

## Conjuring difference, concealing inequality: a brief tour of *Racecraft*

A Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*. New York: Verso, 2012

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The “social construction of race” is an oft-invoked academic truism. As a heuristic, the constructivist principle is at times assumed rather than demonstrated, exclaimed rather than put to work in the difficult task of showing *how*, by whom, under what conditions, and to what ends symbolic categories are made real in the lives of individuals and in the workings of institutions alike. The expression, nevertheless, offers a potent challenge to a visual economy that purports everyone “has” a race that can be read off of or in to the body. With their new book, Karen Fields and Barbara Fields (hereafter FF) take the reader back to first principles, revealing the many ways racial vision and division haunt social life in the United States. They insist that scholars, and survey researchers in particular, relinquish the idea of “race relations” that can be discerned by studying individuals’ attitudes about others. The question of how *others* are continuously made and re-made via custom, law, *and* scholarly suppositions is the focus of *Racecraft*. In this way, the text contributes to a vigorous re-evaluation of the role of sociology in inadvertently deepening static conceptions of groupness through our foundational concepts and methods.

“Racecraft,” the authors argue, is first and foremost an ongoing set of social practices that continuously misconstrue racism for race. The former is a function of power and inequality whereas the latter is purportedly grounded in biology and culture. By focusing on the inherent qualities of groups, whether residing in genes or values, the analyst loses sight of the larger context in which those differences are conjured in the first place. *Conjured*, because in the same way that witches need not exist for people to feel the effects of witchcraft, so too with race—genetic differences between racial groups need not actually exist for such claims to exercise political and social effects. *Racecraft* is the process by which scholarship and public discourse focuses on genes, IQ, or criminal propensity as explanations for patterns of hypertension, high school

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graduation, or racial profiling, respectively, mystifying the underlying power dynamics that produce group differences.

Consider the following example of mystification in lieu of explanation: In the wake of the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, one might describe events as “an unarmed teenager was shot because he was black.” Racecraft converts power into difference insofar as the young man’s race, his *being black*, is given agency—an ontology—thereby veiling the work of multiple forms of racism that led a law enforcement official to shoot this young man to death. The two Fields would remind us that Brown’s blackness did not pull the trigger, as the original formulation mistakenly asserts. Rather, deeply entrenched forms of ideological paranoia and institutional pathology, which routinely conflate blackness with criminality, ensured that officer Darren Wilson would treat Brown as a threat.

In a social context characterized by racecraft, causal relationships are typically stated incorrectly. Brown was not shot because he was black. *He is black because he was shot*. That is, race is the “result of the power of some people over others” (p. 170<sup>1</sup>). Too often, in the way scholars formulate questions and the way public discourse makes sense of social disparities, subjugation is posited as an inevitable outcome of inherent racial difference even when the historical record does not support it. Commenting on a different officer-involved shooting, FF echo Bonilla-Silva’s classic intervention (2009), reminding the reader that, “Racism did not require a racist. It required only that, in the split second before firing the fatal shot, the white officer entered the twilight zone of America’s racecraft” (p. 27). The life and death stakes of not simply demystifying but de-institutionalizing what we hold to be self-evident are nowhere more pronounced than in the pattern of officer-on-black violence that ricochets across the US social landscape with eerie regularity.

Although the text does not address this directly, positioning race as an independent variable in standard social science methodology can also be understood as a form of racecraft. The common practice of “controlling for race,” in an attempt to limit its impact on other variables, assumes racial differences produce outcomes rather than that they are the result of social processes. Paradoxically, then, social scientists have been some of the most ardent practitioners of racecraft, contributing to a “conceptual haze” that maintains the status quo. As one example of recent quantitative work that challenges this tendency, Saperstein and Penner (2008, 2012, 2013) draw on a sample of over 12,000 individuals and position race as a dependent variable. Their work reveals how individuals’ experiences have an impact on their racial classification. Incarceration or job loss, for example, demotes formerly “white”-identified individuals to “other,” in terms of their own sense of self and in the eyes of others. In this longitudinal analysis, they are not imprisoned or fired “because they are other,” rather they become “other” after these negative experiences. Like the arguments put forth in *Racecraft*, these results upend the theoretical assumptions that animate much sociological inquiry.

