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Critical Race Theory: a Marxist Critique

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Synonyms

Critical race theory; (Neo-) marxism; “Race” over class; Racialization; White supremacy

Two central tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) are its advocacy of “white supremacy” as an accurate description of everyday racism and its primacy of “race” over class¹.

“White Supremacy”

Rather than its limited usage to describe only extremist groups today, such as the Ku Klux Klan or hate groups, or realities of antebellum USA, or apartheid South Africa, Critical Race Theory (CRT) employs the concept of “white supremacy” as a descriptor of reality for everyday experiences of racism now. “White supremacy” is seen as a more useful term than racism alone in certain contexts, for example, in the United States and in other specified countries, including the

United Kingdom and Australia². This is problematic, both through history and in the present. There are at least seven reasons for this. “White supremacy”:

- Directs attention away from capitalist economics and politics
- Homogenizes all white people
- Inadequately explains non-color-coded racism
- Does not explain newer hybridist racism
- Does not explain racism that is “not white” against “not white”
- Is historically and contemporaneously associated with beliefs and values which are not necessarily associated with “everyday racism,” and historically and contemporaneously connects to fascism, whereas racism and fascism need to be differentiated
- Is counterproductive in rallying against racism

Directing Attention Away from Capitalist Economics and Politics

While, for Marxists, it is certainly the case that there has been a continuity of racism for hundreds of years, the concept of “white supremacy” does not in itself explain this continuity, since it does not need to connect to modes of production and developments in capitalism. It is true that Critical Race Theorist Charles Mills (1997), for example,

¹For a more general critique and an appraisal of some aspects of CRT, see Cole 2016a, b, c.

²This entry draws heavily on the Introduction to Cole 2016a, pp. 13–22.

provides a wide-ranging discussion of the history of economic exploitation, and that John Preston (e.g., Preston 2007, 2010), writing from within a CRT framework, argues that CRT needs to be considered alongside Marxism. However, unlike Marxism, there is no inherent need to connect with capitalist modes of production or to make links to patterns of migration that are themselves strongly influenced by economic and political dynamics. Thus Gillborn (2008, pp. 34–36) is able to make the case for CRT and “white supremacy” without providing a discussion of the relationship of racism to capitalism. For a full understanding of racism at any given geographical location and/or historical conjuncture, the neo-Marxist concept of racialization is a useful tool.

The Neo-Marxist Concept of Racialization and Institutional Racism

Racialization refers to the categorization of people (falsely) into distinct “races.” The neo-Marxist concept of racialization is distinct from other interpretations of racialization in that it purports that in order to understand and combat racism, we must relate racism and racialization to historical, economic, and political factors.

Specifically, the neo-Marxist concept of racialization makes the connection between racism and capitalist modes of production, as well as making links to patterns of migration that are in themselves determined by economic and political dynamics. Thus the concept is able to relate to these factors, which are the real material contexts of struggle.

Robert Miles, a leading theorist of the neo-Marxist concept of racialization, has defined it as an ideological process, where people are categorized falsely into the scientifically defunct notion of distinct “races” (Miles 1993). Racialization, like “race,” is socially constructed. In Miles’s words racialization refers to “those instances where social relations between people have been structured by the signification of human biological characteristics [elsewhere in the same book, Miles (1989) added cultural characteristics] in such a way as to define and *construct* [my emphasis] differentiated social

collectivities” (Miles 1989, p. 75). “[T]he process of racialization,” Miles states, “cannot be adequately understood without a conception of, and explanation for the complex interplay of different modes of production and, in particular, of the social relations necessarily established in the course of material production.” (Miles 1989, p. 7). It is this articulation with modes of production and with the ideological and the cultural that makes Miles’s concept of racialization inherently (neo-)Marxist.

Maria Papapolydorou (2010) has reminded us that for Miles (1989), racism is associated with modes of production but not limited to capitalist modes of production, and that, according to Miles, racialization and racism predate capitalist societies. As Miles puts it, neither are “exclusive ‘products’ of capitalism but have origins in European societies prior to the development of the capitalist mode of production” (1989, p. 99). While this is true, and the Crusades are but one obvious example, the focus here is specifically on the way in which racialization connects to capitalist modes of production (and to patterns of migration). This is not to say, of course, that all instances of racism in capitalist societies are directly or even indirectly linked to capitalism, economics, and politics. In racialized societies, racism is experienced with massive and constant frequency in countless situations, an insistence for which CRT can be credited. The point is that without the neo-Marxist concept of racialization, it is impossible to have a full understanding of racism under capitalism, both historically and contemporaneously. For a discussion of different uses of the concept of racialization, both (neo-)Marxist and non-Marxist, see Murji and Solomos (2005).

