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Race-centrism: a critique and a research agenda

Andreas Wimmer

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This article reviews some of the most prominent books in the field of race studies in the USA and identifies their shared assumptions: that racial inequality is the primary principle of stratification in the USA; that it has transformed but not lessened since the civil rights era; that it can be explained by the racist inclinations of the white majority, which operates as a collective, strategic actor to preserve its dominance; and finally, that racial domination plays a similarly crucial role around the world. I explore what kind of questions would need to be answered in order to put these assumptions on firmer empirical and theoretical ground and outline a corresponding research agenda. Some empirical evidence is provided to question the assumption that race plays a dominant role around the world and is associated with more political inequality than ethnic divisions.

Keywords: racial inequality; Omi and Winant; Bonilla-Silva; Feagin; Emirbayer and Desmond

Three major books on race in the USA have now appeared in updated editions. Omi and Winant's (2014) *Racial Formation* has been published in its third edition. It represents one of the three most often quoted books on race – after Wilson's (2012) *The Truly Disadvantaged* and Massey and Denton's (1994) *American Apartheid*. Bonilla-Silva's (2013) *Racism without Racists* runs its fourth edition, while Joe Feagin's (2014) *Racist America* arrived at its third edition as well. There are significant differences between the arguments put forward in these books – and heated debates between some of the authors (see the special issue on *Rethinking Racial Formation Theory* published by *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, 6, 2013). But there are also important commonalities in their theoretical approach and intellectual habitus. It is on these that the following essay will concentrate. I will also discuss the forthcoming *Racial Order* by Emirbayer and Desmond (2015), which shares some of the theoretical principles, analytical perspectives and empirical diagnoses with the other three books, while it differs in other, important ways.

The three books base their analyses on five axiomatic assumptions that together form what I call the paradigm of race-centrism. First, race is the primary principle of stratification in the USA. Second, all racial inequality can be explained by the racism (explicit or implicit, conscious or not) of the white majority and/or the state institutions that operate on its behalf. Third, racial inequality has transformed but not lessened, or even worsened over the past fifty years. Fourth, racial groups represent collective actors with shared interests and outlooks on the world. And fifth, race plays a similarly structuring role around the world.

These axioms of race-centrism, I suggest, need to be opened up to critical scrutiny and the empirical exploration of alternative possible interpretations, empirical generalizations and analytical stances. In other words, rather than treating them as axiomatic truths, to be defended against the common intellectual-political enemy of 'colour-blindness', they should be taken as argumentative tenets in search of confirmation. I will discuss each of these five assumptions subsequently, explore what empirical and analytical questions they raise, and discuss which other processes and mechanisms need to be brought into the analytical and empirical picture and properly disentangled from the ones that race-centrism focuses upon. To be clear, since I am not an expert in the field of racial inequality in the USA, I am not in a position to answer the questions I raise, with the exception of the 'race around the world' argument that I will also investigate empirically, if in a preliminary and tentative way. Rather, this essay intends to offer a critique – a suggestion on how to move the ongoing conversation forward by outlining a possible research agenda for the future. I should also add the caveat that as an immigrant from Central Europe, I have never stopped wondering, over the past dozen years of my life, how race is talked, lived and academically thought about in the USA. Much of this puzzlement underlies and motivates the following remarks – very much those of an outside observer, I am afraid. I apologize in advance if my thoughts appear inadequate, ignorant, irrelevant, or otherwise unhelpful in the eyes of my Nacirema colleagues.

Race trumps

According to Bonilla-Silva, Feagin, and Omi and Winant, race trumps gender, class and other forms of inequality in its power to bring about unequal social relations. Omi and Winant's central claim is that 'race has been a master category, a kind of template for patterns of inequality, marginalization, and difference throughout US history' (viii), preconfiguring and structuring other forms of inequality such as those based on gender. Later on, they state 'the ubiquity of race is inescapable across nearly every social domain' and 'pervade[s] every institutional setting' (see also 10, 200). Similarly, Bonilla-Silva argues that despite class, gender and other disparities between whites, the collective project of maintaining white dominance and privilege unites them against the subordinate black race (7–10). Relations of inequality and domination between races thus form, according to the author, the basic social structure of the USA – the core tenet of his 'race structuralist' approach (see Bonilla-Silva 1996). For Feagin's theory of systemic racism, 'white-on-black oppression ... is foundational for society' (Feagin 2013, xii).

All authors cite a series of studies that show black disadvantage in almost every domain of life. Bonilla-Silva (1996, chapter two) is more systematic in this endeavour, and offers a wide range of support for the well-known fact that racial disparities exist in sentencing, incarceration, employment, housing, income, wealth, health, education, and so on. Other forms of inequality, however, are not brought into the analytical horizon – thus mirroring how class-centric approaches to inequality in the USA often ignore race (for an example, see Weeden and Grusky 2012). The most striking example of how inequality is reduced to race is chapter nine in Bonilla-Silva's *Racism without Racists* (also published as an article: Bonilla-Silva 2004). It explores the possible futures of US society, given the increasingly heterogeneous make-up of the population through

immigration from Asia and Latin America. Without considering that inequality could be produced and reproduced through the well-known mechanisms of class formation (children of poor people tend to get less education and remain poor), he deduces from differences in the average income of ethnic and racial groups what the ‘racial order’ of the future might look like, that is which groups will be allowed by whites to have how much income and education (for a similar analysis, see Emirbayer and Desmond, 86). Quite obviously, however, the income of Asians, for example, could also be influenced by their parents’ social class background, the immigration channels through which they arrived, the kind of schools they were able to attend, and the capital of solidarity and support they were able to rely upon.

