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# **Critical Race Theory in England: impact and opposition**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the development of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in England, in terms of impact and opposition. Since the early 2000s CRT has become a significant intellectual space for race-conscious scholars and activists in England. The current paper traces the growth of CRT in the field of education (where it has had greatest impact since its arrival). It identifies the academic research, writing, networks and events that have established CRT in England. It discusses the substantive concerns of English CRT and how these are both similar to and distinct from CRT as developed in the USA. In England CRT has also met with opposition. This paper examines the discourses of derision voiced by its antagonists, arguing that much of this antagonism has an atavistic quality, being rooted in longstanding antipathy towards race-conscious social analyses.

## **Keywords:**

*Critical Race Theory; race; racism; education; academia; Marxism*

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## **Critical Race Theory in England: impact and opposition**

### **Introduction**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has emerged as a significant intellectual force among anti-racist scholars and activists in England, particularly in the sociology of education. Its antagonists, however, continue to regard CRT as an ‘unwelcome guest’ (Gillborn and Warmington, 2015:1). CRT has been derided as an ‘intellectual affectation’ (Parsons, 2015: 1) and as teaching students to ‘think racially’ (Hayes, 2013: unnumbered). Moreover, CRT’s US roots have meant that it has been characterised, like earlier Black Atlantic thought, as anomalous to sociology in England. It is hardly unusual for race-conscious scholars to find themselves working against discourses of derision but it is notable that CRT’s fiercest opponents have often been academics who depict themselves as progressives: anti-racist allies. For these critics, CRT remains a foreign interloper; it is, to use the metaphor that Stuart Hall drew from Mary Douglas, ‘dirt in the bedroom’, ‘matter out of place’ (Hall and Jhally, 1997:3). It should also be noted that while, in England, CRT has included important contributions from white British academics, CRT has had particularly significant impact for scholars of colour. Attempts to devalue CRT have, therefore, had an unfortunate resonance at a time when young activists are pressing for the decolonisation of higher education.

This paper examines the development of CRT in England in terms of impact and opposition. The paper’s originality lies in its tracing of the specific academic networks, events and publications through which CRT has impacted on English academia, particularly in my own field of educational research. The current paper also examines the sustained opposition to CRT among academics who have been unsettled by its race-conscious social analysis. In the USA educator Edward Taylor predicted that CRT’s impact would ‘be limited not by the weakness of its constructs but by the degree that many whites will not accept its assumptions; I anticipate critique from both left and right’ (Taylor, 1998: 124). In England much of the academic antagonism towards CRT is built upon a powerful ‘left’ reflex action: a reiteration of old, paternalistic convictions about the ‘objectivity’ of class and the ‘subjectivity’ of race. Charles Mills, a US academic who has engaged with the English CRT debate, has reflected:

Marxist engagement with CRT is indeed welcome, but a Marxism that limits race ...to the 'subjective' ...to the experiential and autobiographical, to be properly theorized by 'objective Marxist analysis' ('Now, comrade, let me tell you what your experiences *really* mean . . .'), is a Marxism of the 20th century, not the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

(Mills, 2009: 280)

As Mills adds, 'We have already seen that kind of Marxism in both theory and in practice. If it had worked, CRT would not have been necessary in the first place' (Mills, 2009: 280).

However, this paper is not an 'attack' on Marxism; neither it is a 'defence' of CRT. It is a historical review of the growth of a current school of race-conscious analysis in English academia, and the resistance to it. It is salient because the contests over CRT's legitimacy reveal much about the continued regulation of critical theories of race in academia and in the wider public space. The paper begins by outlining CRT's analytical framework and its critique of liberal models of race equality. It goes on to examine histories of race-conscious thought and politics in England. Discussion then turns to the development of CRT in England and the extent to which sustained antagonism towards CRT reflects longstanding tensions around 'left' analyses of race and class.

### **Methodology**

This paper comprises a genealogy of the growth of CRT in the field of educational research, where it has had particular impact. The timeframe begins in 2003 when the first CRT-based paper was presented at the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Conference. In part, the paper draws on sociocultural traditions of analysing shifts in thought and practice by tracing the development of and transfers between communities of practice. As such, this paper identifies exemplars of the literature that has introduced CRT into educational research but also identifies academic networks and events through which CRT has been promoted in England.