Miles insists that we employ the concept of “racialization” rather than “race” to analyze and understand why different groups are racialized in different locations in different historical and contemporary periods and how this all relates to capitalist economic and political processes (Miles 1982, 1989, 1993; Ashe and McGeever 2011).

The UK and the USA are institutionally racist societies. This was recognized officially in the United Kingdom as long ago as 1999 by the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report (Macpherson

1999) which followed a lengthy public campaign initiated by the parents of black teenager Stephen Lawrence, after his racist murder in 1993. It needs to be stressed, however, that the resonances in institutional practices of this recognition have now in the United Kingdom virtually disappeared. Institutional racism is defined in the report as:

The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people (Macpherson 1999, 6.34).

From a Marxist viewpoint, the nebulous and ahistorical definition of institutional racism provided by Macpherson needs to have historical, economic, and political foci. The definition also requires enhancement by the neo-Marxist concept of racialization. Last but not least, it needs to incorporate intentional as well as unintentional or unwitting racism. Institutional racism can thus be reformulated as follows:

Collective acts and/or procedures in an institution or institutions (locally, nationwide, continent-wide or globally) that intentionally or unintentionally have the effect of racializing, via “common sense,” certain populations or groups of people, through a process of interpellation³. This racialization process cannot be understood without reference to economic and political factors related to developments and changes, historically and contemporaneously, in national, continent-wide and global capitalism. Hegemony describes the ongoing attempts by the ruling class to consolidate a racist consensus. Counter-hegemony refers to continuing resistance to these endeavours.

It should be stressed that the interests of procapitalist politicians and capitalists do not always correspond or coalesce around racialization. For example, it is often in the interests of establishment politicians to racialize certain groups of workers, for electoral gain, for example, while capitalists may prefer not to, in

their pursuit of cheap labor power and greater surplus value and hence profits. Marxist political economist Gareth Dale maintains that migrant workers are a perfect solution in times of intensified labor market flexibility, but also stresses the contradiction between capital’s need for (cheap) flexible labor and the need for hegemonic control of the workforce by racializing potential foreign workers:

On the one hand, intensified competition spurs employers’ requirements for enhanced labour market flexibility—for which immigrant labour is ideal. On the other, in such periods questions of social control tend to become more pressing. Governments strive to uphold the ideology of “social contract” even as its content is eroded through unemployment and austerity. The logic, commonly, is for less political capital to be derived from the [social contract’s] content, while greater emphasis is placed upon its exclusivity, on demarcation from those who enter from or lie outside—immigrants and foreigners (Dale 1999, p. 308)

The Homogenization of All White People

Mills acknowledges that not “all whites are better off than all nonwhites, but . . . as a statistical generalization, the objective life chances of whites are significantly better” (Mills 1997, p. 37). To take poverty as one example, poverty for white people is consistently less than that of racialized peoples. Nevertheless, we should not lose sight of the life chances of millions of working-class white people who, along with racialized groups, are part of the 99 %, not the 1 %⁴.

Moreover, the term “white supremacy” at least *implicates* all white people as part of some hegemonic bloc of “whiteness.” For Mills (1997, p. 1), “white supremacy” is “the basic political system that has shaped the world for the past several hundred years” and “the most important political system of recent global history,” while the racial

³(Althusser, 1971, pp. 174-175) makes us think that ruling class capitalist values are actually congruent with our values as *individuals* as we are interpellated or “hailed” to think that capitalist values are natural.

⁴“We are the 99 %” is a widely used political slogan, first coined by the Occupy movement (www.occupytogether.org/aboutoccupy/).

contract⁵ “designates Europeans as the privileged race” (p. 33). To underline the point that he sees “white supremacy” as a political system in its own right, and that the racial contract is both “real” and “global” (p. 20), Mills asserts:

Global white supremacy . . . is *itself* a political system, a particular power structure of formal or informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties (p. 3).

Some critical race theorists argue that “white supremacy” does not necessarily refer to skin color, “rather to structures of subordination and domination.” However, “white supremacy” is generally perceived as referring to skin color.

