

## EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

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# THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

## *Fall of the Postracial Myth and Stirrings of Renewed White Supremacy*

**Lawrence D. Bobo**

*Department of African and African American Studies and Department of Sociology,  
Harvard University*

Distinguished scholar and public intellectual Cornel West has characterized the 2016 U.S. Presidential election as a choice between a “neo-liberal disaster and a neo-fascist catastrophe.” For some, this characterization is unfair to the left and for others it is unfair to the right. I see it as an almost surgically precise analysis of the choices mainstream politics put before the nation in 2016. The clear majority of American voters opted for the neo-liberal disaster of seasoned national politician Hillary Rodham Clinton. As result of the Electoral College system, however, the keys to the White House went to Donald J. Trump, a newcomer to national politics, and standard-bearer for the neo-fascist catastrophe.

The thin margin of voters that decided the outcome of the Electoral College ballots, and thus of the election, leaves the door open to many possible accounts of “what happened.” It could be attributable to Russian meddling, FBI director James Comey’s decision to re-open the investigation into Clinton’s emails, media favoritism of Trump, sexism, a failure of messaging by the Clinton campaign, Clinton’s long-time high negative personal poll ratings, or some mix of all of these. Nonetheless, it seems fair to observe, as did *Washington Post* columnist Eugene Robinson (2017), that:

Clinton, with all her vast experience and proven ability, was defeated by Donald Trump, a reality-television star who had never before run for office, displayed near-total ignorance of the issues, broke every rule of political rhetoric, and was caught on videotape bragging of how he sexually assaulted random women by grabbing their crotches. That’s not just unlikely, it’s impossible. At least it should have been, according to everything we knew—or thought we knew—about politics.”

At some point we must recognize, at a minimum, that the Trump campaign’s combination of openly anti-minority rhetoric—demonizing both Mexican immigrants and Muslims while grossly stereotyping African Americans and bellowing the political

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code words “law and order” and “build that wall”—coupled with a strong economic appeal to working- and middle-class Americans secured a base of support that was sufficient to decide the outcome of this election. Whether that base is a durable political coalition and force in American politics is yet to be determined. But intellectual honesty at this point requires acknowledging that issues of race and the economy were major factors in the 2016 election (Bobo 2017).

Among the few things we can say with certainty, with Donald Trump in the White House and Republicans in firm control of both houses of Congress, is that the myth of postracialism has been tabled for now. The only folks pleased and cheering after Donald Trump’s multiple responses to the recent violence in Charlottesville, Virginia were White supremacists. As *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow (2017) put it: “Sometimes you simply have to call a thing a thing, and the thing here is that Trump’s inner racist is being revealed, and America’s not-so-silent racists are rising in applause.”

What would prompt a mainstream journalist writing for the premiere “establishment” news outlet to effectively label the President of the United States a racist? In short, the answer is Trump’s remarks and record over his comparatively brief time in office to this point. As Blow explained: “Donald Trump continues to say in every way possible that power and privilege in America is primarily the provenance of people who are white, male, Christian, and straight, and that all others should be targeted for denial, oppression, or removal,” (Blow 2017). To wit, Trump has argued for a ban on Muslim entry to the United States and advanced several largely aborted efforts to accomplish this end. His Department of Justice has announced an effort to try to re-ignite the fires of the War on Drugs and to shift Civil Rights Division resources toward investigating and suing universities for potential discrimination against Whites with their affirmative action admission policies. He pardoned Sheriff Joe Arpaio after his conviction for violating a court order prohibiting him from engaging in racial profiling. He then declared an end to the Obama era executive action on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, threatening the status of nearly a million registered participants in the program.

There is much external evidence to suggest that Trump’s campaign, and his early days of governing, have unleashed forces previously marginalized (and arguably shrinking in influence) in the United States. Perhaps the clearest and most troubling indicator involves the rise in both “hate groups” and hate crimes. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) reports a now back-to-back annual increase in the number of active hate groups, with the current level of 917 approaching that of the all-time high of 1018 seen in 2011 (Potok 2017). More strikingly, there were over a thousand hate crimes reported in the month following Trump’s election in 2016. As the SPLC report explained:

The hate was clearly tied directly to Trump’s victory. The highest count came on the first day after the election, with the number diminishing steadily after that. And more than a third of the incidents directly referenced either Trump, his “Make America Great Again” slogan, or his infamous remark about grabbing women by the genitals (Potok 2017).