Four questions frame the current paper. First, when did CRT transfer to the field of educational research in England? Secondly, what were some of the key CRT-based networks, events and publications that signalled CRT's emergence in English educational research? Thirdly, what have been the substantive concerns of CRT-based educational research? Lastly, what are the discursive frameworks in which English critics have voiced opposition to CRT?

## **CRT's analytical framework**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a radical development in social theory. It emerged in the USA during the 1980s as an analytical framework for addressing the endemic presence of racism within society. Originating in the revisionist critiques of civil rights legislation developed by US legal scholars such as Derrick Bell and Kimberlé Crenshaw, CRT has subsequently been adopted in sociology, education, cultural studies and other fields.

CRT comprises a race-conscious social analysis, in that it is 'critical of race' and 'race critical of theory' (Leonardo, 2009: 5). However, CRT opts to retain race categories in its social analysis, 'unlike a Marxist theorist of race who does not lend much credence to them' (Leonardo, 2009: 5). CRT is rooted in traditions of independent Black Atlantic political thought, notably the strains of Dubois and Fanon, and has shown little concern with being validated by Eurocentric liberals or Marxists (Gordon, 2011). Its lack of genuflection may be the reason why it has proved such an irritant. Moreover, while its analysis of racism is central, CRT is also predicated upon intersectionality, focusing on 'how racism works with, against and through additional axes of differentiation including class, gender, sexuality and disability' (Gillborn, 2008: 36).

CRT's adherents argue that its conceptual tools and principles open up space for understanding what Leonardo (2005: 405) terms 'the complete racialization of daily life'. CRT's analytical principles have been described, perhaps not always helpfully, as a collection of 'tenets'. These have proliferated over time, across a spread of texts. A recent paper by Dixson and Rousseau (2018), for example, listed around a dozen characteristics of CRT. This section of the current paper outlines CRT's conceptual tools; readers seeking more expansive accounts are directed to Crenshaw *et al* (1995); Delgado and Stefancic (2001); Dixson *et al* (2018).

### *The permanence of racism; race as social construction; interest convergence*

CRT's defining quality is its stark rejection of liberal models of race equality: a rejection rooted in its understanding of racism as socially pervasive, a *permanent* feature of modern social formations. Derrick Bell's (1992) *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: the permanence of racism* is one of CRT's founding statements. For Bell, racism was an endemic social antagonism; his long involvement in civil rights law had taught him that legislative victories

did not signal the end of racism, which he regarded as ‘permanently embedded in the psychology, economy, society, and culture of the modern world’ (Bell, 1992: x).

The goal of racial equality is, while comforting to many whites, more illusory than real for blacks. For too long, we have worked for substantive reform, then settled for weakly worded and poorly enforced legislation, indeterminate judicial decisions, token government positions, even holidays ... If we are to seek new goals for our struggles, we must first reassess the worth of racial assumptions on which, without careful thought, we have presumed too much and relied on too long ...

(Bell, 1992: 13-14)

Bell claimed an antecedent in Fanon’s combination of pessimism and resistance, depicting CRT as part of a war of position to defy, harass and block white supremacy. Bell wrote in defiance of ahistorical understandings of structural racism. Too often, he argued, putative legislative advances around equal opportunity, representation or diversity had given the appearance of striking against racism, while, in actuality, maintaining racial inequalities at manageable levels. It is arguably its underlying pessimism from which CRT’s critics recoil.

Bell set the terms of subsequent CRT work in fields such as law, social policy and education by arguing that apparently progressive measures to address racial inequality are initiated only at moments of *interest convergence*: when demands for reform converge with the self-interest of white elites. Resulting measures, usually steeped in liberal self-congratulation, tend to address only the most blatant kinds of discrimination but they often become enshrined as *contradiction-closing* cases, which are assumed to have resolved problems of racism, rendering further action unnecessary and excessive. It is only when racist practices threaten to destabilise rather than secure elite power that it is in the self-interest of elites to address racism through legislation and policy. CRT rejects assumptions that powerful elites in racist societies reform willingly. It is not that anti-racist action is pointless but that positional victories – improvements in employment figures, gains in educational outcomes, increased representation in legislative bodies – do not imply that race as an axis of conflict ceases to exist. There is no post-racial domain.

