

## BOOK REVIEW WITH A FOCUS

**Diane Carpenter Emling, *Institutional racism and restorative justice: Oppression and privilege in America*. New York and London: Routledge, 2020, 137 pp., ISBN: 978-0-367-35566-1 (hbk), ISBN 978-0-367-34435-1 (pbk), ISBN 978-0-429-34029.1 (ebk).**

America has a history of extreme racism, which reforms in the twentieth century have alleviated but not eradicated. Before rushing to judgment, however, people elsewhere would do well to look at how people who are different in their own countries are treated, both now and in past centuries: Jews, Roma, Algerians, Turks and others. Diane Emling lists ways in which racism in America has existed and still exists, ranging from the almost accidental way in which '[s]eemingly neutral policies ... administered by whites who have no racist intent continue to benefit whites' (36) to the discrimination formerly enshrined in law and organised violence and lynchings.

The book has specific aims, as the author makes clear: it is an introduction, 'the book I wish I had had during my 30-year career teaching sociology' (xv). It is focused on Blacks (a term she adopts for simplicity) in the USA and not Jews, Hispanic/Latinos or Native Americans. Readers should note that the 'restorative justice' of the title does not indicate the common meaning of a process in which 'victims' and 'offenders' meet, guided by a facilitator, to express feelings, ask questions and possibly give or receive reparation or apologies. The author takes the words in their everyday meaning: making things right and restoring (or improving) fairness.

Emling begins by describing racism, albeit without specifying what can make it 'institutional' rather than, say, endemic or embedded. I take the phrase to mean racism that is prevalent in an institution or a sector of society whose leaders or managers practise it or take no effective measures to eradicate it. At its worst, it is not merely ignored or tolerated but actively imposed, as when Southern states made it illegal to teach slaves to read and write, or, after abolition, established segregated schools. She makes an interesting distinction between acculturation, which means adopting the customs and attitudes of the majority, running businesses, owning homes, speaking English without a foreign accent, and so on, as compared with assimilation, which does not necessarily follow acculturation if the person or group is visibly different from the majority. Assimilation means being accepted as equal, and this is commonly denied to Blacks. Emling notes the 'silent W': for example, Black Entertainment Television is called BET in America, but they do not have White Entertainment Television – the 'W' is silent. With regard to immigration and the 'American dream', she points out that many members of the Black population have much longer ancestral roots in the country than most Whites, whom she describes as 'voluntary immigrants'. Many of these retained their native language, especially German, long after arriving.

The next six chapters examine racism in specific sectors of society: land, housing, education, health, social well-being and employment, and criminal

justice. A few examples will provide the flavour of these accounts. From 1800 to 1912, Homestead Acts gave White settlers millions of acres of land (which as we know had been taken from Native Americans) with the support of the US military. On several occasions White rioting mobs burned down entire Black residential communities, and police protection was absent. Black neighbourhoods were 'redlined' by banks, making it harder to get bank loans and insurance, and making Black homeowners vulnerable to foreclosure and bankruptcy, especially in the subprime mortgage scandal of 2006-2009. The lack of a national health service in America is notorious, but worse still were the shocking unethical experiments in Tuskegee, from 1932 to 1972, on Black men with syphilis, who were denied treatment and not told of their condition. Black women were given a contraceptive called Dopa-Provera without being told of its serious side effects. This programme, for a time funded by Melinda Gates, has given rise to suspicion that it was an experiment in eugenics. Young Blacks are nine times more likely to be killed by the police, and 60 per cent of the prison population is made up of people of colour.

What comes across is the pervasiveness of racism: it leads to unemployment or low wages, which lead to poorer housing, schools and hospitals. Racist policing leads to unjust law enforcement, more crime and periodic riots – the list goes on. But listing the injustices clarifies what needs to be done to put them right.

Emling mentions, but does not highlight, some individuals who have struggled against racism, mostly, to their great credit, non-violently, but it is surprising to find no mention of heroes such as Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, Mohammed Ali, and Martin Luther King Jr., to mention a few internationally known names. Nor does she emphasise the part played by the (mainly White) legislators who passed crucial laws such as the Social Security Act of 1935 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, or the Supreme Court justices who applied them. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is mentioned, but not the American Civil Liberties Union.

The book has two distinguishing features. Emling does not merely catalogue injustices linked to racism, but each chapter provides a 'restorative justice' section, proposing reforms. Some of these are race oriented, while others are measures that ought to be part of the infrastructure of any modern democracy. The longest list is in the criminal justice chapter. Restorative justice in its more usual sense could well be included, or perhaps something modelled on a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Secondly, there are four appendices. The first suggests a Scholastic Aptitude Test with multiple-choice questions and answers on American history and culture, relevant to Black people's experiences. The second is designed to show how procedures for admissions to college might fail to offer a place to capable Black students who scored less than their White counterparts on some relevant criteria. Thirdly, some sociological theories are outlined – perhaps too much to attempt within eight pages. Emling accepts that her analysis could be regarded as cautious or revolutionary, calling for 'a true workers' movement' (115) but concedes that government 'can (sometimes) be dragged to take moderately progressive action where there is no option not to' (115). Finally, there is a useful

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timeline of key events, from the first permanent English settlement in 1607 and the first African slave sale in 1619, to the failure to desegregate more than 1,200 schools in 2011-2012 (data from 2019), including significant legislation and Supreme Court cases. There is also a lengthy bibliography and an index.

This book would serve as a useful teaching tool for American students, but also your (White, English) reviewer learned from it and found much to reflect on in his own country, from the persecution of Jews in the Middle Ages to almost daily reports of racist incidents and a recent official report whose statement that ‘the Review found no evidence of systemic or institutional racism’<sup>1</sup> was widely criticised. It would be helpful if each country produced a comparable book on the treatment of racial minorities (or even in some cases an ethnically different majority), with recommendations – and included it in the syllabus for history and sociology.

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1 Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities in the UK (2021). *Report*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-report-of-the-commission-on-race-and-ethnic-disparities>. The report of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities - GOV.UK ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)) (last accessed 18 October 2021).

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