

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Environmental Racism, and Sustainability: The Flint Water Crisis

If you ask most United States citizens what comes to mind when they hear the name of a city called Flint, their responses would likely reference the water crisis that poisoned the city residents with incredibly dangerous levels of lead; however, the details of this tragedy— and the structural forces that allowed it to happen— are not always openly discussed. Through the concepts of environmental racism, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's theory of color-blind racism, and sustainability, I will explore the Flint water crisis as a harrowing case study illustrating the effects of institutional racism when it comes to environmental degradation and exposure to dangerous substances. What were the structural forces that allowed the black residents of Flint not only to be exposed to extremely high levels of environmental threats but also not to be taken seriously by their government in a supposedly post-racial society? We will begin our look at the Flint water crisis by introducing Bonilla-Silva's theory of race and racism in order to understand the backdrop against which these shocking events of the Flint water crisis unfolded.

Bonilla-Silva argues that race is a ubiquitous force in the contemporary United States that cannot be detected using historical frameworks that only account for explicit acts of racism when he writes "Whether in banks, restaurants, school admissions, or housing transactions, the maintenance of white privilege is done in a way that defies facile racial readings. Hence, the contours of color-blind racism fit America's new racism quite well" (3). Bonilla-Silva suggests that a new racism exists in the United States, one that uses what he terms "color-blind racism" to maintain privilege for whites while appearing racially unbiased. Further, Bonilla-Silva contends that racism remains a force in all facets of United States culture, but functions below the surface

of what can be conceptualized as explicitly racist under the existing historical frameworks of racism.

Bonilla-Silva creates a paradigm for viewing race at the structural level that questions why racial disparities continue to exist between blacks and whites despite whites adamantly denying holding racist beliefs. He argues that in the same way that “Jim Crow racism served as the glue for defending a brutal and overt system of racial oppression in the pre-civil rights era, color-blind racism serves today as the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post-civil rights era” (Bonilla-Silva 3). Thus, Bonilla-Silva asserts that, while Jim Crow racism no longer exists in the form that it once did, a color-blind racism has taken its place in the United States. This color-blind racism functions to reinforce the hierarchical racial status quo without resorting to the overtly brutal tactics of Jim Crow racism.

Further, Bonilla-Silva asserts that, for whites, “racism is prejudice”; however, for people of color, racism is “systemic or institutionalized” (8). In making this distinction, Bonilla-Silva furthers his argument that race “is based on a materialist interpretation of racial matters and thus sees the views of actors as corresponding to their systemic location (Bonilla-Silva 7). Bonilla-Silva takes a position on race that more closely resembles the beliefs that people of color generally hold. Rather than isolating individual instances or actors, Bonilla-Silva’s framework allows for the visualization of entire systems of oppression that are ingrained within large institutions, showing individuals a macro-level perspective of race as opposed to one that focuses itself on micro-level interactions. Because white supremacy “became global and affected all societies where Europeans extended their reach” (9), Bonilla-Silva argues that “a society’s racial structure [is] *the totality of the social relations and practices that reinforce white privilege*”

(emphasis original, 9). Thus, he argues that the goal of taking on the project of studying racial structures is to “identify the particular social, economic, political, social control, and ideological mechanisms responsible for the reproduction of racial privilege in a society” (Bonilla-Silva 9). For Bonilla-Silva, the goal in establishing the existence of color-blind racism is to highlight the existence of systemic racism in the United States that does not depend on the explicitly racist beliefs of individual actors within the system.

In discussing racial ideology, Bonilla-Silva argues that whites create paradigms for viewing race to “explain and justify” the racial order, while people of color do so to subvert this established order (9). He elaborates that

Since actors racialized as ‘white’ — or as members of the dominant race— receive material benefits from the racial order, they struggle (or passively receive the manifold wages of whiteness) to maintain their privileges. In contrast, those defined as belonging to the subordinate race or races struggle to change the status quo (or become resigned to their position) ... [racial orders] exist because they benefit the dominant race” (Bonilla-Silva 9).