It is in this sense that Critical Race Theorists understand race as a *social construction*. Released from the Pandora's box of slavery and colonialism, race is always available as a tool for ordering society. Delgado and Stefancic (2001:7) write:

...race and races are products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society manipulates, or retires when convenient.

The social construction thesis is not, of course, peculiar to CRT. The historical development of social constructivist understandings of race is detailed in, for instance, Omi and Winant (1994) and Back and Solomos (2000). However, CRT emphasises certain aspects of the social construction thesis. Crucially, CRT rejects the conventional Eurocentric Marxist categorisation of race and racism as 'subjective' domains that can be understood in terms of 'race thinking' or 'racial prejudice'. In CRT racism is understood as a fully social relationship, both thought *and* practice; race is never regarded as epiphenomenal to class relations (Warmington, 2009).

#### *Racism as ordinary, colour-blindness, race-neutrality*

CRT's radicalism derives from its understanding of racism as something that saturates the social and political formation, being reproduced within institutions such as law and education. Taking their lead from Derrick Bell and Kimberlé Crenshaw's revisionist critiques of civil rights legislation, Critical Race Theorists argue that by equating racism with overt racial hatred, structural and institutional racism are often rendered invisible. Racism is not merely the violence and hatred espoused by extremist groups. Far from it, in racialised societies, racism is - except in its most extreme forms - so *ordinary*, so business-as-usual, that its very existence is routinely denied. This denial entails strategic *color-blindness*: a deliberate misrecognition of racialised relationships and practices. Schools, universities, welfare systems and police forces deny their institutional racism by depicting their own cultures and practices as *race-neutral* and meritocratic.

Institutional racism is also reproduced by the 'rules of racial standing' (Bell, 1992), which serve to regulate judgements about the credibility of analyses of race and racism by privileging conservative white voices over those of black people who challenge institutional racism (Bell, 1992). At 'micro' level institutional racism is reproduced through

‘microaggressions’: those small, unremarked, daily acts of disparagement that – intentionally or unintentionally - diminish people of colour in their encounters with those racialised as white. As praxis, CRT counters the ideological claims to race neutrality and meritocracy that are proffered in institutions which, in actuality, remain profoundly racist (Dixson and Rousseau, 2006). CRT rejects liberal models of race equality that tend only to address racism in its extreme, ‘aberrant’ forms, instead urging social transformation: the dismantling of global systems of white supremacy.

### *White supremacy, whiteness as ideology*

Perhaps the most controversial of CRT’s analytic tools is its conceptualisation of ‘white supremacy’. In CRT white supremacy is systematic and global: a system of power wherein structural racism, white privilege and overt race hate are mutually reinforcing. Calumny has been heaped upon CRT for its usage of the terms ‘whiteness’ and ‘white supremacy’ as concepts to name the dominant mode of racism but these terms are not unique to CRT. For example, Pankaj Mishra argues that ‘whiteness became in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the assurance of individual identity and dignity’ (Mishra, 2017: 30). He describes white supremacy as a global project advanced by European and American powers to ‘solve, through exclusion and degradation, the problems of establishing political order’ (Mishra, 2017: 30).

Naming ‘white supremacy’ is also an attempt to distinguish white *people* from whiteness as ideology. In CRT white supremacy is ‘a political system, a particular power structure of formal and informal rule, privilege, socio-economic advantages’ (Taylor (2009: 4). CRT does, however, argue that appeals to whiteness (that is, to the value of being non-black) serve to unify both privileged and disadvantaged whites in ways that secure and stabilise the social order. The material and ideological dimensions of racism secure socio-economic advantages and cultural status along raced and classed lines. These advantages accrue principally to white elites but are also doled out strategically (and unevenly) to those fractions of society that buffer white elites (the white working classes). Coates (2017) has argued at length that the result of the 2016 US election, in which a majority of white Americans *across virtually all demographics* voted for Donald Trump, constituted a securing of white supremacy. Bell argued that the ‘critically important stabilizing role that blacks play in this society constitutes a major barrier in the way of achieving racial equality’ (Bell, 1992: 8).



## **Anti-racism in England**

Race-conscious thought has long occupied an ambiguous place in wider left-wing and progressive politics in England. It has expanded and internationalised analyses of capitalism, oppression and resistance but it has also been viewed with suspicion: as a misrecognition of the 'objective' relations of class, a distraction from the primary focus of struggle. As such, the current antipathy towards CRT in academia has long precedents.

