Critical Race Theory and Education: Racism and antiracism in educational theory and praxis

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What is Critical Race Theory (CRT) and what does it offer educational researchers and practitioners outside the US? This paper addresses these questions by examining the recent history of antiracist research and policy in the UK. In particular, the paper argues that conventional forms of antiracism have proven unable to keep pace with the development of increasingly racist and exclusionary education polices that operate beneath a veneer of professed tolerance and diversity. In particular, contemporary antiracism lacks clear statements of principle and theory that risk reinventing the wheel with each new study; it is increasingly reduced to a meaningless slogan; and it risks appropriation within a reformist "can do" perspective dominated by the de-politicized and managerialist language of school effectiveness and improvement. In contrast, CRT offers a genuinely radical and coherent set of approaches that could revitalize critical research in education across a range of inquiries, not only in self-consciously "multicultural" studies. The paper reviews the developing terrain of CRT in education, identifying its key defining elements and the conceptual tools that characterise the work. CRT in education is a fast changing and incomplete project but it can no longer be ignored by the academy beyond North America.

Introduction

This paper argues that if antiracist research and practice are to survive and flourish we must learn from the errors of the past and adapt to the new realities of the present. The latter includes the startlingly successful cultural revolution that is sometimes referred to as "conservative modernization" (Apple, 2004; Dale, 1989), fuelled and given added bile through the resurgence of racist nationalism wrapped in the flag of freedom and security in a "post 9/11" world (Rizvi, 2003). The paper argues that antiracists internationally have much to gain from an engagement with the growing body of work in educational scholarship that draws inspiration from a branch of US legal scholarship known as Critical Race Theory (CRT).

The argument is made through a detailed consideration of antiracist work in Britain but many of the wider lessons might usefully be considered elsewhere. At a time when policy borrowing is reaching new heights (Whitty, Power & Halpin, 1998), both the specifics of educational reform, and the dilemmas facing educational researchers with a commitment to social justice, are remarkably similar in many

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different nation states. Notably, many scholars internationally share a common experience of increasingly market-driven education reforms where key words like "standards" and "accountability" are having are markedly regressive impact regardless of the official tenor of the governing political party: Howard's Australia, Blair's Britain and Bush's America, for example, have each witnessed the emergence of a complex and multifaceted Rightist "Hegemonic Bloc" (Apple, 1998a) that has come to define educational commonsense in a particular way:

> We are told to "free" our schools by placing them into the competitive market, restore "our" traditional common culture and stress discipline and character, return God to our classrooms as a guide to all our conduct inside and outside the school, and tighten central control through more rigorous and tough-minded standards and tests. This is all supposed to be done at the same time. It is all supposed to guarantee an education that benefits everyone. Well, maybe not. (Apple, 2001, p. 5)

The paper has three main sections; first, I reflect on the role of theory in British antiracism; second, the consequences of the present situation are examined; and finally, CRT is outlined and its promise for critical antiracist scholarship and praxis is considered.

Theory and Antiracism

Antiracism is a familiar term in many educational systems but with a wide variety of specific meanings (see Carrim & Soudien, 1999). In Britain, antiracism arose as much from a critique of liberal multiculturalism as it did from an analysis of the racist nature of the state. Academics, notably in places like Birmingham's now disbanded Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS, 1982), played a vital role but so too did committed teachers and activists struggling to affect change in a wide variety of ways (Bourne, 1980; Brah & Minhas, 1985; Brandt, 1986; Chevannes & Reeves, 1987; Coard, 1971; Cole, 1986; Dhondy, 1974; Gill & Levidow, 1987; Gilroy, 1987, 1988; Lawrence, 1982; Mullard, 1984; Nixon, 1985; Sarup, 1986; Tomlinson, 1984). Antiracism established its credentials by exposing the deeply conservative nature of approaches that struck liberatory postures but accepted the status quo and frequently encoded deficit perspectives of Black children, their parents and communities. Among many especially notable examples, perhaps the most influential were Hazel Carby's corrective to white middle class feminism (Carby, 1982) and Chris Mullard's analysis of the assimilationist basis of multicultural education (Mullard, 1982). In education this trend was perhaps at its strongest and most sustained in the work of Barry Troyna.

Initially Troyna had been, in his own words, "seduced by the ideology of multicultural education" (Troyna, 1993, p. vii) but he emerged as one of the most steadfast critics of multiculturalism and the most prominent advocate of antiracist education throughout a career cut tragically short by illness (Troyna, 1984, 1987, 1988, 1991, 1992, 1993). Troyna refused to compromise his antiracist commitments, even when faced with the dual challenges of the postmodern turn and the Burnage Inquiry—which in the late 1980s and early 1990s seemed to many commentators to require a new but unspecified approach (Macdonald et al., 1989; Troyna & Carrington, 1990; Troyna & Hatcher, 1992).[1] The Burnage Inquiry has been dealt with at length elsewhere,[2] suffice it to say that a group of highly respected anti-racists delivered a damning report on the state of race relations in a Manchester school where a young Asian boy, Ahmed Iqbal Ullah, had been stabbed to death by a white peer. At the time, the Burnage Inquiry was misread by many commentators as signalling the end of antiracism. This owed a great deal to a concerted press campaign which grossly distorted the report's findings (see Macdonald et al., 1989, pp. xvii-xxv). In fact, the

report now stands as a landmark publication: a brave attempt to move beyond simple binary oppositions and push antiracists to confront the complexity of life in school, where issues of social class, sexism and able-ism interact in an unpredictable and sometimes deadly combination of oppressions.