To show that race represents the most fundamental, most powerful structuring principle of inequality, one would have to compare it systematically to other inequality-producing processes. For example, recent research by economists based on how individuals with easy-to-trace, rare names fare over half a dozen or more generations, shows that class inequality is extremely resistant to intergenerational change at the very bottom and the very top of the hierarchy (Clark 2014; a fact overlooked by mainstream stratification research that rarely looks at those at the very top and the very bottom, but rather the ‘mainstream’ in between). The increasing gap between income groups and the declining mobility between such groups have been much discussed since Piketty’s (2014) bestseller, and American research shows that this affects blacks and whites equally (Bloome and Western 2011). Other research with individual-level data on a global scale suggests that one’s country of birth nowadays represents the far best predictor of one’s life chances – much more so than one’s class origins (Milanovic 2012). Some well-known other research shows that when controlling for test scores, wage differentials between African Americans and whites disappear (Neal and Johnson 1996) – which moves the empirical challenge to explain how these test scores arise and what relative role race and class and geographic location play in their generation. Incidentally, the achievement gap is now wider between social classes than between African Americans and whites (Reardon et al. [Forthcoming](#)).

To be sure, the question is not whether race can be reduced to class – as in the somewhat dated Marxist interpretations of decades past – or to political closure along national lines, or to some other principle of inequality. The task is not one of reduction but of understanding conjunction. Even if racial forms of classification and discrimination are autonomous from these other processes and need to be understood in their own terms, a point made forcefully and convincingly by all four authors, the question of how they compare to these other forces still needs to be asked and answered. Only an encompassing view – both theoretically and empirically – that looks at the fate of individuals over time and over generations and that takes a series of other major social forces into account can establish whether race indeed trumps.

All racial inequality is due to racism

All authors assume that racial difference in outcomes such as education, income, wealth and occupations must be due to racial discrimination and domination. Bonilla-Silva is most explicit about this point. His book is meant to identify the ‘new racism’ that is responsible for persistent racial inequality as well as the ‘colour-blind racism’

that covers up its effects. After showing the persistence of racial disparities in various domains of life, he attributes all of these differences to white racism. This racism takes two forms: institutional racism by a police state directed at controlling and confining the black population; and a subtle, post-vulgar form of everyday racism, that is, the ‘new racism’ that ‘operates in a ‘now you see it, now you don’t’ fashion’ through implicit, never acknowledged bias of white gatekeepers who keep credit, housing, education, jobs and prestigious career tracks away from people of colour, as well as through everyday discrimination in public places, schools, restaurants, and so on.

To cover up this new racism and legitimate ‘white supremacy’, the ideology of ‘colour-blind racism’ was developed from the 1960s onwards. (A similar argument can be found in Omi and Winant, who call this ideology a ‘neo-conservative project of color-blindness’, for example on page 156; Emirbayer and Desmond also introduce a related argument about colour-blindness – the shared ideological enemy of all four books.) This colour-blind racism consists, Bonilla-Silva argues, in:

explaining contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics ... Whites rationalize minorities’ contemporary status as the product of market dynamics [termed “abstract liberalism” by Bonilla-Silva later on], naturally occurring phenomena [such as residential segregation, i.e. through “naturalization”], and blacks’ imputed cultural limitations [“cultural racism”] (2)

as well as through the ‘minimization of racism’, while in reality, according to the author, all racial disparities go on the account of the ‘new racism’ of whites.

In Emirbayer and Desmond’s sophisticated theoretical review of ‘the racial order’, they first outline racial disparities in the economic, educational and prestige (or ‘racial capital’) domain and then describe a series of processes through which these are generated and reproduced: first, collective feelings of superiority by the dominant white group and the attribution of inferior bodily, cultural and intellectual qualities to non-whites; second, a routinized habitus of establishing white as the normal, unmarked category, exoticizing racial others, denying them cultural autonomy and colonizing their spaces; and third, the interiorization of negative stereotypes by individuals of colour combines with other forms of ‘symbolic violence’ to further reproduce the initial disparities. All three elements, in short, represent processes of racial categorization, discrimination and stigmatization. Similarly, according to Feagin’s (2014, 9) more historically accented argument, ‘systemic racism includes a diverse assortment of racist practices: the unjustly gain economic and political power of whites; the continuing resource inequalities; the rationalizing white-racist frame; and the major institutions created to preserve white advantage and power’. Later on, Feagin describes the ‘white racial frame’ as composed of racist stereotypes, images and emotions as well as discriminatory behavioural dispositions that are crucial in reproducing racial inequality.

A fully analytical approach, however, would have to disentangle various candidate mechanisms that generate, reproduce, exacerbate or attenuate racial inequality, not all of which rest on racial categorization and discrimination practices. At the very least, one would have to consider the following eight processes. The first three are related to racial categorization processes, and the first two to racial discrimination proper – the exclusive focus of race-centric scholarship:

- (1) Stereotype-based discrimination in employment, housing, sentencing and a range of other domains of life, as revealed in audit studies.
- (2) Differential rates of incarceration (due to racial discrimination by police and judges), which have detrimental consequences not only for the incarcerated, but also their children (Wildeman 2009), thus exacerbating racial disadvantage over generations as a consequence.
- (3) Reclassification: as Saperstein and Penner (2012) argue, phenotypically ambiguous individuals tend to get reclassified as white if they do not conform to negative stereotypes about blacks. This would reinforce, in the aggregate, the perception of racial inequality because employed, well-educated (etc.) individuals are reclassified as white
- (4) ‘Statistical discrimination’ based on differences in average behaviour or in characteristics of members of racial categories, which can reproduce or even exacerbate racial disparities in a variety of outcomes above and beyond the stereotype-based discrimination that might have been at the origin of these disparities in the first place (the classical statement is Phelps 1972)
- (5) Spatial mismatch processes (à la Wilson 1978): hyper-segregation limits access to education and jobs for the poorer segments of the black community independent of the direct discrimination mechanism that might generate segregation in the first place.
- (6) The general mechanism of class reproduction that makes the initial positioning of individuals of different racial background in the class hierarchy, due to the century-lasting institution of slavery, persist over generations – independent of the racial discrimination mechanisms.
- (7) Higher rates of divorce and family instability in the black population, including the middle class, which affects social mobility in the next generation (as shown by Bloome 2014).
- (8) Culture of poverty mechanism (Wilson 2010): initial behavioural adaptations to extreme poverty and marginalization tend to reproduce or can potentially exacerbate such poverty and marginalization over the life course and over generations.

