

## BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

**Burke, Meghan.** *Colorblind Racism*. Medford, MA, USA: Polity Press, 2019, 156 pages, paper (9781509524426)

**F**or many people in the United States, the election of Barack Obama signalled the country's arrival at a post-racial society, where differential treatment based on race or skin color no longer occurred. In *Colorblind Racism*, Meghan Burke takes a deep dive into the ideology underpinning such thinking – colorblindness, where people deny race and racism as a signifier of individual and group outcomes, thereby upholding race-based inequalities.

Following essential works such as Bonilla-Silva's (2004) "*Racism without Racists*" and Ruth Frankenburg's (1993) "*White Women, Race Matters*", colorblindness scholarship has blossomed into a core facet of race scholarship, a rather unsurprising occurrence given its recognition as "...the hegemonic U.S. racial ideology of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. (Omi and Winnant, 2009, 204). Simply searching the term "colorblind racism" on Google Scholar yields over 100,000 articles. Yet, as is the case with similarly prominent fields, the need arises for a book offering readers – especially those seeking an entry-point into the field – a somewhat "one-stop" learning experience. Such books act as a roadmap, guiding the reader through a concept's intellectual origins, critical works, key authors, and contemporary research developments. Delgado and Stefánic's (2010) *Critical Race Theory* fulfills this purpose for critical race studies, and *Colorblind Racism* can be regarded in the same vein, as Burke meticulously synthesizes decades worth of literature to produce a concise volume. *Colorblind Racism* is a short book (five chapters and 136 pages) – a point quickly acknowledged by the author herself. Nonetheless, its length belies the depth of knowledge covered, as the book provides readers with both an encyclopedic coverage of colorblindness scholarship to date, and a critical estimation of existing gaps for future research.

In Chapter 1, Burke defines colorblindness, in other words, as a willful ignorance about the continual significance of race and racism to individual and group outcomes. Proponents of this ideology, instead, favor rationales stressing equal opportunity for all groups and attribute the socioeconomic shortcomings of disadvantaged groups to chronic individual or cultural shortcomings. Moreover, Burke points readers

in the direction of the theoretical tenets of colorblindness scholarship, particularly the ideological frames derived by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003) – abstract liberalism, minimization of racism, naturalization and cultural racism – to identify and analyze the multidimensional manifestations of colorblindness

In Chapter 2, Burke traces colorblind racism's historical trajectory against the backdrop of race relations in the United States, detailing key developments in the shift from more overt forms of racism predicated on dubious scientific rationale. Burke also notes in this chapter that colorblindness is not entirely a post-civil rights era phenomenon. Its ideological roots were established before this period – moreover, the author asserts that colorblind logic has also been instrumental to the redaction of key features depicting the movement's attempts to highlight systemic racial inequality. This is reflected, for example, in language: the fact that the 'March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom' is now commonly paraphrased as "The March on Washington" is but one poignant example Burke cites of colorblindness in operation.

In Chapter 3, Burke highlights colorblindness' presence in a remarkable array of settings: from institutional contexts such as healthcare, immigration policy, social science research, politics, criminal justice, to popular rebuttals offered in opposition to viewpoints illuminating racism's continued salience and impact. Revealing colorblind ideology as central to the modus operandi of core institutions and the lingua franca of everyday conversations distressingly gives credence to critical race theorists who have posited the understanding of racism as steeped in a society's social fabric, an "ordinary" problem, or better-put by Delgado and Stefanic (2010) the "...usual way a society does business" (9).

Readers familiar with colorblind theory will be interested in the penultimate and final chapter, where Burke moves past the identification of colorblindness in divergent contexts and into more nuanced manifestations of the concept. In chapter 4, the "common sense" understanding of colorblindness as an enabler of race-based inequality is complicated by research on African American and immigrant communities adopting colorblind logics, thus showing how, as Burke asserts, "...colorblind ideologies and discourses are sometimes changed, in their expression or in their meaning, depending on the people using them or the social context where it is applied..." (78). That colorblindness represents a form of racism is not disputed here, however, regarding this as its sole underlying logic belies colorblindness' ideological and discursive instability, which is shown to be continuously shifting according to certain political and social motivations. Burke also makes abundantly clear in this chapter that the recognition of colorblindness

as the “new” racism need not detract attention from the resurgence of traditional forms of racism, a point worth noting in light of resurgent racist nationalist rhetoric in the last few years, for example, the 2017 Charlottesville ‘United the Right’ rally.

Chapter 5 begins with a call-to-action for researchers to remain committed to empirically grounded analyses of colorblindness. By doing so, nuanced manifestations of the ideology – like Hartmann *et al’s* (2014) study which teases out distinctions between colorblindness as an ideal as opposed to an ideology – can be uncovered to showcase the shifting nature of colorblindness logics in an ever-changing social environment. Burke critiques existing scholarship for its excessive affirmation of Bonilla-Silva’s theoretical frames, an occurrence which, on her account, has temporarily led the field into an intellectual cul-de-sac. One way out this supposed stalemate, Burke asserts, is a return to the materialist roots of colorblindness, the “...material realities (outcomes, disparities, experiences and more) that specific institutions and social settings help to create” (120) while mobilizing colorblindness. The book ends with a few suggestions on how modern racism (colorblindness being its most recent, stubborn manifestation) can be challenged.

A minor but noteworthy limitation of *Colorblind Racism* would be the sole focus on colorblindness from a U.S perspective, at the expense of accounts detailing its manifestation in other countries. France, for example, has historically prided itself on the “non-existence” of race, even going so far as removing the word from its constitution and omitting it as a measurable statistic in censuses. (Leonard, 2001). Providing cross-border perspectives of this sort could have benefitted the reader by underscoring colorblindness as an international phenomenon, enshrined in the socio-political landscape of other countries and shaping the lived realities of their inhabitants.

*Colorblind Racism* is a comprehensive detailing of this logic’s prominent role in reproducing structural racial inequality in the United States, thus making it a potential reading of interest for aspiring race scholars at all levels of post-secondary study across the social sciences. Moreover, the clarity with which Burke writes ensures that prospective readers in other areas of academic or professional expertise would find the book a relatively straightforward read. Complex concepts and ideas are explained with clear, accessible writing. Also, race scholars looking to provide students with a thorough introduction to colorblindness would do well to include this book in their respective syllabi. Including a set of discussion questions at the end of various sections certainly sets the tone for engaging classroom discussions and critical engagement with the book, as well as a means to develop a personal understanding of how

colorblindness may be identified, mobilized and challenged in one's personal life.

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