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Taken for Granted: The Remarkable Power of the Unremarkable

Article in *Contemporary Sociology* · November 2019

DOI: 10.1177/0094306119880196r

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policing strategy for urban black communities.

It is during this period that he became especially sensitive to the effects and construction of black boys and men by the new media. How they are represented to and for the public was as significant, if not more, as their actual self-perceptions. Here, his calling forth of the Central Park Five (1989) is especially instructive. Despite no hard evidence placing five teenage boys (four black and one Hispanic) in the vicinity of the brutal rape and assault of a white woman jogger, they were convicted swiftly in the court of public opinion and later in a criminal court. The convictions would not be vacated until 2002, after Matias Reyes confessed despite never having been considered or investigated at the time of the crime. The case of the Central Park Five underscores Young's contention that "the deeper problem for African American men [is] the inability of others in U.S. society to realize that an improved situation for African American men is contingent upon those others being willing to change, themselves" (p. vii).

In this way, *Are Black Men Doomed?* is not merely targeted at intervening in interracial dialogue but also intraracial politics. The mindset that would have the boy children of black women as criminal and suspicious is not just something believed in non-black spaces but instead one that also actively shapes how black boys become black men within the context of black communities. Underneath claims and well-intentioned advocates on behalf of the crisis of black boys and men is a heretofore under-considered thesis that Young makes plain: "Th[e] crisis is the devaluation of the Black male body" (p. 25).

This argument is an especially welcomed reframing of the existing narrative and debate. Here, the doom for black men is not just something they actualize through their assumed criminal behavior. Rather, as Young convincingly argues, black boys and men suffer from the overall treatment and understanding of their bodies as expendable and worthless. It important to note, however, such should also be understood as the socio-economic and political extension of the fact that the same is true of the bodies

of black women and girls. The devaluation of black mothers necessarily begets that of their children.

Where other books may suffer from an inability to both critically analyze social policy and represent prescriptive feasible solutions-based strategies, Young's book is quite successful. With great emphasis on the influence of the combination of experience, mindsets, policy, and media representation on the lives and realities of black men and boys, Young provides a generative new template for continued scholarship and debate on effective ways to improve the conditions and outcomes of black men and boys. Unequal and discriminatory representations of black people infect their life chances, and change means "developing a mindset about Black men that allows for redemption rather than a permanent indictment" (p. 56).

The powerful provocations and assessments about black men and boys in this book are among its many virtues. Lay and academic readers will find the book an indispensable resource. Successfully rendering decades of scholarship and policy accessible, Young's *Are Black Men Doomed?* offers a compelling translation of the experience of black men and boys into a broader lens for assessing the continued failure of America to provide equal protections and equal opportunity to all.

Taken for Granted: The Remarkable Power of the Unremarkable, by **Eviatar Zerubavel**. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018. 142 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780691177366.

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Historically white colleges, the temporarily abled, different-sex marriages, openly straight, the non-blind, white history month. *Non sequiturs* like these constitute data points in Eviatar Zerubavel's fascinating, tidy, and timely new volume *Taken for Granted: The Remarkable Power of the Unremarkable*. He asks a simple question of these

words: why does putting them together like this draw so much attention today as outrageous, misnomered, politically incorrect, even humorous? A few more samples: stay-at-home moms, working dads, female nurses, people who are not of color, straight-friendly, all lives matter. To convince us that the meaning of *these* words is not *merely* semantic is no hard sell. Zerubavel instead demonstrates a surgeon's touch, presented in witty and compulsively readable argumentative bravado, applying a sharp scalpel to the mundane and everyday (his trademark) in search of larger fare. *Taken for Granted* develops a "sociology of markedness and unmarkedness" as a contribution to Zerubavel's distinguished brand of cognitive sociology. The book dissects and catalogs marked and unmarked phrases in everyday life and documents changes in the semiotic scales that give them their differential weight. It is essential reading for anyone interested in the many subtle, but not at all trivial, grammatical dimensions of social inequality in all its forms. Despite its many strengths, *Taken for Granted* misses at least some of a large forest by focusing on its many freshly grown trees—surely not Zerubavel's fault; the trees are fascinating and essential flashpoints in political struggle today. But, in this book, he seems to be waiting for Foucault.

Taken for Granted begins by emphasizing a basic and indisputable point: "nothing is inherently marked or unmarked" (p. 24); and so the semiotic asymmetry that applies, say, between *polyamory* and *monoamory* is a genuine puzzle. Why is monoamory taken for granted, culturally redundant, and ordinary while polyamory, its nominally equivalent counterpart, is not? For Zerubavel, the difference is that polyamory is *marked*, just like same-sex marriage is marked or openly gay is marked. What does it mean to be marked? One thing it means is to be associated with the *lack* of social dominance embodied by some actually existing social group. The *unmarked* in each case (the monogamous, the different-sex married, the openly straight) are socially dominant in some way. As Zerubavel argues, an unmistakable part of their social dominance lies in their unmarkedness, a relative condition that

holds and communicates power. To be unmarked means to be taken for granted, then. It means to never have to rebut fill-in-the-blank assumptions made by others about oneself with a well-timed "Well, actually. . ."

