

**Book Review: Jones, James R. *The Last Plantation: Racism and Resistance in the Halls of Congress*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024. Xix+223 pages. Hardcover, \$29.95**

In *The Last Plantation: Racism and Resistance in the Halls of Congress*, James R. Jones, an Associate Professor of Africana Studies and Sociology at Rutgers University-Newark, examines the persistent racism in the United States' Congress and the resistance to the inequality by Black staffers and workers. Utilizing his own experiences and interviews with Black staffers for Democratic and Republican Congressmen, Jones reveals the inequality regime at Capitol Hill that perpetuates whiteness in the legislative branch of the government.

Jones reveals that lawmakers of both parties and their staffs refer to Capitol Hill as the "last plantation," because racism is the force that governs Congress. Lawmakers and the highest-ranking members of their staff are overwhelmingly white, which results in whites, who do not have to comply with federal legislation in hiring, determining who works on the Hill, the work they do, how they do it, and the lives and future careers of congressional staffers. As lawmakers' staff are responsible for researching and writing much of the legislation passed in Congress, whites possess an out-sized power to dictate the lives of American citizens and can ignore the needs of peoples of color.

Jones writes convincingly that Congress is one of the last places in America where discrimination and exploitation exist without legal ramifications. By exempting themselves from federal civil rights laws, Congress constitutes "the only institution to survive our racist past unchanged and unchallenged" (p.4).

However, Jones also eloquently portrays how Black workers utilize Black capital as a form of agency that allows them to resist racism in Congress. Black capital is Jones' conceptual framework that identifies and explains the power and agency of Black congressional workers' efforts to recruit other Blacks to the Congressional workplace and the adaptive strategies used by

Black workers. Utilizing Black capital in legislative analysis, Jones aims to “broaden the conceptual and methodological approaches used in studying Congress by taking a Black epistemological standpoint that recognizes the significance of Black workers as significant sources of knowledge” (p.7). Interviews with Black workers demonstrate the use of Black capital as a form of activism for changing the racist practices on Capitol Hill.

The metaphor of Congress as a plantation allows Jones to investigate Congress as an inequality regime, as Whites are the “visible face” of Congress, but Blacks perform the actual work behind the scenes that allows Congress to function. Jones uses a two-part argument that involves showing how the congressional workplace perpetuates inequality and racism, and how Black workers, from the highest-ranking position to cooks and restaurant servers, “fight racism rather than entrench it” (p.7).

One of the strengths of this book is Jones’ description of the hiring practices of Congress. Jones reveals the absence of a centralized hiring mechanism, which allows each congressional office the freedom to use different hiring tactics that favor more who you know over who has the qualifications for the job. Jones demonstrates how the lack of accountability in the hiring in congressional offices of white lawmakers, Democrat and Republican, results in a homogeneously White space in many offices, even in congressional districts with large constituencies of people of color.

A second strength is the use of statistics that illustrate the racism in the United States’ Congress, particularly of the lack of statistical difference between the political parties in the numbers of white staffers in high-ranking positions compared to Blacks. It would be expected that Democrats would have statistically significant higher ratios of Black to White workers than Republicans, which Jones demonstrates is not the case.

A third strength is the extensive use of quotes from Black current and past staffers of Congress, particularly the long quotes that reveal the hearts and frustrations of Black high-ranking staffers as they performed a balancing act between activism for change and not jeopardizing their own futures and careers. Most revealing is Chapter Three, wherein Jones examines the Black cultural gesture of “the nod.” Respondents powerfully relay the importance of nodding to other Black workers in White-dominated spaces. Seen as a symbol of solidarity and belonging, not nodding represented a personal slight or an indicator of “emerging fractures in shared Black identity across class and generational lines” (p.120).

A weakness of the book could be the author’s use of his own experiences, as he worked as a congressional intern for over three years and lived the effects of racism in Congress. He writes that his differential experiences in the congressional offices of Black and White lawmakers “taught me how race and racism were organizing features in their careers and the everyday occurrences of our national legislature” (p.xix).

Following in the footsteps of sociologists of race, such as Howard Winant, Michael Omi, Joe Feagin, and Adia Wingfield, Jones presents an excellent look behind the scenes of one of the most powerful social institutions in American life. It is a timely book, as diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives end in many institutions including universities and workplaces. This book is essential reading in undergraduate and graduate courses in sociology, particularly Race and Ethnic Relations, political science, and history. By examining the historical notion of racism within the United States’ Congress and the resistance to racism by Black congressional staffers, Jones reminds that race still matters in America.

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