

RACISM

Racism

A Critical Analysis

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Introduction

‘RACE’: PAST ITS SELL-BY DATE

‘Race’ is a social construct. That this is the case is explained succinctly by neuroscientist Steven Rose and sociologist Hilary Rose.¹ As they note, in 1972 the evolutionary geneticist Richard Lewontin pointed out that 85 per cent of human genetic diversity occurred within rather than between populations, and only 6–10 per cent of diversity is associated with the broadly defined ‘races’. Rose and Rose explain that most of this difference is accounted for by the readily visible genetic variation of skin colour, hair form and so on. The everyday business of seeing and acknowledging such difference is not the same as the project of genetics. For genetics, and more importantly, for the prospect of treating genetic diseases, the difference is important, since humans differ in their susceptibility to particular diseases, and genetics can have something to say about this. However, beyond medicine, the invocation of ‘race’ is increasingly suspect.

There has been a growing debate among geneticists about the utility of the term, and an entire issue of the influential journal *Nature Reviews Genetics* (Autumn 2004) was devoted to it. The geneticists agreed with most biological anthropologists that for human biology the term ‘race’ is an unhelpful leftover. Rose and Rose argue that ‘[w]hatever arbitrary boundaries one places on any population group for the purposes of genetic research, they do not match those of conventionally defined races.’² For example, the DNA of ‘native’ Britons contains traces of the multiple entries into the United Kingdom of occupiers and migrants. ‘Race’, as a scientific concept, Rose and Rose conclude, ‘is well past its sell-by date.’³ The popular political slogan ‘one race, the human race’ would appear to be accurate. ‘Race’ as a concept should be abandoned. For these reasons, following Robert Miles (referred to at length in this Introduction), if I need to use the term ‘race’ as an ‘idea’, as a social construct, I shall put it in inverted commas. As Miles explains:

I am rigorous in believing that there is a very clear distinction between an idea and a concept ... insofar as there is an idea of ‘race’ that is a historical reality [I] use the notion of racialization [the false categorisation of people into distinct ‘races’] to then seek to explain the origin, development and use of that idea.⁴

Miles’s use of the concept of racialization, a process that serves ruling-class

interests by dividing the working class, promoting conflict among that class – the class with least access to power and wealth – and forcing down labour costs, is explored in this Introduction.

RACISM: A FRIGHTENINGLY REAL, BURNING AND OMNIPRESENT ISSUE

If ‘race’ is a social construct, racism, as I argue throughout this book, is a frighteningly real, burning and omnipresent issue. It is directed at people because of a number of perceived ‘identities’: ‘race’, ethnicity, nationality, religion or a combination of these. In addition, as I shall also demonstrate in this book, contemporary racism is multifaceted. For these reasons, it is important to adopt a broad concept of racism, rather than a narrow one, based on notions of overt biological inferiority as it was in the days of the British Empire in India, Africa and elsewhere; under slavery and its legacy in the United States; and as was the case with indigenous Americans and Australians dating back centuries. In these historical scenarios, notions of cultural inferiority coexisted with perceptions of biological inferiority. In the contemporary world, biological racism is less acceptable in the mainstream than is cultural racism.

Racism can also be unintentional as well as intentional (although the former can sometimes cause as much distress as the latter). The difference between these two forms of racism depends obviously on intention, and is summed up by the epithet – you do not have to be a racist (intentional) to be racist (which can be unintentional).⁵ Racist pronouncements, intentional as well as unintentional, are often introduced with ‘I’m not racist but ...’. Racism can be direct or indirect; it can be overt as well as covert. Moreover ‘seemingly positive’ attributes will probably ultimately have racist implications, as in ‘they are good at sport’, which may have the subtext that ‘they’ are not good at much else; or ‘they have a strong culture’, where ‘they’ are taking over might be a subtext. Racism can be dominative (direct and oppressive) as well as aversive (exclusion and cold-shouldering).⁶ Finally, it should be stressed that racism can also become (more) apparent given certain stimuli.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND MARXISM

