Karen E. FIELDS and Barbara J. FIELDS, *Racecraft. The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London & New York: Verso Books, 2012)

RACECRAFT IS A COLLECTION of essays by two sisters, the historian Barbara Fields and the sociologist Karen Fields, which largely consists of previously-published materials going back as far as 1989. This kind of patchwork is not without its perils. Pressing varied articles, written at different times by different authors for different purposes and in response to different debates, into the service of a coherent argument is not easy. The chapters do not all contribute equally or clearly to the architecture of an overarching claim. And repetition is always a danger: the doggerel that President Eisenhower was "the sleepy conservative who launched the Civil Rights movement" appears three times in this book.

The biggest drawback to a collection that spans nearly a quarter century is that few of its claims are new anymore, and they thus lack the punch their authors seem to believe they deliver. Ironically, this is due in no small measure to the impact that their work—especially that of Barbara Fields—has already had on how scholars think about history and racism. Thanks to her research, we have already been exposed to—and at least in the case of this critic, persuaded by—the claim, for example, that the structural oppression of slavery gave rise to the inferior racial status of African Americans, rather than their "natural," ostensibly racial properties leading to their perpetual enslavement.

Similarly, the other leading arguments in this volume are familiar ones by now, at least to sociologists conversant in the literature on race in the United States, which is the book's focus. The conceptual centerpiece of "racecraft"—which includes "the English suffix *–craft* […] for we need the component of socially ratified *making* or *doing* and its companion, the socially ratified *belief* that travels before and after it, as input and as output" (203)—bears more than a passing resemblance to the widespread notion of "the social construction of race," even though the authors are surprisingly scornful of the latter. What the authors unveil as "the great evasion of American historical literature, as of American history itself" (96)—namely, the observation that "[d]isguised as race, racism becomes something Afro-Americans are, rather than something

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racists do" (97), and that racecraft presents "collective social practice as inborn individual traits" (261)—is something that sociologists can find elsewhere, for starters in the work of former American Sociological Association president Troy Duster. Even the clever likening of race thinking to witchcraft, though thoughtfully explored here, is preceded by Jacques Barzun's 1937 *Race: A Study in Modern Superstition*. Finally, the authors' conclusion that racecraft diverts attention from the broad roots of inequality in the United States, to the detriment of whites as well as blacks, will hardly come as a surprise at this point. Didn't W.E.B. DuBois, so prominently featured in this book, alert us decades ago to the immaterial wages of whiteness that mollified the masses? And haven't numerous other scholars, like David Roediger and Anthony Marx, just to name two, followed in his wake to empirically survey the ways in which race thinking has pre-empted American class consciousness?

What is it then that this volume has to offer? For one thing, it is full of pithy observations like "the very phrase *accurate racial identity* ought to set off sirens" (3). My favorites included:

> No one attributes to political correctness the demise of bio-racism as applied to white persons. So, the free-marketplace-of-ideas apologia for Watson's bio-racism as applied to black persons turns out to be a familiar interloper, the practice of a double standard (43);

and

> in our race-conscious world, virtually anything that can be counted will eventually be sorted, classified, and published by someone according to "racial" differences—which, as such lists demonstrate, are everywhere and have inner mechanisms that, it is assumed, science will eventually vindicate (213).

The authors also make good use of anecdotes (often involving Grandmother Fields) that can be as powerful and illuminating as they are entertaining. However, the most novel contribution of the volume in my opinion is Karen Fields' comparative exploration of racecraft alongside witchcraft, as the latter was depicted by Evans-Pritchard. To be sure, her attempt to explore "the processes of reasoning that manage to make both [witchcraft and racecraft] plausible" (19) would have benefited considerably from a perusal of Berger and Luckmann's 1966 *The Social Construction of Reality*. Nonetheless, her motivation for comparing the two phenomena is compelling—"by not comparing them, we conceptualize neither as sharply as we might" (195)—given the eye-opening list of commonalities she discerns between them: "circular reasoning, prevalence of confirming rituals, barriers to disconfirming factual evidence, self-fulfilling prophecies, multiple and inconsistent causal ideas, and