Here lies the crux of Bonilla-Silva’s argument: that whites will work to uphold and maintain their racial privilege over people of color, and that people of color will work to deconstruct the privileges that whites hold over them. Further, he comments that “whether actors express ‘resentment’ or ‘hostility’ toward minorities is largely irrelevant for the maintenance of white privilege” (Bonilla-Silva 8). Bonilla-Silva engagingly creates a paradigm for race that centers the existence of tangible structural benefits awarded to whites and disadvantages placed on people of

color on the basis of race rather than the individual attitudes of actors within the system. By shifting the focus from personal beliefs and values to structural impact, Bonilla-Silva's racial theory effectively collapses the distinctions that other theories attempt to draw out between those who are racist and those who are not. Regardless of the intentions of the individual actors, white privilege continues to exist and bring benefits to those who are seen as white. Now, we will move into discussing the nuances of the Flint water crisis and how Bonilla-Silva's racial theory helps to illuminate the ways in which racism is structural and institutional.

### **I: Before the Water Crisis**

The water crisis in Flint, Michigan begins long before the media coverage of the event. After World War II, automotive production plants in cities across the United States were able to stop producing supplies for war and return to the business of producing vehicles (Hammer 106). Flint, where General Motors began, was a booming city home to 200,000 people, many of whom were employed by the auto industry (Hammer 106). While once a thriving city full of industrial might, Flint is now a "story of job losses associated with deindustrialization and changes in the auto industry" with significant rates of job relocation for well-paying jobs and "increased concentration and economic isolation of the poor and jobless of all races trapped inside of Flint" (Hammer 107). Despite its initial incredible economic success, Flint has become a city in disrepair. What was once a prosperous community is now facing significant economic difficulties with the shrinking of employment opportunities from General Motors.

The backdrop of this history illustrates some of the struggles that individuals living in Flint are facing today. One of the biggest challenges that the city faces is poverty. With a significant lack of jobs, Flint's poverty rate has been steadily increasing over the last 30 years. In

1990, 30.6% of Flint residents lived at or below the poverty line. In 2009, that number had risen to 34.9%. By the year 2016, 40% of those living in Flint were living in poverty (Hammer 107). With a 23.2% unemployment rate in 2010 and almost half of the working population living in Flint reporting a work commute of 25 miles or more in 2016 (Hammer 107), it is clear that structural forces are present that increase the difficulty of everyday life for those living in Flint. In light of the increasing poverty rate and unemployment rates— which only account for short-term unemployment and do not take into consideration those who are unemployed but have quit looking for a job due to the hopelessness of the situation—, it is clear that there are some institutional-level systems at work that do not allow for some Flint residents to escape this cycle of poverty.

Hammer considers the shifting demographics of race in terms of the Flint population. He finds that the whites who had lived in Flint began to flee the city in search of somewhere more dependable to raise their families when the city's economic fortune began to decline (Hammer 107). Flint's white population had been migrating out of the city since 1960. By contrast, the black population had increased every year until 2010, and only then began declining (Hammer 107). The racial demographics of Flint, Michigan today are about 57% black and 38% white (Hammer 107). Conditions such as poverty, unemployment, and extremely long work commutes for those who manage to find jobs are some of the challenges that Flint residents are up against in the struggle to sustain themselves and their families.

The overall trend of whites moving out of Flint in large numbers approximately 50 years before blacks were able to is an engaging phenomenon that illustrates what happens when a city begins to suffer economically. The white residents of Flint had the ability to move away from the

“sinking ship” of the city to the suburbs, where they would experience fewer job shortages and lower levels of poverty. On the other hand, black residents were not always able to do so. Hammer points out that the black residents of Flint were often more dependent on public transportation within the city because most did not have the use of a car at their disposal (107). One way in which this further disadvantages people of color in the city is that public transit typically includes the city but does not extend out into the suburbs. Hammer argues that public transportation only serves “the urban core with little access to suburban spaces” (Hammer 107). For those who call Flint home and who do not have access to a vehicle, meeting the basic needs of their family can be difficult. Finding a way to get to work, grocery stores, shopping centers, pharmacies, and more can be incredibly difficult, if not impossible (Hammer 107).