Inadequate Explanation of Non-Color-Coded Racism

Mills acknowledges that there were/are what he refers to as “‘borderline’ Europeans” – “the Irish, Slavs, Mediterraneans, and above all, of course, Jews,” and that there also existed “intra-European varieties of ‘racism’” (Mills 1997, pp. 78–79). However, he argues that, while there remain “some recognition of such distinctions in popular culture” – he gives examples of an “Italian” waitress in the television series *Cheers* calling a WASP character “Whitey” and a discussion in a 1992 movie about whether Italians are really white (p. 79) – he relegates such distinctions primarily to history. While Mills is prepared to “fuzzify” racial categories (p. 79) with respect to “shifting criteria prescribed by the evolving Racial Contract” (p. 81) and to acknowledge the existence of “off-White” people at certain historical periods (p. 80), he maintains that his categorization – “white/nonwhite, person/subperson” – “seems to me to map the essential

features of the racial polity accurately, to carve the social reality at its ontological joints” (p. 78).

Mills is, of course, writing about the United States, and his analysis does not provide an explanation for non-color-coded racism in the United Kingdom, where there are well-documented analyses of such racism both historically and contemporaneously (see Cole 2016a, chapter 1).

Robert Miles *is* aware of non-color-coded racism. He stresses that racialization is a process and recognition that “opens the door to history” which subsequently “opens the door to understanding the complexities of who gets racialized when and for what purpose, and how that changes through time” (in Ashe and McGeever 2011, p. 2019). Miles warns against avoiding the “fundamental mistake” of drawing clear lines between what happens to white immigrants and black immigrants, adding that the “black–white” dichotomy leads you into a “huge cul-de-sac” (in Ashe and McGeever 2011, p. 2019). “White supremacy” provides no basis for an understanding of racism in the UK directed at the Irish people, at Jewish people, at Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities, or of the widespread xeno-racism directed at Eastern European migrant workers since Poland joined the European Union (see Cole 2016a, chapter 1). This racism has all the hallmarks of traditional racism, such as that directed at Asian, black, and other minority ethnic workers following mass immigration after the Second World War, but impacts on recently arrived groups of people.

No Explanation of Newer Hybridist Racism

Under this heading, anti-asylum-seeker racism and Islamophobia are included. “Newer hybridist racism” is used because, unlike the forms of racism that are either essentially color-coded or essentially non-color-coded, anti-asylum-seeker racism and Islamophobia can be either color-coded or non-color-coded. These forms of racism can also encompass a combination of color-coded and non-color-coded racism. For example, racism directed at asylum seekers from “sub-Saharan Africa” (itself a term with color-coded racist implications) will be color-coded but may also be Islamophobic, which is not necessarily color-

⁵Mills’s “racial contract” refers to his belief that racism is at the core of the “social contract,” rather than being an unintended result, because of human failing. Social contract theory, which is nearly as old as philosophy itself, is the view that people’s moral and/or political obligations are dependent on a contract or agreement among them to form the society in which they live (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (IEP), www.iep.utm.edu/soc-cont/).

coded, or it may be a combination of color-coded (anti-black) racism and non-color-coded racism (Islamophobia). That form of racism, experienced by Afghan and Iraqi asylum seekers, for example, is also ambiguous and may or may not be more Islamophobic than color-coded.

Lack of Explanation of Racism That Is “Not White” Against “Non-White”

Charles Mills acknowledges that “white supremacy” does not explain “varieties of racial domination . . . that are not white-over-non-white,” and “that is a weakness of the term that should be conceded” (Mills 2009, p. 275). He gives the example of “certain Asian nations.” In late 2015, Islamophobia in Myanmar (Burma) is an obvious example, and anti-Vietnamese racism is rife in Cambodia. Not-white over non-white racism is also a reality in South Africa. However, it has to be said that interethnic racism is also a reality in the “developed world.” For example, in the overtly xeno-racist UK Independence Party (UKIP) there are black and Asian members and supporters.

Historical Context, Historical and Contemporary Association with Other Beliefs and Values, and Connections with Fascism

First of all, it needs to be pointed out that in certain periods of history “white supremacy”, conventionally defined, was the norm. Second, white supremacist groups, conventionally defined, have tended to embrace a number of other beliefs and values which are not necessarily associated with everyday racism. These can include homophobia, Holocaust denial or claims that the Holocaust was exaggerated, antisemitic conspiracy theories (that Jewish people conspire to control the world), and engagement in military-type activity.