One of the challenges of writing a book about racism on three continents is to keep up with the frequency of its occurrence. I am not talking so much

about overt intentional and psychologically or physically violent actions perpetrated by, and/or words expressed by, self-acknowledged or self-proclaimed racists, although there is plenty of that,⁷ but more about racism's everyday mundane taken-for-granted acceptability. Although, as will soon be clear, my own theoretical orientation is neo-Marxist, which in terms of practice veers towards a socialism of the twenty-first century rather than the twentieth,⁸ critical race theory (CRT), arguably the dominant radical paradigm with respect to the analysis of racism in the United States (and also a major presence in Australian academia, but less so in the United Kingdom) must be given credit for one of its central tenets, its insistence that racism is an unexceptional and constant occurrence for people of colour.⁹ For many years when meeting a new acquaintance in the Anglophone world, I would try hard to take them at face value and not to make assumptions, whatever the visual or verbal clues, that they were racist. I do not do this any more, but assume intentional or unintentional racism, unless persuaded otherwise.

What is Critical Race Theory?

What then is CRT? Founding and leading UK-based CRT David Gillborn has defined it as consisting of a number of defining elements, and using several conceptual tools (see Figure 0.1).¹⁰ Gillborn elaborates on each of the elements and each of the tools. Thus, racism as 'endemic' means that it goes far beyond 'crude, obvious acts of race hatred' to include 'the more subtle and hidden operations of power that have the effect of disadvantaging one or more minority ethnic groups'.¹¹ With respect to the crossing of epistemological boundaries, Gillborn argues that CRT's theoretical eclecticism allows it to bring various insights together in a new and challenging way that raise deeply troubling questions.¹²

As far as the limitations of civil rights laws are concerned, following William Tate, Gillborn argues that the laws to remedy racial inequality are often undermined before they can be fully implemented.¹³ Moreover, 'CRT portrays dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy as camouflages for the self-interest of powerful entities of society'.¹⁴ Critical race theorists not only criticize the inability of traditional legal discourse to deal with complex and comprehensive racism, they go further, by viewing legal discourse as 'one of the prime means by which such a critical perspective is denied legitimacy and the status quo is defended'.¹⁵

'Call to context' is a concept coined by leading US critical race theorist Richard Delgado, who insists on the importance of context and the detail

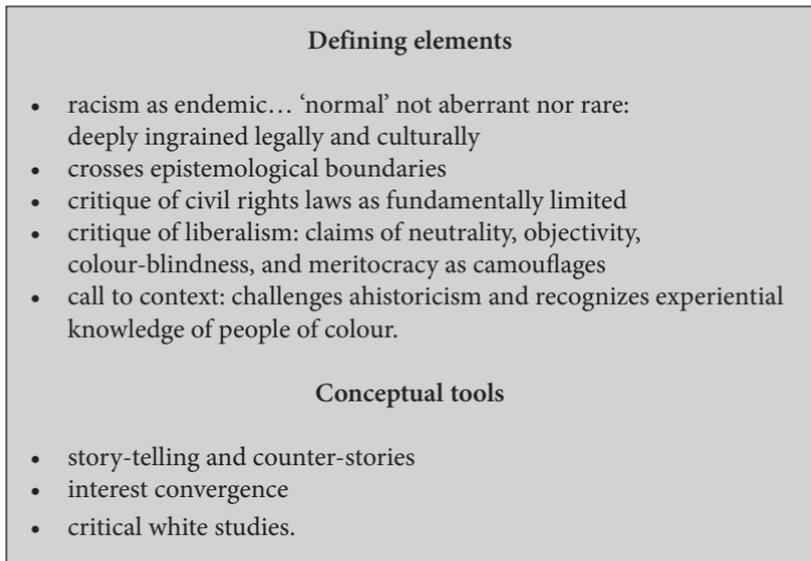


Figure 0.1 Critical race theory: a conceptual map

Source: D. Gillborn (2006) 'Critical race theory and education: racism and anti-racism in educational theory and praxis,' *Discourse*, 27(1), p. 20.