Social actors *acquire* what we *require* to make sense of what is happening around us (p. 206), bringing entities (witches and races) to life that appear to have no empirical grounding. Throughout the text, the authors critique scholarly and activist attempts to populate “multiracial identity,” arguing that while such a concept appears to broaden the social terrain and include previously excluded individuals, these efforts are better

<sup>1</sup> References to page numbers in this review are to Fields and Fields 2012, unless otherwise noted.

understood as “recycled racist fiction” (p. 69). Mixedness relies on an assumption of prior pure ancestry, which is untenable especially in the United States, given the high rates of African ancestry among white Americans and European ancestry among black Americans. Many so-called mono-racial individuals would “count” as multiracial, but of course, phenotypic judgments among other factors mediate who self-identifies and ascribes a mixed identity. For that reason, FF insist that although multiracial classifications “now reemerge in the costume of post-racial progressiveness, not to say a move towards ‘an ideal future of racelessness’, their origins are racist” (p. 57). Here again, the text compels social scientists to grapple with the underlying terrain that guides what and how we study the ideological basis of inequality.

By challenging the idea that societies that practice witchcraft and racecraft somehow lack rationality, the authors shift the epistemic and moral terrain that sustains a belief in witches and races. It is not “ignorance” that perpetuates racism, but a particular way of knowing, however inconsistent and malleable, that makes the existence of racial phenomena real. They explain that: “Far from denying the rationality of those who have accepted either belief as truth about the world, we assume it. We are interested in the processes of reasoning that manage to make both plausible” (p. 19). Critics often refer to the inconsistency of racial logics to emphasize “how ignorant” such beliefs are as the basis for why they should be dismissed. But this supposes that ideas and actions grounded in racial thinking are aberrant, rather than foundational to the social order. By placing racecraft within the realm of reason, the authors take the conceptual and practical battle to the citadel of western thought, rather than to the backwoods of marginal ideologues.

To appreciate the mutual constitution of racism and reason, consider the following example: In 1968 in the aftermath of hundreds of civil rights uprisings across the country, the US Supreme Court gave license to racial profiling practices in *Terry v. Ohio*. The Court stated that officers may base their decision to stop and search a suspect on “reasonable belief,” “reasonable grounds,” “reasonable fear,” and “reasonable danger”—where the subjective and racially skewed underpinnings of *reasonableness* is side-stepped throughout. A *particular way of knowing* on the part of an officer as to what is suspicious or threatening behavior (not the absence of knowledge, i.e., ignorance) is the foundation of institutionalized racism that forms the historical backdrop to the contemporary uprisings unfolding in Ferguson, Missouri and elsewhere. A liberal, multicultural framework that rests primarily on training society to become more tolerant is deficient insofar as it fails to directly address power inequities that produce “threatening others” who can be murdered with impunity by those tasked with upholding the law. Needless to say, officers who undergo “cultural competency” or “racial sensitivity” workshops continue to inhale the smog of racecraft once their training is complete.

The text offers many illustrations of the way that everyday practices animate beliefs. One of the most poignant can be found in chapter 8, where the authors stage an imaginary conversation between W. E. B. DuBois and Emile Durkheim, contemporaries whose intellectual foci, activist work, and personal struggles overlap in instructive ways, although the two never actually met. The imaginative interplay brings the reader to the “sobering conclusion that unreasonable divisions of humankind seem to be born from reason itself, not from its opposite” (p. 228). Indeed, it is the human capacity to form concepts—totemic conceptions of the Kangaroo clan in Durkheim’s

account—that is the foundation of racial thinking through which “special affinities and moral obligations” are enacted. An “abstract notion of common essence (kangaroo-ness)” intersects with the larger discussion of how racecraft makes race palpably real, in that kangaroo-ness is ritualized through everyday social practices and symbolic reminders that continuously *overthrow perception by conception* (p. 231). The authors caution that in contemporary studies of race, Durkheim’s work is often “reduced to glib formulas about the ‘social construction’ of ‘collective identities’”. As a result, we lose sight of the living subjects and active verbs by which Durkheim arrived at the hard-won victories of *Forms*” (p. 227). In short, focusing on the illusory nature of kangaroo-ness or Hispanic-ness is beside the point when the conception of difference is so thoroughly internalized and institutionalized.

Throughout the text, the authors forcefully contend with genomics research, showing how this relatively new field takes up the mantle of what they refer to as “bio-racism.” In tracing the promiscuous career of census categories, they discuss the fact that US taxpayer money was used “for research on something called the ‘Hispanic’ genome.” Researchers broke federal rules and crossed the “US border to pay subjects in Mexico for blood samples” (p. 48), setting the stage for the development of race-specific medicine that could be marketed specifically for Hispanics. Pointing out once again how conceptions of such processes are often backwards, FF argue that, “Visible things like segregated markets come into view as things done and imagined, yet are thought of as having natural causes” (p. 49). As I discuss elsewhere with respect to the global emergence of genomics (Benjamin 2009), proponents of the field are hard pressed to calibrate existing ethno-racial taxonomies with those derived through bioinformatics tools. New biopolitical entities are invoked by scientists and politicians alike, “Mexican DNA and Indian DNA” among others, in order to justify the erection of elaborate legal and institutional infrastructures for state investment in the new field.