Some of these associated beliefs and values were epitomized by the now almost defunct white supremacist and fascist British National Party (BNP). When its then leader Nick Griffin appeared on the popular BBC discussion program, *Question Time* in October 2009, he stated that Islam was incompatible with life in Britain,

admitted sharing a platform with the Ku Klux Klan, and described gay men kissing in public as “really creepy.” He said that “legal reasons” prevented him from explaining why he had previously sought to play down the Holocaust, and that he had now changed his mind. He was challenged by fellow panelist Jack Straw, the then Justice Secretary, who said there was no law preventing him from giving an explanation.

It is important to distinguish between racism on the one hand and “white supremacy” and fascism on the other. Aninda Bhattacharyya (2009) succinctly explains the relationship between capitalism and fascism. As he puts it, “fascist organisations offer themselves to the ruling class as a deadly weapon to use against the left. But the use of this weapon comes at a price – stripping away any pretence that capitalism is a fair or progressive system.” This is because fascism means that the ruling class has to use the full force of the repressive apparatuses of the state (RSAs) rather than just rely on the ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) (Althusser 1971). Thus fascism is “a weapon of last resort for our rulers, one that they turn to in periods of acute crisis but keep their distance from at other times” (Bhattacharyya 2009). In other words, while the ruling class is quite happy to up the barometer of racism, it tries hard not to admit to doing that:

The contradictory political relationship between the ruling class and fascism manifests itself as a contradictory ideological attitude and contradictory action. So the *Daily Mail* [a right-wing tabloid, aimed at the UK middle class] attacks Muslims, but also attacks the BNP for attacking Muslims. The mainstream parties denounce the BNP, but play to its agenda on issues like immigration (Bhattacharyya 2009)⁶.

Fascism tends to have both a parliamentary and a street presence. This is typical of fascist complementarity and dates back to Benito Mussolini, fascist dictator in Italy in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s (he had the *squadre d'azione*), and Adolf Hitler, who had the “Brownshirts” who played a

⁶This was also the case with the xeno-racist political party UKIP in the run-up to the 2015 UK general election (see Cole 2016a, pp. 67–83 for a discussion).

major role in his rise to power in the 1920s and 1930s (Smith 2010, p. 13). Antiracists, including Marxists, need of course to “oppose both fascism and the racism that feeds it, both politically and on the streets, while understanding the distinctions and relationships between them” (Bhattacharyya 2009). Bhattacharyya concludes:

That means understanding that the “right wing anti-fascism” of [sections of the media] isn’t simply a matter of hypocrisy. There are material political motives for why the ruling class is ordinarily opposed to fascism . . . [but we] cannot ever rely on this right wing anti-fascism that can rapidly reverse into support for the Nazis (Bhattacharyya 2009).

CRT obfuscation of “white supremacy” and its collapse into the realm of “everyday racism” critically undermines a serious analysis of “white supremacy” in the conventional use of the term, and its connections to other obnoxious beliefs, values, and actions, and to fascism.

“White Supremacy” as Counterproductive in Rallying Against Racism

As the crisis in capitalism deepens, it is absolutely essential for unity among the working class as a whole. Advocating “white supremacy” as a descriptor of “everyday racism” is useless as a unifier and counterproductive as a political rallying point. While the prospect of social revolution and socialism in the UK and the USA is off the agenda for the foreseeable future, it is inconceivable, in my view, that workers, racialized or not, could productively unite around anti-“white supremacy.” More constructive, from a Marxist perspective, is to demand an end to racialized capitalism.

Critical Race Theory and the Primacy of “Race” Over Class

Mills rejects both what he refers to as the “original white radical orthodoxy (Marxist)” for arguing that social class is the primary contradiction in capitalist society and the “present white radical orthodoxy (post-Marxist/postmodernist)” for its rejection of any primary contradiction. Instead, for Mills,

“there is a primary contradiction, and . . . it’s race” (Mills 2003, p. 156). For Kimberlé Crenshaw and colleagues (1995, p. xxvi), “subsuming race under class” is “the typical Marxist error.”

Mills states that “[r]ace [is] the central identity around which people close ranks” and that there is “no transracial class bloc” (Mills 2003, p. 157). Given the way in which neoliberal global capitalism unites capitalists throughout the world on lines that are not necessarily color-coded, this statement seems quite extraordinary.