There is not a set of legislation that requires that people of color stay living in specific areas; however, structural forces that oppress individuals tend to work most heavily on those who belong to marginalized groups. The systemic nature of racism functioned in a way that allowed whites the privilege to leave the city to escape poverty and harmful environmental exposure but did not afford the black residents of Flint the same privileges. Thus, people of color in this system most often find themselves oppressed by forces that are far beyond their control. The systemic racism experienced by Flint citizens speaks to Bonilla-Silva's concept of racial structure. The racial structure benefitting whites allows them the opportunity to move out of impoverished areas while people of color do not receive these same opportunities.

To further his examination of structural racism, Hammer discusses how Flint receives city funding. Flint has three primary sources of funding available: property taxes, income taxes, and revenue sharing (Hammer 108). He finds that, in all three areas of allocations, the state

reduced city funding by about 33% between the fiscal year 2006 and the fiscal year 2012 (Hammer 108). Cities in economic distress often see an increase in a phenomenon referred to as “housing vacancy,” wherein individuals abandon their homes without a new renter or owner in search of a better living situation. Flint saw an increase in housing vacancy from 8.2% in 1990 to 21.1% in 2010 (Hammer 108). Housing vacancy is a critical factor for cities because abandoned homes reduce funds that the city is able to collect property taxes on and while also reducing the property value of the homes that are in the nearby vicinity. The city loses money on property tax value, but housing vacancy often also results in cities having to expend more funds to maintain and protect the people who still live nearby due to increases in crime related to housing vacancy (Hammer 108).

In light of the many financial difficulties coming to bear on Flint, the state of Michigan used these economic crises as a justification for implementing legislation that allowed them to hire Emergency Managers (Hammer 109). Emergency Managers were tasked with balancing the city budget regardless of the consequences to human health and wellbeing. Given this power under Public Act 4, Emergency Managers were able to override all democratic systems and were not elected, so they did not have any official accountability to the residents of Flint as appointed officials (Hammer 109). Despite the fact that all citizens residing within the state were supposed to have an equal probability of being presided over by an Emergency Manager, “some estimate that more than half of all the African Americans in Michigan have been under emergency management versus only about 2% of whites” (Johnson et al. 217). While one might expect that the legislation would affect everyone equally regardless of race, it is clear that there is a sizable

racial disparity that exists between which groups of people had an Emergency Manager put into power in their area and which groups did not.

Flint residents, unhappy with the existing legislation and acutely aware of the potential for harmful impacts on them as predominantly people of color, decided to take action. Those most closely impacted by the water crisis knew from their experiences that there was a problem, but officials refused to listen. Environmental risk assessments failed to take into consideration the consequences that Flint residents would face (Checker 2007: 112). Further, Checker's 2002 piece framing the environmental justice struggle within prior social justice movements illuminates the way in which sustainability and racism intersect (95). The ensuing political action and mobilizations lead to the repeal of Public Act 4, but a mere few weeks later, the Flint governing body passed another version of Public Act 4 called Public Act 436 (Hammer 105). This new version of the legislation not only allowed for the installment of Emergency Managers, but also made it so that the legislation could not be challenged and thereby repealed by public referendum (Hammer 105). In effect, "Michiganders got the very law they had successfully repealed through grassroots community action re-imposed upon them," despite their initial success at repealing the legislation through mobilization and advocacy (Hammer 105). This new piece of legislation meant that the people of Flint were unwillingly ruled by an undemocratic government that was solely concerned about finances and did not have the interests of the Flint citizens in mind (Hammer 113).

Michigan exacerbated the economic difficulties in Flint by supporting the alleged need for Emergency Managers, even though the citizens of the city had made their voices heard and successfully repealed the legislation allowing for the existence of Emergency Managers. The

justification of “Emergency Management and fiscal austerity is that people like the residents of Flint cannot govern themselves” (Hammer 113). Since Flint residents were portrayed as a group of people unable to effectively govern themselves, this idea allowed for the construction of the narrative that Flint was helpless and needed saving (Johnson et al. 218). Because of the racialized aspects at work in Flint, this “help” often took the form of non-local legislators feeling compelled to assume control in an effort to “fix” the problems of the “broken” city. These types of responses often do not allow the local individuals with experiential knowledge of local issues to have a voice in the solutions to the problems that they face. Despite the fact that these processes are not explicitly racialized, race influences them clearly when the power dynamics result in white legislators holding the political authority to make decisions for large populations of people of color who live in poverty. While these processes are not explicitly racialized, the power dynamics at work tend to lead to whites wielding the power to make decisions for cities with large populations of impoverished people of color. Thus, the Emergency Management systems operate under what Bonilla-Silva would identify as color-blind racism.