The divisive character of the Trump campaign is implicated in the rise of hate crimes nationally in 2016 and what already appears to be a record pace for such crimes in 2017 (Mathias 2017).

As we witness the fall of the postracial narrative and the disturbing recrudescence of White supremacist rhetoric and groups, the need for the perspectives, theories,

data, and insights of social science scholarship on race grows ever more acute. Three of the articles in this issue of the *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* wrestle with questions of direct relevance to the most recent presidential election and the early days of the Trump presidency. Sociologists Kevin Drakulich, John Hagan, Devon Johnson, and Kevin H. Wozniak assess the impact that encounters with the criminal justice system, beliefs about police, and racial prejudice have on the levels of participation and support for Trump prior to the 2016 primary season. Their results show that support for Trump rests substantially on anti-Black prejudice, whether the contrast was with other Republican contenders or versus Hillary Clinton. Both anti-Black prejudice (positively) and a perception of police as racially biased (negatively) affected support for Trump versus Clinton. Notably, these effects emerge above and beyond socioeconomic status indicators, political ideology and party identification measures, and other ideological or value-based positions (e.g., a preference for limited role for government).

Political scientists Evelyn M. Simien and Sarah Cote Hampson examine the role gender affinity and gender identity may have played in the 2008 Democratic Presidential primary season. Their results point to critically important intersections of race, gender, and features of a specific political contest rather than to singular gender identity processes. Political scientists Logan Strother, Spencer Piston, and Thomas Ogorzalek use three different data sources to examine whether it is a sense of Southern cultural pride or anti-Black racial prejudice that undergirds support for flying the Confederate Battle Flag. Across all of the available data they find that anti-Black racial prejudice is far more important to how Whites think about the Confederate flag than is reverence for some putatively race-neutral southern heritage.

Racial inequality plays itself out well beyond politics and political debate, particularly in terms of the potential for segregation of neighborhoods and discrimination in the job market (Samson and Bobo, 2014). One critically important arena involves housing and residential mobility processes. Sociologists Maria Krysan, Courtney Carter, and Marieke van Londen provide data from an innovative survey in the city of Chicago on how Blacks, Whites, and Latinos think about desirable and undesirable neighborhoods, an indicator of tastes that bears on processes that may maintain or break down levels of racial residential segregation. On a more sanguine note they find that most respondents, across racial groups, do create integrated neighborhoods when called upon to describe their most desirable neighborhood. All groups show a tendency to prefer neighborhoods with substantial numbers of same-race neighbors. However, White respondents are the group most likely to create a neighborhood where they are in the majority and they prefer considerable distance from African Americans. Black respondents are among the most likely to create highly integrated neighborhoods. Krysan and colleagues point to the clear effects of an American racial hierarchy in accounting for these patterns.

It has often been observed that African Americans fare better in public sector employment, in part because enforcement of anti-discrimination measures has been more consistently and effectively applied there (Wilson 1980; 2011). Sociologists George Wilson and Vincent J. Roscigno examine how pressures under a neoliberalism regimen to make the government sector function more like the private business sector has had effects on the Black-White pay differential. Using data from the General Social Survey for 1992 through 2012 they examine the race differential in earnings returns to job authority for those working in the public sector. They find, as we move deeper and deeper into the era of neoliberal reform, the Black-White earnings return differential substantially widened.

The work of Krysan and colleagues and of Wilson and Roscigno suggest that there remain key structural underpinnings and social processes that maintain Black-White inequality. Thinking in such sociological terms about racial inequality varies considerably in the public at large. Jason Shelton takes up a novel examination of how more affluent Blacks and Whites go about explaining racial economic inequality. Pooling data across a large number of years from the General Social Survey he is able to gain leverage on the question of how high income and highly educated Blacks differ from less well-off co-ethnics as well as from White respondents. In general, his results suggest that income has a stronger and more consistent impact on how Whites think about racial inequality than it does for Blacks, but that in both cases those with higher earnings tend toward a more individualistic, less structural type of account for inequality. A higher level of education, particularly among African Americans, encourages more structural views of racial inequality.

