

The transformations of structural racism

Interview with Eduardo Bonilla-Silva

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Eduardo Bonilla-Silva is internationally recognized as one of the leading proponents of the concept of “structural racism”. Born in 1968 in Puerto Rico, he served as president of the *American Sociological Association* (ASA) in 2018. Currently a professor at Duke University, Bonilla-Silva has argued that the racialization of our social structures is more effective in reproducing inequalities than explicitly racist ideologies or political doctrines. In 2003, he published *Racism without racists* (translated to Portuguese by Perspectiva in 2020), a book in which he suggests that the contemporary world experiences a “color-blind racism”, wherein racial discrimination continues to operate despite widespread condemnation of racist values by various political movements. Despite the increasingly common use of the notion of structural racism, Bonilla-Silva’s works remain relatively unknown in Brazil. For this reason, we conducted this interview with him in September 2023, addressing topics such as the structuring of racism in today’s world, the impact of events like the brutal murder of George Floyd in the U.S., and the current challenges of anti-racism in Brazil and globally.

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You are one of the foremost proponents and advocates of the concept of structural racism. Could you offer a comprehensive definition of this concept? What is its significance in today's global context?

I will assume your readers appreciate that the phenomenon we label as racism emerged in modernity (1492) as an outgrowth of the imperial ventures of various European nations (e.g. Spain, Portugal, Netherlands, France etc.). In their voracity to extract resources and profit, they developed, in a haphazard way, “races” as well as what we call racism. But once the category race was created and racism solidified as a system of practices as well as a culture and logic, they congealed as elements of the social structure of modernity.

But what is specifically this thing we call structural racism? In my work I have conceived structural racism as *a set of practices at the economic, political, social, and even psychological levels geared towards maintaining systemic advantages for the group racialized as white and keeping groups classified as non-whites under control and in a position of subordination*. Understanding that racism is structural means that our racial problems are not a matter of a few prejudiced individuals, but a collective, societal manifestation. It also means – and this is central to my structural argument – that these practices are in place to benefit those at the top of the racial hierarchy which I why I have emphasized that racism always has a material foundation. Hence, the correct approach to addressing any polity's racial problems involves studying how racial inequalities are produced in housing, politics, criminal justice, neighborhoods, and other domains. Rather than fishing for “racists” through surveys, what is needed, particularly in Latin America and Caribbean societies, is studies to uncover the *specific* ways in which discrimination affects the life chances of people of color in all areas of life.

It is fundamental to recognize that the racial elements of modernity are not limited to a few countries (USA, South Africa etc.), but are world-systemic as Howard Winant argued in *The world is a ghetto*. No country in the world is unaffected by racism either as a system or as a logic. As a system or structure, most nation-states have a racial order, including some we think are “beyond race” because they are presumably mono-racial. Take for instance the case of Haiti. Most casual observers assume race has no impact there because everybody is black. In truth, Haiti, since before the revolution, had developed a mulatto brown or light *pardo* class that used their resources and phenotypical capital to achieve a degree of racial mobility. Thus, once the Haitian revolution ended, they were able to achieve dominance and since then, have been the racial segment in power. The black masses in Haiti, much like in Jamaica, Brazil, or Puerto Rico, are at the bottom of the well in all aspects of life and

are regarded by the brown elite as an inferior kind of people. (I would be remiss if I do not mention the presence of small “white” population of descendants of French colonists, immigrants from other European countries, and immigrants from Lebanon. They tend to be in a middle economic position as many work in professional jobs, but the color logic – the elite’s preference for whiteness and everything French or Western – helps them retain a distinct social status.)

World-systemic racialization also accounts for how immigrants of color or with religious backgrounds other than Christian are “racialized” in Western nations. This is clearly illustrated in the United Kingdom where their colonial immigrants from India, Pakistan, and the Caribbean are placed in “collective black” position. But the logic of race works everywhere, so immigrants from Nicaragua to Costa Rica are denigrated (of course, Costa Rica has a long and rich history of racism against indigenous people as well as against Black populations in the Atlantic part of the country), Haitians are viewed as the “black threat” in the Dominican republic, and Dominican immigrants are stigmatized and treated as inferior people in Puerto Rico. There is no question that brush of racism painted everyone in the world-system albeit differently. No country or peoples, no matter their protestations, can legitimately claim to be beyond race.

How does the notion of structural racism, which you endorse, differ from similar concepts like “systemic racism” or “institutional racism”? What leads you to prefer the former term over others?

