

# ***WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN (AND JESSICA)<sup>1</sup>:***

**SOME OBSERVATIONS ON WHITE IDENTITY,  
SYSTEMIC RACISM, & THE CONJUNCTURE**

**EDUARDO BONILLA-SILVA**

**(DUKE)**

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this brief is inspired by John Holmwood's 2019 article "Claiming Whiteness," *Ethnicities*, Vol. 20(1) 234–239, where he criticizes E. Kaufman's book *Whiteshift* (2018). He states that Kaufman, who claims a multiracial identity, frames whiteness as a positive, non-racist identity and accuses "left modernists" with their "multiculturalist" agenda of making Whites feel guilty for being white. In Kaufman's view, whiteness is "an ethnic identity like any other" (2018: 1). Holmwood criticizes this simplistic reading of whiteness and writes (My emphasis. 236):

If white identity is 'like any other', *it is also relational with those other identities and those relations will necessarily involve power and domination*. Yet, this is precisely what Kaufmann is unwilling to talk about. His account of all human groups defining themselves in relation to an 'other' is an ahistorical cultural anthropology that allows him to 'neutralise' the particularity of the present and its history.

To make my points on the questions at hand, I must begin with some conceptual clarifications. Far too many social scientists address race matters by focusing exclusively on people of color and their so-called “problems.” For example, the first course I taught as a graduate student in Wisconsin was called “Problems of American Racial and Ethnic Minorities.” This state of affairs did not improve much when I taught at the University of Michigan their race course titled “Race and Cultural Contacts” (the language of choice was influenced by the work of Robert E. Park in the 1920s). Contacts? Colonialism, land dispossession, and genocide are not “contacts,” but brutal practices of racialized domination. Therefore, my entry point to the subject is understanding racism as a *system of racial domination*. Systemic racism (SR henceforth) then refers to societies where social, political, economic, cultural, and even psychological rewards are *partially* allocated along racial lines (Bonilla-Silva 1997; 2021).

It is beyond the scope of this brief to explain the historical processes (the plural is important) that led to the construction of “races” out of various ethnic, national, tribal, or regional groups. But suffice to say that the racial constructions engendered by modern colonialism were not dependent on “identities,” but on placing actors in different positions in the racial hierarchies that emerged in the “New World.” Actors placed at the bottom of the hierarchy gradually developed a collective identity consonant with their location as the racially oppressed. The case of Indigenous peoples is illustrative. The evidence shows that before colonization and even during the early process of colonization, Indigenous peoples in the Americas had distinctly unique identities as Cherokees, Illinois, Iroquois, Taínos, Toltecs, Mapuches, etc. Many, much like was the case of the peoples of European descent,<sup>2</sup> had even more provincial identities as members of bands and even smaller units (for example, among the Comanches, they had “*rancherías*”). But as colonization imposed a collective treatment on *all* Indigenous peoples, the various indigenous communities developed a *supra-tribal identity*. This identity

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<sup>2</sup> The various peoples that came from Europe came from “countries” that were not nation-states yet, hence, as Benedict Anderson (1991) has pointed out, they did not have solid ethnic identities.

was imposed on them by the collective conditions they endured as well as by the fact that the colonizers labeled them as “Indians” (Columbus insisted he had reached “the Indies,” hence, he labeled the peoples he encountered “Indians”). Accordingly, the historical record shows that Indigenous peoples, much like Blacks, Latinos, and others developed a group identity that allowed them to act in concert to fight those who kept them subordinated (for Indigenous peoples in the USA, see Stephen Cornell, *Return of the Native: American Indian Political Resurgence* (1990)).

Whites had class and gender divisions *before* and *after* coming to the New World. But the business of establishing colonies and exploiting various non-European peoples quickly forced the development of what we call today “whiteness.” Not creating a racial separation from the various “races” they were exploiting could have led to the poor, laboring, exploited classes developing a singular class identity. But across the New World, colonial administrators, planters, and elites<sup>3</sup> realized very early that they needed to join in with their “brethren” as Whites to maintain their possessions. In the USA, the Bacon Rebellion was an early case that proved the need to solidify the Whites as a team. In many other parts of the Americas, the strategy was to create manifold divisions among the racially subordinated (*castas*, intermediate racial groups, colorism, etc.) while still having the White group unified at the top of the hierarchy. Regardless, *the key to Whites’ identity as a racial group was—and still is—based on them receiving material<sup>4</sup> advantages at all levels over all non-whites*. Hence, the matter of racial identity is always connected to the social position of groups. Again, it is beyond the scope of this brief, but poor Whites and non-yet white workers, as David Roediger among many has argued, were not passive agents in this process. Becoming white was—and is—an asset that those “workers of the world” with sufficient phenotypical and cultural capital have worked very hard to secure. (The agency of subordinated actors is

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<sup>3</sup> I have stated in my work that we cannot assume that capitalists are hyper-rational actors *above* the racial game. Although they have class interests and always work to “divide and conquer,” they are also *racialized actors* with racial interests, cognitions, and emotions (Bonilla-Silva 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Material is not reduced to economic advantages as it includes social estimation, respect, access to schools and neighborhoods, political rights, and the like as “man (sic) does not live on bread alone” (Deuteronomy 8:3).

not always “progressive.”)