One cannot focus on race relations in the United States without engaging the impact that immigration and demographic shifts in the composition of the population have had. Three articles in this issue of *Du Bois Review* speak to this aspect of the new ethno-racial landscape. Sociologist Abigail A. Sewell takes up the eminently practical question of what impact the push for multilingual public sector work forces has on monolingual English speakers, especially monolingual English-speaking African Americans. Her results from Oakland, California indicate that this well-intentioned policy is indeed having the effect of reducing the number of Blacks hired in public facing contact positions in local governments. Anthropologists and race relations researchers Angela Stuesse, Cheryl Staats, and Andrew Grant-Thomas provide a portrait of the landscape and potential best practices for building bridges between the Black community and immigrant communities. Sociologist Michelle D. Byng examines how second generation Muslim Americans think about issues of race and identity. She suggests that these Muslim immigrants are aware of a clear American racial hierarchy and think with some complexity about their place within it.

Three articles in this issues reinforce the importance of organizational environments and cultural resources in whether or not efforts at progressive racial reform and change ever fully take root. Sociologist Christi Smith provides a fascinating tracing of how an early, explicit, and central commitment to racial integration and an elaborate “anti-caste ideology” influenced the early years of Oberlin College, Berea College, and Howard University. The strongly progressive postures on race in the era of Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow, while initially enormously influential at each of the institutions of higher learning, eventually fell by the wayside. According to Smith’s careful archival work and analysis this was largely due to changing organizational environmental fields in which it became important to compete for different forms of status and different sources of support. In a much more contemporary but conceptually closely related piece, sociologists David Cunningham and Ashley Rondini examine efforts to implement the Mississippi Civil Rights/Human Rights Education law. This bill, passed by the Mississippi state legislature in 2006, was the first state-wide mandate for civil rights and human rights education in K – 12 public schools in the United States. Cunningham and Rondini show, however, the level of success at implementing a plan hinged importantly on prior local levels of civic organization, particularly local civil rights organizing in the past and the degree of prior organized White resistance to civil rights initiatives. Urban planning and public policy scholars Davia C. Downey and Laura Reese examine the fates of two largely Black cities hit by different types of disasters: a long, slow road to bankruptcy in the case of Detroit, MI and the sudden devastation of hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, LA. The intensive coverage, sympathetic response, and huge initial commitment of resources seemed

to open the door for a more fundamental realignment of trajectory for the city of New Orleans. Taking stock of the situation ten years after Katrina, however, these researchers find many ways in which the opportunities for improvement in both of these substantially Black metropolises were under resourced, sidetracked, or undercut.

Each of these articles thus underscores the multi-pronged and deeply socially embedded character of racial inequality and how even high level institutional mandates or opportunities for change can founder on the shoals of channeling, resistance, or blockage rooted in related contextual groups, organizations, and cultures (cf. Reskin 2012).

Two articles in this issue of *Du Bois Review* can be seen as examinations of situated cultural identities and practices. African Americanist scholar James R. Jones considers the case of how and, importantly why, Blacks working for U.S. Congress engage in a cultural practice he terms “the Black nod.” He suggests “the nod” takes on and expresses a deeper perspective, set of meanings, and shared understanding than are obvious from mere observation of the gesture itself. Sociologist Chandra Waring plumbs the identities and behavioral strategies of biracial individuals. She finds that they frequently see themselves as having a footing, or special “in” on both sides of the Black-White divide.

The research in this volume, whether historical or contemporary in focus, whether quantitative, archival and interpretative, or qualitative in method, reinforces the on-going power of socially constructed race and ethno-racial distinctions on our social world. The case for postracialism, at least strong varieties of it, were certainly pressed too hard, too soon. More distressing still is the sense in which the Trump era seems likely to re-open a veritable Pandora’s box of White supremacist stirrings. Scholarship that poses the tough questions, carries out the needed research, and then speaks with clarity on the import of the results in the arena of race and inequality is needed now more than ever.

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