While difficult analytically and demanding from both a theoretical and a data point of view, efforts at disentangling at least some of these mechanisms from each other have recently been made (Bloome 2014; Wimmer and Lewis 2010; Fryer, Pager, and Spenkuch 2013). Maybe discrimination alone is sufficient to explain inequality? Maybe it combines with other factors to produce the overall pattern of racial inequality? Maybe – *horribile dictu* – it is, while widespread and well documented, less effective in maintaining racial inequality than other mechanisms and processes? Maybe initial, discrimination-based inequality is amplified by some of these other mechanisms to such a degree that the amplification becomes, over time, the more important element in the overall social process?

Race-centric authors diverge in how they deal with the possibility of non-racial mechanisms that might (re)produce racial inequality. The first is to conceive of research into these mechanisms as elements of ‘colour-blind racism’.¹ The second is to call *all* mechanisms that produce or reproduce racial inequality ‘racist’. Both

therefore operate through a similar rhetorical move – by extending the meaning of the term ‘racism’. The third way is to acknowledge the existence of these other processes but to minimize their possible consequences by insisting on the autonomy of racial processes. Bonilla-Silva takes the first route: those who believe that standard stratification mechanism might reproduce racial inequality would be accused of ‘abstract liberalism’ (one aspect of ‘colour-blind racism’), those who put forward culture of poverty arguments are quite obviously ‘cultural racists’, and those who pursue the other mechanisms listed above are guilty of ‘denying’ the reality of racism.

Omi and Winant as well as Feagin take the second route and subsume all inequalities in outcomes along racial categories, including those produced by other mechanisms, under the term ‘racism’. According to the Omi and Winant, ‘racism’ cannot be defined based on the intention of actors. Everything that perpetuates or creates racial inequality in outcomes, including institutions, individual acts (unconscious ones included) and unintended consequences, are defined as racist. This conceptual move produces its own set of logical problems, as the following illustrates. According to the analysis of Omi and Winant, during the years before the Great Recession, loans were made more accessible to minority individuals at least in part with the intention to foster home ownership among minority communities (as an interview passage with a mortgage lender in *Racial Formation* shows) and, at the level of the lender institution, in order to *not* racially discriminate.² Since the consequence of this policy was a disproportionate suffering from the housing crisis among minority communities after 2008, Omi and Winant describe the sub-prime lending system as ‘racist’ (228). Whether or not this analysis of the sub-prime crisis is correct:³ One wonders what the empirical consequences of the extension of the term racism are and about its logical consistency. Does it make sense to call attempts to overcome racial inequality ‘racist’ if they are producing opposite results or are ineffective?

Emirbayer and Desmond briefly discuss, in the concluding chapter, how other, non-racial processes interact with and possibly influence the racial structures analyzed in the main body of the book. Following Bourdieu, they define racial inequality, categorization practices, emotional dispositions and cognitive schemata, interactional encounters and political movements as constitutive elements of the autonomous social field of race. A common problem of field theory (and of system-theoretic analysis of differentiation processes à la Luhmann as well) thus emerges: how to understand how individual practices and destinies are influenced by the logics of several fields simultaneously. Emirbayer and Desmond argue that these other forces and dynamics will be ‘refracted’ (Emirbayer and Desmond 2015, 211f.), meaning restructured and modified by the dynamics proper to the racial field. Emphasizing the autonomy of the racial field (e.g. 212), however, does not allow us to conceptually allow for the possibility that these other mechanisms might profoundly alter the results of the ‘racial game’ in such a way as to exaggerate, counterweigh or even completely overturn the dynamics of racial categorization and discrimination proper. Assessing whether or not this is indeed the case is obviously an empirical rather than a theoretical question that remains to be addressed in the future.

Progress is an illusion

The third axiom maintains that racial domination and hierarchy are persistent, constant features of US society. Omi and Winant state, for example, that ‘legally sanctioned forms of racial discrimination may have receded, but racial inequality and racial injustice have stubbornly persisted’ (vii), or ‘in many cases have even deepened’ (1). The ‘inadequate and vulnerable civil rights measures ... have also served to ratify and reinvigorate the underlying racial regime’ (8), ‘without altering the underlying structural racism that was characteristic of the United States’ (15). Later, they argue that ‘American society has in many ways ... become more segregated and more racially unequal’ (page 60). They continue:

Today the condition of the black middle class seems more fragile, not less, as job losses in the public sector have accelerated and the already huge chasms of income and wealth distribution have deepened enormously ... The distribution of wealth remains tied to race in increasingly brutal ways. (60)

Bonilla-Silva shares the pessimistic assessment of change over the last decades and draws a picture of persistence of inequality.

Empirically, all four books agree that the mechanisms through which whites have maintained their dominance have changed: less violence than in the past, less overt racism and more concealed and subtle forms of discrimination. This transformation, however, has not changed the degree, structural relevance, deep embeddedness and disastrous consequences of racial inequality: ‘today “new racism” practices ... are as effective as the old ones [such as Jim Crow laws or lynching violence] in maintaining the racial status quo’ (Bonilla-Silva 2013, 25). Emirbayer and Desmond agree that the collective habitus and emotional dispositions of whites remained largely stable, even if the behavioural practices following from them are no longer as overtly racist and violent as before. According to Feagin (2014, 18), ‘the political and legal changes of the contemporary era have by no means eradicated white-imposed racism as the foundation of the U.S. “house” ... Racism is still systemic and webbed across all sectors of this society’.

