

Who's afraid of critical race theory in education? a reply to Mike Cole's *'The color-line and the class struggle'*

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CRT's usefulness will be limited not by the weakness of its constructs but by the degree that many whites will not accept its assumptions; I anticipate critique from both left and right. (Taylor 1998: 124)

A decade ago I was involved in a prolonged dispute about the politics of antiracist research. Along with several other qualitative researchers who sought to document how racism operated in schools and classrooms, I found myself subject to sustained and repeated criticism from a small group of methodologists who seemed to be developing a new genre of work based solely around the denial of our research. For a while I responded, determined not to let the 'methodological purists' (as Barry Troyna dubbed them) win the debate through their sheer persistence (see Gillborn 1998; Gillborn & Gipps 1998; Troyna 1993). Eventually, however, I began to wonder whether anyone else was interested in the debate anymore. Each reply merely provided material for yet another critique and seemed to reconfirm the methodologists' belief that the academy was hanging on their every word. On both sides the arguments had been made and re-made: what was the point of continuing, other than to swell the CVs of the protagonists. I must admit to experiencing a sense of *déjà vu*.

Mike Cole's arguments in this journal (Cole 2009a) largely repeat points that have already been made elsewhere (Cole 2007; Cole & Maisuria 2007) and seem likely to re-appear in further treatments that are already in press (Cole 2009b & c). So, you may be asking, why am I writing this response? The answer is that I wish to take the opportunity to set the record straight on certain matters and offer readers some signposts as to where they might look next if they are interested in understanding Critical Race Theory (CRT) as it is developing in the work of critical race scholars rather than through the confused and often misleading straw person version that tends to appear in critiques from both ends of the political spectrum (for discussions of previous critiques see Bell 1995; Crenshaw 1995; Delgado & Stefancic 2001; Mills 2009; Stovall 2006).

What is Critical Race Theory?

There is no space here to offer a comprehensive explanation of CRT, its background in US legal studies, or the particular ways in which the approach is developing across many different fields in contemporary social science. Suffice it to say that there are plenty of books and articles that provide an accurate and informative overview of CRT (see Delgado & Stefancic 2001; Gillborn 2006 & 2008; Ladson-Billings 1998; Lynn & Parker 2006; Solórzano & Yosso 2002; Tate 1997). There are also edited collections that conveniently pull together the foundational texts in CRT (Crenshaw *et al* 1995; Delgado & Stefancic 2000 & 2005; Taylor *et al* in press; Wing & Stefancic 2007). In these accounts readers will discover a diverse, stimulating and

radical take on the role of race/racism in contemporary education.[²] What they will *not* find is a unitary or dogmatic account of how things are and how they must be.

CRT began in the 1970s and 1980s as a movement of radical scholars, mostly people of minoritized backgrounds, working in US law schools. It was introduced into educational studies in the mid 1990s (Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995). There is no single canonical statement of CRT but certain elements have emerged as central themes that characterize the movement. The first of these is the central role accorded to racism, which is seen as a subtle and pervasive force in society that is so deep rooted as to appear ‘normal’ to the majority. CRT is also characterised by a critique of liberalism, which points to the failure of notions such as ‘merit’, ‘neutrality’ and ‘color-blindness’ which masquerade as fair and just but, because of the uneven playing field of contemporary racist society, they actually function to ensure the continuation of race inequality.

Building on a long tradition of oral histories and subversive storytelling, CRT writers sometimes adopt a narrative approach and, distinctively, they give particular prominence to the experiential knowledge of people of color. This has been a point of controversy with the academic mainstream but reflects CRT’s constructivist view of knowledge and its determination to challenge the common-sense assumptions that often encode majoritarian interests. This deep commitment to promoting real change in the position of minoritized groups is a central tenet of CRT and fuels its disenchantment with traditional notions of civil rights progress. Critical race scholars draw inspiration from their activist predecessors but they are far from content with the scale of changes that have been won to date. Indeed, a central concept is the ‘interest convergence principle’ which notes the benefits to White people at the heart of even the most celebrated civil rights cases (See Bell 1992; Delgado 1995).

CRT is a vibrant and changing movement. It is characterized by the development of a range of off-shoot perspectives, such as Latina/o CRT (‘LatCrit’) and Critical Race Feminism (Delgado & Stefancic 1998; Wing 1997; Yosso 2005). Each perspective reflects key aspects of foundational CRT but also adds distinctive elements of its own. The interchange between these perspectives is frequently unpredictable, often highly productive and, almost always, respectful and grounded in a firm grasp of the work that has gone before. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of all critiques, especially those that over-simplify and caricature CRT itself.

Question: When is a debate not a debate?

Answer: When one side isn’t listening.

In addition to offering a more accurate picture of CRT, a second reason for replying here is to put to rest the idea that I have somehow refused to engage with criticism in the past. In the conclusion to his current paper, for example, Cole states:

Elsewhere (Cole, 2009, chapter 5), I have discussed David Gillborn’s reluctance to engage in debate with Marxists. (manuscript, p. 14)

And

Dare I urge Gillborn, in a comradely way, to reconsider this reluctance to talk with Marxists... (manuscript, p. 14)

These are puzzling statements. Their effect is to give the impression that I have sought to ignore the criticisms formulated by Cole and some of his colleagues. I look forward to reading chapter 5 of Cole's forthcoming book so that I can discover exactly how I have demonstrated 'reluctance to engage in debate with Marxists'. In fact there is a section in my recent book (Gillborn 2008: 37-8) devoted to acknowledging, contextualising and responding to the initially hostile reception that CRT has received from *some* Marxist writers, such as Cole & Maisuria (2007) in the UK and Darder & Torres (2004) in the US. Cole actually references parts of that section in the conclusion to his current paper, although he describes the arguments as 'confusing'. For example, he mentions my citation of CRT scholars Kimberlé Crenshaw and David Stovall. He does not, however, comment on a longer quotation in the same section which perhaps puts some of the attacks on CRT in an uncomfortable light: the statement in question is by Ricky Lee Allen, a critical race scholar who has argued that certain forms of contemporary Marxist writing equate to an exercise of White privilege:

Across all disciplines, white Marxists and their supporters have had a history of scrutinizing the contradictions of Blacks much more harshly than those of non-Blacks ... I don't think that our focus should be on merely bridging the emergent rift between CRT- and Marxist-oriented critical pedagogists by concocting some sort of synthesis. I won't do this because I believe that this rift marks a historic and much needed shift in the racialized plate tectonics of critical pedagogy. (Allen 2006: 5 & 9)

In addition to that published engagement with the debate, I also discuss these issues in person at conferences and seminars, and - not surprisingly - this usually requires that I 'talk with Marxists'. At a recent conference, for example, I gave a keynote presentation on CRT and took numerous questions from the audience. On that occasion the very first 'question' came from a colleague of Cole's who - seated on the front row - stood, turned his back to me and addressed the audience to inform them that he wished I had ceased writing in 2000 before I started working with CRT. This didn't seem a particularly comradely nor positive engagement to me but I nevertheless sought to answer the points and I continue to do so (both in public debates and in private conversations). Similarly I have swapped emails with Professor Cole. In view of these exchanges (in person, electronically, and in print) it is difficult to see how I can be accused of 'reluctance to engage in debate' with Marxists or anyone else.

Encounters in critical theory: CRT meets Marxism

Cole (2009a) begins his conclusion by stating:

... the purpose of this paper is not to divide, but to unite. My intention has not been to question the ideological or political integrity of Critical Race Theorists, but to open up comradely discussion... (manuscript, p. 14)

These are fine sentiments, though perhaps at odds with his assertion, two paragraphs earlier, that:

...it is Marxism and Marxism alone that I believe provides the possibility of a viable equitable future. (manuscript, p. 13).

Indeed, the inclusion of 'I believe' points to part of the problem with Cole's engagement with CRT: fundamentally, CRT challenges Cole's theory of history and his particular version of Marxism. The latter point is important because Marxism is a diverse and wide ranging perspective. There are numerous scholars who have worked productively with a complex array of critical theory in order to better understand – and oppose – the inequalities that scar contemporary society: Stuart Hall, in the UK, and Michael Apple, in the US, are two notable examples (see Gillborn & Youdell in press). Indeed, Apple has argued forcefully for a reappraisal of the potential role of Marxisms (note the plural) as part of a revitalized critical project (see Apple 2006a; 2008). However, he has also warned of the dangers of rhetorical game-playing:

... white scholars who think that everything of central importance can be fully understood by somehow merging race as a set of historically determined and determining relations and realities into a relatively economic understanding of Marx—and here I must speak bluntly—risk practicing a form of whiteness themselves, a form that is based on a privileged position of being white in our societies. (Apple 2006b: 686).

It has been argued that Marx himself demonstrated considerably more complexity than is sometimes evident in work done by those who claim his legacy.^[3] Charles Mills, in his reply to another of Cole's critiques of CRT, explains that a CRT/Marxist encounter could be productive, if we can move beyond a limited and all-encompassing version of economic determinism:

...for me and many others, contra Cole, a Marxist version of CRT is entirely possible, one which locates the emergence of race and white supremacy in the history of European imperialism, in bourgeois class interests and projects, while also recognizing that—*once created*—race achieves a certain autonomy of its own which requires the rethinking of orthodox white Marxism. (Mills 2009, original emphasis)^[4]

Cole's response to CRT is less about a constructive engagement and unifying debate, and more about a restatement of his faith in a particular class-reductionist version of Marxism. Indeed, in the second footnote to his current piece, Cole states emphatically:

My own view is that CRT and Marxism are basically incompatible ... (Cole 2009a: manuscript, p. 15)

A similar path has been taken in the US by Antonia Darder and Rodolfo Torres who, in their treatment of CRT, are at pains to 'acknowledge and commend' the efforts of CRT scholars (2004: 97) before dismissing critical race scholars' attempts to apply 'constructs derived from legal theory to shape arguments related to educational policy and institutional practices..' (ibid, 99). Their conclusion is that such work 'although well meaning and eloquent, is like beating a dead horse. No matter how much is said, it is impossible to enliven or extend the debate on educational policy with its inherent inequalities by using the language of "race"..' (ibid, 99-100). This response

simultaneously ‘commends’ critical race scholars while effectively rejecting out of hand the entirety of CRT in education.

Good faith and bad readings

I am glad that Cole finds some of my insights on race inequality in the English education system ‘revealing’ and ‘of use and interest to all of us involved in the antiracist struggle’ (manuscript, p. 4) but disappointed that he misinterprets my points about the dangers of a myopic focus on the attainments of students in receipt of free school meals (FSM). Professor Cole interprets this section as added ‘in order to retain his post-2000 faith in CRT’ (manuscript, p. 11). In fact, the point is made in order to help us see beyond the discourse of white racial victimization that is constructed in official statistics, government press releases and the popular media. By focusing exclusively on the 13% of students living below a crude - and partial - poverty line (FSM), official analyses effectively erase the continued stark racist inequalities that pertain in the remaining 87% of the student population. This is a fact and one that speaks back to the racist fiction that tells White people they are the new race victims and that, in the words of the BBC ‘*White*’ TV season, ‘no one speaks for people like us’ (see Gillborn 2009; Youdell *et al* 2008).

Cole cites a paper by Dave Hill (2008) as concluding that the UK data ‘does not show an overall pattern of White supremacy’. That is because Hill (like Cole) insists on reading White Supremacy in simple blanket terms as if CRT viewed all whites as equally privileged and equally powerful. In the present paper Cole’s section on my treatment of White Supremacy uses an article I published three years before the book which forms the basis for the rest of his critique (Gillborn 2005; 2008). Hence he does not deal with my statement – made explicit in the book precisely to answer earlier criticisms – that ‘*All White-identified people are implicated in these relations but they are not all active in identical ways and they do not all draw similar benefits – but they do all benefit, whether they like it or not*’ (Gillborn 2008: 34, original emphasis).

Cole also uses my 2005 paper as the basis for an assertion about the relationship between the concepts of racism and White supremacy in CRT:

...Gillborn believes that ‘white supremacy’ should replace the concept of ‘racism’ because the concept of ‘racism’ tends to put the focus on overtly racist practices that ‘are by no means the whole story’. The concept of ‘racism’ thus ‘risks obscuring a far more comprehensive and subtle form of race politics’ (p. 491)—that which he believes is captured by his articulation of ‘white supremacy’. (manuscript, p. 4)

This assertion (that critical race scholars wish to replace the concept of ‘racism’ with that of ‘White Supremacy’) is made in relation to my work (as above) and more generally as if true of all CRT:

Another limit to the CRT argument is that it restricts racism (‘white supremacy’ in CRT terms) ... (manuscript, p. 9)

Critical Race Theorists share with Marxists a desire to rid the world of racism (although, as we have seen, they prefer the term ‘white supremacy’) ... (manuscript, p. 12)

This assertion is just plain wrong and obviously so.

One of the core defining features of CRT is the central role that it accords racism: I note this in the 2005 paper that Cole quotes (Gillborn 2005: 492) and it is the *first* defining element of CRT that I discuss in my book (Gillborn 2008: 27). The word ‘racism’ appears around 270 times in that book, clearly denoting that far from being a concept that I want to erase, it occupies a central role in my work.

Put simply, the idea that I, or any other critical race theorist, want to ‘replace the concept of racism’ is absurd.

The fact that Professor Cole can make such a statement betrays a failure to engage seriously with the real work of critical race scholars.^[5] But what of the quotation which allows Cole, apparently using *my* words, to say that ‘The concept of “racism” thus “risks obscuring a far more comprehensive and subtle form of race politics” (p. 491)’. In fact, the words he quotes are aimed, not at the concept of racism, but specifically at the limited commonsense understanding of ‘White Supremacy’ which equates the term with obviously extremist far right groups (such as the British National Party and the Ku Klux Klan) and eugenic pseudo-science such as Herrnstein & Murray’s (1994) *The Bell Curve*. The words in question come from a section of the paper called ‘*Seeing supremacy*’. It is instructive to quote the section at some length:

Critical race theory promotes a different perspective on white supremacy than the limited and extreme understandings usually denoted by the term in everyday language. ‘White supremacy’ is a term usually reserved for individuals, organizations and/or philosophies that are overtly and self-consciously racist in the most crude and obvious way (...). Such extreme and obviously racist positions are highly dangerous but they are by no means the whole story. Indeed, there is a danger that their influence on debate risks obscuring a far more comprehensive and subtle form of race politics—one that actually exerts a more powerful influence. (Gillborn 2005: 490-491: underlined text denotes the sections quoted by Cole).

To equate this critique of mainstream notions of White Supremacy with a critique of ‘the concept of “racism”’ requires an act of bad faith or sloppy scholarship. To selectively lift words and phrases, and then substitute a different object for the sentence, is not worthy of the serious antiracist intent that I genuinely believe Professor Cole brings to his work. I trust that any future comradely engagements with CRT will do greater justice to the object of criticism.

In conclusion, I hope that this brief reply places Professor Cole’s article in a wider context that readers will find both helpful and constructive.

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NOTES

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² The social construction of ‘race’ differences is *always* associated with raced inequities in some form; consequently the notion of ‘race’ inevitably carries racist consequences (Leonardo 2002) and race/racism become categories that are mutually dependent and reinforcing.

³ ‘Marx simply was *not* an economic reductionist. He did not believe that all forms of politics, or culture, or social conflict were simply expressions of underlying economic or class interests...’ (Kitching 1994: 168, original emphasis).

⁴ I am indebted to Professor Mills for sharing his article with me before its publication.

⁵ Cole’s third footnote offers further evidence of this when he describes the concept of ‘transposition’ as one of the ‘basic tenets’ of CRT. In fact the concept was first coined by Gregg Beratan (2008). I apply the idea in my book (Gillborn 2008). Although the concept is important, it hardly qualifies as a CRT ‘tenet’.