles, such as the abolitionist and civil rights movements, “gives way to the dominant trend of antiracialism” (p. 19), in that legal or structural success in mitigating racism give the dominant elements of society license to treat racial problems as *solved* and race as an inconsequential characteristic relative to merit and effort.

Goldberg (2009) builds on these previous arguments by explaining the ways in which contemporary racism is directly tied to neoliberalism. Just as neoliberalism has elevated privatization in economic sectors, racism and racial beliefs have also been effectively privatized, or “[protected] from state incursion” (Goldberg, p. 334). By elevating the supremacy of personal privacy, personal racist sentiments are protected and considered unrelated from public sentiment: In such a climate, public figures can share extremely racist viewpoints without their views being necessarily seen as reflective of

societal racial attitudes. Since central to neoliberalism is “the principle that people should be free to express and exercise their preferences as they see fit” (Goldberg, 2009, p. 341), public racist speech can proliferate without any perceived implications for *mainstream* society.

Bonilla-Silva's (1997) discussion of the “new racism” as the most recent “racialized social system” (p. 469) that has arisen in the United States since WWII (see also Bonilla-Silva, 2001) has much in common with Goldberg and Winant's analysis of U.S. race relations post-WWII, as they all identify “the increasingly covert nature of racial discourse and practice” and “the invisibility of most mechanisms to reproduce racial inequality” (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, p. 90), though they call such by different names. What Bonilla-Silva (2001) calls the “new racism” or “color-blind racism” (p. 137) is called “antiracism” or “racial neoliberalism” by Goldberg (2009, p. 19) and hegemonic racism by Winant (2001, p. 288).

Despite their similarities, Bonilla-Silva's (2001) discussion of “color-blind racism” brings a number of new insights. Particularly, his term “biologization of culture” (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, p. 142) usefully refers to the fact that explanations of the inferiority of racial minorities have been transferred over time from biology to culture. As Bonilla-Silva (2001) notes, the switch from biology to culture as an explanatory framework for natural and innate inferiority is hardly a move forward for racial equality, and, in fact, is in many ways more problematic because it makes the hegemonic continuation of racial inequalities easier by making such inequalities appear natural and inevitable (p. 142).

Though these various discussions of contemporary racism may ring quite true and are backed by historical and empirical data (for historical, see Winant, 2001; for empirical, see Bonilla-Silva, 2001), their juxtaposition against a clear, biologically-based, explicit form of previously dominant white supremacy can seem overly simplistic. Many of these definitions of current racism (see particularly Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Winant, 2001) present it as more nuanced and complex than previous overt forms of racism: Stoler (2002) calls such simplistic depictions of the past to task, asserting

instead that all forms of racism (no matter their time frame) are culturally coded and complex, and that we should not “flatten” the past (p. 370-371) to create a convenient oppositional binary that can be used to define the present. Racism has always been nuanced, and will always be, as contextual factors will always shape and form its measurable manifestations. As Stoler asserts, “the porousness we assign to the contemporary concept of race may be a fluidity fundamental to the concept itself and not a hallmark of our postmodern moment”—our construction of race is and always has been as nebulous as the Milky Way, hardly as clear the Southern Star (p. 383).

Thus, the implication for social research on race is clear: Whether one's research is historical or empirical, focused on contemporary racism or previous forms, researchers must always recognize that racism will be nuanced, complex, and culturally coded as a product of its time and place. Biology may have played a leading role in 19th century public rhetoric on race, but our social construction of race in every time and place has always “mixed science with common sense and traded on the complicity between them” (Wacquant, 1997, p. 223).

Winant (2001) insightfully notes how the iterative process of racial formation contributes to this malleable nature of race and racism. To make this point, Winant appropriates Gunnar Myrdal's notion of “circular and cumulative causation” (p. 39). That is, to Winant (2001), “the racialization of the world is both the cause and consequence of modernity” (p. 3), both a result of the structures and practices of modernity as well as the *praxis* through which modernity comes to be (p. 19). To Winant, the basic structures of modern society (including the economy, politics, culture, and personal identity) have always been fundamentally “racially shaped categories” (p. 289), at least in the modern era.