Continuity is not only an empirical diagnosis, but for Bonilla-Silva, Emirbayer and Desmond, as well as Feagin, it is a matter of theoretical architecture since all three authors offer, in essence, theories of reproduction. Let me illustrate this with a brief discussion of Feagin as well as Emirbayer and Desmond. The latter’s theoretical apparatus is hard-wired to understand the reproduction of racial inequality – quite similar to the often discussed and criticized focus on class reproduction, rather than change, that lies at the heart of Bourdieu’s *Distinction* (1984). Unequal positions of racial groups in hierarchies of power, economic opportunity and prestige generate specific habitus and collective feelings that tend to legitimize, even if in a contested and conflictual way, naturalize and ‘largely, but not wholly’ (Emirbayer and Demond 2015, 186) recreate the racial order (empirical statements about continuity can also be found at 5, 255, 269, 353). To be sure, there is plenty of emphasis, adding a pragmatist stone to the theoretical mosaic of the book, on creativity and improvisation by actors – especially of racially subordinate actors. But there is little theoretical space

for such creativity and improvisation to eventually change the racial order itself. Similarly, if couched in a different (more functionalist) language, Feagin's theory of 'systemic racism' argues that 'macro-level, large scale institutions ... routinely perpetuate racial subordination and inequalities' and are in turn 'created and recreated by routine actions at the everyday micro-level', creating a 'web of alienating racist relations' in which individuals are caught, 'whether perpetrators of discrimination or recipients of it' (Feagin 2014, 13). These two theoretical architectures⁴ need to be remodelled, I suggest, to be able to take into account the accumulation of unintended consequences, the transformative power of social movements (which in the authors' account are immediately balanced out by conservative countermovements; Emirbayer and Desmond 2015, 164), and global connections that shift balances of power between domestic racial groups – to mention just the three sources of change outlined in my theory of ethno-racial boundary making (Wimmer 2012).

To return to the empirical question at hand, I should again admit that I am not an expert in this field and I have no well-founded opinion about whether to agree with these authors that '*plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*', or whether to embrace an alternative 'progress' narrative. To an outside reader, it seems that Omi and Winant, Feagin and Bonilla-Silva try to avoid any hint at 'progress' at any cost. *Racial Formation* does not offer a systematic evaluation of the various empirical trends documented in the literature, but declares that levels of racial inequality have worsened, citing a handful of studies, many of which refer to the consequences of the recent sub-prime crisis. By contrast, *Racism without Racists* gives an informative and carefully researched overview of various dimensions of inequality and how far they have changed over time – the highlight of the book in this reader's eyes. Unfortunately, however, the evaluation goes reliably and predictably in one direction only: whatever supports the story of continuity is highlighted and emphasized, and what could support an opposite story of 'progress' is de-emphasized. If forced to admit that trends have been encouraging (less residential segregation over time; less difference in education; less income disparity; black enfranchisement and political representation), the trends are portrayed as either irrelevant (less segregation does not mean more contact or integration [32]), or misleading (the quality of degrees earned differs along racial lines [35]; the number of unemployed blacks who do not enter into income statistics has increased [54]), or de facto negative (the black vote means that radical mobilization for protest is no longer legitimate, taking the most powerful political tool out of black hands [42]), or illusory (most black representation in the supreme court, government, the presidency, etc. is by 'anti-minority minorities' [38], 'sanitized blacks' [40], or 'anti-black blacks' [41]).

A more analytical approach would assume a principally open outcome of social processes including the logical and empirical possibility of racial 'progress'. Empirically, it would seek to answer the following questions. How do the different trends intertwine and how have they transformed racial inequality for which sub-segments of the overall population in which way and with which consequences? Do they result in a segmentation of the black (and/or white) population into different subgroups with systematically differing life trajectories, as argued by some, or is there a master trend (and which one) that applies to the entire black population (as maintained by race-centrism), or do we find a series of conflicting developments that

affect all individuals in similar but largely unpredictable ways, leading to an individualization of life trajectories less patterned by race than before? Or is the continuity story proposed by race-centric scholarship indeed the dominant trend that emerges from a careful reading of the empirical scholarship? Finally, and on a more policy-relevant level, how could we create an overall indicator of ‘progress’ that somehow could aggregate the various trends? Would asking people of colour about which period of American history they would prefer to live be such an indicator and if not, what alternatives are available? Is police brutality and violence against men of colour a better overall thermometer?

Races as collective actors: white supremacy rules

The fourth axiomatic assumption is that individuals of the same racial background – whites, blacks, Hispanics, Asians – represent groups of shared political destiny and common material interests. In other words, they are collective actors whose relationships form the structural core of American society (the ‘racial regime’, ‘white supremacy’, ‘the racial order’, or ‘the racial structure’). In Omi and Winant’s writings there is some ambiguity about this point. ‘Racism’, they write, ‘in its most advanced forms ... had no perpetrators; it is nearly invisible, taken-for granted, common sense feature of everyday life and social structure’ that is ‘detached from its perpetrators’ (129). In other sections of their book, however, the actors are racial groups: whites act as a collective to suppress people of colour and save white supremacy (making some reformist concessions when needed, see e.g. 149), and the peoples of colour collectively struggle against white supremacy. On page 147, for example, ‘the “fundamental group” may be seen as whites – or more properly whites and others who benefit from white supremacy and racism – while the “subordinate groups” are people of color and their allies’ (see also 190).⁵ The state is portrayed as the institutional arm of the collective white and is in charge of suppressing people of colour. Obama’s election thus appears as a charade orchestrated to hide the continued reality of racial domination by whites and ‘their’ state.

Bonilla-Silva is less ambivalent and clearer that:

although not every single member of the dominant race defends the racial status quo or spouts color-blind racism, most do ... Although some whites fight white supremacy and do not endorse white common sense, most subscribe to substantial portions of it in a casual, uncritical fashion that helps sustain the prevailing racial order. (10f.)

Feagin’s idea of ‘systemic racism’ is built on the analysis of black and white individuals as ‘racial classes’ separated by ‘divergent group interests’ – the result of a centuries-spanning history of the enrichment of whites thanks to the exploitation of the labour of blacks (Feagin 2014, 12, 14ff.). Whites maintain racial exploitation through shared racist stereotypes, cognitive scripts and images, collective emotions and discriminatory behavioural dispositions (Feagin 2014, 26). Emirbayer and Desmond’s complex text comprises many eloquent statements in which they warn against reification and essentialization of racial groups as well as the pitfalls of ascribing agency to them (e.g. 4, 82, 89, 108, 143f., 352). On other pages, they emphasize the heterogeneity of political outlooks, lived experiences and racial

strategies of whites (251f.). In their main analysis, however, they quickly (sometimes on the same page, e.g. 82, 140, 252) return to treating races as collective actors (e.g. 35, 85ff., 164). Somewhat eerily, whites are even attributed 'collective emotions' as a group (as distinct from the similarity of individual feelings) and a shared set of unconscious, habitual dispositions, mostly the desire to dominate non-whites and maintain the privilege associated with whiteness (e.g. 152).