colorfully inventive folk genetics" (198). The analytical payoff is not only an exceptionally clear-eyed view of the current state of affairs: "American race beliefs [continue] to offer us an invisible ontology whose reality cannot readily be doubted by normally constituted, rational American men and women. It provides an idiom of thought, is protected by secondary elaboration of belief, is acquired as obvious and uncontroversial, and so forth" (223). It also lies in its hard-nosed take on the prospects for the future evolution of race thinking. As Fields puts it, "If racecraft is unlike witchcraft, then lifting from us what Appiah calls its 'burdensome legacy' becomes easy lifting. All that is needed is propagation of the truth. Repetition of the scientific statement 'There are no races' will suffice. But if racecraft is like witchcraft, then repetition can no more than transmute the scientific statement into the ritual drone of a mantra" (220). These are wise words for contemporary sociologists, who too often seem think that invoking the formula "race is a social construct" is enough to sweep away the centuries-old belief that it is something very different.

Ultimately, however, the power of *Racecraft* is circumscribed by three features: a needlessly condescending tone on multiple occasions; an inexplicable reverence for biological science; and a grounding in the historical experience of black and white Americans that raises the question of how this book can speak to the United States of the 21st century.

In a chapter devoted to C. Vann Woodward's 1957 *Origins of the New South*—you can see already why I ask what the authors offer to our understanding of the US in 2013—Barbara Fields lauds his "brisk way with foolishness" (168). I get the feeling that both sisters admire this trait and try to apply it liberally in *Racecraft*. However, the objects of their literary scorn are so numerous—only Woodward, Grandmother Fields and biologists seem to be spared—that I fear they needlessly antagonize their readers, not to mention their fellow-travellers. Some complaints just seem like petty and willful misunderstandings (see for example the fast and loose dismissal of Patrick Wolfe's work). Is it really so damning that authors who write about race thinking, like Matthew Jacobson, use the word "race" (as opposed to "racism") in their book titles? The authors use it in the title of their fourth chapter, after all. In other instances the criticism is so sustained readers will probably be able to smell the smoke from their singed eyebrows. My sympathy goes out to the hapless "[p]eople marching under the banner of biracialism and multiracialism…[who] may not be aware of the malignant history to which they are signing on" (288);

they heed "the siren song of multiracialism" (107), which is "a particularly ugly manifestation of racism" (108) because it is based on a "thwarted hope to be excused, on grounds of mixed ancestry, from a fate deemed entirely appropriate for persons of unambiguous African ancestry" (108). This barb, supported by references to the writers Jean Toomer and Anatole Broyard (born in 1894 and 1920 respectively)—and to "their well-meaning but misguided champions" (109) for good measure—not only give the flavor of a Fields double-whammy but also reveals something about the era in which their perspectives are grounded. It is hard to believe that such sophisticated scholars really think that the early 20th century social conditions that shaped the racial identities of "mulattoes" like Toomer and Broyard are unchanged in the early 21st, influencing racial identity for people of mixed Asian, Latino, American Indian, African and/or European ancestry today in the same old ways and for the same old reasons. To apply the "mulatto escape hatch" thesis, attributing the multiracial movement of the 1990s to no more than a desire not to be black, ignores all the careful empirical work that has gone into understanding how people today make sense of their racial membership, not to mention the census statistics that show that "more than one race reporting" is hardly being driven by people of black and white ancestry.[1]

Even more puzzling is the scorn heaped on "scholars […] who accept race […] as a valid category of analysis" (151). (Note that in 2003, the American Sociological Association issued a statement entitled, "The Importance of Collecting Data and Doing Social Scientific Research on Race"). It is worth reprinting one such passage in full:

> Though discredited by reputable biologists and geneticists, race has enjoyed a renaissance among historians, sociologists, and literary scholars. They find the concept attractive, or in any case hard to dispense with, and have therefore striven mightily, though in vain, to find a basis for it in something other than racism. The most recent pedigree papers trace it to culture or identity, at the same time implicating its victims as agents of its imposition (156).