How then has CRT established its presence in England? England has its own traditions of black and anti-racist thought, historically entwined with diverse social movements (see Warmington, 2014). By the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century a spread of organised black activism – race-conscious political activity - was evident in England. Figures such as CLR James, George Padmore, Una Marson and Harold Moody were prominent in both anti-colonial and local politics. Their political trajectories were, in part, informed by their bumpy alliances with the English left. In the 1930s, for instance, Padmore and James built links with the Independent Labour Party but declined to join its ranks. Such political relationships set a tone of mutual ambivalence between black radicals whose socialism had been formed out of histories of racism and imperialism, and white progressives whose understanding of class was often less universal than they imagined.

There were direct links between the pre-war activists and some of those who organised among the settled African, Caribbean and Asian communities of the post-Windrush era. The hive of activism of the 1960s, 70s and 80s was dynamic and diverse but bound together by overlapping concerns with African, Caribbean and Asian solidarity; black feminism; community and mainstream education; immigration policy; policing; and the welfare of young people and families. Post-Windrush politics were grounded in the specific experiences of migration and settlement in England but were also the result of the new global political mood of the late 1960s and 1970s. Consequently, US black radicalism influenced activists in England profoundly (Gilroy, 1993). Cultural and political organisations, such as Sivanandan's Institute of Race Relations, the Race Today Collective, Southall Black Sisters and John La Rose's New Beacon were part of the broader new left and their fortunes rose and fell accordingly. However, their relations with the white left were as convoluted as Padmore and James' had been. Black radical positions on race, gender and class did not always cohere easily either with a liberal left that was only tentatively committed to multiculturalism or with

white Marxists whose notions of the primacy of class meant that they often struggled with pluralities (see Liverpool Black Caucus, 1986; Gilroy, 1987).

### **CRT: Atlantic crossings**

CRT's emergence in England is part of a long history of intellectual exchanges within Black Atlantic politics and scholarship but in England, CRT's 'foreignness' and its 'blackness' have made it the object of censure, with critics such as Carl Parsons referring disparagingly to 'imported CRT'. While CRT's English antagonists have suggested that CRT is entirely predicated on African-American experiences, in fact, CRT has generated a whole series of 'off-shoots', of which 'Britcrit' (see Hylton *et al*, 2011) is only one. These 'off-shoots' include movements such as Latinx CRT (*LatCrit*: see Solórzano and Bernal, 2001); scholarship on the position of 'Asian' groups (*AsianCrit*: see Buenavista, 2016); scholarship on indigenous peoples (*TribalCrit*: see Brayboy, 2005); writing that explores intersections between race and sexuality (*QueerCrit*: see Han, 2008) and race and dis/ability (*DisCrit*: see Annamma *et al*, 2013). Each of these 'off-shoots' has taken a distinctive line in trying to understand processes of 'minoritisation' and practices of resistance. CRT has now been adopted by radical scholars working in South America, Europe, South Africa and Australia. However, this global reach has barely been acknowledged by English critics, whose analysis of CRT has been based on readings of a relatively small spread of writing.

CRT's arrival in England can be dated to the period 2003-2006. In the USA during the 1990s CRT had been taken up in the field of education. The paper that signalled the transfer of CRT to the field of education was Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) 'Towards a Critical Race Theory of education'. Their research was developed in the subsequent work of, among others, Richard Delgado, Laurence Parker, Daniel Solórzano, Tara Yosso, Edward Taylor, Adrienne Dixson and Zeus Leonardo. In England it was educational researchers, rather than legal scholars, who first adopted CRT. The reasons for this are not hard to fathom. England did not have the same history of civil rights legislation as the USA. From the 1950s onwards, as Britain's post-Windrush migrants became settled communities, activists and intellectuals had waged anti-racist struggles that tended to focus on street politics and on government policy rather than legislation *per se*.

In 2003 English educational researcher David Gillborn gave the first CRT paper to be presented at the BERA Conference, subsequently published as 'Education policy as an act of white supremacy' (Gillborn, 2005). In 2005 Kevin Hylton published on CRT in the journal *Leisure Studies* (Hylton, 2005). The following year Lorna Roberts (whose key role in bringing together US and English CRT scholars has been under-acknowledged) organised a day-seminar on CRT and education at Manchester Metropolitan University, featuring US Critical Race Theorist, Marvin Lynn. Out of that seminar emerged a CRT discussion group comprising academics from Manchester, London and Birmingham, including CRT-influenced academics, such as John Preston and Namita Chakrabarty.