## **II: A City Under Water Crisis**

Since 1967, Flint had been purchasing water that was pretreated and ready to drink wholesale from the Detroit Water and Sewage Department (DWSD). Flint had its own Water Treatment Plant (WTP) that was used only as an alternate system in the event that the city needed it. Flint had three choices for providing water to the city: continue purchasing water from DWSD, purchase less water from DWSD and supplement with treated water from the Flint River in the WTP (with upgrades to WTP), and cease partnership with DWSD and partner with newly-established Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA) for untreated water that would be treated

entirely at the upgraded WTP (Hammer 111). Ed Kurtz, the Emergency Manager during this time, decided to go against the recommendations of the engineering firm that the city treasury commissioned by commissioning a biased study of his own. Kurtz used those skewed results to take the first two options off the table, leaving only the KWA alternative. Kurtz upheld this decision even after DWSD offered Flint reduced wholesale rates for purchasing water (Hammer 111).

This series of actions resulted in the Flint water crisis, as the city was not ready to move to KWA water and so was forced to use water from the Flint River. A significant problem with using water from the Flint River is that the water was low-quality due to pollution dumping from industries operating without regulation (Masten et al. 23). The low quality of the water and lack of training for the staff members combined to produce significant variability in water outputs (Masten et al. 28). Additionally, the water from the river was extremely corrosive, and Flint officials did not treat it with an anti-corrosion agent (Hammer 114). Corrosive water coming through pipes made of lead caused the heightened levels of lead in the water that Flint residents used for drinking, bathing, and cooking. Some demonstrated effects of the presence of lead in the body are “reduced IQ, increased impulsivity and violence, and epigenetic effects in grandchildren” (Johnson et al. 216). Children and grandchildren born to women who were exposed to lead poisoning tend to have higher predispositions to the illnesses that lead poisoning can cause. Maloney et al. argue that “of great concern is that environmentally-induced epigenetic lesions [such as lead] may be passed across generations, leading to familial predisposition to neuropsychiatric disorders (Maloney et al. 127). Since people of color are disproportionately exposed to environmental harm, the effects of these harms throughout the next generations also

disproportionately impact children born to families of color. Thus, the policies of environmental racism and Bonilla-Silva's color-blind racism not only directly harm those alive today who come from marginalized racial identities, but also have a direct impact on the next generations of their children. In this way, children of color are placed at a structural disadvantage long before their birth.

Kurtz' decisions indicate that he valued his agenda over the health and wellbeing of Flint residents, who were predominantly people of color who come from a low-income background. In making choices that uphold the racial status quo, Kurtz engaged in actions that fit within Bonilla-Silva's theory of color-blind racism. Kurtz reinforced white privilege while putting people of color at a massive health and safety risk. Those exposed to the water contaminated with lead and bacteria, while feeling adverse effects, were unable to exert the political power necessary to reverse the decision. Once again, people of color were structurally disadvantaged and silenced by the institutions that are tasked with protecting them.

### **III: Social Justice and Sustainability**

The Brundtland Commission offers a commonly-cited definition of sustainability as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." It especially considers "the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given" (Brundtland Commission). In discussing the concept of sustainability as it relates to various groups of people, S.C. Hackett remarks that ecologists and others who subscribe to a traditional notion of sustainability tend to view it as "premised on the integrity of the ecosystems that provide the basis for life on earth" (324). By contrast, social scientists recognize the importance of maintaining the ecosystem but also focus

on social justice, democracy, the economy, work opportunities, and empowerment as other vital components to sustainability (Hackett 324). It is clear that Hackett supports the notion that sustainability as a project must also include social factors. They argue for a definition that discusses sustainability as

a community's control and prudent use of all [five] forms of capital—nature's capital, human capital, human-created capital, social capital, and cultural capital—to ensure, to the degree possible, that present and future generations can attain a high degree of economic security and achieve democracy while maintaining the integrity of the ecological systems upon which all life and production depends. (Hackett 330)

I find Hackett's definition of sustainability to be the most engaging and useful because it encompasses the broadest conception of sustainability while also identifying and expanding upon the various forms of capital that create a sustainable society.

