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Citation for published version

Song, Miri (2016) Can there be a truly systematic and comprehensive theory of race? Ethnic and Racial Studies . pp. 2303-2308. ISSN 0141-9870.

DOI

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Document Version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

Miri Song

Symposium on <u>The Racial Order</u>   (by Mustafa Emirbayer & Matthew Desmond, University of Chicago Press)

This is surely one of the boldest and most ambitious works on 'race' in the last several decades. In one of their first salvoes, the authors contend that there has never been 'a truly comprehensive and systematic theory of race'. Their main thesis is that: '… race studies have moved from analyses of how race works (as in Black Metropolis) to demonstrations that racial inequality or discrimination continue to exist… Much of our best work no longer tells us how to understand or reconstruct racial dynamics but simply gives us concrete proof of their continuing significance' (3). While there is acknowledgement that theorizing about the history of race in the US cannot simply be foisted upon the analysis of other societies, the authors insist (rightly, in my view) that '…it is incontrovertible that race today has certain global systemic features, with Anglo-European whiteness at its dominant pole and peoples of color in its dominated sector….' (57).

The ambitious sweep of this book, and its engagement with a foundational sociology, is inspiring. In their conclusion, the authors remind us that while the racial order in the United States is the object of their study, their aim is to understand how race works more generally in a variety of modern societies. Mustafa Emirbayer and Matthew Desmond succeed in this aim, and they have written a thoughtful and impressive book.

When the authors declare in this rather hefty book that theorizing on race has been stunted, in the plethora of empirical studies about the many ways in which race is implicated in our lives, I was immediately worried that I would have to wade through a staid, one-damn-thing-after-another review of how race has been theorized. However, the way in which the book unfolds is novel; and rather than being staid, it is

quite passionate and lively. The authors draw most heavily on Bourdieu, Dewey, and Durkheim, in their elaboration of the racial order. Unlike some theorizing on race and racial structures, which can be highly abstract, I was struck by the painstakingly careful and precise writing in this book, and their references to a variety of empirical studies, in the construction of their multi-layered argument.

As Emirbayer and Desmond suggest, it is important that we do not conceive of the racial order (whether in the US, or globally) in a polite, yet anemic manner in which all ethnic minority groups are deemed to have suffered from forms of racial denigration and domination in roughly similar ways (see Hollinger's critique 2005 of such a view). At the same time, the authors recognize the importance of breaking free of orthodoxies of thought, which are largely maintained by political considerations and stake-holders, and not academics and intellectuals who wish to advance both debate and understanding of how racial dynamics may persist.

Early on, the authors make a number of points worth noting, before they get to the heart of their thesis. While it is now almost drearily de rigeur to declare the importance of being 'reflexive' in our scholarship, Emirbayer and Desmond are adamant about the need to critically examine one's 'prenotions' that can distort our thinking about race. For instance, they laud the interventions by Brubaker and Wimmer on 'groupism' – though they also think that some revisionist scholars have gone too far in querying the lived realities of race and racial inequalities. Another important point with which I agree is that some authors or works have become convenient foils – but that the dismissal of certain authors or theories more often reveals a political agenda, as opposed to a genuine attempt to understand and evaluate it. It is true that one popular target has been Milton Gordon's book, Assimilation in American Life (1964), in which he is often (unfairly) attributed a rather simplistic elaboration of assimilation and of racial barriers.

To what extent does The Racial Order theoretically advance existing theorizing of race? One important advance is the emphasis upon the processual and dynamic nature of what the authors (and other scholars of race) call the 'racial structure'. Another important contribution – and a central plank in the book – is the way in which a wide variety of cultural and social phenomena is discussed and interwoven into the analysis. While it is not uncommon for ethnographers of race to devote a great deal of attention

to cultural processes and artifacts, it has been much less common in works theorizing the broader racial structure, or what the authors call 'the racial field'. The chapter on the social psychology of the racial order (one which engages with a psychoanalytical perspective on symbolic violence) is welcome, as this is not often examined by sociologists of race. Furthermore, the discussions of the 'intelligence of anger' and the 'intelligence of compassion' are stirring and bring a fresh perspective to the table.

According to the authors, especially in relation to the US, no key work on race has surpassed the influence of Michael Omi and Howard Winant's (1994) theorizing on racial formation and racial projects. But to allege a 'thinness' of theorizing on race by US scholars more generally may be a bit ungenerous. There has been considerable theoretical debate among US scholars about race and racism – much of which is not in the form of a major opus. For instance, in 2013, there was a special issue of *Ethnic and Racial Studies* devoted to a symposium on 'Rethinking Racial Formation Theory' edited by Joe Feagin and Sean Elias, in which Feagin and Elias engage in what they call a 'systemic racism' critique of theorizing on racial formation. And while Feagin's work may not constitute a comprehensive theory of race, as such, his studies have illuminated the processes and workings of so-called color blind racism – as has the work of David Wellman (1999) and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003) (whose theorizing is discussed mostly in the penultimate chapter on 'Race and Reconstruction').

The authors' privileging of 'the field of blackness' (90) as the paradigmatic case for understanding the racial order, while not unjustified, limits their aim to flesh out a more nuanced understanding of the so-called racial order. It would have been interesting to consider some theoretical interventions about the workings of a racial hierarchy, for instance Claire Jean Kim's (1999) discussion of how Asian Americans are racially 'triangulated' in relation to White Americans and African Americans.