As in the case of the attack on multiracialism, it is hard to know what current scholarship the authors are targeting; the only example they give of this historical, sociological, and literary renaissance is a 1998 history of slavery in New England. Examples of "the most recent pedigree papers" they dismiss would be useful for judging their claim,

[1] See for example: Rockquemore Kerry Ann and David L. Brunsma, 2007. *Beyond Black: Biracial Identity in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman Littlefield); DaCosta Kimberly McClain, 2007. *Making Multiracials: State, Family, and Market in the Redrawing of the Color Line* (Stanford, Stanford University Press); Khanna Nikki, 2011. *Biracial in America: Forming and Performing Racial Identity* (Lanham, Lexington Books).

since the best-known sociological scholarship on race today hardly seems to overlook racism (consider for example work by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva). I wonder what the Fields make of the well-received and widely-cited work of sociologists like Steven Epstein, Nadia Kim, Wendy Roth, and Tanya Golash-Bolaza, not to mention those writing at the intersection of law and sociology like Ian Haney López and Laura Gómez?

It is noteworthy that the broad-stroke take-down of scholars in the social sciences and humanities is accompanied by a more favorable depiction of "reputable biologists and geneticists" who have "discredited" the race concept. Not only do the authors position biological scientists as making "commonplace disclaimers" (113) against the race concept, but there is a more pervasive positioning of "science" as somehow antithetical to race thinking. This is odd, since the Fields are well aware of the intertwining of race and science in US history—note their discussions of Louis Agassiz and of "bio-racism." Yet the first definition of "racecraft" they offer is that it reflects "the ability of pre- or non-scientific modes of thought to hijack the minds of the scientifically literate" (5-6), and they describe Nobel Prize winner James Watson's derogatory comments about Africans' intelligence as demonstrating "the ease with which scientific and non-scientific thinking conflate in the minds of individuals" (23). This language suggests that race thinking is "pre-" or "non-scientific" and thus flourishes where science does not. However, as a whole school of social scientific literature today shows, the race notion remains comfortably ensconced in the most cutting-edge realms of the natural sciences.[2] It is hard then to understand why the authors believe that biological scientists have rejected race, unless their view stems from the same datedness that weakens other strands of their argument—a possibility that is suggested by the work they cite in this connection, namely Stephen Jay Gould from 1981 and Richard Lewontin *et al*. in 1984 (113). Since then—and since the sequencing of the human genome in 2000—it has become quite evident that the earlier relief at not finding any race-specific or -determining genes would not prevent an intense research effort aimed at associating broader genetic patterns with so-called "races."

[2] See for example: Fullwiley, Duana. 2008. "The Biologistical Construction of Race: 'Admixture' Technology and the New Genetic Medicine." *Social Studies of Science* 38 (5):695-735; Fujimura, Joan H., and Ramya Rajagopalan. 2011. "Different differences: The use of 'genetic ancestry' versus race in biomedical human genetic research." *Social Studies of Science* 41(1): 5-30; Montoya, Michael J. 2011. *Making the Mexican Diabetic: Race, Science, and the Genetics of Inequality*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Such questions about the relevance of assertions made a decade or more ago are, I have already claimed, inevitable for a collection of essays that were initially published anywhere from 1989 to 2003. These concerns are one dimension of a broader question about the book's scope. So far I have raised the question solely in terms of time: are perspectives grounded in the historical study of slavery applicable to today? What are their strengths and what are their limitations? However, *Racecraft* is also delimited in other ways that call into question its relevance for thinking about race belief today. First of all, due to its focus on the history of slavery and the American South, its attention is riveted on blacks and on whites. How helpful is that for thinking about a nation where Latinos now make up the largest minority group and the white share of the population is well on its way to falling below the 50 percent mark before mid-century? Is the notion of racecraft easily transferred to the historical experience of the Southwest that Laura Gómez details in *Manifest Destinies* (2007)? Does it speak to young Americans of Filipino or Indian or Mexican descent as much as it does to the "Afro-Americans" the Fields have in mind? Finally, as the imagined conversation between Durkheim and DuBois suggests, race is not an exclusively American phenomenon. Can this book illuminate ideologies of difference as they have taken shape beyond US borders? The authors speak most directly to those with a historical, black and white vision of the United States, leaving readers the task of making connections beyond it.

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