Thereafter, a number of seminars, symposia and conferences on CRT were convened by loosely networked UK academics, sometimes attended by US colleagues. The first national CRT conference in England was a three-day event at the Institute of Education, University of London in June 2009, organised by a special interest group within the Higher Education Academy's Centre for Sociology, Anthropology and Politics that included Shirin Housee, Andrew Pilkington and Kevin Hylton. In 2008 and 2012 US Critical Race Theorists (Gloria Ladson-Billings, Zeus Leonardo) were invited to give keynotes at BERA's annual conference. Between 2014 and 2016 US CRT scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, Laurence Parker and Adrienne Dixson spoke alongside English colleagues at events in London and Birmingham.

In terms of published work, the first book-length explorations of CRT and education included Preston's (2008) *Whiteness and Class in Education*; Gillborn's (2008) *Racism and Education: Coincidence or Conspiracy*; Hylton *et al's* (2011) *Atlantic Crossings: International Dialogues in Critical Race Theory*. As of 2017, CRT-based research has become a feature in British-based journals such as *Race, Ethnicity and Education* and a presence at BERA events. CRT has also overlapped with emergent critical whiteness studies in the UK (Preston, 2008). In 2017/18 CRT was influential in the development of what has been promoted as England's first undergraduate Black Studies degree, offered by Birmingham City University.

### **CRT in educational research**

Educational research is a broad field and CRT has been applied to a range of issues. It has been used to re-interrogate concerns that have persisted since the 1960s: disproportionate

rates of permanent school exclusions among black pupils; racialised patterns in streaming and setting; inequalities in exam achievement; racialised barriers to elite higher education (see Gillborn, 2008; Rollock *et al*, 2015). Researchers such as Parker and Roberts (2011) and Housee (2012) have studied professional practices and learners' experiences in schooling, higher education and informal settings, focusing on how racialised relations are maintained through classroom discourses and institutional practices.

In terms of policy scholarship, the work of Chakrabarty and Preston (2008) has focused on the racialisation of policy discourses around education and national security. Warmington *et al* (2018) have argued that, despite periods when race equality has appeared to be on the political agenda (as in the wake of the Macpherson Report, 1999), it has never held a consistent place at the heart of policy. Gillborn, Demack *et al* (2017) have focused on the ways in which successive government policy has redefined the benchmarks for achievement at Key Stage 4 (the end of compulsory schooling), noting that whenever benchmarks have been redefined, it has had the effect of restoring ethnic gaps in achievement.

### **Reactions to CRT**

One of the notable things about the initial emergence of CRT in England was the speed and ferocity with which it was countered by a fraction of the academic community: principally white academics who defined themselves as radical social democrats or Marxists. Almost as soon as the earliest CRT papers were published, they were met with a hostile reception, which in turn provoked a series of published exchanges between pro- and anti-CRT camps. A small bibliography would include: Cole and Maisuria (2007); Cole (2009); Mills (2009); Hill (2009); Gillborn (2010); Hayes (2013); Gillborn and Warmington (2015); Parsons (2015); Parsons and Thompson (2017). The purpose of the current paper is not to revisit the details of these somewhat exhausting published exchanges nor to reiterate the arguments of individual critics, but to identify their historical underpinnings and discursive frameworks. Why have these critiques – if indeed they are coherent enough to be termed critiques - assumed their particular shape and how do they compare with the kinds of criticisms that have historically been levelled at race-conscious scholarship?

It is hardly necessary to point out that on the political right, anti-racism has long been a folk demon and, for the far right, it is sometimes a target in a very literal sense. Between 2013 and 2016 I was a founder member of the Centre for Research in Race and Education (CRRE) at

the University of Birmingham. Headed by David Gillborn, an advocate of CRT, the CRRE is the only research centre in England dedicated to research on race and education. Within weeks of the Centre's formation in 2013, its academics and administrative staff were issued with personal attack alarms and latex gloves, following the receipt of hate mail and suspect packages. While it might be stretching a point to suggest that the overt racial abuse and threats the Centre attracted was directly due its association with CRT, it is worth remembering that working in the field of race equality does not only attract antipathy from academic quarters.