of the lived experience of minority peoples as 'a defence against the colour-blind and sanitized analyses generated via universalistic discourses'.¹⁶ I fully agree with critical race theorists¹⁷ that we should reject 'color blindness'. As Delgado and Stefancic explain:

Critical race theorists . . . hold that color blindness will allow us to redress only extremely egregious racial harms, ones that everyone would notice and condemn. But if racism is embedded in our thought processes and social structures as deeply as many critics believe, then the 'ordinary business' of society – the routines, practices, and institutions that we rely on to effect the world's work – will keep minorities in subordinate positions. Only aggressive, color-conscious efforts to change the way things are will do much to ameliorate misery.¹⁸

Given CRT's roots in critical legal studies and the legal profession,¹⁹ the call to context, according to Delgado and Stefancic,²⁰ is essential to understand the full background to any major dispute or issue.

A particularly striking aspect of CRT, Gillborn suggests, is the use of story-telling and counter-storytelling. Here, he explains, 'myths, assumptions, and

received wisdoms can be questioned by shifting the grounds of debate or presenting analyses in ways that turn dominant assumptions on their head.²¹

'Interest convergence' refers to the fact that 'white elites will tolerate or encourage racial advances for blacks only when such advances also promote white self-interest'.²² Finally, 'critical white studies' is a wide-ranging field of study which focuses on white people and their sense of self, their interests and concerns. But Gillborn points out that since the mid-1980s there has been 'a significant increase in the amount of critical scholarship on the nature of "whiteness", work that is deconstructing the taken-for-granted myths and assumptions that circulate about what it means to be, and not be, a "white" person'.²³ Gillborn concludes that '[c]ritical scholarship on whiteness is not an assault on white people per se: it is an assault on the socially constructed and constantly reinforced power of white identifications and interests'.²⁴

What is Marxism?

From a Marxist perspective,²⁵ social class is fundamental to capitalism, since capitalism relies for its very existence on the extraction of surplus value from workers: capitalists pay workers less than the value they produce, with the value added by workers' labour appropriated as profit by and for the capitalist when goods are sold (this is the labour theory of value, LTV).²⁶ This means that there is a permanent inherent conflict between the working class and the capitalist class. Class struggle is endemic to the capitalist system. It cannot be eradicated as long as capitalism exists. However it does not always, or even typically, take the form of open conflict or expressed hostility. It arises unavoidably from the tension generated by the zero-sum game (a benefit to one is at the cost of the other) between profits going to capitalists and wages or salaries given to workers. The objective interests of the capitalist and the worker are thus incompatible, and 'therefore generate not a tendency to permanent hostility and open warfare but a permanent tendency towards them'.²⁷

Because of the cyclical instability of capitalism, periodic crises in capitalism mean that social revolution is always a possibility. However, as we shall see, the early socialists' prognosis that social revolution and socialism were inevitable and imminent has been undermined by subsequent historical developments, which are best explained by neo-Marxist theory.

If the LTV is one basis of Marxism, the other is the materialist conception of history. As Marx's co-writer Friedrich Engels explains, the materialist conception of history 'starts from the proposition that the production of the means to support human life and, next to production, the exchange of

things produced, is the basis of all social structure.²⁸ In capitalist societies, production is based on private ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, with workers forced to sell their labour power to capitalists in order to live. This combination of forces means that the way people relate to the physical world and the way people relate to each other are bound together in historically specific structural and necessary ways. As Marx put it, in the male-centred and sexist language²⁹ which was the norm in the nineteenth century:

My inquiry led me to the conclusion that neither legal relations nor political forms could be comprehended whether by themselves or on the basis of a so-called general development of the human mind, but that on the contrary they originate in the material conditions of life In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.³⁰

In other words it is the economic base, or the capitalist economy, that generates the legal and political levels of society. These are not neutral or objective but reflect the needs of the capitalist economy and capitalists. We tend to think the way we do because of the type of economic system in which we live. Marx also once noted that the:

ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.³¹

Thus, in order to understand social, political, legal and intellectual life, which form the terrains of racism, and which have a massive effect on

how we think and act, we need to make connections with the capitalist economy. Later in this Introduction, I try to explain how we come to think the way we do.