Here, Zerubavel continues a research track pioneered by Wayne Brekhus, among others, who viewed such distinctions as fundamentally cognitive. The cognitive here is not a referent to naturalistic brain-based stuff but to the "norms, traditions, and conventions" shared by members of the same "thought community" (p. 6). Zerubavel deploys this analytic frame to great effect, continuing his own enormously productive line of research that builds on the work of the legendary physician Ludwik Fleck, the same Fleck to whom Kuhn and "paradigms" owed everything. To be marked or unmarked is the result of social construction in this perspective, and as Zerubavel makes clear in this and his other work, these are socially constructed *cognitive* phenomena, meaning that they are cognitive phenomena that psychology and cognitive science, saddled by naturalistic assumptions, *cannot* explain.

The proof, as always, comes in the pudding of *variability*, which *Taken for Granted* demonstrates in spades, visiting other thought communities and showing how they mark and unmark things with astonishing difference. "Love marriage" is marked in a thought community where "arranged marriage" is traditional and unmarked. The same goes for "non-vegetarian" in thought communities where "vegetarian" diets are the norm (p. 26). This kind of situational variability demands our attention. White students are more likely to identify as "white" (marked) when they attend schools with more ethnic diversity. In areas overpopulated by the hyper-fashionable and the uber-trendy, "normal" clothes become marked and therefore fashionable (e.g., "normcore"). These are all cognitive variations. In Zerubavel's argument this means that they are products of "specific and therefore nonuniversal marking conventions . . . [that] vary across cultures as well as among different subcultures and across different social situations in the same society" (p. 24). Such cognitive variations remain mysterious if the locus of cognition is *merely* the brain. Zerubavel

therefore encourages sociologists to, in fact, *mark* brain-based assumptions and remove *them* from the taken-for-granted about cognition, in a necessary bit of semiotic subversion, mimicking the way sociology as a whole tries to make the modifier “individual” *out of the ordinary* by demonstrating that humans are, in fact, “normally” social beings.

The book’s latter half (Chapters 4 and 5) analyzes semiotic subversion, of which Zerubavel identifies three primary forms. The first subversion—“marking the hitherto unmarked”—is a politics of foregrounding. This includes marking colleges and universities as “historically white colleges” in order to subvert the assumption that they have *not* been characterized by significant racial disparity. Another example is foregrounding the status of hitherto unmarked novelists as “white male novelists,” foregrounding the fact that “white male” is not a reference to some non-particular set of experiences that mirrors the entire human condition. The second subversion—“unmarking the hitherto marked”—is a politics of backgrounding. This includes changing the labels policeman, fireman, or salesman to police officer, firefighter, and salesperson. It also includes the tennis player Serena Williams staking a claim to being the greatest tennis player of all time rather than the greatest *female* tennis player. This connects with a third strategy of semiotic subversion, which consists of essentially doing a politics of backgrounding and foregrounding at the same time. The U.S. women’s national soccer team, winners of three World Cups and four Olympic gold medals, argue for a subversion of the unmarked “soccer” by marking it “men’s soccer” while simultaneously unmarking “women’s soccer” now as “soccer.” More examples proliferate in film and literature. Luis Buñuel’s film *The Phantom of Liberty* portrays a dinner party where bowel movements are public, with guests arranged around a table, while eating is private.

Zerubavel’s discussion of these subversions is probably the best part of an already good book, and it offers a clear and lively demonstration of his larger point: “the unmistakably fluid nature of ‘normality’” and the fact that normality *is a political issue* (p. 96). But here I become more cautious and quizzical. Is it all *merely* linguistic? The final chapter of *Taken for Granted* is entitled “Language and Cultural Change.” Good pithy title this, on point, but perhaps too narrow? Reading Zerubavel’s book it is hard not to find a ready complement in the *oeuvre* of Michel Foucault as one who shares similar interests, who would surely devour *Taken for Granted* with relish were he alive today, but whose own work reached an acute dead-end in a parallel language-centric “marking” argument sometime around 1969.

The larger question is whether sociocultural controls, which Zerubavel’s cognitive sociology consistently identifies, can be *more* than formally linguistic, should cognitive sociology remain committed to social constructionism even while language-centric arguments (gene-based or otherwise) are eclipsed in cognitive science. The politics of normality is much more than a language dispute, as *Taken for Granted* vividly demonstrates, which means that the analytic frames we bring to bear matter for how this politics is done. Sociologists are probably the best equipped to swing these debates in new directions. Indeed, the discipline has already done so. But the assumptions that sociologists make about cognition can no longer claim innocence then. Foucault’s cul-de-sac did not lead him toward naturalism. The surprise is that his post-linguistic politics of normality (mirroring Pierre Bourdieu’s own version) anticipated in many ways the direction that cognitive science is *now* taking. Perhaps it is time, then, for a reconciliation.