Sivanandan, one of the single most important writers on race and racism in Britain, made a simple but vital observation writing in the midst of the Burnage controversy. He noted that the biased and caricatured attacks in the media served to:

> … still the voices of those, like myself, who tried to say that there was no body of thought called anti-racism, no orthodoxy or dogma, no manual of strategy and tactics, no demonology. What there was in our society was racism, in every walk of life, and it had to be combated—in every conceivable way. (Sivanandan, 1988, p.147)

The absence of an antiracist orthodoxy can be a source of strength. Racism takes many forms and so antiracism must be flexible and constantly adapt. However, the absence of a dogmatic "manual" of antiracism does *not* require that we avoid all attempts to systematize our critical approaches and conceptual starting points. Unfortunately, in many ways, antiracism has fallen into this trap: our awareness of the multifaceted and constantly changing nature of racism may have led inadvertently to a failure properly to interrogate our conceptual history and theoretical frameworks. This does not mean that antiracism has been atheoretical: there have been several attempts to take forward antiracist analyses of education in general, and of schooling in particular, that have sought to engage explicitly with new developments in social theory (see, for example, Bhavnani, 2001; Bonnett, 2000; Dadzie, 2000; Gillborn, 1995; Mac an Ghaill, 1999; Mirza, 1997 ; Rattansi, 1992). Nevertheless, none of this work has yet managed to elaborate an appropriately critical yet accessible conceptual map that can do two simple yet vitally important tasks:

- first, describe what is characteristically *antiracist* about an "antiracist" analysis; and

- second, offer a suitable starting point for further explorations in educational theory, policy and practice.

A way of addressing both these issues may lie in the work of North American educationists (mostly scholars of colour) who draw inspiration from a branch of legal studies known as Critical Race Theory. Before examining CRT in greater detail, however, it is worth considering why such an approach is necessary. After all, the lack of an elaborate theoretical schema may not necessarily be a bad thing, especially for those activists and practitioners seeking to bring about change in the real world beyond the walls of the academy. I am certainly not advocating theory for its own sake. In the following section, therefore, I consider some of the reasons why antiracists need CRT (or something like it).

Dangers of the Current Situation

There are numerous problems that arise from the absence of a clear conceptual map of antiracism. Here I will touch on two: first, the need to counter the use of antiracism as an empty rhetorical device in educational policy, and second, the need to strengthen the critical character of scholarship that addresses racialized inequalities in practice. These are by no means the only relevant issues but they are among the most important and are sufficient to illustrate some of the dilemmas that could usefully be addressed through a more systematic approach to antiracist theory and practice.

Antiracism versus empty policy rhetoric

Perhaps the most pressing reason for developing a more systematic approach to antiracist work concerns the problem of antiracism being reduced to a meaningless slogan that is evacuated of all critical content. Until 1999 antiracism was widely portrayed in Britain as a dangerous and extreme political ideology—usually associated with the so called "looney left" of socialist councils who took seriously issues like race and gender equity (see Gillborn, 1995; Richardson, 2002; Troyna 1993). This situation changed, virtually overnight, with the publication of *the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report* (Macpherson, 1999).

Stephen Lawrence was 18 years old when, as he waited for a London bus, he was attacked and stabbed to death by a group of white youths. The police inquiry generated no arrests. Stephen's parents, Doreen and Neville, were treated more like troublemakers than grieving parents and they became convinced that the case was being mishandled because, as a black young man, Stephen's death was a not a sufficient priority for the investigating officers nor the Metropolitan Police Force itself. After years of campaigning the Lawrences' demands for a public inquiry were finally met by an incoming Labour government in 1997. *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report*, and the consequent public debates, provided the closest British parallel yet to the kinds of national furore over racism that were sparked in the US by the Rodney King affair and the O.J. Simpson trials. The Inquiry Report stated categorically that institutional racism was a routine and pervasive factor in many of the key agencies of society, including the police, education and the health service. The Government, the Conservative opposition and even the Metropolitan Police were forced to accept the inquiry's findings of institutional racism, so great was the moral authority of the Lawrence family's case, and so damning was the meticulously logged evidence of police incompetence and racism. Suddenly antiracism came in from the cold. As Sivanandan noted:

> … the unrelenting struggle of the Lawrences has put institutional racism back on the agenda … they changed the whole discourse on race relations and made the government and the media and the people of this country acknowledge that there is a deep, ingrained, systematic racism in the institutions and structures of this society. (Sivanandan, 2000, p. 7)

Predictably, the charge of institutional racism was met with horror and outrage by right wing commentators keen to defend the traditional "tolerance" of the British people and to fight the forces of "political correctness" (see Gillborn 2002 for an account of these debates). In addition to this backlash, however, a somewhat more subtle development can also be identified, namely, antiracism has been tacitly redefined so that it can mean almost anything: *if you are against racism (and who isn't?) then you are an antiracist. Yes?* No. This approach reverts to a characteristic white assumption that racism is simple and crude and obvious. The whole thrust of the Lawrence Inquiry's analysis of *institutional* racism (as being frequently unintended and hidden) has been lost amid a self-congratulatory glow of liberal righteousness. Most important of all, this tendency seems to support the illusion that something meaningful has actually changed in the way that public services were delivered. The language has changed but not the reality of race inequality. Speaking at a central London conference attended by around 2000 Black parents and educationists, for example, the then Under-Secretary of State with responsibility for "School Standards" rejoiced in the fact that:

> The Race Relations Amendment Act places a new duty on all public bodies including schools and including, for that matter, the Department for Education. They will be required, not only to have a written policy on race equality, but also to assess the impact of their policies on ethnic minority pupils, staff and parents, and to monitor levels of attainment of ethnic minority pupils. This Act provided a unique opportunity for a concerted focus on raising the attainment of ethnic minority pupils. What it means in practice is that every school will need to mainstream racial equality. (Ashton, 2003, p. 11)

But simply asserting our antiracist intentions means nothing if we leave unchanged the dominant systems of testing, the curriculum, teacher education, and punitive inspection regimes that penalise schools serving working class and minoritized communities. The "Race Relations Amendment Act", referred to by Baroness Ashton (above), provides a startling example. The Act arose directly from The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry and represents the government's primary response to the report's numerous recommendations. It was flagged, on the day that the Inquiry Report was published, when Prime Minister Blair told Parliament that:

> The publication of today's report on the killing of Stephen Lawrence is a very important moment in the life of our country. It is a moment to reflect, to learn and to change. It will certainly lead to new laws but, more than that, it must lead to new attitudes, to a new era in race relations, and to a new more tolerant and more inclusive Britain. (Tony Blair MP, *Hansard,* 24 February 1999, col. 380)

The amended legislation placed new duties on more than 45,000 public authorities, including every state-funded school in England, Scotland and Wales. They must:

- have a written policy on race equality;
- monitor their activities for signs of bias (especially focusing on student achievement); and
- must actively plan to eradicate race inequality.

These new duties are mandatory and require public authorities to be pro-active in their pursuit of race equality. This is a major step forward and is among the most radical equalities legislation on Earth. Unfortunately, early indications are that the education sector in general, and schools in particular, are lagging well behind other public authorities in their attempts to meet these new requirements.

Data gathered for the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE)[3] paint an especially discouraging picture in relation to the education sector. In a survey of more than 3000 public authorities, schools were the least likely to reply: only 20% of schools replied, compared with an overall rate of almost 50% (Schneider-Ross, 2003, p. 5). Of course, nothing substantial can be read into a return rate. For example, among countless possible explanations, it might be thought that schools were not interested in race equality, or that they were more fearful of responding to a survey sponsored by the authority that polices the race equality legislation. The most obvious explanation in the eyes of most teachers with whom I have discussed this, is simply that schools are too busy to fill in questionnaires. Any or all of these might have a grain of truth. Looking ahead, however, we might have assumed that since relatively few schools managed to respond, then at least those few that did return the questionnaire might be assumed to be among the more confident of their counterparts when it comes to race equality. If that is the case, the detail of their responses gives even more cause for concern.

The CRE data suggest that more than half of respondents in the education sector have not identified any clear "goals" or "targets" for improvement (Schneider-Ross, 2003, p. 6). In relation to differences in attainment, which is an especially prominent

area in the legislation, even fewer schools (around one in three) have set any clear goals for change (Schneider-Ross, 2003, p. 11). Schools also appear sceptical about the value of any race equity work they have completed to date: school respondents are among the least positive of all groups when questioned about the effects of the changes that they have made: 65% of schools believe the work has produced positive benefits, compared with 68% of local government respondents, 74% of those in criminal justice and policing, 80% of Further & Higher Education, and 89% of Central Government (Schneider-Ross, 2003, p. 8). Perhaps most worrying of all, despite the relatively poor response to the other items, educationists are the least likely to express a need for any further guidance on these issues (Schneider-Ross, 2003, p. 13). Put simply, early indications suggest that many schools are inactive on race equality: at best they are too busy; at worst, they appear to be complacent about their duties and uninterested in further progress.

Despite the rhetoric of antiracism that now features in a kind of "official" or rhetorical multiculturalism in many policy pronouncements, therefore, it appears that schools have a long way to go before they even comply with the basics of existing race equality legislation. Antiracism has not failed—in most cases, it simply has not been tried yet. In this new context (following the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry), a radical perspective is required to cut through the superficial rhetorical changes and address the more deep-rooted state of race inequality in the education system.

Antiracism as a radical, not reformist, perspective

In his critical work examining the literatures on school effectiveness and school management, Martin Thrupp (1999) has attacked those he describes as "textual apologists". Among these he distinguishes between the "overt apologists", who set out explicitly to "sell" existing government policy as best practice, and the "subtle apologists", who make *reference* to inequality and wider political and economic structures, but then continue the detail of their work in a largely or entirely decontextualised and uncritical way (Thrupp, 1999; Thrupp & Wilmott, 2004, pp. 228-229). Louise Morley and Naz Rassool (1999) have also noted the particular impact that school effectiveness discourse has had upon the place of equity and social justice as an increasingly marginal (even irrelevant) aspect of education. Several authors have argued that a similar trend characterizes much of the British Sociology of Education in recent years. Stephen Ball (1994, 2004), Roger Dale (1992, 2001), and Rob Moore (1996) have argued that sociologists, often in a battle to demonstrate their "relevance" within a new managerialist culture in the academy, have too often come to concern themselves with reforming the system, while taking for granting the essential shape and character of the system itself. Indeed, as Sara Delamont (2001) notes, British sociologists of education have often been both exclusionary (especially with regard to gender and internal colonialism) and excluded (by the mainstream of their discipline).