Engels referred to the combination of the LTV and the materialist conception of history as *scientific socialism*. In early scientific socialist writing, there is an undercurrent of the inevitability and imminence of socialism. This is particularly evident in the work of Engels and the Russian Bolshevik revolutionary, and leader of the Russian Revolution in 1917, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, commonly known as Lenin.³²

Although he did not write much about racism, Marx was well aware of its importance in the genesis of the industrial capitalist:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.³³

Taylor notes how Marx was also aware of three important features of capitalism, with respect to racialization.³⁴ First, capitalism promotes competition between workers for jobs, housing, education, health care and so on. Taylor calls these ‘laws of false scarcity’, whereby, as she notes, we are told there is not enough to go round:

While the scarcity is false, the competition is real, and workers fighting over these items to better themselves or their families are often willing to believe the worst about other workers to justify why they should have something and others should not.³⁵

The reality is that if wealth were to be distributed equally, and society run on socialist, rather than capitalist lines, there would be abundant jobs, housing, education, health care and so on for all.

The second feature of capitalism is that the ruling class uses racist ideology to divide workers against each other, and racialization is the perfect tool for this. As we shall see throughout the book, capitalism can thrive as long as workers blame other (racialized) workers rather than capitalists and capitalism for their structural location in societies.

Third, when one group of workers are super-exploited, it negatively impacts the working class as a whole. Thus, if capitalists can get away with paying very low wages to migrant workers (who often have migrated from capitalist economies with still lower wages, or no work at all), thereby

generating greater surplus value and thereby profit, this lowers the wage level for all workers, racialized or not.

What is Neo-Marxism?

The development of neo-Marxism (the ‘neo’ – ‘new’ – in Neo-Marxism refers to theoretical developments in Marxism, post-Marx) needs to be seen in the light of the fact that inevitability and imminence of a general transition to socialism proved to be over-optimistic, and severely compromised. This fact meant that some aspects of Marxism had to be rethought. Specifically, what needed to be understood was the role of capitalist institutions in maintaining their power base.

As Leszek Kolakowski³⁶ has argued, the common element in theories designated as ‘neo’-Marxist is a concern with the role of capitalist states’ welfare institutions in retarding rather than advancing socialism. The defining features of neo-Marxism are a concern with culture (as in the notion of the forging of a hegemonic culture as elaborated by prominent Italian neo-Marxist Antonio Gramsci)³⁷ and with ideology (ideas that work in the interests of the ruling class, as in the concept of ideological state apparatuses outlined by French neo-Marxist Louis Althusser)³⁸ (both theorists are discussed in the next section). Neo-Marxist analysis should be seen as a supplement to rather than a replacement of Marxism.

Humanist Marxism and Structuralist Marxism

The neo-Marxism primarily employed in this book to understand racism can be divided into humanist Marxism and structuralist Marxism. The fundamental difference between the two is that the former emphasizes the power of the human will in breaking through the structures of capitalist society, while the latter reminds us of how powerful these constraining structures are. We should over-emphasize neither humanism (as this leads to idealism) nor structuralism (as this leads to determinism and defeatism).

Moreover, the humanist Gramsci and the structuralist Althusser should not necessarily be seen as polar opposites. While it is easy to see how the latter’s writings have been used to stress domination by structures (such as interpellating subjects – see below) and the former’s to stress struggle (as in hegemony and counter-hegemony – see below), there are passages in both writers’ works that imply the opposite. Both forms of Marxism are in fact predated by Marx’s famous dictum that stressed both the power of the structures of capitalist society and the power of workers to change history. I am referring to Marx’s famous (1852) observation in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*

that we make our own history (humanism), but not in circumstances of our own choosing (structuralism).³⁹ What is distinctive about my approach in this book is that rather than relying on Althusserian structuralist Marxism or Gramscian humanist Marxism, I argue that, in order to get a full understanding of the relationship between racism and schooling in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia, it is informative to utilize some key concepts from both Gramsci and Althusser, as well as those of other (neo) Marxists, and of course those of Marx and Engels themselves.