All race-centric approaches thus attribute agency to categories of individuals that comprise, in the case of whites, hundreds of millions of members. Such agency can exist in principle, of course, and it can be observed, for example, during all-out wars between states when massive numbers of individuals are coordinated through their respective states. In the case of contemporary US race relations, how does such coordination come about? It cannot be through political parties because according to race-centric analysis, white supremacy is the shared goal of the majority of white people who vote for different parties that subsequently feud with each other in the political arena and perpetuate well-entrenched ideological divides between whites. What, then, is the coordination mechanism that ensures that most whites are on track in the shared goal of dominating and subduing people of colour?

First, this could be achieved by non-political forms of institutional coordination across different domains – because judges, admissions officers in schools and colleges, human resource managers at larger companies and the bosses of smaller ones, realtors and credit agencies coordinate with each other in the shared goal to maintain white supremacy, perhaps under the guidance of the state who acts as a guarantor of white privilege. This would be in line with Omi and Winant's analysis. But how could this solution to the coordination problem come to terms with the considerable variation in the way in which categorical sorting and discrimination processes operate in different institutional fields, in some of which gatekeepers now discriminate *in favour* of individuals of colour in order to create a diverse group of employees, clients, or students?

For example, when lower-class whites are matched with lower-class blacks and other non-whites in terms of high-school grade point averages and SATs, lower-class Asian applicants are seven times as likely to be accepted to competitive private institutions as similarly qualified whites, lower-class Hispanic applicants are eight times as likely, and lower-class blacks ten times as likely (Espenshade and Radford 2009, 128). On the other hand, the negative discrimination in sentencing and employment are equally well documented. Famously, it is better to be white with a criminal record than black without a record when applying for working-class jobs (Pager, Western, and Bonikowski 2009). How do these various directions, degrees and forms of institutionalized discrimination affect each other, and do they – if they do – coalesce into a unifying logic of coordination?

The question is not asked by race-centric scholars because the focus lies exclusively on institutional discrimination *against* people of colour (by the courts, for example), and not on the institutional apparatuses, at the federal, state, company and university level, that have been set up to combat racial discrimination and inequality in voting, housing, the labour market, the recruitment of employees, the admission of students, and so forth. These are either not mentioned at all, or simply dismissed as ineffective and feeble. Remarkably, Emirbayer and Desmond's book, which otherwise covers an admirable range of empirical topics associated with race,

has no place for such institutional rules. This is surprising because in Bourdieu's field theory, in the image of which *The Racial Order* is modelled, institutions play a critical role since they define the field-specific rules of the game, set up and codify the distribution of field-specific capital over participants, and so forth. Since the dismantlement of the Jim Crow laws, the formal institutional framework that structures the racial field in the USA is meant to combat racial discrimination and inequality, not to create and foster it. A field-theoretic approach to race in the USA might thus very well put these at the centre of the analysis, including, of course, an evaluation of their effectiveness or the lack thereof, their interaction with other institutional orders (which might render the anti-discrimination legislation ineffective), their possible subversion by political agendas different from those of the lawmakers who designed them, and so forth.

Instead, Emirbayer and Desmond shift the focus on the shared 'habitus of whiteness' as the coordination mechanism that ensures that whites remain united in the goal of maintaining dominance. Similarly, in Bonilla-Silva's account, the shared racist mentality of whites, learned within white families in a durable way, explains how and why most of the 220 million whites are united in and remain focused on the goal of keeping peoples of colour at the bottom of the social order. According to Feagin, a 'white racial frame' consisting of stereotypes, images, emotions and the intent to discriminate serves as the 'ideological apparatus' (an Althusserian term) that reproduces systemic racism (Feagin 2014, 19). This is a theoretically more convincing argument than to suppose an institutional coordination mechanism. But it produces a new set of empirical and analytical problems that need to be addressed. If whites are united by the habitus of whiteness (as in Emirbayer and Desmond's account), or by a shared racist outlook (as in Bonilla-Silva's argument), or by 'white racial frame' (à la Feagin), how did it happen that Asians (including native-borns) now outpace whites in terms of individual educational achievement and income – despite well-entrenched anti-Asian stereotypes and everyday racism by the white majority (documented by Chou and Feagin 2008), exclusionary state policies and laws until 1952, and so forth? Why did the white collective let this happen – since according to race-centrist analysis, the relative socio-economic standing of ethno-racial groups is determined by the will of the dominant white group? Bonilla-Silva's answer is that the collective white allowed the upward mobility of Asians to avoid a non-white coalition against white supremacy by creating 'an intermediate racial group to buffer racial conflict' (Bonilla-Silva 2004, 934). This quite obviously leads to a resurgence of the coordination problem in a new and sharper form: who decided – absent institutional coordination – on this strategy rather than another, equally beneficial for white supremacy, and how is coordination around this strategy subsequently enforced?

The world is a ghetto

The fifth axiomatic assumption is that race serves not only as the master template of inequality in US history, but in global history as well. While shaped by different contexts and histories, it is argued, racial inequality assumes similar forms and dynamics around the world. Correspondingly, authors expect to find dominated, racially defined groups equivalent to African Americans around the world – a perspective adequately captured in

the book title *The World is a Ghetto* (Winant 2001). Its author reviews the history of the modern world through the lens of race-centric theory and offers many well-researched and interesting insights along the way. He traces the origin of the concept of race to the age of discoveries, shows how it then developed into the major legitimizing ideology of the slave trade and the European colonization of the Global South in the nineteenth century, how it becomes enriched with biological postulates later on, informs the Holocaust and South African apartheid, and then transforms after the civil rights revolution into a neo-conservative and then neo-liberal colour-blind ideology or the various newly emerging anti-immigrant nationalisms in Europe.

