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Colorblindness, Nativist Organizing, and the Discursive Construction of Latino/Latinas in the United States

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The 2008 election of Barack Obama was touted as a symbol of the United States' movement towards a colorblind society – a country in which race is no longer a barrier to historically marginalized populations. Yet, in the years after his election, there were record levels of hate groups organizing (increasing from 149 in the beginning of 2008 to 1274 in 2011) (Feldman & Weinberg, 2012) as well as hate crime activity targeting Latino/Latinas (Costantini, 2011). Furthermore, Latino/Latinas continue to be at a disadvantage in wealth accumulation (Lui, Robles, Leonar-Wright, Brewer, & Adamson, 2006), the criminal justice system (Rios, 2006), and other social institutions. At the same time, there has been a broad, collective movement in opposition to intellectualism, progressive reform, and civil rights for people of color and immigrants (Gonzalez, 2009; Bunch, 2010).

As this paradox shows, simply claiming to be “colorblind” does not eradicate the oppression and legacy of white supremacy in the United States. Rather, colorblindness is a new phase in America's “white racial frame” (Feagin, 2010), which argues that racism is no longer a factor in racial inequality and views inequity as caused by “nonracial dynamics” including economic processes, individual shortcomings, cultural differences, and personal preferences (Bonilla-Silva, 2009, p. 2). Employing an ideology of colorblindness, organizations such as the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps (MCDC), the nation's largest nativist movement organization, contribute to a culture intolerant of and inhospitable to Latino/Latinas via reproducing and camouflaging xenophobic definitions of citizenship.

This article provides an overview of the image the MCDC constructs of Latino/Latinas via the societal colorblind discourse. It further explores how this emergent discourse permits yet camouflages the continued denial of full citizenship for people of color in the United States.

Methodology

This research uses interviews, participant observation, and content analysis of movement documents to analyze the Minutemen construction of Latino/Latina migrants. I collected interview data over two years, beginning in the spring of 2008. Data include forty in-depth interviews, forty-five to ninety minutes in length, with active members in the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps. I supplemented interview data with participant observation at two “musters” (weekend border patrols) in Arizona and California where I interacted with an additional fifty members. Finally, I coded and analyzed every document authored by the movement organization on their website, www.minutemanhq.org.

Discursive Production of Latino/Latina Migrants

E(race)ure: Migrants as Lawbreakers

Colorblind ideology allows, and perhaps causes, activists to see themselves and migrants as beyond race. Thus, they define migrants according to legal status, which they attempt to divorce from racial meanings. For example, Rick, an auto salesman explains his work in the following manner:

I'm not here to judge you based on your race, color or creed. That's all based on your action and your action was that you came here illegally... It has nothing to do with where you came from or who you are – how good of a person you are or anything like that. It's the fact that you violated the law just to get here. You started out a criminal, really (Rick, 2008).

The Minutemen pride themselves on abiding by ‘the rule of law’, unlike the migrants who “violate the law just to get here” (Rick, 2008). This perspective allows activists to claim to focus on differences as constructed through legal status and their actions become contingent on their ability to lump together the extremely diverse assortment of migrants into a single category, disregarding race and nationality.

The Minutemen attempt to define Latino/Latinas by their lawful actions (a pattern also found by Lowe 1997 in the construction of Asian migrants). Furthermore, such a definition of citizenship allows nativists to dismiss accusations of racism, despite the historical, often violent, exclusion of people of color from U.S. society¹. This historical amnesia concerning race relations is a central part of the construction of colorblind subjects.

Migrants as Innately Dangerous

The MCDC further employs colorblind rhetoric while defining race through the construction of migrants as innately dangerous: like natural disasters and animals. Activists compare migrants to uncontrollable natural disasters, describing the work of the border patrol as a “monumental task of turning back the tidal wave of people entering our country illegally” and the entrance of immigrants as a “human flood breaching our Homeland Defense” (Minuteman Civil Defense Corps, 2008). Natural disasters also have devastating consequences for ‘innocent’ bystanders. In this manner, the MCDC use the established notion of citizen as ‘silent’ and ‘in need of protection’ to strengthen the connection between immigrant and natural disasters.