Johnson et al. critique the ways in which media representations of the Flint water crisis contributed to and influenced the systemic nature of racial narratives. The media portrayed Flint as a helpless city that could not govern itself, which reinscribes the narratives that depicted Flint residents as passive victims of institutional racism who did not have agency (Johnson et al. 217). Despite this one-dimensional narrative of the Flint water crisis, the authors argue that the black residents of Flint began mobilizing long before the water crisis reached the level of becoming a crisis, and that such biased portrayals do not give Flint locals the credit they deserve for resisting the political decisions that lead to these changes (Johnson et al. 216). Further, these narratives do

not show the ways that Flint residents managed to find creative solutions to these problems long before the media arrived. For example, groups of volunteers in Flint joined forces to distribute bottled water as early as 2013, while media coverage of the crisis did not begin until early 2016 (Johnson et al. 217). Furthermore, residents expressed frustration that the media coverage of the water crisis was biased toward showing whites who were actively working toward solutions next to blacks who were portrayed as passive victims of the situation (Johnson et al. 216). These biased portrayals of whites as active and blacks as passive in the aftermath of the crisis are detrimental to people of color because they serve to reinforce the existing cultural conceptions of people of color as helpless victims waiting to be saved by whites. These narratives also function to privilege whites as those with the agency and power to make change and challenge destructive institutions.

Using Bonilla-Silva's theory of race and color-blind racism, it is possible to see the ways in which the Flint water crisis was created and exacerbated by structural oppression in combination with governmental actions and inaction. Such decisions are connected to race because they are influenced by the demographics of those who bear the brunt of their consequences. It is vital to consider the variety of ways in which color-blind racism reinforces white privilege while further marginalizing the voices and perspectives of people of color, especially when dealing with a tragedy that most directly impacts a community of individuals who have been marginalized and oppressed because of their race. Through the lens of color-blind racism, it is clear that racism as a cultural phenomenon in the United States has changed, but still has acute effects on marginalized populations today.

Examining the Flint water crisis through the lens of Hackett's discussion of the competing conceptualizations of sustainability as it relates to various groups of people proves to be productive in a few ways. The ecologists who conceptualize sustainability as something that is "premised on the integrity of the ecosystems that provide the basis for life on earth" (324) would look at the Flint water crisis as an issue of environmental harm. They would probably cite the unregulated pollution dumping in the water from the Flint River as a significant contributor to the crisis in that it eliminated the possibility that the water could be effectively treated at the WTP before being transported into the homes of Flint residents. Flint residents being exposed to toxic water thus live "downstream" and bear the brunt of these harms (Tartar 221). They would most likely also be inclined to discuss the long-term effects of environmental degradation on the ecosystem of Flint overall. While this perspective is valid and vital to an understanding of the overall effects of pollution and environmental harms, there are other social factors that have and continue to impact the outcomes of the Flint water crisis.

What the environmentalist approach can miss are the ways that social justice issues impact the outcomes of the Flint water crisis. Those who take a social scientist perspective recognize the importance of maintaining the ecosystem, but also focus on social justice, democracy, the economy, work opportunities, and empowerment as other key components to sustainability (Hackett 324). In Flint, the increasing levels of unemployment and housing vacancy in addition to the cuts in state funding undoubtedly affected the economic problems that contributed to the installment of Emergency Managers. These managers thereby instituted racialized policies and practices that disproportionately affected people of color who were living in the state of Michigan during this time. The perspective of social scientists on the Flint water

crisis provides a holistic view of sustainability and harm that takes into account the human toll of the policies and events that took place in Flint.

Through the Flint water crisis, we can see the ways that different paradigms of sustainability interact with institutional and environmental racism in addition to issues of social justice. Taking an approach rooted in sustainability for scholars of environmental racism is a worthwhile endeavor, but true sustainability depends on social and environmental justice and requires researchers to work together in ways that bridge the gaps between traditional sustainability and issues of social justice. Access to clean drinking water is vital for the health of all people, both locally and on a global scale (Dakubo 56). Thus, the Flint water crisis is a harrowing example of the dangers of institutional racism, environmental racism, and issues of sustainability.

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