On the Racial Fantasies of White Liberals in Trump’s America and Beyond

EDUARDO BONILLA-SILVA

Introduction

I voted for the Democrats in the 2020 election, but not because they represented progressive change. I voted for maintaining the limited liberal democracy that workers, women, and People of Color have carved in America. My vote was against Trump (and, honestly, I would have supported a cucumber over him) and Trumpism and to defend the narrow institutional political space available to fight for a non-racist, multiracial democratic regime. Along these lines, this essay examines some of White liberals’ current racial fantasies and explains why they are dangerous. For ease of communication, I list them below in no special order.

Trump’s Racism and Trumpism Are Unique

Liberal commentators advanced this myth. However, Trump playing the “race (gender, sexual orientation, etc.) card” was not a new development in American politics. The Republican Party has been playing this game since the late 1960s with their infamous “southern strategy.” The original plan to directly focus political attention on White voters’ interests morphed in the 1980s and became subtler, increasingly relying on “dog whistles.” Nixon, for example, portrayed his opposition against school desegregation not as a racial matter, but as a way of mitigating the deleterious effects of busing on children. Reagan took the dog whistles to the next level, a practice that began with him having his first presidential campaign event in “Philadelphia, Mississippi quite near where three civil rights workers had been lynched earlier” (Davis 6). Although this racist strategy began with Republicans, Democrats—with their long and nasty racist history—emulated it quickly. After losing the 1984 election, the Democrats formed the now defunct Democratic
Leadership Council (DLC), which advocated moving the party to the center on issues of economics, race, and winning back White workers. The election of Bill Clinton as president in 1992, after having chaired the DLC from 1990 to 1991, bolstered the Democrats’ move to the right. Clintonism, as Nancy Fraser has argued, amounted to “progressive neoliberalism” and changed the “historic bloc” the Democratic Party had forged since the 1960s.

**Trump Is a Psychological Aberration**

It is true that there has not been any other president like Trump in American history and that he scores off the chart on the DM5 for Narcissistic Personality Disorder (Dodes), but we must appreciate that all rich folks—Ross Perot, Steve Forbes, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Mark Cuban—are similar psychological beasts. These (mostly) men believe they are gifted people who alone can solve the problems of the world using their unique talents.\(^1\) Therefore, their “pathological” psychologies are better understood as class-related products, “at least in part facilitated by the socioeconomic and political conditions of neoliberalism itself” (Tarnopolsky 110). For these billionaires, the solution to “neoliberalism’s problems (e.g., stock market bubbles which inevitably burst or social security nets with no netting left in them) is simply more neoliberalism” (Tarnopolsky 110).

**The Racists Are Those People**

Since Trump came down the escalator of Trump Plaza in 2015, social scientists and commentators regressed to the troublesome comfort of the prejudice problematic. They succumbed to the old narrative of racism as the problem of the “racists,” embodied exclusively in southern, “poorly educated,” rural, working-class White folks. But focusing on “the racists” prevents us from analytically and politically tackling the collective practices, mechanisms, institutions, and behaviors that reproduce racial domination (Bonilla-Silva, “Rethinking Racism”). It prevents us from realizing that Whites from all income and educational levels (except for White women with postgraduate education) supported Trump. Lastly, and most troubling, it conveniently exculpates White Democrats from racism when systemic racism, as I argue below, incorporates all actors in society.

**Racism Is About “Class Anxieties”**

Another problematic narrative that emerged in the 2016 campaign was that White workers’ support for Trump was an expression of their “class anxieties.” Even though I am critical of assuming White workers are the only “racists” in America (Bonilla-Silva, “Trumpamerica”),

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\(^1\) On “philanthrocapitalism,” see Klein.
interpreting their political views as a pure expression of their class location is equally inaccurate. Unfortunately, sociologists, such as Arlie Hochschild in her book *Strangers in Their Own Land*, have contributed to this narrative. Hochschild, as well as other academics and commentators such as Justin Gest, J.D. Vance, Joan C. Williams, and Katherine Cramer, have published books urging Americans to be empathetic toward the class-based plight of White workers, a segment that clearly has lost ground in the last ten to twenty years. Although it is true that working-class Whites have lost ground and that progressives should be empathetic, all these authors say precious little about their racialized, gendered, and xenophobic consciousness. More problematic, all ask for empathy for their White brethren, but exhibit little understanding and empathy for the plight of poor Black and Brown folks, a group whose situation has worsened relative to Whites. As Paul F. Campos wrote in *The New York Times*:

In 2015, the most recent year for which data are available, black households at the 20th and 40th percentiles of household income earned an average of 55 percent as much as white households at those same percentiles. This is exactly the same figure as in 1967. Indeed, five decades of household income data reveal a yawning and uncannily consistent income gap between black and white Americans across the economic spectrum. Fifty years ago, black upper-class Americans had incomes about two-thirds those of white upper-class Americans, while the black middle-class—those in the 60th percentile—earned about two-thirds as much as its white counterpart. Those ratios remain the same today.

**Proud Boys and Boogaloo Boys Are the Worst Expression of American Racism**

I have collaborated with the Southern Poverty Law Center, an organization that tracks “hate groups” in the United States, because I believe we must pay serious attention to these groups. Nevertheless, I do not believe their brand of racial practices and ideology are hegemonic. Despite the fact that they grew in size and import in Trump’s America, I still believe that (1) racism as a system of practices to reproduce White privilege operates along the lines of “new racism” (Bonilla-Silva, *White Supremacy*), and (2) color-blind racism is the dominant racial discourse in America—even Trump has tried to express some of his views in somewhat color-blind fashion (e.g., “I love Mexicans,” “I am the least racist person you have ever met,” “I am the least anti-Semitic person you’ve ever seen” [qtd. in Scott]).

The “new racism” refers to the suave, seemingly non-racial character of the practices and mechanisms responsible for the reproduction of racial privilege, and includes things such as realtors steering people into neighborhoods based on their race, clerks cleverly monitoring People of Color in stores, and relying on standardized tests to make admissions decisions in colleges (Bonilla-Silva, *White Supremacy*). In consonance
with the seemingly non-racial character of the “new racism,” color-blind racial ideology relies on the abstract and decontextualized extension of the principles of liberalism to account for racial affairs. Thus, most Whites nowadays justify their opposition to affirmative action or to policies to guarantee school or neighborhood integration by claiming that they violate the principle of equal opportunity. Of course, their position would be a truly principled one if racial discrimination was not operative (which is not the case) and market choices were meritocratic (race-based networks account for as much as 85% of labor market decisions). Accordingly, racial domination is not fundamentally the product of the actions of “the racists,” but of the actions and inactions of regular White folks who do not consider themselves racist.

**We Must Return to Normal America!**

Almost every day, Trump and his representatives say or do something that pundits identify as a major threat to democracy. Although I believe Trump, like most billionaires, is an authoritarian person, I am more concerned about social analysts in general, and Democrats in particular, normalizing regular power. They seem to be confusing form (Trump not following the rules of the game) with content (the fact that liberal democracy in America is “the best possible shell” [Lenin 393] for class, race, and gender rule [Domhoff]). To be clear, the question is not ignoring the authoritarianism of Trump and his followers. The issue is defending the existing limited democracy in a critical manner, with the goal of deepening it (Strickland). Otherwise, we will continue reifying the “good old times” of pre-Trump America where racial, class, and gender domination worked primarily in a hegemonic way and everyone (but for People of Color) was happy, happy, happy!

**Systemic Racism: We White Liberals Understand It!**

Since the lynching of George Floyd in May 2020, liberals have begun using the term “systemic racism.” Nevertheless, using the term does not mean having clarity about what it means or its analytical, sociopolitical, and even personal implications. For example, our new President Biden used the term throughout the campaign, yet showed us he is clueless about what the term means. In a debate with Trump, he stated that police departments suffer from systemic racism, yet added immediately that most officers were not “racist.” Like most Whites, Biden does not understand that the selection, training, and culture of officers, in conjunction with the militarization of departments, the stigmatization of People of Color as “criminals,” and the elimination of community boards to monitor departments all but guarantee the hypervigilance of communities of Color, which explains why People of Color are more likely to experience disrespect, hostility, and violence from police of-
ficers. The problem is so systemic that research shows that officers of Color are as likely as White officers to kill People of Color (Menifield, Shin, and Strother).

We must understand that racism is systemic because it incorporates all actors into the game. We are incorporated because we are all racialized subjects, but also because we act racially in conscious and unconscious ways. If racism is systemic, we all take part in it, albeit actors’ participation is not symmetrical (People of Color are, for the most part, unwilling participants) or enacted with the same level of consciousness.

**Conclusion**

Most of the racial fantasies I have examined here are not new. But in Trump’s America, they all gained believability because his chaotic presidency presumably cleared up who the real racists in America were. Unfortunately, as I have suggested, because everyone participates in systemic racism, Whites’ fantasies help bolster the racial status quo. White liberals’ racial fantasies are not only self-serving, but quite dangerous, as they leave the door wide open for a return to “Whiteness as usual.”

Now with a new administration in the White House, most Americans are relieved because we have returned to normality and civilized politics. But what are the implications of “normality” and “civilized politics” in terms of race? After all, current levels of racial inequality are not the product of Trump’s nasty racial politics, but rather of the normal, racialized rule in place in America from the 1970s onward, and in which both Democrats and Republicans have participated.

Yet the messiness of Trump’s rule produced a truly unfortunate racial outcome. Americans are tired (rightly so) and hope anxiously for peace and tranquility. The implication of this national mood is that the Biden-Harris administration, much like the Obama-Biden team of yesteryears (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich), will likely get a free pass. Progressives and radicals will be rebuked if they dare criticize or make demands to the current administration, as happened in the early Obama years. Already progressives are being rebuked by centrist Democrats (Goddard), and, given the narrow margin of the Democrats’ victory, asking for deep, structural change will be framed as an exaggerated expectation.

I am afraid that in post-Trump America, White liberals will exalt America as “the exceptional nation” that returned, against all odds, to normality. It is incumbent on activists and progressive organizations alike to defend the space gained by Black Lives Matter in 2020. Accordingly, when our liberal friends ask us to be quiet, we should shout as loud as we can: “No Justice, No Peace!” and “Racial Justice NOW!”
Works Cited