The metaphor of natural disaster is partnered by the Minutemen’s construction of immigrants as animalistic. A statement by a Minuteman, Jason, in his online field notes illustrates this as he discusses the behavior of immigrants and the danger they pose to local citizens stating: “In the Northwest when you are driving at night you have to be very careful you don’t run over a deer. Here on the border you have to be very vigilant that you don’t run over an illegal alien”. Such pairings make a direct connection between Mexicans and threats to innocent citizens while simultaneously dehumanizing immigrants.

¹ This colorblind tactic of reframing racial inequity as one surrounding the issue of legality is particularly telling given the racial disparities in the criminal justice system (Alexander 2010).

The frame of Mexicans-as-animals produces a metaphor of hunting – legitimating the activity of the Minutemen. Not only does the aforementioned Minuteman state that he plays a game of “hide and seek” with the Mexicans, but he does so after depicting them as animals. This is paired with repeated talk of “trails”, described as a migration route for migrant “stampedes, making migrants appear no different than deer, or any other hunted animal. While on the border, activists joke about “picking them off” as migrants came across and patrols consist of selecting an elevated spot and silently watching for movement in the brush, much like a hunter awaiting his prey.

In order to legitimate the metaphor of migrants as animals, the Minutemen employ a colorblind narrative to claim that they are not racist. However, as Santa Ana (2002) argues, the white supremacist legacy of the United States is rooted in similar analogies and by comparing migrants to animals, the Minutemen engage historical discourses used to legitimate racial hierarchies between categories of people and rationalize oppression.

Migrants as Perpetual Foreigners

The national rhetoric which overlays a history of white supremacy requires that people entering society assimilate to the dominant culture’s norms. However, the Minutemen’s construction of migrants makes their full acceptance as citizens impossible. Consider the statement by Chris, a Minuteman from the southwest, who explains why he gives his time to the MCDC:

In New Jersey, there isn’t a convenience store that isn’t owned by Indians... There is not a gas station that is not owned by Pakistanis... The traditional Mom and Pop stores that started with Mom, John, and Mary, who were there for 30 years, those are all gone. They’re all owned by people from another country now (Chris, 2008).

In this statement Chris demonstrates that America is not available to all. He speaks of the “Mom and Pop” stores owned by John and Mary and feels as if their character is lost now that the moms

and pops are of Indian descent. This indicates that, even when migrants culturally and professionally assimilate, they are still denied full status as American due to their race and national origin.

Conclusions

While the MCDC is only a single organization, this research presents insight into the nature and impact of colorblind discourse and how it contributes to the replication of power inequity in society. Specifically, it shows how colorblindness, when used by nativist organizations, reproduces white supremacy and social division through reframing and reinventing historically (faulty) biological framework of race with one based on perceived cultural divisions and hidden by the language of legality. This process, in turn, discursively prevents migrants from being seen as full citizens in the United States.

The Minutemen employ colorblind ideology to produce an image of migrants as innately dangerous (akin to natural disasters and wild animals) while cloaking the legacy of white supremacy upon which they draw through referring to people of color as embodied legal statuses. The construction of migrants in this manner perpetuates, in the words of Balibar and Wallerstein (1998), “a racist community” (p. 83). As mentioned, racial stories and racisms are constructed through discourses and representations of people of color to which stereotypes and values are imposed (Feagin, 2010; Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Balibar and Wallerstein, 1998). By constructing an image of migrants as innately dangerous and calling on historical metaphors of people of color as animalistic and lacking self-restraint, the MCDC uses colorblindness to create a new type of racist community in which the work of the Minutemen is presented as beyond race. This reinforces yet disguises the organization and state’s foundation on white supremacy through ignoring continued systemic oppression and producing space for social movement organizations

to claim colorblindness in the act of racial oppression. Furthermore, colorblindness allows activists (and broader society) to discursively camouflage the continued denial of people of color access to full citizenship.

Future research should examine if and how right-wing ideologies influence public policy and restricts the rights and responsibilities afforded to migrants as a result of this discursive production. Furthermore, the impact of right-wing ideologies on U.S. culture and climate, and how these perspectives affect the lived experience of migrant populations needs further exploration. Finally, research on the construction of indigenous Americans by right-wing activists could shine light on the nature of the perpetual foreigner construction.

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