In my 1997 article in the *American Sociological Review*, “Rethinking racism: Toward a structural interpretation”, I advanced my structural theorization which I labeled the *racialized social system* approach. For many years I advocated for a structural understanding of racism in my quixotic fight against those who insist that racism is just prejudice, that is, a disease that can be cured through education. I also participated in many efforts to bring “structural racism” to the fore and make it stick as a legitimate and useful concept in the public square. I must admit though, that those of us in the structuralist camp failed in this effort, but a door was opened after the murder of George Floyd. Rather quickly, people began using the term “systemic racism” which scholars such as Joe R. Feagin have been using for years. In the back-and-forth of the political juncture created by the mass movement against police violence and in the middle of the pandemic, I decided to write a piece on systemic racism. The article appeared in *Sociological Inquiry* in 2021, and I titled it “What makes ‘systemic racism’ systemic?”. I explained why I switched terms and provided an eminently political argument. I cite what I wrote below in its entirety.

The uprising brought to the fore the notion of “systemic racism” (SR henceforth), which seems to have buried the simplistic notion of racism as just prejudice to the dustbin of history. It is hard to imagine this old term coming back to command the space it did for such a long time, both in the Americans’ commonsense as well as in the academy. In this article, I use SR in place of “structural racism”, but attach it to the theoretical platform I built years ago. The term one uses to discuss racial matters is not a theoretical matter per se, but as Marx said, “The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question” (Marx, 1978, p. 156). Therefore, if we are still in the business of changing, rather than just interpreting, the world, the term we use to convey the heavy weight of racism in society is of cardinal significance. Otherwise, for whom are we writing? (Lee, 1976).

Thus, these days I use the term “systemic racism” and “structural racism” as equivalent. For me, the issue is simple. The term “structural racism” does not click with regular people and, as a scholar activist, terms and concepts must be practical and help us move from *A* to *B*. I just superimposed my theoretical scheme on the notion “systemic racism” hoping that the structural approach, and the politics it entails, gain more traction.

Regarding the term “institutional racism”, a term that emerged in the 1960s and popularized by Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture) and Charles Hamilton in their book *Black power* (1967), I confess that I seldom use it. Although the term was revolutionary at the time it burst into existence and I retained some of its elements in my structural perspective, the concept had some deficiencies that I believe I addressed in my theorization.

While the concept of structural racism has gained prominence in public discourse in Brazil, it has recently encountered criticism. Advocates often employ it to underscore the pervasive and universal nature of racism in Brazil, while detractors argue that it is overly broad and generic. What is your perspective on applying this concept to countries like Brazil?

This is not an issue peculiar to Brazil as the same polemic is happening in France, the UK, and many other countries. In all these countries, a segment of the intelligentsia, prominent politicians, and social commentators have criticized the so-called importation of concepts such as structural or systemic racism and anti-racism as well as the use of the Critical Race Theory tradition. This is not surprising as all these places generated versions of what I labeled in my *Racism without racists* (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) as the “color-blind racism” racial ideology, hence, they cannot acknowledge their racial problems are systemic. In France, for example, prominent scholar Pierre

André Taguieff argued in a recent interview in *Telos* that those using the term “anti-racism” in the country were engaging in “anti-white racism”.

But “el sol no se puede tapar con un dedo”. The racial order of Brazil, as well as that of the UK, France, and nations playing the racial innocence card, is actually older than the racial order of the USA. As racial formations, we in Latin America are at least 100 years older than the USA. Racism in Europe as well as in Brazil, Puerto Rico, Colombia, Venezuela, Cuba (yes, socialism has not superseded the historical racial dynamics of this nation), and every nation-state in the region is real and profound. This said, there are two issues to keep in mind. First, those criticizing using the concept structural racism in our societies usually prefer the limited frame of racism as prejudice. The answer to their view on racism – and they believe that prejudice has been declining in significance in our societies over the years – is simple. If race does not matter, why are the black masses in our countries behind in almost all social indicators? Why are people of color in the Americas, poorer, less educated, more segregated, and more likely to experience the criminal justice system as a system of social control and punishment rather than one that provides them safety? The facts of life in our societies clearly indicate that something systemic is producing the differences in outcomes between whites and non-whites. Denial is no substitute for analysis and a clear understanding of things.

Second, and this is quite important – the theoretical, analytical, and empirical practices developed in the USA that we are using must be distilled and retooled to fit our realities. For example, we cannot just use survey questions developed in the USA in our instruments without adequate calibration. We also must always be cognizant that our “structural racism” has some important differences vis-à-vis that of the USA. I am on record saying that it is a pity that racial theories were developed in the USA when in fact, our racial orders are older and more typical of racial organization in countries all over the world. Racial theorizations would have been more robust and comprehensive had they emerged from our societies. This why I tell my students that if one decodes with clarity and specificity how race structures life in countries such as Mexico, Brazil, Peru, or Puerto Rico, one will understand better the world race made since 1492.

