

**Book review: Kimberley Ducey and Joe R. Feagin (2021). *Revealing Britain's Systemic Racism: The Case of Meghan Markle and the Royal Family*. London: Routledge, 266pp. ISBN 9781000380101**

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*Revealing Britain's Systemic Racism: The Case of Meghan Markle and the Royal Family* explores the past and present of Britain's relationship with racism through a case study of Meghan Markle and the British monarchy. Ducey and Feagin's is the first book-length contribution into the growing field of 'Markle Studies', and the field's discussions of institutional racism, gender inequality, national identity, and white supremacy. The book's conjunctural analysis tracks Markle's initial entry into the royal spotlight in 2016, through to the couple's exit in 2020-21, and maps this onto cultural shifts in broader society, such as the Black Lives Matter movement and Donald Trump's presidency. Using frameworks such as the white racial frame, the authors assess what Britain's first contemporary mixed-race royal has revealed to us about broader structures of patriarchy, whiteness, and (post)colonialism.

The opening sentence, 'while many whites in Britain and elsewhere seemed shocked by the announcement that the Duke and Duchess of Sussex... were stepping down as senior royals, black Britons seemed far less surprised' (p.1) sets the scene for the book's approach of destabilising hegemonic understandings about the couple, the royal family, and Britain's national imaginary. *Revealing Britain's Systemic Racism* consists of seven chapters. In Chapter One, Ducey and Feagin detail Britain's colonial history and its legacy in order to understand how Markle's treatment is invested in these broader structures of white supremacy. They then outline the 'white racial frame' as the beliefs, feelings, cognitive, visual and auditory aspects of the 'British elite-white-male dominance system, which has long operated mostly through its major white-racist, male-sexist, and capitalist-class subsystems' (p.6). Such framing underpins the book's assessment of the royal family as, in my own words, the 'ultimate' white racial frame: underpinning the very stories Britain tells about itself and its population. Markle's image very precisely counters such a framing, from within the establishment itself. Furthermore, although the book does not pay as much

attention to it, the overlap of Markle's entry into the royal family with Brexit, where Britain was (re)negotiating its position on the world stage and (re)intensifying its neo-imperialist racialised borders, only serves to strengthen such a frame.

The subsequent chapters analyse various key moments in Markle's royal life in order to document the white racial frame in action. Chapter Three discusses Markle's framing as a 'trophy' of diversity, who can be used as 'proof' that Britain is not racist. Such discourses were particularly prevalent at the time of the royal wedding in 2018, when Markle's image was seen to represent a moment of progress for the monarchy. *The Daily Mail*, for instance, published the headline "Meghan's Manifesto: 'proud feminist' the Duchess of Sussex will take the royals in a striking new direction" (English, 2018). This celebration was almost immediately countered, Ducey and Feagin argue, by the steep decline in the tenor of media and public commentary around Markle's royal life. Celebrating Markle as a 'trophy' serves to obscure the broader white racial frame and white-racist policies and discourses in Britain.

Chapters Four and Five turn towards intersections of race and gender. Chapter Four takes Markle's identity as a self-described feminist of colour and considers why this, at the heart of the British establishment, might be seen as a 'threat' to the elite-white-male status quo. This, they argue, in part describes why Markle has been so vilified, considering the dominance of these elite groups within the highest echelons of state, society and media. Markle's disruptive power is further addressed in Chapter Five, which suggests she can be understood as a 'feminist-counter-framer' and 'anti-racist-counter-framer'. Key moments, such as her foregrounding of Black culture during the royal wedding, have the potential to interrupt the white racial frame. The authors are cautious not to overstate Markle's power for change. As they write, 'much more than a royal wedding or a biracial duchess is needed to change a systematically racist and systematically sexist society like Britain' (p.175). Indeed, the book as a whole balances this caution and optimism well: not dismissing the representational importance of Markle in a white supremacist institution, while remaining attentive to systematic and structural racism and sexism which cannot be dismantled by one woman.

In Chapter Six, the authors turn towards Markle's critics, particularly the legions of white men (like Piers Morgan) who fanatically vilify Markle in the mainstream press, drawing on racist language, while continuing to suggest British racism is exaggerated. The authors deftly contrast this with histories of racism in Britain, and the connections between various senior royals, white racism and fascism, to demonstrate how such discourses are embedded in the fabric of Britain itself. The conclusion brings the research up to date by focusing on the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic: a moment which is once again emphasising racialised, classed and gendered inequalities around the globe. It focuses particularly on how the British royal family were centered in attempts to unite the country in crisis through, for example, speeches and recorded videos, despite the fact that their privilege insulates them from many of COVID-19's worst consequences, including the fact that the pandemic disproportionately effects people of colour.

*Revealing Britain's Systemic Racism* is a welcome, comprehensive analysis of a key moment in Britain's contemporary history. Its interdisciplinary perspective, spanning across history, sociology, media and communications studies not only makes it a valuable read for a variety of scholars but also helps to enrich its understanding of the conjuncture. Markle will no doubt continue to capture the imaginations of commentators and scholars alike, and this book serves as a timely intervention into this field.

## References

English, R. (2018) 'Meghan's Manifesto: "proud feminist" the Duchess of Sussex will take the royals in a striking new direction.' Daily Mail. 21st May, pp. 1–3.