The main argument is that exclusionary racial ideologies produced the starkest forms of social exclusion and political inequality around the world. On page 1, Howard Winant writes:

Race has been fundamental in global politics and culture for half a millennium. It continues to signify and structure social life not only experientially and locally, but nationally and globally. Race is present everywhere: it is evident in the distribution of resources and power, and in the desires and fears of individuals from Alberta to Zimbabwe. Race has shaped the modern economy and the nation-state

In short, ‘the racialization of the world is both the cause and consequence of modernity’ (3). Similarly, Emirbayer and Desmond declare at the outset of their book that:

a global racial order came into being that organized social relations, symbolic classifications, and even collective emotions in terms of a white/non-white polarity. We recognize that this global racialization of ethnicity received a different inflection in each specific spatial locale ... but we affirm that in every instance it evidences certain shared, essential features. (15f., see also 58f., 83f.)

In a similarly brief ex cathedra statement, Feagin (2014, 8) affirms that ‘European colonialism and imperialism ... reached much of the globe and created a global racial order, which has had severe consequences for the world’s peoples for centuries’.

Some important omissions in Winant’s race-centric history of the modern world need to be highlighted. The narrative is, as Winant admits in the foreword, thoroughly and exclusively Atlanto-centric, rather than truly global. There are only two paragraphs on the East African slave trade to the Middle East, which affected at least an equal number of enslaved black Africans. We do not hear about the around one million Northern Mediterraneans (‘whites’ from a race-centric point of view) captured by Barbary pirates from 1600 to 1815 and sold into slavery in the Ottoman Empire or about the many more from the northern shore of the Black Sea (also ‘whites’) who shared a similar fate. There is no discussion about widespread slavery in parts of precolonial Africa (of Africans by Africans), parts of South East Asia, or Korea (where ‘Asians’ had enslaved ‘Asians’). Perhaps more importantly, Winant does not analyze the rise of the land-based empires (in which ‘whites’ dominated mostly ‘whites’) that covered the vast populations and territories of Eurasia from Vienna to Vladivostok up to the First World War. Nor is the conquest and subjugation of Central Asia and the Caucasus (inhabited by ‘Caucasians’) by Romanov Russia in

the late nineteenth century given any attention. We also do not learn anything about caste, race and ethnicity on the Indian subcontinent, or the Japanese Empire and its ideological justifications. This list of forms of slavery, conquests and imperial dominations that do not conform to the white-over-peoples-of-colour configuration does not negate or minimize the importance of the Atlantic slave trade or European colonization for world history. It suggests, however, that a truly global history cannot be told exclusively as a story of the rise of white domination over peoples of colour.

Still, one might argue, racial forms of categorization might be more prevalent in the average country of the world and in any case associated with starker, more systematic forms of inequality, domination and exclusion than those that emerged from the various other historical configurations mentioned above. Compared to the other axiomatic assumptions discussed previously, I am on firmer empirical ground here since my own expertise lies squarely in the comparative domain. The following analysis is based on data from Version 3 of the Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) data set (Wimmer, Cederman, and Min 2009), which was assembled to show that ethno-racial political domination is a recipe for armed rebellion and civil war.

EPR contains information on all ethnic or racial groups that are at least minimally politically relevant at the national level, that is, in the name of which a political actor with some salience in the national political arena claims to speak. In the USA, for example, EPR does not include 'German Americans', but the major racial groups plus, after 9/11, Arab Americans. Group lists can change from year to year. For each year, representation at national-level government (the junta in military dictatorship, the presidency in presidential regimes, etc.) by individuals who claim to represent ethnic or racial groups is recorded on an ordinal scale. This scale ranges from politically discriminated against (such as African Americans until the civil rights revolution, according to EPR), through powerless, representation in regional government only, to junior or senior partner in central government coalitions, dominance, and monopoly. The data set thus hones in on one, and unfortunately only one, dimension of inequality: political representation at the national government level. Version 3 of EPR also identifies the main markers of difference on the basis of which group membership is defined: language (for ethno-linguistic categories), religion (for ethno-religious groups), somatic features (for racial groups), and so forth. Sunni in Iraq would be coded as an ethno-religious group, Afro-Colombians as a racial group, Hungarian speakers in Romania as an ethno-linguistic group, and so forth.

Table 1 shows the average country-level population shares of different types of groups in different continents. Thus, for example, in the average country of the Americas, the population share of racially defined groups is 32%, while in the average Eastern European country, the population share of racially defined groups is close to 0. Clearly and unsurprisingly, racial groups are the most prominent in the Americas – the legacy of transatlantic slavery – and much less so in sub-Saharan Africa (which inherited some racial categories from the two slave trade systems as well as colonial classification practices), in Europe (generated by postcolonial immigration to Atlantic seaboard countries), and in parts of Asia (where Chinese diasporas are often racially differentiated). Overall, however, we cannot say that race is the dominant form of ethno-racial classification around the world.

Table 1. Types of ethno-racial groups around the world (in proportions).

	Americas	Western Europe	Eastern Europe	Sub-Saharan Africa	North Africa and Middle East	Asia
Ethno-religious	0	0.00	0.09	0.03	0.47	0.06
Ethno-linguistic	0.21	0.44	0.74	0.45	0.20	0.58
Racial	0.32	0.14	0	0.13	0	0.06
Ethno-cultural	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.08	0	0.03
Ethno-regional	0	0.01	0.01	0.18	0.11	0.03
Ethno-professional	0	0.00	0	0	0	0.02
Mixed types of categories	0.37	0.09	0.11	0.04	0	0.10

Maybe the second conjecture of *The World is a Ghetto* holds: are racially marked groups more likely to be discriminated against in countries and places ‘from Alberta to Zimbabwe’ than ethno-culturally defined groups? The following regression analysis tries to answer this question (see Table 2). The dependent variable is whether or not a group is politically discriminated against (and the appropriate model is thus a logistic regression). The omitted type of group is ethno-linguistic, the large majority of all ethno-racial groups around the world. A control for group size and for past armed conflict is added since political discrimination could follow from unsuccessful rebellion in the past.

It turns out that racial groups are more likely to be politically discriminated against, on average, than ethno-linguistic groups. But this is also true for ethno-religious, ethno-cultural as well as ethno-professional groups. Ethno-cultural groups (such as the highland tribes of Thailand) or ethno-professional groups (caste groups around the South Asian subcontinent) are even more likely to be politically disadvantaged than racial groups, thus raising doubts about whether there is something uniquely exclusionary about racial forms of categorization.