Since the 1990s, analysts of various stripes have objected to what they label as “identity politics.” Conservatives have claimed this is “divisive” (as if we had been a happy, happy, happy family before the evil civil rights and feminist movements came to the fore) while some “radicals” have argued it has prevented class solidarity (of course, the “(White) workers of the world” had, for the most part, participated without much qualms in SR). My take then and today is the same. I remain convinced that the *ultimate* political goal is attaining a democratic socialist society.<sup>5</sup> But to get to Damascus, we cannot ignore the *real* racial divisions (I leave to others adding to the mix gender, sexual orientation, and other social divisions) in the world-system. *To get to class we will have to go through race* (Mills 2003). Why? Because as Stuart Hall observed race is “the modality in which class is ‘lived,’ the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and ‘fought through’” (Hall et al. 1978: 394).

Now that I have outlined a basic conceptual map, I can advance a few specific observations.

1. The study of white identities is important insofar as it can help us understand *fractures* in the team (after all, most Whites experience “marginal whiteness” (Rich 2010). However, it also helps us understand *how* (and perhaps *why*) out of many specific locations (e.g., working-class male, Southern working-class woman, middle class Jewish male, etc.) Whites still coalesce as a team (Bonilla-Silva 2021).
2. White identities are not subjective, social-psychological phenomena. Whiteness has certain collective affectations and cultural components, but what unites all Whites is their *social position of superiority* which gives them systemic advantages at all levels in all areas of life. Hence, to understand these

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<sup>5</sup> I came to the USA in 1984 as a vulgar Marxist for whom class was everything. I slowly morphed into a critical race theorist, but I still believe that class, as well as a gender and race, are central elements in the “matrix of domination” and that democratic socialism is the ultimate political goal.

identities (and, in truth, *all* identities), one must examine their material basis. (No identity is primordial as they are all social products, always changing and always imperfect. See p. 4 below.)

3. To study whiteness correctly, one must pay attention to the various ideological racial formations of the White team. In my work I have urged analysts not to reduce the study of whiteness to the study of the “racists” and white nationalist groups as they are, despite what many believe, *less* central to the reproduction of SR in America than meets the eye. The reproduction of SR has never depended on the actions and practices of “extremists” as racial domination has always been the expression of collective practices that have included in various ways and degrees *all actors* in the polity. Today, for example, nice, liberal Whites who voted for Obama twice and enthusiastically supported the Biden-Harris team in 2020, live in segregated neighborhoods, send their kids to mostly white schools, have white friends, and have an all-white bread diet in all they do. This “white habitus” (see chapter 6 in my *Racism Without Racists*) is key for understanding the normative, habituated way in which SR is reproduced in contemporary America.

4. The social construction of all the races is a process that is always “in the making” and one that is not perfect. Fractures and deviance abound. Hence, examining in detail the social construction of various groups and strata in the white team provides evidence-based alternatives for how to best craft political strategies to deracialize actors. I am on record urging progressives to engage with all Whites, but particularly with the White masses, to move us closer to the political “beloved community” MLK envisioned (Bonilla-Silva 2019). But I have also said that this engagement should not be done in a racially naïve way that ignores the reality of racialization. We simply cannot ignore how the racist practices and the racist culture in the world-system have shaped the “souls of white folk” for 500 years!

5. The study of whiteness requires paying serious attention to how certain “people of color” are being currently racialized as White or “honorary white” (Bonilla-Silva 2004). Assuming that whiteness is

exclusively based on ancestry is a deviation from the idea that race is a “social construct.” As such, we should not be surprised that some Asian Americans, many Indian Americans, many Latinos, and some Blacks may be morphing into Whites through marriage, education, acculturation, and their social and political agency. This emerging reality might help explain why (1) so many Latinx folks supported Trump in 2016 and 2020, (2) the fact that proportion of Blacks voting Republican has increased in the last 3 electoral cycles, and (3) the demographic prediction of people of color becoming the majority in the near future is based on a *contemporary* reading of racial identities, identities which may not be in play in the same way 30 years.

6. We should examine not just Whites’ identities, but Whites’ specific *racial practices*. This, for me, is fundamental. After all, as we know, most Whites in the post-civil rights era do not display a strong and open White racial identity. Even most Trumpistas play the “I am not a racist, but...” tune and downplay their whiteness.

Accordingly, we must study Kevin and Jessica not as individuals but as members of the racial group in charge; *as mostly but not exclusively, unconscious, habituated personifications<sup>6</sup> of the racial order*. How does systemic racism shape their cognitions, emotions, perceptions, and aesthetics? Besides the “white habitus,” what other factors reel Whites into whiteness? Is the White socialization process training for domination (on this, see the “culture of segregation” in Hale 1998)? Are Kevin and Jessica exposed to a culture, institutions, practices, family life, and even friends (Hagerman 2020) that teaches them that they are good, smart, ethical people in contrast to non-whites who are framed as their

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<sup>6</sup> In the Preface to *Das Kapital*, Marx introduced the idea of “personification.” He wrote that he was not dealing with the morality of individual actors, but with them as expressions of the capitalist order. Thus, he wrote:

To prevent possible misunderstanding, a word. I paint the capitalist and the landlord in no sense *couleur de rose*. But here individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class-interests. My standpoint, from which the evolution of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he socially remains, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them (see Preface to Volume 1 of the first German edition, pg. 297.

antinomies? What are the ruptures and fractures in Whites' identities that may help us develop a political praxis to undo whiteness and help uproot SR? These are some of the burning questions I see as emanating from the study of white identities.

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