In Brazil, there is an ongoing debate about the role of the nation’s history of slavery in perpetuating contemporary racism. How do you perceive the processes of continuity and transformation of racism in the histories of the United States and the world as a whole?

This is a big debate in the USA too and it is connected to the discussion on reparations. It is clear that the lengthy enslavement of Africans (and we must always remember

that Brazil was the last nation in the Americas to officially end its slavery) as well as the land dispossession and genocide committed against indigenous peoples, were the economic foundation for the development of our nation states. Without the land of indigenous peoples and the labor of both indigenous peoples and Africans, Europeans in the Americas would have perished. And the “peculiar institution”, which some of our historians have wrongly claimed that was “paternalistic” or “benevolent” in our region, was not only long-lasting (300 years or so in Brazil) but continued in many forms. In Puerto Rico, for instance, slave masters were compensated for their loss of property and former slaves entered into a period of three years contracts with their former masters and had no political rights. In Brazil, the master/slave relation continued without the title as whites continued in charge of the fundamentals of the polity.

The long tentacles of slavery’s legacies can be clearly seen throughout the region. For example, areas of hyper concentration of blacks remain severely underdeveloped and have been virtually abandoned by the state. In Colombia, the pacific coast is clearly much poorer than the rest of the country and is subject to extreme forms of exploitation by mining and logging companies as well as the nefarious influence of international drug and human trafficking cartels. In Puerto Rico, predominantly black areas such as Loiza and its adjacent municipalities are not as developed as the rest of the coastal, metropolitan areas and seem far behind the rest of the country. In Costa Rica, cities in the Atlantic region such as Limón and Tamarindo with historical black and Afro-Carib populations, are years behind the level of development of San José (although rich white Americans and Europeans are moving in creating bubbles of gentrified white development). And throughout the region, in the urban areas where blacks migrated massively after the abolition of slavery, they tend to be concentrated in “villas miserias” or favelas and poor barrios where they are subject to state neglect and hyper vigilance.

However, as a social scientist, I believe in the need to make historically-specific claims. I have argued that our current situation is not just a “legacy of slavery”, but the product of the complex interaction between our racial past and our racial present. For instance, after slavery ended in the USA, we endured 100 years of Jim Crow. That system ended virtually at the end of the 1960s, but was replaced by the “new racism”. I have characterized the new racism as the set of post-Civil Rights seemingly non-racial set of racial practices and mechanisms where “smiling discrimination” is the new norm. For instance, in the past black and brown people were excluded from white neighborhoods through housing covenants, the actions of neighborhood associations in the north and Citizens’ Councils in the south, and the violence of the KKK, white mobs, and individual whites. As many of these practices became il-

legal and the mores of the country changed after the Civil Rights Movement, new sophisticated techniques of exclusion emerged. Realtors steer people by race into different neighborhoods while also claiming they are color-blind and that racial considerations do not matter in their business. Whites in some localities also forgo advertising that their properties are for sale and rely on word of mouth. This practice guarantees that their homes tend to be sold to other whites.

In Brazil, much like in the USA, we have to fight *both*, the legacies of slavery *as well* as the manifold, contemporary practices of racial exclusion. Therefore, as Americans say, we can “walk and chew gum at the same time”.

A significant portion of your career has been dedicated to establishing institutions such as the American Sociological Association (ASA), where you served as president from 2017 to 2018. How do you envision the political role of sociologists in the fight against racism?

The ASA was established in 1905 and I served as its 109th president in 2017-2018. That year, I also served as the President of the Southern Sociological Society. But before serving as president of these two organizations, I was a known commodity in the discipline as I had made various political interventions since early in my career. For example, in 1999, I published along with Cedric Herring a piece in *Footnotes*, the newsletter of the ASA, titled “We’d love to hire them but...: The underrepresentation of sociologists of color and its implications”. That piece generated a lot of discussion as we showed that the top departments of sociology hardly had faculty of color and, more significantly, we outlined the specific mechanisms used to limit the likelihood they would be hired. Sometime later, I published an open letter representing the ASA’s Section of Racial and Ethnic Minorities questioning the process whereby a black candidate that had been endorsed by the Publications Committee was ultimately not selected as editor of our premier journal, the *American Sociological Review*. During the USA intervention in Iraq, I wrote a piece with a colleague opposing the invasion and outlining the likely outcome. Interestingly, the sociological elite attacked us in a statement signed by various sociological luminaries claiming we were “unqualified” to make comments on this matter as we lacked the “expertise” needed. A year later, when almost all our predictions became a reality, I had the pleasure of writing another piece titled “We were right!”. This time around, we did not receive a collective response from the sociological elite.