But perhaps we underestimate how much political exclusion is associated with race because both dominant and dominated groups can be differentiated racially from each other (as in the USA), such that the association between race and the likelihood of being discriminated against (positive for groups of colour, negative for whites) is cancelled out. To avoid this problem, we can test whether the share of the population that is differentiated on the basis of race (almost 100% in the USA) is associated with higher levels of exclusion overall – a higher proportion of the population excluded from central-level power on the basis of ethnicity or race. I therefore now count discriminated, powerless and regionally represented groups as excluded from power and the share of this population forms the dependent variable. The model specification is now a general linear model since the dependent variable is a proportion. As Table 3 shows, countries characterized by racial rather than some other form of ethnic differentiation are not excluding a higher proportion of the population from power, casting further doubt on the idea that worldwide political domination is mostly a matter of race.

To be sure, these results do not imply that there is no political discrimination along racial lines. They imply, however, that it is not the *only* form of classification associated

Table 2. Logistic regression on political discrimination of an ethno-racial group (pooled time-series analysis with groups as units of analysis).

Logistic regression (SE adjusted for 758 group clusters)		<i>N</i> = 37,055				
	Coef	Robust SE	<i>z</i>	<i>P</i> > $ z $	95% CI	
Reference: Ethno-linguistic						
Racial	0.9006442	0.280518	3.21	0.001	0.350839	1.450449
Ethno-religious	0.678944	0.2789605	2.43	0.015	0.1321916	1.225696
Ethno-cultural	1.649535	0.3289045	5.02	0.000	1.004894	2.294176
Ethno-regional	0.1267176	0.3963051	0.32	0.749	-0.6500262	0.9034613
Ethno-professional	1.767649	0.8973943	1.97	0.049	0.0087886	3.52651
Mixed	-0.0427459	0.4865463	-0.09	0.930	-0.996359	0.9108673
Size	-1.490625	0.5050406	-2.95	0.003	-2.480487	-0.500764
Past conflicts	0.2716272	0.204205	1.33	0.183	-0.1286072	0.6718615
Constant	-2.129898	0.1530154	-13.92	0.000	-2.429803	-1.829993

with stark forms of political exclusion. The question, therefore, shifts to a different analytical task. If it is not racial modes of classification (and the historical circumstances such as slavery and colonization that gave rise to them) that explains levels of political exclusion along ethno-racial lines today, how can we understand variation across the world? (My answer to this question can be found in Wimmer 2014b.) It is unlikely that these are the last words to be spoken about the global role of racial and related forms of inequality. Maybe the data set that we created underestimates the degree to which some of the discriminated-against groups that we coded as non-racial have become 'racialized' over time, meaning that biological difference, unassimilationability and inheritability of cultural traits have come to be attributed to them? Maybe race is associated with starker forms of discrimination outside of the political field on which I have focused above? Research on these questions, based on global data rather than selectively chosen case studies, has only recently started to emerge.

Conclusion

As Emirbayer and Desmond (3ff.) rightly observe, much of the empirical scholarship on race over the past decades proceeded along a rather standardized pattern.

Table 3. Generalized linear model of the proportion of the politically excluded population in a country (pooled time series analysis of 134 countries since 1946 or first year of independence).

Generalized linear models (SE adjusted for 134 country clusters)		<i>N</i> = 6,559				
	Coef	Robust SE	<i>z</i>	<i>P</i> > $ z $	95% CI	
Share of racial groups	-0.3019013	0.4232654	0.71	0.476	-0.5276837	1.131486
Year	-0.0032455	0.0033736	-0.96	0.336	-0.0098576	0.0033667
Constant	4.938095	6.693979	0.74	0.461	-8.181864	18.05805

Sociologists united to combat the idea – mostly put forward by politicians and public intellectuals, but also by academics such as Wilson (1978) – that race no longer matters as much as it did a generation ago, or even that we have arrived at a ‘post-racial’ age and thus should focus on other dimensions of inequality. Against this common enemy of colour-blindism, study after study showed that ‘race still matters’ for one or other domain of social life, thus providing empirical and ideological ammunition for a continuation of the civil rights struggle. Emirbayer and Desmond’s book inspires new theoretical depth and sophistication into this discussion about race by asking how – not whether – and through which processes race matters. They are thus able to move beyond what Bonilla-Silva, Feagin, and Omi and Winant have been able to achieve in terms of theoretical depth and breadth.

In this article, I pursued a related, but obviously much more modest goal: to show that these major theoretical statements themselves can be connected to a mechanism-based, analytical understanding of social processes whose direction can only be determined by empirical investigation and whose complexities need to be unpacked with appropriate tools. Problematizing axiomatic assumptions and probing deeper into how one could show whether or not they indeed hold up to an empirical analysis defines a series of research agendas for the future.

An encompassing view of inequality-generating processes and mechanisms, bringing together the highly specialized literatures on intergenerational class and educational mobility, racial inequality, gender discrimination and global social closure, would allow us to properly determine the changing role of race within the life trajectories of individuals across generations. Unpacking racial disadvantage by exploring the various possible mechanisms generating, amplifying, muting, or counteracting such disadvantage would allow us to assess the role of racial discrimination proper with more analytical clarity and empirical precision. Similarly, a conjoint vision of competing, contradicting, reinforcing, or autonomously developing trends of racial inequality in various domains (or fields) of social life would lead to a deeper understanding of whether, how far, and why there is ‘progress’, or, to the contrary, ‘more of the same’. I also called for a deeper understanding of critical probing into and systematic empirical evaluation of how, under which scope conditions and through which micro-mechanisms, coordination of actors along racial lines is actually achieved such that it is – if it is at all – meaningful to speak of racial groups as collective actors, as in race-centric theories. And finally, a truly global analysis of the role of race in generating patterns of domination around the globe needs to go beyond an Atlanto-centric view, take other patterns of domination and exploitation not associated with race into account, and critically assess their respective roles in the generation and transformation of hierarchies of exclusion.