“Race,” Mills goes on, is “the stable reference point for identifying the ‘them’ and ‘us’ which override all other ‘thems’ and ‘us’s’ (identities are multiple, but some are more central than others)” (p. 157), while for Crenshaw and colleagues (1995, p. xxvi), although they acknowledge that “race” is socially constructed (an issue addressed earlier in this entry), with which Marxists would fully concur, “race” is “real” since “there is a material dimension and weight to being ‘raced’ in American society.” It is the case, of course, that racism has real material effects on racialized peoples. “Race,” Mills (2003, p. 157) concludes, is “what ties the system together, and blocks progressive change.” For Marxists, it is capitalism that does this.

Mills invites readers to:

Imagine you’re a white male Marxist in the happy prefeminist, pre-postmodernist world of a quarter-century ago. You read Marcuse, Miliband, Poulantzas, Althusser. You believe in a theory of group domination involving something like the following: The United States is a *class* society in which class, defined by *relationship to the means of production*, is the *fundamental* division, the bourgeoisie being the *ruling* class, the workers being *exploited* and *alienated*, with the state and the juridical system *not* being neutral but part of a superstructure to maintain the existing order, while the *dominant ideology* naturalizes, and renders invisible and unobjectionable, class domination (Mills 2003, p. 158).

This all seems a pretty accurate description of the United States in the twenty-first century, but for Mills it is “a set of highly controversial propositions” (p. 158). He justifies this assertion by stating that all of the above “would be disputed by mainstream political philosophy (liberalism), political science (pluralism), economics (neoclassical marginal utility theory), and

sociology (Parsonian structural-functionalism and its heirs)” (p. 158). While this is true, my response to this would be, well, of course it would be disputed by mainstream philosophers, pluralist political scientists, neoclassical economists, and functionalist sociologists, all of whom are, unlike Marxists, at one level or another apologists for capitalism.

Social class, albeit massively racialized⁷, is the system upon which the maintenance of capitalism depends. It is possible, though extremely difficult, because of the multiple benefits accruing to capital of racializing workers (not least forcing down labor costs) and the unpaid and underpaid labor of women as a whole, to imagine a capitalist world of “racial” (and gender) equality. It is not logically possible for capitalism to exhibit social class equality. Without the extraction of surplus value from the labor of workers, capitalism cannot exist.

Capitalism is dependent on racism both as a source of profiteering (in general appropriating more surplus value from racialized workers) and as a means of “divide and rule,” driving a wedge between nonracialized and racialized workers. These processes of “divide and rule” were recognized by Marx, some 145 years ago:

In all the big industrial centres in England there is profound antagonism between the Irish proletariat and the English proletariat. The average English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers wages and the standard of life. He feels national and religious antipathies for him. He regards him somewhat like the poor whites of the Southern states regard their black slaves. *This antagonism among the proletarians of England is artificially nourished and supported by the bourgeoisie. It knows that this scission is the true secret of maintaining its power* (my emphasis) (Marx 1870 [1978], p. 254).

That is one of the reasons why combating racism is so crucial for Marxists. As Keengaya-Yamahatta Taylor puts it, without “a commitment by revolutionary organizations in the here and

now to the fight against racism, working-class unity will never be achieved and the revolutionary potential of the working class will never be realized.”

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⁷Social class is of course also gendered, and there is a substantial and substantive literature on Marxism and feminism, the latest of which is Mojab (2015). Many feminists have rejected Marxist feminism in favor of intersectionality (see Cole 2016a, pp. 22–23).

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MARXISM At its roots, Critical Race Theory is a legal/social/political theory that belongs to the postmodern philosophical tradition and has certain neo-Marxist tendencies. Broadly speaking, postmodern political theories share with classical Marxists a deep suspicion of all prevailing power structures; not only of wealthy and powerful classes, but of the narratives (stories) with which we commend certain behaviors and condemn others; and of the manner in which language itself tends to favor some and suppress others.

CHRISTIAN CRITIQUE A Christian critique of postmodernism (and theories like CRT) is not purely negative, as it begins with the recognition that truth-claims cannot be divorced from a story about all of reality. Critical Race Theory, or CRT, is a theoretical and interpretive mode that examines the appearance of race and racism across dominant cultural modes of expression. In adopting this approach, CRT scholars attempt to understand how victims of systemic racism are affected by cultural perceptions of race and how they are able to represent themselves to counter prejudice.

Gates, Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Harris, Cheryl. Critical race theory (CRT) is a Postmodernist construct based on Critical theory that teaches that race is not genetic. Instead, race is a social construct and a basis for political struggles in the fight for racial justice. In some schools Critical race theory is being camouflaged as Culturally relevant teaching (CRT) or culturally responsive teaching (CRT).