Accordingly, I firmly believe it is possible to be a serious and parsimonious social scientist and have an engaged political life. My position is similar to that outlined a long time ago by the economist Gunnar Myrdal, author of the classic book *An American dilemma*. Nevertheless, I am keenly aware some scholars believe social

scientists ought to be neutral, dispassionate, and let the data and facts speak for themselves. Yet historically, this objectivist, neutral stance has implied defending the status quo. “Facts” never speak for themselves and usually must be explained in a careful manner. Too often mainstream academics publish reports or articles where they underscore differential rates of incarceration by race or data on I.Q. differences by race. These “facts” released to the public without proper calibration reinforce racist perspectives on crime and that ill-defined and even worse measured thing we call “intelligence”. This objectivist stand also allows scholars to hide their politics and biases. For example, Max Weber argued, in “Objectivity in social science and social policy” ([1949] 2017), that social scientists had to be so clear in their methods “that even a Chinese can understand them”. (In the last fifteen years, scholars have examined in detail Weber’s sinophobia and his anti-black sentiment).

My work, unlike that of some of my colleagues, is not scholastic. I study racism and racial formations not just to understand the intricate ways in which race matters, but because I want to end the pernicious impact of all these things in society. As a Black Puerto Rican who endures racism in “carne propia” both in Puerto Rico as well as in the USA, I unabashedly advocate for policies and politics that move forward the ball in the race terrain. Given that conservative populism has become an enormously influential social force in the world, not taking a public, political stand against racism, sexism, and rampant neoliberal policies is simply unconscionable.

In Brazil, we have legislation against racism that imposes prison sentences for discriminatory acts. However, these penalties are rarely enforced because the accused often conceal their racist motivations. How can we address institutional racism effectively in light of such complexities?

The development of anti-discrimination laws is important and an outcome of social movements in Brazil, Colombia, and other countries in the region as was the case in the USA. But legal victories, as important as they are, are not the same as a practical change in how things work. In the USA, we successfully achieved anti-discrimination law in the 1960s, but the basis for classifying certain behavior as “discriminatory” was based on Jim Crow-type actions. This has meant that since the 1970s, for racial discrimination cases to have a shot at winning, the evidence must be clearly racist and overt (e.g., someone has to say or do things that are unequivocally racist such as using the “N-word”). In practice, given that the bulk of discrimination in the new racism era has become sophisticated, covert, and seemingly non-racial, most of the contemporary subtle discrimination is not deemed as discrimination by the courts.

This seems to be the case in Brazil too as I believe your country, as well as others in the region, have their version of the new racism in place. In Colombia, where I spent some time as a Fulbright specialist, I learnt that when blacks enter some fancy stores, clerks make peculiar statements through their PA systems (e.g., “Cinco en la tienda”) to let employees know that a black person is in the store and that they should monitor him. In Puerto Rico, when I returned to the El Convento hotel in Old San Juan after midnight during a visit a few years ago, the security guard stopped me and asked where I was going. I told him, “To my room” and immediately asked him, “How come you did not stop my wife and my brother in law who just entered?” (They are Palestinians and were likely read by the guard as white). In jobs, they still advertise in many ads in the region that “se require buena presencia”, a coded way to state they are looking for white or white-looking applicants. These new practices help maintain whites’ privilege in a seemingly non-racial way as they always have plausible deniability (“What is racist about asking for applicants to have *buena presencia* given that the job is as a receptionist in a hotel?”).

The issue then in the USA, Brazil, and other Latin American countries is the following: how do we change the law’s way of determining what counts as discrimination? We need to keep bringing cases involving sophisticated discrimination to courts until a few are deemed as discrimination and the appropriate penalties are levied against perpetrators. Creating legal precedents on this matter is key! To advance this agenda we will to get a lot of progressive, anti-racist prosecutors involved filing charges in cases such as the ones I mentioned above. The movement will also need educate the public and engage our own folks on the new nature of discrimination. I am of the mind that the more we *only* classify as racism or organize for action when “big events” happen (an example of the former in the USA is the murder of George Floyd and an example of the latter in Brazil is the discrimination experienced by African American music producer H. L. Thompson in a Hilton hotel in Rio de Janeiro in 2022), the less we will likely tackle most of the racism we face these days. Activists and progressive scholars must highlight and illustrate the changing nature of discrimination and its cardinal impact in determining outcomes. If as I suggested, Brazil has a version the new racism in place, you must study it, uncover its manifestations in various areas, and develop approaches to fight it. Focusing on the old monster will do little to eliminate the new, seemingly friendlier monster. After all, the friendly new racism monster may have a smiling face, but it is largely responsible for our second-class status.

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