

Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror

Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, eds. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press. 1997. 680pp.

Scholars in the field of ethnic and racial studies throughout the English-speaking world have long operated under the assumption that race and ethnicity are terms which describe foreign, subaltern or minority groups. This has led to a paucity of work on ethnic and racial majority groups. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic's reader, *Critical White Studies*, represents an attempt to fill this void by highlighting the background against which the study of ethnic and racial "others" takes place.

The book, which is 680 pages long, consists of eleven thematic parts and 114 entries, mainly selections clipped from larger books or articles. Most of the selections are no more than several pages in length - the purpose of the work being to provide an overview of current developments in the field rather than a substantive analysis. Sections are followed by thematic reading lists and run as follows: How Whites See Themselves, How Whites See Others, Whiteness: History's Role, Whiteness: Law's Role, Whiteness: Culture's Role, White Privilege, The Ladder of Whiteness, The Color Line: Multiracial People and "Passing for White", Biology and Pseudoscience, White Consciousness - White Power, and What Then Shall We Do? A Role for Whites.

In approaching a volume of this size, one element the reviewer looks for is scholarly coherence. In the case of this work, unity is provided by Critical race theory, an approach which developed in the 1970s from neo-Marxist and post-structuralist wellsprings. Accordingly, this is a volume that operates from the premise that whiteness is a construct designed to confer political, economic and status advantages to its advocates. Constructivist interpretations of whiteness are given their grounding in the sections on history and law, the strongest parts of the book.

On the latter topic, Herbert Hovenkamp's account of the evolution of American jurisprudence on the race question is exemplary (pp. 199-208). The presence of contributions by historians of the stature of Reginald Horsman, Eric Foner and David Roediger ensure that the historical perspective on whiteness is also ably presented. Horsman, for instance, speaks of how mid-nineteenth century Anglo-Saxonism provided an ideological weapon which gave white Americans a sense of racial exclusivity and

legitimized American expansion to the south and west. (pp. 139-44) Roediger later provides a much-needed look at how the boundaries connoted by the label "white" in the United States, have only recently expanded to include southern and eastern European groups (pp. 402-5).

Sociologists will find the section on white power the most empirically interesting, while for pure reading pleasure, the literary sketches contained in the multiracial section are highly recommended. Discussion of Murray and Herrnstein's *The Bell Curve* in part nine offered enlightened debate on a highly-charged contemporary issue. Other parts of *Critical White Studies* are more problematic, but even in these chapters, some gems may be unearthed. For instance, possibly the best sociological contribution in the reader comes from the youthful pen of Charles Gallagher, whose gritty realism and grounded description of the nature of white identity struck me as particularly innovative. (pp. 6-11)

Gallagher's contribution nevertheless highlights a problem with this anthology: it does not adequately address the relationship between whiteness and the decline of white ethnicity. Gallagher's work addresses themes similar to those of Herbert Gans, Mary Waters, Richard Alba and Stanley Lieberson. These researchers have amassed an impressive body of empirical literature concerning the rise of white, or "Euro-American" identity. High rates of inter-ethnic marriage (a relatively recent development) have created this new "white American" ethnic category, whose culture and ontology urgently need mapping. However, in scanning the 680 pages of *Critical White Studies*, not a single selection appears from this literature.

The work is also light on anthropological and cultural studies material pertaining to white identity (contributions by Sacks and Gallagher notwithstanding). A clutch of fine material has recently appeared that examines latter-day white identity, especially as it relates to the sociological concept of lifestyle. On this note, the authors may wish to consult the reading list on the Organization for the Study of White American Culture website. The upshot of all this is that while *Critical White Studies* does an admirable job of tracing the lineaments of white power, it says next to nothing about white culture and identity. This has to be considered a major weakness of the anthology, a deficit less evident in Mike Hill's recent reader, *Whiteness*. Finally, the book's breadth of enquiry is useful for the introductory reader, but themes lack continuity and development, leaving

the specialist frustrated. Multiple passages that relate similar facts (i.e. 'one-drop' rule) or didactic positions (Noel Ignatiev's essays) only exacerbate the problem. Consequently, in an age of limited funding, this reviewer does not recommend that academics or post-graduate students acquire the book. That said, *Critical White Studies* belongs in every library as a specialist's reference and is a suitable reader for undergraduate courses.