The tendency to adopt a perspective that is reformist, rather than radical, is already visible in work on race inequalities in education. A great deal of research on race and education in Britain, for example, is concerned with mapping the scale of inequalities and attempting to generate school-level approaches that will improve the situation. This work is important but it is not sufficient and, in isolation, may have the unintended consequence of limiting our vision to what seems possible within the given constraints that have such a powerful determining effect on how minoritized groups experience school and ultimately achieve (or not) within the institution.

Let me be explicit here, I am not criticizing research that focuses on the scale of race inequality (this has proven to be an essential spur to even the most minimal of

policy responses), nor am I criticizing work that attempts to address race equity at the school- and classroom level (this is a vital tool in the struggle for greater race equity). Indeed, I have actively contributed to both strands of work, as have many colleagues (predominantly scholars of colour) all of whom share a commitment to greater race equality in education, and some of whom are self-avowedly antiracist (Bhavnani, 2001; Blair et al., 1998; Dadzie, 2000; Gillborn, 1995; Gillborn & Gipps, 1996; Gillborn & Mirza, 2000; Haque, 2000; Modood et al., 1997; Osler, 1997; Richardson & Wood, 1999; Weekes & Wright, 1999). This is important work but it is not the sum of critical scholarship on race and education in Britain. There is a real danger that we are being seduced (by funding priorities and demands to be "relevant") into a school-level focus that loses sight of the "bigger picture" (Thrupp & Wilmott, 2004, after Ozga, 1990). If we *only* focus on the scale of inequity, and school-level approaches to addressing it, we lose sight of the most powerful forces operating at the societal level to sustain and extend these inequalities. Essentially, we risk tinkering with the system to make its outputs slightly less awful, but leaving untouched the fundamental shape, scale and purpose of the system itself.

There is a problem, therefore, of ensuring that antiracism resists the pressure to become a reformist perspective and retains a radical, critical edge. This refers not only to the directions taken by experienced and established researchers but also, indeed *especially*, to the work of younger scholars. There is a pressing need to offer new researchers a clear and coherent map to help them navigate the essentials of an antiracist perspective. At present, there is a danger that each new researcher must "re-invent the wheel" so far as antiracism is concerned. The lack of a clear and widely understood set of antiracist perspectives means that each new contributor (scholar, activist and/or practitioner) must re-learn the antecedents of any antiracist analyses that they wish to develop. This is both wasteful and risky. It is wasteful because the lack of a widely recognised antiracist framework means that each new researcher must construct such a map for themselves. Of course, this can be highly rewarding and generate new perspectives but it may be easier for new voices to re-shape and revitalize antiracism if they could be more certain of what has gone before. This can be difficult in such a diverse but relatively poorly charted field. In particular, it is becoming increasingly difficult to access many of the original sources that have shaped antiracism. The growth of ICT applications has had a major impact on how educationists identify and access previous work in their field. There is a danger that newer secondary sources (that are more easily accessed electronically) could come to take prominence over older, but more detailed and contextually sensitive, original sources. This is especially dangerous in the field of antiracism because of the tendency of secondary sources to oversimplify the originals. Put simply, antiracism needs a clear and accessible conceptual map in order to enable new antiracists to build on the successes, failures and frustrations of previous work.

The present situation for antiracism, therefore, is not encouraging. A range of different pressures (from the rhetoric of policymakers to the financial and lived pressures of the academy) threaten to remove antiracism's critical content and reduce it to a reformist level where it is at best a palliative to make a divisive system seem a little less exclusionary, and at worst, an empty phrase to be mouthed by policymakers content that their plans can be enforced unchanged on a relatively docile audience. It is in this context that Critical Race Theory may offer an invaluable way ahead for antiracist scholars beyond North America and, as part of the process, CRT itself may gain from a wider exposure to new territories, debates and questions.

Critical Race Theory

> Critical Race Theory embraces a movement of left scholars, most of them scholars of color, situated in law schools, whose work challenges the ways in which race and racial power are constructed and represented in American legal culture and, more generally, in American society as a whole. (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xiii)

CRT has its roots in US legal scholarship where it grew as a radical alternative to dominant perspectives, not only the conservative "mainstream" paradigmatic views, but also the apparently radical tradition of critical legal studies which, in the words of Cornel West, " 'deconstructed' liberalism, yet seldom addressed the role of deep-seated racism in American life" (West, 1995, p. xi). Frustration with the silence on racism prompted CRT scholars to foreground race and to challenge not only the foci of existing analyses, but also the methods and forms of argumentation that were considered legitimate (see, for example, Bell, 1980a; Crenshaw, 1988; Delgado, 1989; Matsuda et al., 1993). In 1995 an article by Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate, in the *Teachers College Record*, set out the first steps towards taking a CRT perspective and thinking through its possible application and insights within the field of education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Both authors have further refined their views in subsequent work (e.g. Ladson-Billings, 1998, 1999, 2005; Tate, 1997, 1999, 2005), and a new wave of radical scholars have begun to take forward the perspective in novel ways and in relation to different issues and a wider range of minoritized groups (see, for example, Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Parker, 1998; Taylor, 1999; Villenas, Deyhle & Parker, 1999).

Despite its name, CRT is not so much a theory as a perspective. That is, CRT does not offer a finished set of propositions that claim to explain current situations and predict what will occur under a certain set of conditions; rather, it is a set of interrelated beliefs about the significance of race/racism and how it operates in contemporary Western society, especially the US. In fact, the vast majority of CRT in education (like CRT in law) focuses exclusively on the US. There is no reason, however, why the underlying assumptions and insights of CRT cannot be transferred usefully to other (post-) industrial societies such as the UK, Europe and Australasia.