*But why is race reinvigorated at this historical juncture as a set of biological classifications?* Following FF, it is not the case that “people simply do not know” that race is socially constructed. One of the primary engines of the geneticization of difference is that the global pharmaceutical industry has set out to corner “niche” ethnic markets to capitalize on increasing rates of chronic diseases that correspond to a rise in the standard of living in so-called emerging economies. Piercing through the haze of racecraft, wherein different races supposedly need tailored medicine, the analyst observes how global inequality, specifically the rabid expansion of the global pharmaceutical industry, generates an imperative on the part of national governments to protect against corporate pillage. A twofold strategy has emerged—crafting ethnically-specific DNA profiles and passing genomic sovereignty policies to penalize those who attempt to collect blood samples without permission. An inequitable context, both in terms of scientific agenda-setting and capital flows, animates a return to race as biological. Likewise, challenging this resurgence requires concerted attention towards these underlying forces, rather than abstractly insisting that, “race is socially constructed.”

With respect to their discussion of “bio-racism” and the insistence on that term early in the text, the authors appear intent on distinguishing *sound* versus *pseudo* science. The former escapes the bewitching logics of racecraft whereas the latter continues to rehash racist modes of classification and generalization. Discussing Nobel laureate James D. Watson’s pejorative comments about black people as unreliable employees

and Africa as a low IQ continent, the authors write: “That a scientist of his stature slipped into that half-light demonstrates the ease with which scientific and non-scientific thinking conflate in the minds of individuals” (p. 23). Throughout the text, the binary that FF inadvertently reinforce between “good” versus “bad” science is misleading and runs counter to a key argument about racial thinking as grounded in rationality. It is precisely the human propensity to form concepts that lends itself to racial abstractions, as they explain, but the authors nevertheless idealize an insulated realm of scientific rationality that is non-racial (p. 5). From this uncontaminated perch, individuals may tragically fall, like Watson, or tenuously remain, like geneticist Craig Venter, so long as they refute biologically-based racial classifications in their work. *But what of the larger institutional and economic structures that normalize and incentivize a return to race as a genetic category, beyond the moral failings or uprightness of individual scientists?*

This part of the discussion would be greatly strengthened by further engagement with science studies, which offers an understanding of genomics as a social enterprise—constituted through specific institutional structures, policies, and norms that vary according to the context in which the field is taking shape (Benjamin 2009; De Vries and Pepper 2012; Egorova 2010; Erasmus 2013; Fujimura et al. 2008; Fullwiley 2008; Schwartz-Marin and Restrepo 2013; Slabbert and Pepper 2010; Reardon 2004; TallBear 2013; Wade et al. 2014). Social scientists studying genomics reveal that some of the “best” scientists—published in top peer-reviewed journals and recipients of major grants—are energetically engaged in conceptualizing biological differences in racial terms, in part, to redress scientific and medical neglect of subordinate populations (Epstein 2007). FF’s focus on Watson, as a kind of fallen scientific hero who forsook good science, obscures how racecraft permeates genomics as part of a color-conscious *anti-racist* agenda (Bliss 2012). Here racial thinking is not only a “smog” or “haze” that people unwittingly inhale *despite* the facts, which is how most of the examples in the text frame the problem. Rather, racecraft is also strategically employed as a form of ventilation—one that esteemed scientists and lucrative companies knowingly produce *as fact*—in the process of revitalizing research agendas and intellectual property alike. Presenting this process as a lesser grade of science, as opposed to work-a-day science, can lead sociologists to overlook how well respected researchers are employing race as a genetic category in what is otherwise considered “good” work by conventional standards. For this reason, the binary, *sound* versus *pseudo* science, should be replaced with a porous conception of scientific practice where findings that both support and undermine racial thinking are understood as socially situated.

In the final pages of their book, the authors draw out the implications of their analysis of racecraft by discussing how, in the study and experience of inequality, notions of inherent difference based on phenotype or ancestry serve as a dangerous placeholder. Juxtaposing the chatter over President Obama’s ancestry and post-racial prognostications more broadly with the growing inequities in education, employment, housing, healthcare, and incarceration, the primary contribution of the text is made clear: In obscuring the relationship between power and difference, racecraft haunts our popular imagination, impoverishes our collective vocabulary, and distorts our scholarly suppositions. It “operates like a railroad switch, diverting a train from one track to another. [...] By crowding inequality off the public agenda, racecraft has stranded this country again and again over its history” (p. 289). In taking the reader on a superbly

curated tour of this nation's social terrain, Karen and Barbara Fields put our collective hand on the switch so that we may reorient analysis and activism, casting off the spell of race even as we marshal forces against the scourge of racism.

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