That said, the response of some academics to CRT was less than temperate. I had a foretaste of the tone that CRT's critics would take at a 2008 CRT seminar organised by the Higher Education Academy's Centre for Anthropology Sociology and Politics, at which a colleague topped a tirade about CRT's supposed lack of engagement with class politics with a raised octave cry that 'Critical Race Theory is driving the white working-class into the arms of the BNP!' Shortly afterwards, a (white, Marxist) colleague and I convened a reading group on race and education and chose Gillborn (2005) as reading material. Before discussion of the paper could start, three senior white academics attending the meeting declared, in choreographed fashion, arms folded, that Gillborn's article was simply a 'bad' paper and that they were refusing to discuss it further.

The demonisation of CRT has continued in conferences and print. These illustrations range from the economic to the testicular:

'Critical Race Theory ...is inadequate and counter-productive'

(Parsons and Thompson, 2017: 575)

'...critical race theory boils down to one simple claim: 'If you are white you are racist!' ...Critical race theorists will dismiss my claim as absurd, but that is because they avoid saying what they really think.'

(Hayes, 2013: unnumbered)

...they collude... in super-elevating subjective consciousness of one aspect of identity and thereby occluding the ('raced' and gendered) class essential nature of capitalism and the labour-capital relation.

(Hill, 2008: unnumbered)

CRT is ...short on theory ...What CRT lacks is a structural dimension which seeks to bridge agency and social structure: why people think and behave as they do and the extent to which this is determined by their socio-economic context.

(Parsons and Thompson, 2017: 595)

...CRT appears to me to be ultimately lacking in a direction for moving humankind forward progressively ...In the barrios of Caracas, and everywhere else the poor live, and the spark of socialism has been lit ...they are not embracing postmodernism, transmodernism or Critical Race Theory (for these are largely academic pursuits).

(Cole, 2017: 149-150)

Among its self-styled opponents, the wilful misreading of CRT has become something of an academic mini-industry. Early critical papers seemed to rest on the barest knowledge of CRT. For example, in a paper titled, “‘Shut the F\*\*\* up”, “You Have No Rights Here”: Critical Race Theory and Racialisation in Post-7/7 Racist Britain’, Cole and Maisuria (2007: 2) argued that the term white supremacy ‘homogenises all white people together in positions of class power and privilege.’ This was despite the fact that the paper critiqued by Cole and Maisuria stated unambiguously that CRT’s position ‘is not to argue that White people are uniformly powerful’ (Gillborn 2005: 491). The authors went on to assert that CRT claims white supremacy ‘is *now* mainstream and not the preserve of “white supremacist” hate groups’ (Cole and Maisuria 2007: 2; emphasis added). This was another substantial misreading. CRT does not suggest that white supremacy has suddenly shifted to the mainstream; it argues that to treat white supremacy as a marginal extremist activity, as opposed to being integral to the social and political formation, is a category error in the first place.

There has been something of a one-way quality to subsequent debates, which have rested ostensibly on critics’ dissatisfaction with CRT’s refusal to recognise the political and sociological primacy of class. Published exchanges have focused on whether CRT is sufficiently cognisant of the labour process under capitalism (Cole, 2009, 2017) and whether CRT is sufficiently ‘materialist’ (Hill, 2008). Disputes over statistical evidence on racial

disadvantage in education have attempted to reduce CRT merely to a form of stratification research (Hill, 2009; Parsons and Thompson, 2017).

### **Discourses of derision: anti-CRT tenets**

There have long been strains of ‘20th Century’ Marxist thinking that are immediately suspicious of race-conscious social analyses, that regard racism as primarily a technology of class (see Miles, 1989). This position advocates a jettisoning of race as an analytical concept, arguing that the retention of race concepts serves to reproduce racialised views of the world. At best, it proposes a trickle-down anti-racism: the conviction that justice for the working-classes as a whole will eventually produce racial justice as a kind of spin-off. Leonardo (2009) contends that this kind of ‘race is not real’ fundamentalism fails to acknowledge the racialised assumptions of its own social theory and remains unconvincing to those who continue to experience racism.

CRT’s English critics have relied on a set of rehearsed criticisms: discourses of derision that locate public pronouncements on racism within racialised hierarchies of credibility and authority. These anti-CRT ‘tenets’ might be summarised as follows:

- CRT is an import from the USA that has little relevance in England (Parsons, 2015).
- CRT essentialises race and homogenises white people; its analyses apply a rigid black/ white binary (Cole, 2017).
- CRT’s race-conscious analysis is inherently opposed to Marxism (Hill, 2008) – or, alternatively, CRT has a few strengths but needs to learn from Marxist concepts of class relations (Cole, 2009, 2017).
- CRT is not a theory at all but is, at best, ‘a perspective, a set of beliefs about racism’ (Hayes, 2013).

Do the exchanges between pro- and anti-CRT scholars tell us anything about CRT or, for that matter, about Marxism? In many ways antipathy to CRT echoes earlier contests over race and class in English politics and sociology. During the 1960s, 70s and 80s African, Caribbean and Asian communities were, in policy and in the wider public sphere, more often than not

regarded as immigrant communities. Moreover, in many 'progressive' circles minority ethnic communities were regarded as client states, destined to play a subsidiary role in class politics (see Liverpool Black Caucus, 1986; Phillips, 2001). Three types of criticism were routinely levelled at race-conscious thinkers and activists who attempted to carve out independent political spaces, those who refused to bend the knee. First, they were often described as 'black nationalists' or 'cultural nationalists', whether or not they themselves accepted this designation. Secondly, their race-conscious politics were regarded as 'splitting' the working-class along racial lines and distracting from class-based struggles. Lastly, in retaining critical race concepts, race-conscious thinkers were accused of being theoretically misguided, guilty of fetishising identity.

The discourse of derision applied to CRT echoes these earlier attempts to regulate independent race-conscious social analyses. CRT too is said to misrecognise class relationships. It is said to essentialise white people; to divide black and white; to encourage 'racial thinking'. Underpinning these claims has been an insistence that CRT should learn from the Marxism of the 20th Century, while refusing to admit much possibility that Marxism might draw on CRT. In response, Leonardo (2005) and Mills (2009) have suggested that it is those who employ 'universal' categories of labour and exploitation as a front for very particular, deeply racialised experiences who have truncated debates around race and class. Eurocentric classism has narrowed possibilities for what Leonardo has termed a '*raceclass*' approach, one predicated upon analysis of 'two intimately related points on one axis' Leonardo (2012: 429).

For critical theorists of race, such as Leonardo and Mills, the relegation of race to 'the subjective' is a reproduction of racism and its hierarchies at the level of sociological theory. A legitimate question to ask, therefore, is whether CRT's critics should be accorded the automatic privilege of being regarded as distinct from those other parts of English society that trivialise issues of race and racism. For there is little doubt that these 'allies' claim a certain kind of privilege. Our antipathy towards race-conscious thought, they urge, is not like that which comes from other parts of society. It is not paternalism but fully developed critique; it is born not out of vulgar racism but out of anti-racism. Don't worry, comrades; it's just friendly fire!



## Imports and interlopers

To what extent does the current antipathy towards CRT reproduce racialised assumptions about legitimate voice, about legitimate presence? This has become a point of contention, given the routine marginalisation of Black Atlantic scholarship in English academia. In the USA, CRT has been seen as a conceptual interloper, unwelcome in fields such as law and education (indeed one of the seminal CRT education papers was Gloria Ladson-Billings' 1998 article, 'Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education?'). However, among its English critics, CRT's 'foreignness' seems to be a very literal problem (see Parsons, 2015). Their implication is that Critical Race Theorists in England have done little in the way of transfer work, nothing to ground CRT in England's social and educational conditions. The 'foreignness' of CRT is, it seems, problematic in a way that is not the case for imports such as Bourdieu or Deleuze.

However, if England and the USA are so very disparate, how might we describe England's post-war social and cultural formation? There has been widespread analysis of the growth of nativist politics across Europe. In Britain (and England, most of all) this has been compounded by residual post-imperial melancholy, marked by Brexit, Islamophobia, the demonisation of migrants and renewed suspicion of cultural diversity (Tomlinson, 2018). Both left and right in England currently seek to 'honour' and recruit the white working-class, albeit an *imagined* white-working class.

In considering the profound race and class contradictions inherent in post-imperial Britain, Carby (1982: 184) once argued that principal among them was 'the attempt to balance the perceived needs of the working class and the demands of capital.' One means of rhetorically 'resolving' the contradiction between these interests has been the manufacture of a 'national interest', a 'we're-all-in-it-together' view of education, work and economy. However, the place of minority ethnic communities within this national interest has always been ambiguous. In some instances, people of colour are deemed within the national interest: as in the 2012 Olympics or Britain's promotion of urban music and fashion. At other times, their presence and requirements can be constructed by the state as being in opposition to the national interest, as in debates on immigration, multiculturalism and national security, wherein communities of colour are positioned still as interlopers. In England the ambiguous location of communities of colour vis-a-vis the national interest is constructed in the

discourses that exist around the end of empire and patterns of immigration since. Racial formations based on whiteness do not require American histories of segregation or battles over civil rights legislation. Appeals to whiteness, both tacit and overt, pervade English culture and politics; communities of colour remain marginal and ambiguous.

A kind of nativism also permeates the social sciences, often reproducing rather than challenging post-imperial melancholy. Academics keen to demonstrate ‘relevance’ and ‘impact’ have swiftly renewed their focus on the white working class: the ‘left behind’ who have, it is argued, been neglected not merely by neo-liberal policies but by metropolitan cultural diversity (see Goodhart, 2013; cf. Coates, 2017, for parallels with the positioning of ‘left behind’ working-class whites in the USA). This is not so new. We can look back to the first post-WW2 sociologists who went against the grain by treating race in England seriously (such as John Rex) and to the first generation of English-born black social theorists, including Chris Mullard, Paul Gilroy and Hazel Carby. One of the theoretical challenges they perceived was that the ‘legitimate’ object of English sociology was seen to be social class, as lived by the white industrial working-classes (see Gilroy, 1987). Given its deep ambivalence to race as a legitimate political space, expanding the English sociological imagination to encompass interlopers such as race (and gender, sexuality and disability) has entailed culture wars on several fronts.

The reception of CRT in particular quarters of English academia has been shaped by a sociological variation of post-imperial melancholy, by resentment against the ways in which issues of race and racism (like issues of gender, sexuality and disability) have complicated certain classed narratives. In the stock criticisms of CRT, the national interest transmutes into a putative class interest, wherein anti-racism is included only insofar as it is regulated, not too outspoken. Silence may be demanded or it may be that speaking out is gently deemed unnecessary. After all, why speak out when legislation has resolved racial injustices? Equally, what need is there to speak out with the language of ‘imported’ CRT, when the more acceptable narratives of white, male, straight, able-bodied 20th Century Marxism already exist to speak for you?

## **Conclusion**

In England the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century have seen a continuing backlash against multiculturalism and the rise of nativist politics. My own field of education has seen the

retreat of the race equality drives that were implemented in the wake of the Macpherson Report; the narrowing of the school curriculum in ways that have excluded the diversity and citizenship agenda; and the dropping of schools' race equality policies from Ofsted's schools inspection criteria (Warmington *et al*, 2017). In academia we have seen deepening feelings of marginalisation among students and faculty of colour, whose efforts to decolonise the curriculum have been widely caricatured. In this context CRT has become a rare space for resistance. For race-conscious, anti-racist scholars, it has promoted international dialogue and offered conceptual tools with which to bring to the fore issues of race and racism at a time of rising populism and white nationalism. In a period in which politicians and commentators have largely decided that race and racism are 'closed' issues – that we have 'done' race – the emergence of CRT has been a significant departure from the script. That departure has helped shape many of the current youthful movements to dismantle racism in higher education, such as 'Decolonising the University' and 'Why is my Curriculum White?'

Responding to the antipathy that CRT has provoked as if it were coherent critique is much like responding to Islamophobia as if it were theological debate. For, while the rules of derision applied to CRT often employ the language of Marxism, they rest upon atavistic beliefs about the illegitimacy of race-conscious politics and sociology. For many of us, therefore, the rhythm of the CRT debate brings with it déjà vu: 'We say "race"; they say "class".' What we have also seen before, however, is the persistence of race-conscious thought in England, the continued development of critical theories of race and racism, and the resilience of independent networks of anti-racist scholars. There are possibilities for more fruitful dialogue between CRT and Marxism than we have yet seen but it will require comradeship, not paternalism.

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