Most notably, Winant (2001) asserts how the creation of the modern world would have been impossible without chattel slavery, which in turn would have been impossible without racial classification systems (p. 48-49). When free industrialized labor, another product of modernity, began to challenge chattel slavery as a means of production, another form of racial classification compatible

with this new labor system also came into place (Winant, p. 85). In this sense, race has continued to both invent and reinvent modern society, and in Winant's opinion, continues to do so. Race and racism have been and continue to be malleable categories, iteratively formed through their interaction with other social structures and dominant paradigmatic ideas of any given time and place.

This notion of racism as *praxis* has strong ties to Omi and Winant's (1994) earlier notion of racial formation. Omi and Winant define racial formation as “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (p. 55), giving discursive meaning to racial identities and structures. Stoler's (2002) assertion regarding the need to deepen our analysis of racial ambiguity rather than *flattening* certain historical and contextual forms of racism only highlights the insight of Omi and Winant's notion of racial formation, as it is this sociohistorical process of shaping racial categories through social and political forces that makes the analysis of racism in any of its temporal, spatial, and cultural contexts so nuanced and complex.

While many excellent monograph-length ethnographies of race and racism follow these principles (see Caldwell, 2017; Carter, 2005, 2012; Godreau, 2015; Grundy, 2017; Mitchell, 2018; Perry, 2013; Posey-Maddox, 2014; Smith, 2016; Williams, 2013), in the article I will use de la Cadena's (2000) excellent scholarship on the forms of racism historically and presently in Cuzco, Peru, as an example of how racial scholarship can be deepened and enriched by limiting its temporal and spatial scope. de la Cadena's (2000) central argument is that race in Cuzco has throughout the course of the twentieth century moved from having biological associations to becoming a culturalist construction. However, though this culturalist construction has created different indicators of *indianness* apart from biology, it is no less real, and one's *indianness* is used as a strong marker of social inclusion or marginality. As in other analyses (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, comes particularly to mind), the cultural essentialism present in Cuzco is one in which *indian* culture is associated with a lower social status and naturalized as an innate characteristic of rural populations around Cuzco. The urban *mestizo* elite in

Cuzco distinguishes itself from *indianness* through their urbanity, good manners (or *decencia*), and their efforts towards education and literacy. In this way, the definition of *indianness* in Cuzco has clear class distinctions which, despite their racial implications, are tolerated due to their supposed grounding in *earnable* characteristics, which meritocratically reward the hard-working. That is, all Cuzco residents theoretically are seen as having the potential to become *mestizo*, if they are willing to move to the city, acquire urban ways, become literate, and at the most basic level, abandon their Indian identity. This provides an interesting twist on *mestizaje*, in that it is more a *cultural passage* from rural *indian* to urban *mestizo*.

By restricting her analysis to a very particular location (unlike the global theoretical works of scholars like Winant [2001] and Goldberg [2009], or even the national-level analysis of Feagin [2006] and Bonilla-Silva [2001]), de la Cadena (2000) is able to exchange limited breadth for a refreshingly deep and insightful level of analysis. By focusing on a particular cultural and temporal context, de la Cadena (2000) is able to draw powerful insights that present a round, complex picture of both historical and current racism in Cuzco. Future studies of racism, whether historical or current, would do well to follow de la Cadena's (2000) example of trading global breadth for contextual depth.

Discourse and Action as Data for Racial Analysis

However, even when one has a clear context within which one hopes to analyze racism, there is still the debated question of what content one should analyze to present a clear picture of how racism reproduces and manifests itself. Stoler (2002) and Wacquant (1997) particularly disagree on the relative merit of discourse as opposed to measurable action, or what we more commonly refer to methodologically as qualitative data that documents or measures what is done or said by participants in a study. As mentioned earlier, Wacquant sounds a call for what he refers to “an analytic of racial domination” (p. 230), or a set of categories meant to organize the various ways in which racial domination is enacted. This focus on monitoring and identifying racial domination and injustice in

action is timely and needed, as Wacquant justly notes the preeminence of discourse analysis in current writings and analysis of race and racism (p. 227-228). However, Wacquant's discussion of discourse analysis seems almost dismissive at times, leaving discourse unrecognized within his own five-part “analytic of racial domination.” In so doing, he seems to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Discourse is a powerful form of action and symbolic violence that cannot be disregarded in any serious discussion of race and racism. While Wacquant's dismissal of discourse seems in large part to be in response to Stoler's emphasis thereon, discourse must be part of any serious analytic regarding race and racial discrimination, and discourse can be included in such an analytic without dominating the discussion. It is possible to analyze the *logos* without becoming “logocentric” (Wacquant, 1997, p. 231). As such, to be most fruitful, one could combine Wacquant's emphasis on measurable action with a healthy recognition of discourse (as emphasized by Stoler) without necessarily undercutting the importance of either.

Conclusion

I have here argued that race and racism play a central role in society, and that racism is structurally interwoven into the make-up of modern society itself. Racism in a universal sense has been defined as socially created and perpetuates discrimination or stigmatization of the racial other. There are many elements of contemporary racism, particularly its cultural coding and silent hegemony, which have been justly emphasized by a number of scholars (see Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Goldberg, 2009; Winant, 2001). However, in their depiction of racism in the contemporary West, many of these writings have dismissed previous forms of racism as less nuanced and culturally coded, while this essay argues that any form of racism is nuanced and based in contextual culture and social structure.

Indeed, key to any deep and complete definition and depiction of racism is recognition and documentation of racism's contextual intersectionality with class, gender, and other elements of social structure. de la Cadena (2000) has been put forward as a clear example of how such nuanced analysis

of racism is possible when the scope of academic inquiry is focused on both discourse and action, but limited to a specific time, place and cultural context. Moving forward, future applications of this analytic will hopefully incorporate such various elements, emphasizing the centrality of racism alongside its contextual nuance in all of its manifestations, focusing on analysis of both discourse and measurable racist actions in a specific cultural and sociohistorical context.

References

- Balibar, E. & Wallerstein, I. (1991). *Race, nation, class: Ambiguous identities*. Verso.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (1997). Rethinking racism: Toward a structural interpretation. *American Sociological Review*, 62(3): 465-480.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2001). *White supremacy & racism in the post-civil rights era*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Caldwell, K. L. (2017). *Health equity in Brazil: Intersections of gender, race, and policy*. University of Illinois Press.
- Carter, P. L. (2005). *Keepin' it real: School success beyond Black and White*. Oxford University Press.
- Carter, P. L. (2012). *Stubborn roots: Race, culture, and inequality in US and South African schools*. Oxford University Press.
- de La Cadena, M. (2000). *Indigenous mestizos: The politics of race and culture in Cuzco, Peru, 1919-1991*. Duke University Press.
- Feagin, J. (2006). *Systemic racism: A theory of oppression*. Routledge.
- Godreau, I. P. (2015). *Scripts of blackness: Race, cultural nationalism, and US colonialism in Puerto Rico*. University of Illinois Press.
- Goldberg, D. T. (2002). *The racial state*. Blackwell Publishers.
- Goldberg, D. T. (2009). *The threat of race: Reflections on neoliberal racism*. Blackwell Publishers.
- Grundy, P. (2017). *Color and character: West Charlotte High and the American struggle over educational equality*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Hall, S. (1980). Race, articulation and societies structured in dominance. In UNESCO (1980), *Sociological theories: Race and colonialism*. Paris: UNESCO. 305-345.
- Mitchell, G. L. (2018). *The politics of Blackness: Racial identity and political behavior in contemporary Brazil*. Cambridge University Press.
- Omi, M. & Winant, H. (1994). *Racial formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. Routledge.
- Perry, K. K. Y. (2013). *Black women against the land grab: The fight for racial justice in Brazil*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Posey-Maddox, L. (2014). *When middle-class parents choose urban schools*. University of Chicago Press.

Smith, C. A. (2016). *Afro-paradise: Blackness, violence, and performance in Brazil*. University of Illinois Press.

Stoler, A. S. (2002). Racial histories and their regimes of truth. In Essed, P., & Goldberg, D. T. (2002), *Race critical theories: Text and context*. Blackwell Publishers, 369-391.

Wacquant, L. J. D. (1997). For an analytic of racial domination. In David, D. E. (1997), *Political power and social theory, Volume II*. JAI Press, 221-234.

Williams, E. L. (2013). *Sex tourism in Bahia: Ambiguous entanglements*. University of Illinois Press.

Winant, H. (2001). *The world is a ghetto: Race and democracy since World War II*. Basic Books.