In addition to their evident enthusiasm for social theory (some of which has probably not been discussed on the page in some years), another way in which this book stands out is that it is quite literary throughout, with references to a variety of artistic phenomena, including literatures, music, art, etc. (for instance see the discussion of the structure of collective emotions). However, some of the rich discussion in *The Racial Order* will be lost on those readers who are not well versed in social theory. I can't recall any books about 'race' which discuss such a wide range of

works which span the social science/humanities divide - Bakhtin, the novels of Faulkner and Baldwin, not to mention Aristotle.

But because the authors attempt to cover so much ground, and with so many layers of discussion, I sometimes lost the forest for the trees. There is a delicate balance in how the amount of detail can either enhance or detract from the elucidation of an argument. For instance, in the conclusion of chapter 4 ('The Dynamics of the Racial Order'), the discussion of Peirce's theory of signs (with the diagram on p. 181) and what the authors call a 'relational pragmatics', does not illuminate the broader argument at hand, and feels like a bit of an indulgent digression. And while the book is fluidly written, there are times when the nth reference to Bourdieu (typically a quote) to bolster a point the authors are making, feels like an unnecessary interruption – especially since they able to explicate their points perfectly clearly, without recourse to Bourdieu.

One gets the sense that, in comparison with their book *Racial Domination, Racial Progress* (2009), which was clearly aimed at a student readership, the authors were finally able to pack in all of the more abstruse theoretical discussions in this book, which they were unable to include in their prior book! Not being a social theorist, this wide-ranging discussion left me with the sense that I had better go back and read (or re-read) many of the scholars they discuss. Given the centrality of theoretical discussions and framing in this book, I wonder if their stated aim to develop 'a theoretical approach that is universalizing but not grand theoretical' (334) is a bit disingenuous!

Not surprisingly, there is acknowledgement that the racial order they elaborate undeniably intersects with many other fields of power and domination. At the same time, they note (early on in the book) that it is not possible to distinguish analytically in a neat fashion between race, ethnicity, and nationality. One could also add that the ways in which religious identifications and attachments combine with 'ethnic' or 'racial' dimensions of experience increasingly means that it is harder to isolate (and to distinguish) any one field, such as the racial field, in relation to others with which they meld.

One significant way in which The Racial Order does *not* translate well to the analysis of many European societies is that there is no discussion of Muslims, or of forms of what some would call Islamophobia, or even of religious intolerance. There is one reference to 'Islam' on p. 124. On the one hand, this omission is understandable because the majority of Muslims in the US are relatively privileged and highly educated, and much more 'integrated' than are, say, the vast majority of working class Pakistani or Bangladeshi Muslims in Britain, or Turkish Muslims in Germany or the Netherlands. Nevertheless, it is surprising that a book with such ambitions as The Racial Order (which purports to be of relevance to countries other than the US) does not at least provide a short discussion (somewhere) of how hostility toward 'A-rabs' (in US parlance) or Muslims more generally, which is manifest in various forms of racialized discourses, interactions, and policy deliberations, fits in relation to their overall argument. Scholars of migration, such as Nancy Foner (2015), have recently questioned whether Islam in Western Europe is like race in the US, and concludes that the Black/White racial divide in the US is less likely to blur or fade than the religious and cultural divide that marks out Muslims in many European societies (though a number of European scholars may disagree – see the work of Tariq Modood 2005, for one).

I recognize that no one book can cover every point worth debating, especially concerning a concept as fraught as 'race'. However, some more discussion about what, exactly, is meant by 'racism', would have been welcome, as this term is used throughout in a taken-for-granted fashion. The authors note that the importance of reflexivity '…. Is to uncover unconscious assumptions that produce blind spots in our thinking about race….' (23). In Britain (as in the US, and elsewhere), the indiscriminate use of the term 'racism', without specifying why particular interactions and/or phenomena are 'racist', both in academic writings and in media debates, has resulted in what Miles (1989) called the 'inflation' and hollowing out of this concept. As I've recently argued, the imprecise and off-hand use of the term racism has led to what I call a culture of racial equivalence in which a multitude of quite disparate scenarios and interactions are referred to as 'racist', and thus deemed equivalent (Song 2014).

This culture of racial equivalence has gradually emerged at a time when a more relativistic understanding of racism has been employed by some analysts to make sense of the often 'messy' and less than straightforward nature of many contemporary societal interactions. For instance, some postmodern analysts of racism, such as Rattansi (2007) have argued against the binary of 'racist' v. 'non-racist', and argued for a more nuanced and complex understanding of racial incidents and people, especially involving people's (often ambivalent and contradictory) beliefs and behaviors. According to this way of thinking, many people are neither racists or non-racists, but capable of a range of beliefs and behaviors. These are valuable insights, but this relativistic trend has made it increasingly difficulty to define racism (given its multiple manifestations and perpetrators), and to challenge erroneous charges of 'reverse racism'. A recognition of the ambivalence (and even possibly confusion!) people may experience about their racial selves would have enhanced the chapter on the social psychology of the racial order.

A critical appraisal of race scholarship in the early part of the 21st century is indeed crucial – not least because of the prevalence of 'color blind' discourses by seemingly well meaning, liberal, White people and the backlash against allegedly 'politically correct' posturing about ethnic and racial difference. What is to be done? In their discussion of racial reconstruction, I'm not convinced that a combined discussion of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism does justice to the many variants of each – not least in terms of what scholars in the these two camps prescribe in addressing inequality and recognition. But the authors' advocacy of 'racial democracy' is forceful and convincing. In closing, the authors will have come as close to writing a book which is a comprehensive and systematic theory of race as anyone has. But because 'race' and its many attendant parts is such a moving target, such a project will always be partial and in process, and will spur on other scholarly undertakings on race, both big and small.

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