Response to Howi Winant

For his engaged criticism of my work I thank Howi Winant, whom I hold in greatest respect as an intellectual of firm political vision and commitment whose argumentative agility and erudition I have always admired. His reading of my work surprised me in various ways and I am grateful for this opportunity to respond and clarify. First, the book is written explicitly *against* the exaggerated constructivist position according to which there is no such thing as racial groups, no thick identities, no deeply felt

allegiance, no hard boundaries, no political struggles, no racial realities. As is stated in almost every chapter of the book, as well as on the book jacket for the quick reader, the goal of *Ethnic Boundary Making* is to offer an analysis of the conditions under which such politically relevant, socially closed off, and deeply identified with groups emerge, and under which, on the other hand, boundaries remain ephemeral, inconsequential and blurred, thus not generating groups in any meaningful sociological sense of the term.

Second, throughout the chapters I refer to black–white relations in the USA as the prime example of hard, politicized boundaries associated with ‘thick’ group identities marked by inequality and discrimination. This is also how I explain the very high levels of racial homophily among African Americans in the Facebook study. I do not understand why Winant accuses me of ‘colour-blindness light’, of purging race from the analysis of the USA, of overlooking what boundaries enclose. It is rather surprising to see my position summarized as follows: ‘in order to achieve the requisite degree of analytical rigor, we must get race out of the picture. It may be “folk knowledge,” but it has no scientific relevance.’ The explicit, stated goal of the chapter on racial homophily was to disentangle it from other mechanisms, not to purge it out of the picture.

In the chapter on Switzerland, however, we found that in the eyes of the working-class neighborhood residents of the 1990s, hard boundaries separated Muslim, refugee newcomers (including ‘whites’ from former Yugoslavia or Turkey) from old-established residents of various origins – not white versus non-white. These were the social facts that we uncovered through ideographic inquiry and fieldwork. To argue that these forms of boundary making and exclusion are not primarily racist does not imply, as I state explicitly in the book, that they are in any moral or political sense ‘better’. Nor do we gain much analytical leverage when discovering a racist or racial component in every discourse and practice of exclusion around the world. Some forms of exclusion primarily take on racial forms, others don’t.

Third, to suggest, as I do in *Ethnic Boundary Making* (and as have many colleagues before), that race and ethnicity are similar kinds of social phenomena does not mean to ‘reduce race to ethnicity’. To say that lions and tigers and cats are all ‘cats’ does not mean to ‘reduce’ lions to cats. It simply means that there might be interesting commonalities and differences between lions and tigers and cats – and that studying them offers a usefully delimited field of inquiry quite different from studying other kinds of things, let us say roses and tulips and sunflowers (or gender and class, for that matter). If one prefers to define all racial, ethno-linguistic, ethno-religious (etc.) forms of categorization and inequality as subtypes of ‘race’ that would not make much of a theoretical difference. The reason why I use the term ‘ethnic’ as an overarching term is that ethnic forms of categorization are more frequent than racial ones in the world as a whole, as shown above. Omi and Winant’s definition of race is almost identical with mine: a form of classification centred on the idea that there are communities of descent marked by bodily difference. I would happily accept the criticism that my book does not offer much of an analysis of how the marking of bodily difference changes the dynamics of boundary making compared to, say, linguistic markers. And I would agree that from the point of view of those primarily interested in race in the US, this must be disappointing. The claim that the book “reduces” race to ethnicity, however, is not well founded.

Fourth, I also have a hard time understanding how Winant comes to the conclusion that I argue that spatial segregation along racial lines is unrelated to race or racial discrimination. Segregation is explicitly treated as the outcome of discrimination in section nine of chapter three. The one sentence that Winant quotes from the chapter on racial homophily suggests that such segregation produces additional racial homogeneity of social networks because individuals in hyper-segregated communities do not encounter many opportunities to make friendships across racial divides – this is quite obviously not the same as saying that racial segregation *itself* has nothing to do with race. Finally, I wonder about the motivation to open Winant’s essay by identifying my epistemological and methodological approach – nomothetism, positivism – as ‘complicit’ of racism, slavery, colonial exploitation, and so on, to be juxtaposed, at the end of his essay, to the explicitly politically engaged, emancipatory, hermeneutic, ‘good’ social science that Winant sees himself to exemplify. Such rhetoric of “guilty by association” (similar to the association with the enemy of racial progress, “color blindness”) is juicy indeed, and Winant undoubtedly masters this genre of subtle political denunciation brilliantly. But I wonder how much such rhetoric will help us in achieving a deeper understanding of racial processes. After all, aren’t “positive” data on the racial background of individuals necessary to measure racial disparities, and how can we understand why such disparities have persisted or changed without a good dose of “nomothetism”—of finding repeating patterns in such data?

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Notes

1. This conforms to what Wacquant (1997) has called a ‘logic of the trial’.
2. The prime policy tool to achieve greater home ownership among minorities and counter widespread loan discrimination was the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) of the 1970s, which was considerably strengthened in 1997. As Bhutta (2008) shows, areas newly covered by the CRA considerably increased sub-prime lending by banks before the crisis, and non-bank institutions who relied on CRA banks’ risk assessment then moved into these neighbourhoods to sell mortgages as well.
3. Surprisingly, Omi and Winant do not focus here on predatory lending targeting financially inexperienced minority communities (the core assumption behind the analysis of Rugh and Massey 2010; this is in line with Bonilla-Silva’s analysis). In fact, however, whites were around 5% less likely to have a home foreclosed than blacks, controlling for a range of factors, while Latinos were 13% *more* likely than blacks to lose their home (Rugh 2014).

4. Omi and Winant's theoretical architecture is the most open to change. Using Gramscian language, the racial order of the USA is described as the result of an ongoing struggle between reactionary and progressive 'racial projects'. The outcome of this struggle is, in this theoretical account, principally open, even if the empirical diagnosis points at the continued hegemony of reactionary agendas, as outlined above. There is no theoretical leverage, however, to understand why and under which conditions which kind of project wins over others.
5. In other parts of the book, however, the actors are very clearly defined historical figures and organizations (see e.g. 191f.), such as a group of business executives who decided on a new form of lobbying to unleash neo-liberalism, or a successive series of US presidents.

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