> … there is no canonical set of doctrines or methodologies to which we all subscribe. (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xiii)

As with British antiracism, there is no single, unchanging statement of what CRT believes or suggests. William Tate captures well the dynamic of CRT when he describes it as "an iterative project of scholarship and social justice" (1997, p. 235). Unlike antiracism, however, there are a series of key elements (perspectives and insights) that can be taken as largely representative of a distinctive CRT position. In addition, there are a series of more specific methodological and conceptual tools that are often used by CRT writers but whose presence in a study is neither sufficient nor necessary to identify it as part of CRT in education. This distinction, between defining elements and conceptual tools, is used here as a heuristic device, meant to help clarify thinking about the "shape" of CRT as an approach. I have found this approach useful in discussions about CRT with colleagues and students, but it is by no means fixed. As more writers add to the tradition, and priorities alter, it is quite likely that certain features may change in status, or disappear, while new aspects might be added (see figure 1). For the time being, however, this is a useful strategy that builds on a wide range of existing approaches. For the sake of clarity, therefore, in the following account I will try to present these elements and tools separately, although their use and interpretation in the literature necessarily relies on a great deal of mutual citation and application.

CRT: Some defining elements

The starting point for CRT is a focus on racism. In particular, its central importance in society and its routine (often unrecognised) character:

> CRT begins with a number of basic insights. One is that racism is normal, not aberrant, in American society. Because racism is an ingrained feature of our landscape, it looks ordinary and natural to persons in the culture. Formal equal opportunity—rules and laws that insist on treating blacks and whites (for example) alike—can thus remedy only the more extreme and shocking forms of injustice, the ones that do stand out. It can do little about the business-as-usual forms of racism that people of color confront every day and that account for much misery, alienation, and despair. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p. xvi).

In this way, CRT argues that racism is "endemic in US society, deeply ingrained legally, culturally, and even psychologically" (Tate, 1997, p. 234). It is of central importance that the term "racism" is used not only in relation to crude, obvious acts of race hatred but also in relation to the more subtle and hidden operations of power that have the *effect* of disadvantaging one or more minority ethnic groups. This is a more radical approach than many liberal multiculturalists are comfortable with. Nevertheless, it is an approach that is in keeping with recent developments, not only in the academy, but also in British legal approaches to racism and race inequity. As I have already noted (above), race equality legislation in the UK was significantly amended following the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry. One of the most important aspects of the Lawrence Inquiry's approach to institutional racism is the insistence that we focus on outcomes and effects—rather than intentions:

> "Institutional Racism" consists of 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. (*The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*: Macpherson, 1999, p. 321)

By explicitly including "unwitting" and "thoughtless" acts, this approach moves away from endless debates about *intent* by insists upon a focus on the *outcomes* of actions and processes. The report states clearly that regardless of the type of racism involved (overt or institutional) the outcomes can be just as destructive:

> Racism … in its more subtle form is as damaging as in its overt form. (*The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*: Macpherson, 1999, p. 321)

In this way, the Lawrence approach, like some longer established definitions, presents a fundamental challenge to liberal complacency about the realities of contemporary racial politics and inequalities. As Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton observed decades ago in what is widely credited as the first attempt to define the term:

> … institutional racism … is less overt, far more subtle, less identifiable in terms of *specific* individuals committing the acts. But it is no less destructive of human life. [It] originates in the operation of established and respected forces in the society, and thus receives far less public condemnation … (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967, original emphasis, reprinted in Cashmore & Jennings, 2001, p. 112)

The last part of this quotation is highly significant: institutional racism "originates in the operation of *established* and *respected* forces in the society" (emphasis added). This is vital, because CRT amounts to more than a perspective on institutional racism, it involves a critical perspective on the nature of US politics and society. For example, among the other defining features that William Tate identifies are:

> CRT reinterprets civil rights law in light of its limitations, illustrating that laws to remedy racial inequality are often undermined before they can be fully implemented. (Tate, 1997, p. 234)

> CRT portrays dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy as camouflages for the self-interest of powerful entities of society. (Tate, 1997, p. 235)

These perspectives, of course, are not unique to those identifying with CRT. Indeed, as Tate notes, CRT "borrows" from numerous traditions and is frequently characterized by a readiness to cross epistemological boundaries. This theoretical eclecticism is so strong that Tate includes it as one of his key characteristics of the approach (1997, p. 234). What is most important, however, is the way that these various "insights" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p. xvi) are brought together in a new and challenging way. These perspectives, of course, raise deeply troubling questions. Indeed, CRT is frequently misinterpreted as taking a dismissive stance on the advances achieved by the Civil Rights movement in the US, advances achieved at enormous human cost. This criticism, however, misreads CRT. As Kimberlé Crenshaw and her colleagues argue:

> Our opposition to traditional civil rights discourse is neither a criticism of the civil rights movement nor an attempt to diminish its significance … we draw much of our inspiration and sense of direction from that courageous, brilliantly conceived, spiritually inspired, and ultimately transformative mass action. (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xiv)

CRT's critique of liberalism springs from its understanding of racism (as wide ranging, often hidden and commonplace) and its frustration with the inability of traditional legal discourse to address anything except the most obvious and crude versions of racism. As already noted (above) CRT's principal concern is with "the business-as-usual forms of racism" that are "normal" and ingrained in the fabric of US society not the few exceptional cases of obvious discrimination "that do stand out" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p. xvi). CRT not only criticizes the inability of traditional legal discourse to deal with such complex and comprehensive racism, it goes 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:

> Racial justice was embraced in the American mainstream in terms that excluded radical or fundamental challenges to status quo institutional practices in American society by treating the exercise of racial power as rare and aberrational rather than as systemic and ingrained. … [This perspective] conceived racism as an intentional, albeit irrational, deviation by a conscious wrongdoer from otherwise neutral, rational, and just ways of distributing jobs, power, prestige, and wealth. … liberal race reform thus served to legitimize the basic myths of American meritocracy. (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xiv)

As this quotation helps to explain, CRT's criticisms of meritocracy, and related notions such as objectivity and colour-blindness, are not a rejection of them in principle but a criticism of their raced effects in practice. It is simply and demonstrably the case that these notions, despite their apparent concern for equity and justice, operate as a mechanism by which particular groups are excluded from the mainstream (be it in relation to legal redress, employment or educational

opportunities). For example, arguments about the possibility of neutrality and objectivity in social research are well rehearsed, and not only in relation to antiracist scholarship, where deeply conservative and regressive perspectives frequently masquerade as a concern for "objectivity" and "standards of evidence".[4]

William Tate concludes his review of the "defining elements" of CRT by noting that the approach "challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical examination of the law and a recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color" (Tate, 1997, p. 235). This relates to what Delgado terms the *"call to context"*: an insistence on the importance of context and the detail of the lived experience of minoritized peoples as a defence against the colour-blind and sanitized analyses generated via universalistic discourses. The concern with the perspectives and experiences of minoritized groups arises from several different perspectives and offers numerous ways ahead. In relation to the legal roots of CRT, the call to context is essential to understand the full background to any major dispute or issue (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Even something as seemingly simple and obvious as a speeding violation might be rethought if the contextual information revealed that the speeding vehicle was an ambulance. Sociologically, of course, ethnographic and other forms of qualitative research take for granted the need to understand the viewpoints and experiences of multiple actors as an essential step in making sense of the social world. Not because of any sentimental attachment to the "under-dog" position (as Howard Becker, 1967, is frequently assumed to have argued) but as a recognition that people in different social locations have different perspectives and understandings:

> … every analysis of a hierarchical situation must contain explicitly or implicitly some proposition, some empirical proposition about how the subordinates view things … they, after all, know more about certain things than the people above them … I systematically question as a routine matter whether the people who run any organization know anything about it. I don't say they don't, I just say it's a question … it's not that you do that for political motives you do it for scientific ones. But it has political consequence and the political consequence is almost invariably in the direction of anti-establishment. (Becker, 1980, pp. 15-17) [5]

In addition, antiracism (in Britain and elsewhere) has long emphasized the need to build upon and respect the viewpoints and experiences of minoritized groups (see Brandt, 1986). This approach not only adds essential data and perspective, it can offer a fundamental challenge to the "common sense" assumptions through which so much racism operates and the mechanisms by which it is legitimized. Several scholars have written, for example, of the heated, and sometimes emotional, exchanges that occur when the silence about white racism is challenged in university classrooms (see Dlamini, 2002; Leonardo, 2002; Rich & Cargile, 2004). The exchanges by no means guarantee an equitable outcome, but they can dramatically highlight the ways in which notions of "validity" and "objectivity" operate in racialised ways. They also draw attention to the human scale of issues that are too often reduced to an apparently technical level in academic discussion. In a recent class, for example, I was exploring institutional racism and criticisms of "whiteness" with a large and diverse group of adult learners, most of them experienced school-teachers. After a long exchange with a white teacher, who vehemently disagreed with my interpretation of some particularly damning statistics on race inequity, a Black woman intervened to draw attention to the consequences of her white peers' apparently technical argument:

> I'm really sick and tired of sitting in class and listening to people tell me that it's not about race. My children get it. I get it every day—at school, here, in the supermarket, everywhere. How dare you sit there and tell me that I'm wrong and that *you* don't believe the statistics. Don't you believe *me*?

Critical Race Theory: A conceptual map

Defining elements

- racism as endemic… 'normal' not aberrant nor rare: deeply ingrained legally and culturally;
- crosses epistemological boundaries;
- critique of civil rights laws as fundamentally limited;
- critique of liberalism: claims of neutrality, objectivity, colour-blindness, and meritocracy as camouflages;
- call to context: challenges ahistoricism and recognizes experiential knowledge of people of colour.

Conceptual tools

- story-telling and counter-stories;
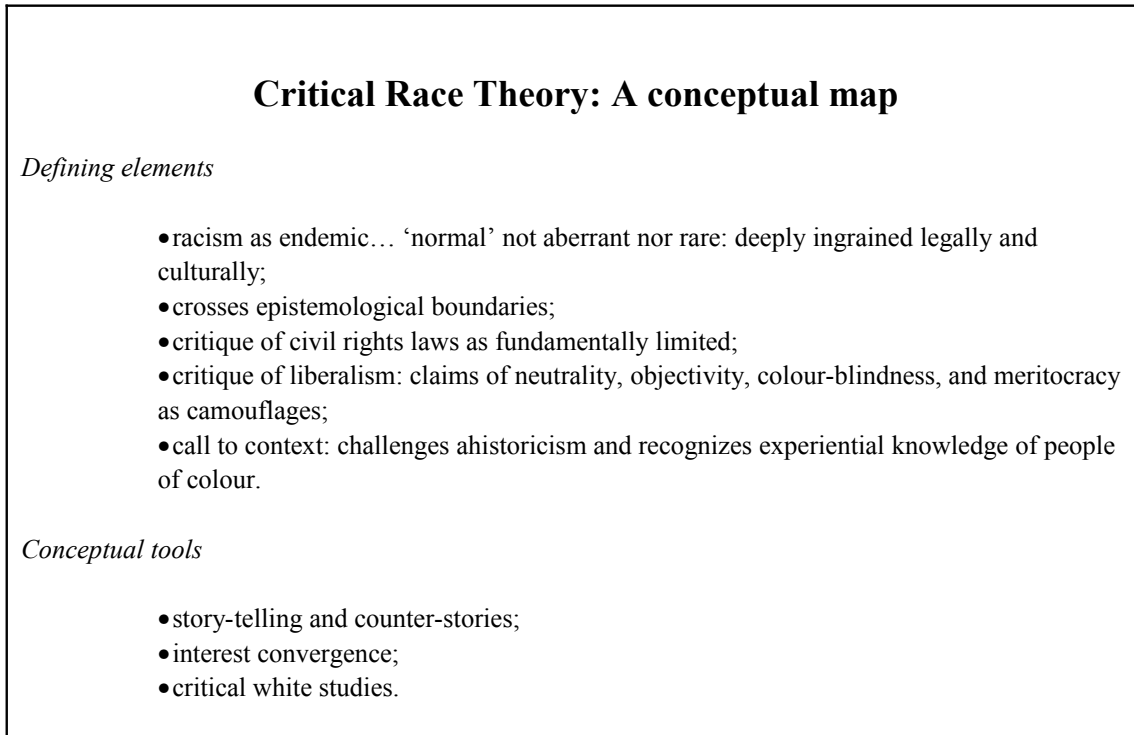- interest convergence;
- critical white studies.

Figure 1: Critical Race Theory: A conceptual map

CRT: Some conceptual and methodological tools

It is highly significant that CRT scholars have been reticent to identify a set of unchanging theoretical tenets and would rather talk of "basic insights" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000) or "defining elements" (Tate, 1997). This reflects CRT's recognition of the changing and complex character of race/racism and its opposition in contemporary society. Nevertheless, as CRT grows, so the range and sophistication of its conceptual toolbox becomes a little clearer. In particular, concepts which have, in the past, been seen as definitively "CRT" in nature, may now be viewed as tools rather than defining tenets. These are lines of analysis that often appear centrally in CRT treatments but whose presence does not necessarily signify a conscious appeal to CRT.

Storytelling and counter-storytelling

A particularly striking aspect of some CRT is the use of storytelling and counter-storytelling. Here 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. Of course, auto/biography and the use of narrative have long characterized many minoritized cultures. At their best, CRT approaches serve to

appropriate such forms and use them to build a powerful challenge to "mainstream" assumptions. One of the best known and most influential examples is Derrick Bell's (1990) *"Chronicle of the Space Traders"* which posits serious questions about how the US would respond, as a nation, to a situation where substantial benefits accrue to the white majority but at the cost of even the most basic rights for African Americans. Even as Bell relays his fictional account, whereby the entire African American population is sacrificed to alien Space Traders offering wealth, health and safety for non-Blacks, there is clear sense in which similar "deals" have already been done in history and will likely be done again in the future. Bell's story, first told in 1990, has already proven prophetic in terms of the USA PATRIOT ACT 2001 [6] and other costs to civil liberties enacted in the name of US national defence.

Interest convergence

Derrick Bell is generally credited with coining the concept of "interest convergence" in a paper in the *Harvard Law Review* (Bell, 1980b). This notion proposes that "white elites will tolerate or encourage racial advances for blacks only when such advances also promote white self-interest" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p. xvii). It is a concept that has been especially important, for example, in understanding the history of Affirmative Action in the US; an approach that superficially privileges Black interests but whose principal beneficaries have been white women, in terms of numbers benefiting from affirmative action hiring policies (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 12). Similarly, it has been argued that the *Brown* decision on the de-segregation of US public schooling owed a great deal to Cold War politics and the need to protect the US's image overseas (Bell, 1980b; Dudziak, 2000). More recently, a Supreme Court decision on Affirmative Action is widely thought to have been swayed by representations that linked the policy to national security—arguing that without Black Officers (promoted via AA) the US forces could become unmanageable.[7]

Critical White Studies

> A poor rural Mississippi "white" man was asked by a New Orleans newspaper reporter, "What is white?" After musing for a little while, the man responded, "Well, I don't know a lot about that. But, I'll tell you one thing … it's not black!" (Hare, 2002, pp. 7-8)

As Rosa Hernandez Sheets (2000, 2003) has argued, focusing on white people (their sense of self, their interests and concerns) has become such a fashionable past-time within parts of the US academy that there is a danger of whiteness studies colonizing and further de-radicalising multicultural education. However, the field is extremely wide. If the guilt-ridden white introspection that Sheets fears is at one end of the spectrum, at the other pole lie Marxist analyses that firmly identify whiteness as one more "strategy for securing to some an advantage in a competitive society" (Ignatiev, 1997, p. 1).

The last two decades or so have seen a significant increase in the amount of critical scholarship on the nature of "whiteness", that is, work deconstructing the taken-for-granted myths and assumptions that circulate about what it means to be, and not be, a "white" person (see Bush, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic. 1997; Fine et al., 1997). Critical 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 (see Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, pp. 58-60). "So-called 'White' people" (Bonnett, 1997, p. 189) do not necessarily reinforce whiteness any more than heterosexual people are *necessarily* homophobic, or men are *necessarily*

sexist. However, these analogies are useful because they highlight the forces that recreate and extend the kinds of "unthinking" assumptions and actions which mean that most heterosexuals *are* homophobic and most men *are* sexist. It is possible for white people to take a real and active role in deconstructing whiteness but such "race traitors" are relatively uncommon. It is, of course, also possible for people who do not identify as "white" to nevertheless actively reinforce and defend whiteness.

Whiteness studies is a growing area but, in relation to CRT, it is the nature of the questions and analyses that are important. It is insufficient to merely state a concern with how whiteness is organised and understood. What matters for whiteness studies within CRT is the deeply critical and radical nature of the questioning. In some hands, whiteness studies can become just another exercise of whiteness itself; as Michael Apple has warned:

> … having Whites focus on whiteness can have contradictory effects, ones of which we need to be well aware. It can enable people to acknowledge differential power and the raced nature of everyone … It can just as easily run the risk of lapsing into the possessive individualism that is so powerful in this society. That is, such a process can serve the chilling function of simply saying "but enough about you, let me tell you about me". (Apple, 1998b, p. xi)

Conclusion

> Although Critical Race scholarship differs in object, argument, accent and emphasis, it is nevertheless unified by two common interests. The first is to understand how a regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained in America … The second is a desire not merely to understand the vexed bond between law and racial power but to *change* it. (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xiii)

The language and achievements of CRT are not widely recognised outside North America. Nevertheless, there is a great deal to be gained by a dynamic understanding of how antiracists and critical race theorists have approached certain key issues and dilemmas. Both schools share a concern not merely to document but to change: they are engaged in praxis. Building upon this common commitment, this paper has argued for a conscious and reflexive engagement between antiracism and CRT.

This is a field where perspectives can quickly become confused and misunderstood. So let me end by stating, as clearly as possible, the key points that I have been trying to make. First, it may be useful to clarify what I am *not* saying. I am *not* arguing for an abandonment of antiracism. Following the Burnage inquiry, and the media's manipulation of the tragedy, many writers were quick to write off antiracism in the 1990s. The gains made following the *Stephen Lawrence Inquiry* demonstrate that real and important changes are possible. However, antiracism must remain a critical perspective concerned with a radical analysis of power and its operation through racialised processes of exclusion and oppression.

Second, I am not seeking to establish an antiracist rule book nor blueprint. Racism is complex, contradictory and fast-changing: it follows that antiracism must be equally dynamic. What works in one place at one time may not work at another place or another time (Gillborn, 1995, 2000). But we are not faced with an all or nothing choice. In seeking to promote a wider understanding of Critical Race Theory beyond North America I am not suggesting that CRT is in any sense a complete and unproblematic approach. CRT is a relatively new and developing perspective. Even the limited set of theoretical starting points outlined here would almost certainly be challenged by some within the field. Nevertheless, this level of complexity is no excuse for the continued absence of CRT from the vast majority of work on race and education outside the US.

In this paper, therefore, I have set out the case for a greater awareness of CRT and for its adoption within a revitalized critical antiracism. In this way CRT offers a coherent and challenging set of important sensitizing insights and conceptual tools. These provide a starting point for critical antiracist analyses that can avoid some of the dangers inherent in the current situation—where antiracism risks being reduced to the level of the worst kind of "multiculturalism": that is, a slogan, evacuated of all critical content, ritually cited but leaving untouched the deep-rooted processes of racist oppression and exclusion that currently shape the education systems in many nation states. Perhaps most significantly, Critical Race Theory offers a challenge to educational studies more generally, and to the sociology of education in particular, to cease the ritualistic citation of "race" as just another point of departure on a list of exclusions to be mentioned and then bracketed away. CRT insists that racism be placed at the centre of analyses and that scholarly work be engaged in the process of rejecting and deconstructing the current patterns of exclusion and oppression.

1   NOTES

   One of the most important contemporary discussions of these challenges was Ali Rattansi's (1992) contribution
   to a new Open University Course ED356 *"Race", Education and Society* . See also Nazir Carrim's (1995)
   discussion of how these issues have developed.
2   See Gillborn (1995).
3   The Commission for Racial Equality is a publicly funded body with responsibility for advising on race
   equality issues and policing the enforcement of relevant legislation.
4   See, for example, the debate about antiracist research in the UK. Foster, Gomm & Hammersley (1996),
   Hammersley (1995, 2000) and Tooley with Darby (1998) are leading examples of the "standards" approach; see
   Blair (2004), Connolly (1998) and Gillborn (1995) for critical commentaries and responses.
5   This is an extract from an interview with Howard Becker conducted by J.C. Verhoeven for his study of
   Symbolic Interaction (Verhoeven, 1989). I am extremely grateful to Professor Verhoeven for so generously
   sharing his data with me.
6   Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct
   Terrorism (USA PATRIOT ACT) Act of 2001. Public Law 107-56-Oct 26 2001. A full transcript of the
   legislation may be downloaded from the American Civil Liberties Union at
   http://www.aclu.org/SafeandFree/SafeandFree.cfm?ID=12251&c=207 (last accessed 21 February 2005).
7   This is one of the factors identified in the brief by the University of Michigan, defending its admissions
   policies. The support of then US Secretary of State, the Republican former General Colin Powell, was also seen
   as a key factor in contemporary news coverage (CNN.com, 2003). For further background on the Michigan case,
   see Ethridge (2003).

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