

2013

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Recommended Citation

Embrick, David G.. 2013. "Review of *White Party, White Government: Race, Class, and U.S. Politics* by Joe R. Feagin." *Societies Without Borders* 8 (3): 391-393.

Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb/vol8/iss3/5>

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D. Embrick/ Societies Without Borders 8:3 (2013) 391-393

Book Review

White Party, White Government: Race, Class, and U.S. Politics

By

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Routledge

Written in time for the 2012 U.S. presidential election and with a critical eye, Feagin once again illuminates the systemic nature of race and class in our society, and more specifically in national politics. Feagin's central motivation in writing this book is to uncover and examine the elite white male oligarchical political system that has often worked against the interests of the majority of the population. What readers get from this book is a much more accurate historical overview of the racialized and classed politics that have helped to undermine real democracy in the US since its inception.

Much like some of Feagin's other books—*Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression* (2006) comes immediately to mind—this book is both historically thorough and uncanny in its exploration of what Feagin labels in Chapter 2 “our undemocratic political system.” According to Feagin, in order to really understand how politics work in the US, one must first understand that democracy in the US has largely been, and currently is a failure. That is, the US has never had a real democracy, at least real in the sense that a majority of the population has never had any major say on political decisions that affect their daily lives or US society, at large.

The book is straightforwardly written in a timeline, and well organized. In the first two chapters, Feagin sets up the theoretical and historical framework for understanding the complex relationship of race, class, politics, capitalism, and economics in the development of US democracy. Feagin adeptly draws upon his theory of “systemic racism” and the “white racial frame” to interpret a better understanding of the central viewpoints that most whites and especially white male elites choose to abide by in their interpretations and visions of American society. According to Feagin, the white racial frame partly explains the deeply entrenched inequalities of racism, classism, and sexism that have allowed American society to continue along its undemocratic trajectory. The next four chapters are rich in content and take the reader on a journey that uncovers the hidden dimensions of race and class from early US politics in Chapter 3 through the George Bush era in Chapter 6. I

D. Embrick/ Societies Without Borders 8:3 (2013) 391-393

personally was interested in Chapter 4's outline and explanation for the expansion and rise of the arch-conservative movement beginning in the late 50s as whites reacted to increased racial diversity by engaging in white flight from urban neighborhoods to segregated and racialized suburbs. Chapters 8 and 9 are devoted to the Obama Presidential campaign and presidency. Beyond outlining the sheer perfect storm that it took for Obama to become elected President of the United States—both acknowledging the election as a watershed moment in US history but also emphasizing the increased acceptance of overtly racial attacks on Obama—Feagin does an admirable job noting how the white racial frame allowed whites to accelerate their already overused mantra that we are indeed living in post-racial times. The book ends with an examination and discussion of the changing demographics in the US and what this means for our political and racial futures.

There is little not to like about this book—as I mentioned above it is certainly thorough in its aim to restore some historical accuracy to what has become our largely academic failure to shed light to truth, or perhaps the overwhelming push to maintain ignorance or denial of our racialized history by both conservatives and neo-liberals. Surprisingly, for all his thoroughness in capturing the insidiousness and pervasiveness of the racialized elite US political system, Feagin provides little discussion about the gendered nature of American government. One could argue that Feagin's "white racial frame" concept could be more aptly named "white male racial frame." Indeed, as Gale Bederman so noted in her book, *Manliness and Civilization*, for white elite males in the 19th and early 20th century, the reinforcement of white male power was brought about as a response to the perceived challenges to both their manhood as well as their whiteness.

In addition, although Feagin rightfully points to changing demographics (see Chapter 9) and the fear of the political white elite (males) in terms of what an increase in racial diversity would mean for maintaining the racial status quo, other scholars are not so quick to see the change. For example, George Yancey's (2003) work on the black/non-black divide and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's (2002) Latin Americanization thesis suggests that political and social construct of whiteness is both malleable and complex. Thus, as the Latino/a population in the US continues to grow, we might also see a growth in the "white" population as more and more Latino/as mark themselves as white, non-Hispanic. Further those who are able to pass as whites would no doubt side with politics that serve the best interests of whites, and help to maintain the current privileges of whiteness. This is not to disagree with Feagin's pointing to whites' fear of becoming the minority, but I do wonder what the future of race and politics in the US might hold for us should the anticipated, dramatic change in racial demographics not be so dramatic.

D. Embrick/ Societies Without Borders 8:3 (2013) 391-393

In summary, this book is a must read for students interested in whiteness studies, economics, international law, human rights, political sociology, Critical Race Theory, or race and ethnic relations, in general. And like many of the books that Feagin has written over the years, this one is both thought provoking and refreshingly needed.

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