One of Gramsci's key concepts is 'common sense'. Gramsci made a distinction between 'common sense' and good sense. 'Common sense' refers to thoughts and reflections that are felt to be the product of years of knowing what is right and necessary, but really mirror the interests of the ruling class. 'Common sense', then, is 'based on surface appearances and information, and does not reach deeper to give a systemic explanation for the disparities that exist in society'.⁴⁰ Engels described this as 'false consciousness':

Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, indeed, but with a false consciousness. The real motives impelling him remain unknown to him Hence he imagines false or apparent motives He works with mere thought material which he accepts without examination as the product of thought, he does not investigate further for a more remote process.⁴¹

'Common sense' connects racialization with popular consciousness. Thus, we might pick up in the street, read in a tabloid or hear from a politician, 'it's only common sense to restrict immigration to this small island', or 'become an official member of the Common Sense Campaign ... [and] win back America',⁴² or 'it's common sense that we should put jobs for Australian workers first and keep Asian workers out'.⁴³

'Common sense' also works to reinforce racist stereotypes. Political activist and Marxist academic Keenga-Yamahtta Taylor gives the example of African Americans (although this can usually be applied to racialized groups in general) who, because of their worse housing, schooling, shorter life span and generally worse conditions are perceived to be inferior – 'they caused all this themselves' – which reinforces racism and racialization.⁴⁴

Good sense, on the other hand, for Gramsci, is informed by a real political and economic awareness of capitalism, exemplified by Marxism and obtained by reading Marx. As educationalist Diana Coben has argued, good sense 'may be created out of common sense through an educative

Marxist politics.⁴⁵ Good sense then would reveal that racialized groups are living in worse conditions because of racism, racialization and their structural location in capitalist society.

It is also useful to employ in our understanding of racism the concept of *interpellation*, as developed by Althusser. Interpellation is the process via which the politicians and the media, for example, claim to be speaking on behalf of the people: ‘what the British have had enough of’, ‘what the American people want’ or ‘what Australians are sick and tired of’. Althusser stressed that it is individuals rather than classes or groups that are interpellated or hailed. For Althusser, the interpellation of subjects – the hailing of concrete individuals as concrete subjects, as in ‘Hey, you there!’⁴⁶ – provides the absolute guarantee that everything really is so, and that on condition that the subjects recognize what they are and behave accordingly, everything will be all right: Amen – ‘So be it.’⁴⁷ Althusser notes that it is a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes, without appearing to do so, ‘obviousnesses as obviousnesses.’⁴⁸ Interpellation is the process by which ideologies function through concrete social institutions. This means that individuals as bearers of structures are transformed ideologically into subjects; that is, they live the relation of their real conditions of existence as if they autonomously determined that relation.⁴⁹ In other words, echoing Engels’s notion of ‘false consciousness’, we tend to think and act in the interests of the ruling class, as if it was solely our choice to do so, and it is fully in our interests to do so. To give an example pertaining to racism, in the 2015 UK general election there was universal agreement about immigration among all establishment political parties, whose spokespersons could say with confidence that of course the British people want to restrict it.

More generally, this leads to the claim that there is no point in workers questioning their social class position under capitalism, let alone considering alternative ways of running the world, such as democratic socialism, or even social democracy:⁵⁰ ‘socialism’s been tried and it doesn’t work. Anyway, people are basically selfish, and we need businesses and free enterprise to create wealth.’⁵¹

Interpellation is thus a fundamental process inserted within the ideological apparatus of the state, Althusser having made a distinction between the ideological apparatuses of the state (ISAs) (religion, education, family, law, politics, trade unions, communication, culture) and repressive state apparatuses (RSAs) (government, administration, army, police, courts, prisons).⁵² Within the ISAs, subjects ‘recognize’ the existing state of affairs: ‘it really is true that it is so and not otherwise.’⁵³

Leading cultural theorist the late Stuart Hall has described how the interpellation process passes into common sense: