

# Shattering the "Race" Lens: Toward a Critical Theory of Racism

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*Race has become the lens through which is refracted all of society's problems.*

—Kenan Malik (1996)<sup>1</sup>

*The truth is that there are no races. . . . The evil that is done by the concept and by easy—yet impossible—assumptions as to its application. What we miss through our obsession. . . . is, simply, reality.*

—Kwame Anthony Appiah (1995)<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, "race"<sup>3</sup> has been the focus of theoretical, political, and policy debates. Dramatic national and international changes, both economic and political, have created conditions in which, on the one hand, racialized structures, processes and representations are more intricate and elusive; yet, on the other hand, the historically entrenched inequalities persist. The changing socioeconomic conditions in the United States present immense challenges and opportunities for anti-racist activists and social science scholars to rethink the nature of contemporary racialized inequality. With President Bill Clinton's recent "race initiative" commencement address at University of California, San Diego, and the acrimonious debates on affirmative action, language policy, and immigration, it is more evident now than ever before that there is a need for a critical theory of racism that can assist us to better understand the complex issues associated with the increasing racialization of American society.

"Race," though a key concept in sociological discourse and public debate, remains problematic. Policy pundits, journalists, and conservative and liberal academics alike all work within categories of "race" and use this concept in public discourse as though there is unanimity regarding its analytical value. However, like all other component elements of what Antonio Gramsci<sup>4</sup> called

common sense, much of the everyday usage of "race" is uncritical. Gramsci argues that human beings view the world from a perspective that contains both hegemonic forms of thinking and critical insight. As such, notions of common sense are "rooted in cultural folklore but at the same time are enriched with scientific ideas and philosophical opinions, which enter into ordinary daily life."<sup>5</sup> Racialized group conflicts are similarly advanced and framed as a "race relations" problem, and presented largely in Black/White terms. A prime example of this confusion is the analysis of the causes of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. In the aftermath of the riots, academics and journalists analyzed the riots as a matter of "race relations"—first it was a problem between Blacks and Whites, then between Blacks and Koreans, and then between Blacks and Latinos, and back to Blacks and Whites. The interpretation of the riots as a "race relations" problem failed to take into account the economic restructuring and the drastic shifts in demographic patterns that have created new dynamics of class and racialized ethnic relations in Los Angeles.<sup>6</sup> These new dynamics include increasing changes in the ethnic composition of the city and a dramatic shift from a manufacturing-centered economy to one based on light manufacturing, service industries, and information technologies—urban dynamics intricately linked to "the globalizing pressure of capitalism to abandon the will to social investment within the national-domestic sphere."<sup>7</sup>

#### THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY POLITICS

*[W]e work with raced identities on already reified ground. In the context of domination, raced identities are imposed and internalized, then renegotiated and reproduced. From artificial to natural, we court a hard-to-perceive social logic that reproduces the very conditions we strain to overcome.*

—Jon Cruz (1996)<sup>8</sup>

Over the last three decades, there has been an overwhelming tendency among social science scholars to focus on notions of "race." Over the last three decades, there has been an overwhelming tendency among a variety of critical scholars to focus on the concept of "race" as a central category of analysis for interpreting the social conditions of inequality and marginalization.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence, much of the literature on subordinate cultural populations, with its emphasis on such issues as "racial inequality," "racial segregation," "racial identity," has utilized the construct of "race" as a central category of analysis for interpreting the social conditions of inequality and marginalization. In turn, this literature has reinforced a racialized politics of identity and representation, with its problematic emphasis on "racial" identity as the overwhelming impulse for political action. This theoretical practice has led to serious analytical weaknesses and absence of depth in much of the historical and contemporary writings on racialized populations in this country. The politics of busing in the early 1970s provides an excellent example that illustrates this phenomenon.

Social scientists studying "race relations" concluded that contact among "Black" and "White" students would improve "race relations" and the educational conditions of "Black" students if they were bused to "White" (better) schools outside their neighborhoods.<sup>10</sup> Thirty years later, many parents and educators adamantly denounce the busing solution (a solution based on a discourse of "race") as not only fundamentally problematic to the fabric of African American and Chicano communities, but an erroneous social policy experiment that failed to substantially improve the overall academic performance of students in these communities.

Given this legacy, it is not surprising to find that the theories, practices, and policies that have informed social science analysis of racialized populations today are overwhelmingly rooted in a politics of identity, an approach that is founded on parochial notions of "race" and representation which ignore the imperatives of capitalist accumulation and the existence of class divisions within racialized subordinate populations. The folly of this position is critiqued by Ellen Meiksins Wood<sup>11</sup> in her article entitled "Identity Crisis," where she exposes the limitations of a politics of identity which fails to contend with the fact that capitalism is the most totalizing system of social relations the world has ever known.

Yet, in much of the work on African American, Latino, Native American, and Asian populations, an analysis of class and a critique of capitalism is conspicuously absent. And even when it is mentioned, the emphasis is primarily on an undifferentiated plurality of identity politics or an "intersection of oppressions," which, unfortunately, ignores the overwhelming tendency of capitalism to homogenize rather than to diversify human experience. Moreover, this practice is particularly disturbing since no matter where one travels around the world, there is no question that racism is integral to the process of capital accumulation. For example, the current socioeconomic conditions of Latinos and other racialized populations can be traced to the relentless emergence of the global economy and recent economic policies of expansion, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). A recent United Nations report by the International Labor Organization confirms the negative impact of globalization on racialized populations. By the end of 1998, it was projected that one billion workers would be unemployed. The people of Africa, China, and Latin America have been most affected by the current restructuring of capitalist development.<sup>12</sup> This phenomenon of racialized capitalism is directly linked to the abusive practices and destructive impact of the "global factory"—a global financial enterprise system that includes such transnational corporations as Coca-Cola, Wal-Mart, Disney, Ford Motor Company, and General Motors. In a recent speech on "global economic apartheid," John Cavanagh, co-executive director of the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C., comments on the practices of the Ford Motor Company.

The Ford Motor Company has its state-of-the-art assembly plant in Mexico . . . where because it can deny basic worker rights, it can pay one-tenth the wages and yet get the same quality and the same productivity in producing goods. . . . The same technologies by the way which are easing globalization are also primarily cutting more jobs than they're creating.<sup>13</sup>

The failure of scholars to confront this dimension in their analysis of contemporary society as a racialized phenomenon and their tendency to continue treating class as merely one of a multiplicity of (equally valid) perspectives, which may or may not "intersect" with the process of racialization, are serious shortcomings. In addressing this issue, we must recognize that identity politics, which generally gloss over class differences and/or ignore class contradictions, have often been used by radical scholars and activists within African American, Latino, and other subordinate cultural communities in an effort to build a political base. Here, fabricated constructions of "race" are objectified and mediated as truth to ignite political support, divorced from the realities of class struggle. By so doing, they have unwittingly perpetuated the vacuous and dangerous notion that the political and economic are separate spheres of society which can function independently—a view that firmly anchors and sustains prevailing class relations of power in society.

Ramon Grosfoguel and Chloe S. Georas posit that "social identities are constructed and reproduced in complex and entangled political, economic, and symbolic hierarchy."<sup>14</sup> Given this complex entanglement, what is needed is a more dynamic and fluid notion of how we think about different cultural identities within the context of contemporary capitalist social formations. Such a perspective of identity would support our efforts to shatter static and frozen notions that perpetuate ahistorical, apolitical, and classless views of culturally pluralistic societies. How we analytically accomplish this is no easy matter. But however this task is approached, we must keep in mind Wood's concern:

We should not confuse respect for the plurality of human experience and social struggles with a complete dissolution of historical causality, where there is nothing but diversity, difference and contingency, no unifying structures, no logic of process, no capitalism and therefore no negation of it, no universal project of human emancipation.<sup>15</sup>

Hence, if we are to effectively challenge the horrendous economic impacts of globalization on racialized communities, we must recognize that a politics of identity is grossly inept and unsuited for building and sustaining collective political movements for social justice and economic democracy. Instead, what we need is to fundamentally reframe the very terrain that gives life to our political understanding of what it means to live, work, and struggle in a society with widening class differentiation and ever-increasing racialized inequal-

Through such an analytical process of reframing, we can expand the terms which identities are considered, examined, and defined, recognizing racialized relations of power are fundamentally shaped by the profound organizational and spatial transformations of the capitalist economy.

### CRITIQUE OF "RACE RELATIONS"

*If "race relations" are a feature of contemporary society, it seems obvious that academics should study them. But the casual observer could equally well conclude from personal observation that it is "obvious" that the sun circulates around the earth. In order to believe otherwise, it is necessary to confront personal experiences with analytical reasoning and forms of rational measurement. In other words, "obviousness" is a condition which depends upon the location of the observer and the set of concepts employed to conceive and interpret the object.*

—Robert Miles (1993)<sup>16</sup>

There has been a tendency in postmodern and post-structuralist views of the anti-racism project and "race relations" to neglect or ignore profound changes in the structural nature and dynamics of U.S. capitalism, in place of obvious or common-sense appraisals of racialized inequality. This same tendency is also evident in much of the recent scholarship on cultural politics and social difference. At a time when a historical materialist analysis of capitalism is most crucially needed, many social theorists and radical educators seem reticent to engage the very idea of capitalism with any analytical rigor or methodological specificity. Yet, recent structural changes in the U.S. political economy and the increasing cultural diversity of America have made the issue of racism much more complex than ever before.

Rather than occupying a central position, these historical socioeconomic changes serve merely as a backdrop to the contemporary theoretical debates on the meaning of "race" and representation in contemporary society, debates that, more often than not, are founded on deeply psychologized or abstracted interpretations of racialized differences and conflicts. This constitutes a significant point of contention, given the dramatic changes in U.S. class formation and the demographic landscape of major urban centers. These changing conditions have resulted in major shifts in perceptions of social location, prevailing attitudes, and contemporary views of racialized populations. More so than ever, these socioeconomic conditions are linked to transnational realities shared by populations of Mexico, Taiwan, the Caribbean, and other "developing" countries, despite specific regional histories which gave rise to particular sociocultural configurations, configurations that are fundamentally shaped within the context of the ever-changing global economy.

Recent works in cultural studies, multicultural education, and critical pedagogy have brought new critical perspectives to the study of racism and cultural differences within society. U.S. scholars such as Cornel West, Michael

Omi, Howard Winant, bell hooks, Henry Giroux, and others have attempted to recast the debate on the nature of "race" and racism and its implications for social change and educational reform. More specifically, these scholars discuss the concept of "race" within the larger context of changing social and economic conditions and posit "race" as both a social construct and fluid analytical category, in an effort to challenge static notions of "race" as a biologically determined human phenomenon. Although it cannot be denied that these provocative and eloquent works represent a challenge to the mainstream analysis of "race relations" and have made contributions to our understanding of the significance of racism and anti-racist struggles, they have failed to reconceptualize the traditional social science paradigm that relies on the reified category of "race." In the final analysis, the conceptual framework utilized by these scholars is entrenched in the conventional sociology of "race relations" language.

Nowhere has this theoretical shortcoming been more evident than in the contemporary multicultural education debate—a debate that has widely informed the development of postmodern educational theory today. Despite an expressed "transformative" intent, much of the multicultural education literature has only peripherally positioned public education within the larger context of class and racialized class relations. Noticeably absent from much of the writings of even critical multicultural educators is a substantial critique of the social relations and structures of capitalism and the relationship of educational practices to the rapidly changing conditions of the U.S. political economy. The absence of an analysis of the capitalist wage-labor system and class relations with its structural inequalities of income and power represents a serious limitation in our efforts to construct a theory and practice of democratic life.

A lack of imagination in multicultural education discussions is also highly evidenced by a discourse that continues to be predominantly anchored in the Black-White framework that has for over a century shaped our thinking and scholarship related to social group differences. One of the most severe and limited aspects of the Black-White framework to the future of the anti-racist project is its tendency (albeit unintentionally) to obstruct or camouflage the need to examine the particular historical and contextual dimensions that give rise to different forms of racisms around the globe. Further, the conflation of racialized relations into a Black-White paradigm, with its consequential rendering of other subordinate cultural populations to an invisible or "second-class oppression" status, has prevented scholars from engaging with the specificity of particular groups and delving more fully into the arena of comparative ethnic histories of racism and how these are ultimately linked to class forms of social inequalities.

The habitual practice of framing social relations as "race relations" in discussions of students from subordinate cultural communities obfuscates the

complexity of the problem. Here educational theorists assign certain significance to "racial" characteristics rather than attributing student responses to school conditions and how these are shaped by the structure of society and the economic and political limitations which determine the material conditions under which students must achieve. The unfortunate absence of this critique veils the real reasons why African American, Latin American, and other "minority" students underachieve, perform poorly on standardized tests, are over-represented in remedial programs and under-represented in gifted programs and magnet schools, and continue to drop out of high school at alarming rates. As a consequence, educational solutions are often derived from distorted perceptions of the problem and lead to misguided policies and practices. The politics of busing in the early 1970s discussed earlier in this chapter provides an excellent example of this phenomenon of distortion.

Although some would be quick to object to our critique, we can see the above also at work in the manner in which many education scholars have focused their studies in racialized communities. Overall, studies with minority students have placed an overwhelming emphasis on cultural and linguistic questions tied to academic achievement. This is illustrated by the large body of education literature that focuses on the cultural difference of "language minority" students, while only marginally discussing the impact of racialized inequality and class position on identity and cultural formations, as if somehow the problems of African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and other students from subordinate cultural populations can be resolved simply through the introduction of culturally relevant curriculum or the enactment of language policy. Moreover, it is this limited view of the problem that most informs the recent political debates between supporters of bilingual education and California's Proposition 227 (also known as the Unz Initiative or English for the Children).

#### FROM "RACE" TO RACIALIZATION

*For three hundred years black Americans insisted that "race" was no useful distinguishing factor in human relationships. During those same three centuries every academic discipline . . . insisted that "race" was the determining factor in human development.*

—Toni Morrison (1989)<sup>17</sup>

As Morrison implies, unproblematic "common sense" acceptance and use of "race" as a legitimate way to frame social relations has been highly prevalent in the social sciences. The use of this term, for example, among Chicano scholars in the 1960s can be linked to academic acts of resistance to the term "ethnicity" and theories of assimilation which were generally applied to discuss immigration populations of European descent. In efforts to distance Chicano scholarship from this definition and link it to a theory of internal

colonialism, cultural imperialism, and racism, Chicanos were discussed as a colonized "racial" group in much the same manner that many radical theorists positioned African Americans. Consequently, the term's association with power, resistance, and self-determination has veiled the problematics of "race" as a social construct. Protected by the force of cultural nationalist rhetoric, "race" as an analytical term has remained a "paper tiger"—seemingly powerful in discourse matters but ineffectual as an analytical metaphor, incapable of moving us away from the pervasive notion of "race" as an innate determinant of behavior.

In these times, we would be hard-pressed to find a progressive scholar who would subscribe to the use of "race" as a determinant of specific social phenomena associated with inherent (or genetic) characteristics of a group. Yet the use of "race" as an analytical category continues to maintain a stronghold in both academic and popular discourse. What does it mean to attribute analytical status to the idea of "race" and use it as an explanatory concept in theoretical discussions? The use of "race" as an analytical category means to position it as a central organizing theoretical principal in deconstructing social relations of difference, as these pertain to subordinate cultural populations.

Notwithstanding provocative arguments by left theorists such as Adolph Reed Jr., who unequivocally asserts that "Race is purely a social construction; it has no core reality outside a specific social and historical context . . . its material force derives from state power, not some ahistorical 'nature' or any sort of primordial group affinities,"<sup>18</sup> there is an unwillingness to abandon its use. Yet, it is this persistent use of "race" in the literature and research on African Americans, Latinos, and other culturally subordinated populations that perpetuates its definition as a causal factor. As such, the notion of "race" as a social construction "only leads us back into the now familiar move of substituting a sociohistorical conception of race for the biological one . . . that is simply to bury the biological conception below the surface, not to transcend it."<sup>19</sup> Hence, significance and meaning are still attributed to phenotypical features, rather than to the historically reproduced complex processes of racialization. This ultimately serves to conceal the particular set of social conditions experienced by racialized groups that are determined by an interplay of complex social processes, one of which is premised on the articulation of racism to effect legitimate exclusion.<sup>20</sup>

This process of racialization is at work in the disturbing "scientific" assertion that "race" determines academic performance made by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray in their book *The Bell Curve*.<sup>21</sup> Their work illustrates the theoretical minefield of perpetuating such an analytical category in the social sciences and the potential negative consequences on racialized groups. The use of the term "race" serves to conceal the truth that it is not "race" that determines academic performance; but rather, that academic performance is determined by an interplay of complex social processes, one of which is



premised on the articulation of racism (and its subsequent practices of racialization) to affect exclusion in the classroom and beyond.

It is within the historical and contemporary contexts of such scholarship that differences in skin color have been and are signified as a mark which suggests the existence of different "races." As a consequence, a primary response among many progressive activists and scholars when we call for the elimination of "race" as an analytical category is to reel off accusations of a "color-blind" discourse. This is not what we are arguing. What we do argue is that the fixation on skin color is not inherent in its existence but is a product of signification. This is to say, human beings identify skin color to mark or symbolize other phenomena in a variety of social contexts in which other significations occur. As a consequence, when human practices include and exclude people in light of the signification of skin color, collective identities are produced and social inequalities are structured.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, it is this employment of the idea of "race" in the structuring of social relations that is termed racialization. More specifically, Miles in his book *Racism* defines this process of racialization as

those instances where social relations between people have been structured by the signification of human biological characteristics in such a way as to define and construct differentiated social collectivities . . . the concept therefore refers to a process of categorization, a representational process of defining an Other (usually, but not exclusively) somatically.<sup>23</sup>

Hence, to interpret accurately the conditions faced by subordinate cultural populations requires us to move from the idea of "race" to an understanding of racialization and its impact on class formations. This summons a bold analytical transition from the language of "race" to recognizing the centrality of racism and the process of racialization in our understanding of exclusionary practices that give rise to structural inequalities.

#### **BREAKING THE "RACE" FIXATION**

*The first task of social science is to deconstruct common sense categories and to set up rigorous analytic concepts in their place. Here, it appears to us that an excessively vague use of the vocabulary of race should be rejected, and that one should resist the extensions which banalise the evil, or remove its specificity.*

—Michel Wieviorka (1997)<sup>24</sup>

Yet, despite the dangerous forms of distortion which arise from the use of "race" as a central analytical category, most scholars seem unable to break with the hegemonic tradition of its use in the social sciences. Efforts to problematize the reified nature of the term "race" and consider its elimination as a metaphor in our work swiftly meet with major resistance, even among progressive intellectuals of all communities—a resistance that is expressed through anxiety, trepidation, fear, and even anger. It is significant to note that even the

act of questioning the existence of “races” often meets with greater suspicion that the liberal notions that perpetuate a deficit view of “race.” For example, Oliver C. Cox,<sup>25</sup> in his 1948 treatise on “race relations,” posits that “it would probably be as revealing of [negative] interracial attitudes to deliberate upon the variations in the skeletal remains of some people as it would be to question an ongoing society’s definition of a race because, anthropometrically speaking, the assumed race is not a real race.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in a more recent work, *The Racial Contract*, Charles W. Mills argues that:

[T]he only people who can find it psychologically possible to deny the centrality of race are those who are racially privileged, for whom race is invisible precisely because the world is structured around them, whiteness as the grounds against which the figures of other races—those who, unlike us, are raced—appear.<sup>27</sup>

Inherent in these commentaries is the inability to conceive how the denial of “races” does not imply the denial of the racialization of populations and the racist ideologies that have been central to capitalist exploitation and domination around the globe. Yet, it is precisely the failure to grasp this significant analytical concept that ultimately stifles the development of a critical theory of racism, a theory with the analytical depth to free us from a paradigm that explains social subordination (or domination) within the alleged nature of particular populations.

It cannot be left unsaid that often uncritical responses to eliminating the concept of “race” are associated with a fear of delegitimizing the historical movements for liberation that have been principally defined in terms of “race” struggles or progressive institutional interventions that have focused on “race” numbers to evaluate success. Although understandable, such responses nevertheless demonstrate the tenacious and adhesive quality of socially constructed ideas and how through their historical usage these ideas become common sense notions that resist deconstruction. The dilemma that ensues for scholars and activists in the field is well-articulated by Angela Davis:

“Race” has always been difficult to talk about in terms not tainted by ideologies of racism, with which the notion of “race” shares a common historical evolution. The assumption that a taxonomy of human populations can be constructed based on phenotypic characteristics has been discredited. Yet, we continue to use the term “race,” even though many of us are very careful to set it off in quotation marks to indicate that while we do not take seriously the notion of “race” as biologically grounded, neither are we able to think about racist power structures and marginalization processes without invoking the socially constructed concept of “race.”<sup>28</sup>

As a consequence, “race” is retained as “an analytical category not because it corresponds to any biological or epistemological absolutes, but because of

the power that collective identities acquire by means of their roots in tradition."<sup>29</sup> This is a tradition that oftentimes has functioned to obstruct the development of political alliances necessary to the establishment of social movements for human rights, social justice, and economic democracy.

#### THE OPPOSITIONAL LIMITS OF "WHITE SUPREMACY"

*No one was white before he/she came to America.*

—James Baldwin<sup>30</sup>

In efforts to sort out the complexities of "race" problems in America, many prominent intellectuals have placed an overwhelming emphasis on the notion of White supremacy. The writings of bell hooks well illustrate this particular predilection and insistence on using White supremacy as the term of choice when addressing the racialized inequalities suffered by African Americans. In *Talking Back*, she specifically notes this shift in her use of language.

I try to remember when the word racism ceased to be the term which best expressed for me the exploitation of black people and people of color in this society and when I began to understand that the most useful term was white supremacy . . . the ideology that most determines how white people in this society perceive and relate to black people and other people of color.<sup>31</sup>

What seems apparent in hooks's explanation is both her belief in the existence of a White ideology that has Black people as its primary object (albeit her mention of "people of color") and the reification of skin color as the most active determinant of social relations between Black and White populations. Consequently, the persistence of such notions of racialized exploitation and domination mistakenly privileges one particular form of racism, while it ignores the historical and contemporary oppression of populations who have been treated as distinct and inferior "races" without the necessary reference to skin color.

Moreover, "White supremacy" arguments analytically essentialize Black/White relations by inferring that the inevitability of skin color ensures the reproduction of racism in the postcolonial world, where White people predominantly associate Black people with inferiority. Inherent in this perspective is the failure to recognize the precolonial origins of racism which were structured within the interior of Europe by the development of nation-states and capitalist relations of production. "The dichotomous categories of Blacks as victims, and Whites as perpetrators of racism, tend to homogenize the objects of racism, without paying attention to the different experience of men and women, of different social classes and ethnicities."<sup>32</sup> As such there is little room to link, with equal legitimacy, the continuing struggles against racism of Jews, Gypsies, the Irish, immigrant workers, refugees, and other racialized populations of the world (including Africans racialized by Africans) to the struggle of African Americans in the United States.

Hence, theories of racism that are founded upon the racialized idea of White supremacy adhere rigidly to a "race relations paradigm." As such, these theories anchor racialized inequality to the alleged "nature" of White people and the psychological influence of White ideology on both Whites and Blacks, rather than to the complex nature of historically constituted social relations of power and their material consequences. In light of this, hooks's preference for White supremacy represents a perspective that, despite its oppositional intent and popularity among many activists and scholars in the field, still fails to critically advance our understanding of the debilitating structures of capitalism and the nature of class formations within a racialized world. More specifically, what we argue here is that the struggle against racism and class inequality cannot be founded on either academic or popularized notions of "race" or White supremacy, notions that ultimately reify and "project a 'phantom objectivity,' an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature."<sup>33</sup> Rather than working to invert racist notions of racialized inferiority, anti-racist scholars and activists should seek to develop a critical theory of racism to confront the fundamental nature and consequences of structural inequalities as reproduced by the historical processes of racialization in U.S. society and around the globe.

#### TOWARD A PLURALITY OF RACISMS

*[T]he presumption of a single monolithic racism is being replaced by a mapping of the multifarious historical formulations of racisms.*

—David Theo Goldberg<sup>34</sup>

In order to address these structural inequalities, an analytical shift is required, from "race" to a plural conceptualization of "racisms" and their historical articulations with other ideologies. This plural notion of "racisms" more accurately captures the historically specific nature of racism and the variety of meanings attributed to evaluations of difference and assessments of superiority and inferiority of people. Conversely, to continue our engagement of racism as a singular ideological phenomenon fails to draw on the multiplicity of historical and social processes inherent in the heterogeneity of racialized relations. This is to say, for example, that the notion of "White supremacy" can only have any real meaning within populations whose exploitation and domination is essentialized based on skin color. As such, this view severs the experience of African Americans, for instance, from meaningful comparative analysis with those racialized populations whose subordination is predicated on other social characteristics.

Consequently, "White supremacy" arguments cannot be employed to analyze, for example, the racialization of Jews in Germany during the 1930s, or Gypsy populations in Eastern Europe, or the Tutsi population in the

Congo. More close to home, the concept of "White supremacy" sheds little light on what is happening in Watts and South Central Los Angeles between the Korean petite-bourgeoisie and the African American and Latino underclass or reserve army (to use a more traditional concept!). Instead, what we are arguing for is a plural concept of racism that can free us from the "Black/White" dichotomy and, in its place, assert the historically shifting and politically complex nature of racialization. More specifically, it is a pluralized concept of racism that has relevance and analytical utility in comprehending the political economy of racialized relations in South Central Los Angeles, as well as the larger sociocultural landscape that can, beyond this analysis, link the economic structures of oppression in this local context to the global context of racialized capitalism. Most importantly, we argue that the problems in racialized communities are not about "race" but rather about the intricate interplay between a variety of racisms and class. It is for this reason that we do not believe that scholars should not be trying to advance a "critical theory of race."<sup>35</sup> A persistence in attributing the idea of "race" with analytical status can only lead us further down a theoretical and political dead end. Instead, the task at hand is to deconstruct "race" and detach it from the concept of racism. This is to say, what is essential for activists and social science scholars is to understand that the construction of the idea of "race" is embodied in racist ideology that supports the practice of racism. It is racism as an ideology that produces the notion of "race," not the existence of "races" that produces racism.<sup>36</sup>

Hence, what is needed is a clear understanding of the plurality of racisms and the exclusionary social processes that function to perpetuate the racialization of members from culturally and economically marginalized communities. Robert Miles convincingly argues that these processes can be analyzed within the framework of Marxist theory without retaining the idea of race as an analytical concept.

Using the concept of racialization, racism, and exclusionary practices to identify specific means of effecting the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production, one is able to stress consistently and rigorously the role of human agency, albeit always constrained by particular historical and material circumstances, in these processes, as well as to recognize the specificity of particular forms of oppression.<sup>37</sup>

Miles's work also supports the notion that efforts to construct a new language for examining the nature of differing racisms requires an understanding of how complex relationships of exploitation and resistance, grounded in differences of class, ethnicity, and gender, give rise to a multiplicity of ideological constructions of the racialized Other. This knowledge again challenges the traditional notion of racism as predominantly a Black/White phenomenon and directs us toward a more accurately constructed and, hence, more politi-

cally and analytically useful way to identify a multiplicity of historically specific racisms.

We recognize that there are anti-racist scholars who cannot comprehend a world where the notion of "race" does not exist. Without question, mere efforts to undo and eliminate the idea of "race" as an analytical category in the social sciences is insufficient to remove its use from the popular or academic imagination and discourse of everyday life. Moreover, in a country like the United States, filled with historical examples of exploitation, violence, and murderous acts rationalized by popular "race" opinions and scientific "race" ideas, it is next to impossible to convince people that "race" does not exist as a "natural" category. So, in Colette Guillaumin's words, "let us be clear about this. The idea of race is a technical means, a machine, for committing murder. And its effectiveness is not in doubt."<sup>38</sup> But "races" do not exist. What does exist is the unrelenting idea of "race" that fuels racisms throughout the world.

#### THE NEED FOR A CRITICAL THEORY OF RACISM

*Moreover, language presents us with resources for the construction of meanings which reach out towards the future, which point to possibilities that transcend our experience of the present. . . . And those fighting for liberation from oppression and exploitation will invariably find within language words, meanings and themes for expressing, clarifying, and coordinating their struggle for a better world.*

—David McNally (1997)<sup>39</sup>

In considering a shift from the study of "race" to the critical study of racism, what is clear is that we need a language by which to construct culturally democratic notions of sociopolitical theory and practice. This entails the recasting and reinterpretation of social issues in a language with greater specificity, which explicitly reflects an international anti-racist notion of society. Such a language must unquestionably be linked to global histories of social movements against economic inequalities and social injustice. Although we fully recognize that theoretical language alone will not necessarily alter the power relations in any given society, it can assist us to analytically reason more accurately and, thus, to confront more effectively how power is both practiced and maintained through the systematic racialization of subordinate populations. As such, a critical language of racism can provide the foundation for developing effective public policies that are directly linked to liberatory principles of cultural and economic democracy.

In summary, we deny any place for the use of "race" as an analytical concept and support efforts to eliminate all conceptions of "race" as a legitimate entity or human phenomenon. We believe that the future struggle against racism and capitalism must at long last contend with the reality that

There are no "races" and therefore no "race relations." There is only a belief that there are such things, a belief which is used by some social groups to con-

struct an Other (and therefore the Self) in thought as a prelude to exclusion and domination, and by other social groups to define Self (and so to construct an Other) as a means of resisting that exclusion. Hence, if it is used at all . . . "race" should be used only to refer descriptively to such uses.<sup>40</sup>

In light of this, we posit a critical conceptualization of racism with which to analyze both historical and contemporary social experiences and institutional realities. Insofar as such a concept, whether employed in social investigation or political struggle, reveals patterns of discrimination and resulting inequalities, it raises the question: What actions must be taken to dismantle these inequalities? This in turn requires nothing less than to confront racism in all its dimensions head-on. At the risk of being redundant, we must emphasize once again that rejecting "race" as having a real referent in the social world does not mean denying the existence of racism, or the denial of historical and cultural experiences predicated on a specific population's particular struggle against racism. Rather, a critical theory of racism represents a bold and forthright move to challenge common-sense notions of "race" that often lead not only to profound forms of essentialism and ahistorical perceptions of oppression, but also make it nearly impossible to dismantle the external material structures of domination that sustain racialized inequalities in schools and the larger society.

Further, we recognize the empirical reality that people believe in the existence of biologically distinct races. This can be captured analytically by stating that people employ the idea of "race" in the construction and interpretation of their social worlds. Similarly, we acknowledge that it is a common practice among the oppressed to invert the experience of exploitation. This is to say that negative notions of "race" linked to racist ideology are turned on their head and employed to fuel political movements among racialized populations. Social activists and scholars are not obliged to accept the common-sense ideas employed in the social world and use them as analytical concepts. The whole tradition of critical/Marxist analysis highlights the importance of developing an analytical framework that penetrates the surface and reified realities of social relations. (See, for example, Marx's discussion of the distinction between phenomenal forms and essential relations, his discussion of reification, and his discussion of method in the *Introduction to the Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*<sup>41</sup> [1939].) In keeping with this tradition, we focus on racism as an analytical concept—a concept that has a real object in the social world, namely an ideology with a set of specific characteristics informed by economic imperatives—and we only refer to the idea of "race" when people use the notion in their everyday genres, utilizing it to make social distinctions based on the significance that is attached to differences between populations.

Finally, unlike scholars who argue resolutely for a critical theory of "race," we seek a critical language and conceptual apparatus that makes racism the cen-

tral category of analysis in our understanding of racialized inequality, while simultaneously encompassing the multiple social expressions of racism. Undoubtedly, this entails the development of a critical language from which activists and scholars can reconstruct theories and practices of contemporary society that more accurately reflect and address capitalist forms of social and material inequities that shape the lives of racialized populations. Most importantly, we are calling for a critical theory of racism that can grapple with a radical remaking of democracy in the age of a globalized post-industrial economy. There are many who have proclaimed the death of the socialist project, but we argue that its renaissance is close at hand and will be articulated through a language that is fueled by the courage and passion to break with those hegemonic traditions on the left that fail to support a democratic vision of life for all people.

## NOTES

1. Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race: Race History and Culture in Western Society* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 34.
2. Kwame Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," in *Overcoming Racism and Sexism*, Linda Bell and David Blumenfeld, eds. (Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield, 1995), 75.
3. Quotation marks are used around the word "race" not only to distinguish it as a social construct but to question the legitimacy of its descriptive and analytical utility. Following the example of British sociologist Robert Miles we agree that the use of "race" as an analytical concept disguises the social construction of difference, presenting it as inherent in the empirical reality of observable or imagined biological differences. For more on this issue, see *Racism* (London: Routledge, 1989) and *Racism after 'Race Relations'* (London: Routledge, 1993) both by Miles. For an insightful note on the use of quotation marks and the "racial" logic of the practice itself, see *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) by Mathew Frye Jacobson; ix, x.
4. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publications, 1971).
5. Antonia Darder, *Culture and Power in the Classroom* (Westport, Conn.: Bergin & Garvey, 1991), 42.
6. Victor Valle and Rodolfo D. Torres, "The Idea of Mestizaje and the 'Race' Problematic: Racialized Media Discourse in a Post-Fordist Landscape," in *Culture and Difference*. Antonia Darder, ed. (Westport, Conn.: Bergin & Garvey, 1995), 139–153.
7. Jon Cruz, "From Farce to Tragedy: Reflections in the Reification of Race at Century's End," in *Mapping Multiculturalism*, Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 29.
8. Cruz, "From Farce to Tragedy," *Mapping Multiculturalism*, 35.
9. Some contemporary examples of this scholarship can be found in *Race Matters* by Cornel West (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993); *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* by bell hooks (1995); *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* by Michael Orm and Howard Winant (New York: Routledge, 1993); and *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
10. Gordon Allport's *The Nature of Prejudice* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1954); and Kenneth Clark's *Prejudice and Your Child* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955) strongly influenced the intellectual rationale and public policy decisions that instituted the busing solution in the United States.
11. Ellen Meiksins Wood, "Identity Crisis," *In These Times* (June 1994): 28–9.
12. Associated Press, Geneva, report released by the United Nations' International Labor Organization, entitled *Unemployment Will Reach 1 Billion Worldwide by Year's End* on Sunday, September 28, 1998.
13. John Cavanagh, "Global Economic Apartheid" (transcript from a speech delivered in Takoma Park, Maryland, September 19, 1996, p. 2); available through Alternative Radio, Boulder, Colorado. Dr. Cavanagh is a specialist in international trade, economics, and development and is



- coauthor with Richard J. Barnett of *Global Dreams: Imperial Corporations in the New World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).
14. Ramon Grosfoguel and Chloe S. Georas, "The Racialization of Latino Caribbean Migrants in the New York Metropolitan Area," *Centro: Focus En Foco*, 1–2, No. 8, 1996: 193.
  15. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 263.
  16. Robert Miles, *Racism after 'Race Relations'* (London: Routledge, 1993), 1.
  17. Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28 (Winter 1989), 3.
  18. Adolph Reed Jr., "Skin Deep," *Village Voice* 24 (September 1998), 22.
  19. Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument," *Overcoming Racism*, 74.
  20. Robert Miles and Rodolfo D. Torres, "Does 'Race' Matter? Transatlantic Perspectives on Racism after 'Race Relations,'" in *Resituating Identities: The Politics of Race, Ethnicity and Culture*, Vered Amit-Talai and Caroline Knowles, eds. (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1996), 32.
  21. Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1994).
  22. Robert Miles and Rodolfo D. Torres, "Does 'Race' Matter?" *Resituating Identities*, 40.
  23. Miles, *Racism* (London: Routledge, 1989), 75.
  24. Michel Wieviorka, "Is It Difficult to Be an Anti-Racist?" *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multicultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood, eds. (London: ZED Books, 1997), 40.
  25. Fifty years after the publication of *Caste, Class and Race* (New York: Doubleday, 1948) many continue to attribute Marxist analytical status to the work of Oliver C. Cox. Yet, we argue that this is misleading in that Cox, who retained race as the central category of analysis in his work, remained staunchly anchored in a "race relations" paradigm.
  26. Oliver C. Cox, *Caste, Class and Race* (1948: reprint New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), 319.
  27. Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 76.
  28. Angela Davis, "Gender, Class, and Multiculturalism: Rethinking Race Politics" in *Mapping Multiculturalism*, Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 43.
  29. Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 9.
  30. James Baldwin, "On Being White . . . and Other Lies," in *Black on White*, David Roediger, ed. (New York: Schocken, 1998), 178.
  31. bell hooks, *Talking Back* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 112–13.
  32. Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, and Color and the Anti-racist Struggle* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 15.
  33. Margaret Radin, cited in Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," in *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White*, David Roediger (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), 107.
  34. David Theo Goldberg, *Anatomy of Racism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), xiii.
  35. For recent scholarly works that focus on "critical theories of race," see *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, Richard Delgado, ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, Kimberlee Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, eds. (New York: New Press, 1995); and *Critical Race Feminism: A Reader*, Adrien King Wing (New York: New York University Press, 1997); as well as writings by Michael Omi and Howard Winant, including *Racial Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
  36. Colette Guillaumin, *Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1995).
  37. Robert Miles, *Racism after 'Race Relations'* (London: Routledge, 1993), 52.
  38. Guillaumin, *Racism, Sexism*, 107.
  39. David McNally, "Language, History and Class Struggle," in *In Defense of History: Marxism and the Postmodern Agenda*, Ellen Meiksins Wood and John Bellamy Foster, eds. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997), 40–41.
  40. Miles, *Racism after 'Race Relations'*, 42.
  41. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Okonomie* (Moscow: Verlag fur Fremdsprachig Literatur, 1939).

# Suggested Readings for Future Study

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## RACE, RACISM, AND EDUCATION

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