

“White People in Trump’s America: A Field Guide”

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In this paper, I discuss what I see as the two major points of intellectual convergence (consensus is too strong a word) around the notions of white privilege and colorblindness. I elaborate on the intellectual and pedagogical utility of these concepts, acknowledging the virtues of their parsimonious and compelling explanations for the persistence and deepening of racial inequality in a post- discrimination society. I then turn to the limitations of these concepts as currently formulated, noting both their over-general nature and the lack of clear empirical support for the validity of the concepts. I conclude that what is needed is a rigorous theoretical framework for generating more accurate hypotheses and more accurate empirical research.

Accordingly, I make the modest proposal that boundary theory can serve as a model theoretical framework for a new generation of whiteness studies. I briefly explain the elements of this approach and I highlight recent research on whiteness that deploys boundary theory to press claims about the complex and contested nature of whiteness at different historical moments and in different national contexts.

In a second section of the paper, I draw on boundary theory to address current cultural and political dynamics among whites in the US. As a first step, I develop a hypothetical, highly simplified typology of whites, drawing on two variables to create four “ideal types” of whites (Weber 1978). I generalize about each of these four types, paying close attention to the lines of conflict and cooperation, both real and potential, that serve as sources of cohesion and contradiction among whites. Where possible, I identify sources of empirical support for selected hypotheses and I note where empirical evidence is either lacking or weak and offer suggestions about where it may be found.

The paper concludes with a series of observations about the different kinds of studies that can follow from the proposed agenda and why this research may have important implications for understanding the prospects for social change. I conclude that the core problem of whiteness and the major obstacle to racial justice is exactly the opposite of what whiteness studies has long assumed. White privilege is not shared by all whites and not all whites are blind to the color line. This variation in white attitudes and experiences sets up struggles between whites about the meanings of whiteness and race,

struggles that consume political energies that might otherwise be directed toward racial advancement of nonwhites.