

# Why the Critical Race Theory Concept of 'White Supremacy' should not be dismissed by Neo-Marxists: Lessons from Contemporary Black Radicalism.

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## **Abstract**

Since entering the field of education studies, Critical Race Theory (CRT) has had an uneasy relationship with Marxism. One particular point of disagreement between Marxists and CRT scholars centres on the CRT concept of 'White supremacy'. Some Marxist scholars suggest that, because of its reliance on 'White supremacy', CRT is unable to explain the prevalence of racism in Western, capitalist societies. These Marxists also argue that 'White supremacy' as understood within CRT is actively damaging to radical, emancipatory movements because the concept misrepresents the position of the White working class as the beneficiaries of racism, and in doing so, it alienates White workers from their Black counterparts. Some neo-Marxist thinkers have sought to replace the concept of 'White supremacy' with 'racialisation', a concept which is grounded in capitalism modes of production and has a historical, political, and economic basis. Drawing on arguments from CRT, Marxism, and Black radicalism, this paper argues that the CRT concept of 'White supremacy' is itself grounded in historical, political, and economic reality and should not be dismissed by neo-Marxists. Incorporating 'White supremacy' into a neo-Marxist account of racism makes it more appealing to a broader (Black) radical audience.

**Key words:** Marxism, Critical Race Theory, Black Radicalism, Race, Racism, Racialisation, White Supremacy.

## 1. Introduction

A long-running argument between neo-Marxists and critical race theory (CRT) scholars has centred on the CRT concept of 'White supremacy'. From a neo-Marxist perspective, it has been suggested that 'White supremacy' cannot explain the nature of racism in contemporary, Western, capitalist societies, nor is it suitable to act as a rallying point and motivator for positive, radical action for oppressed groups (particularly the White working class). Some neo-Marxist thinkers have sought to replace the CRT concept of White supremacy with that of 'racialisation' which links the construction of race and racism to capitalist modes of production, thus providing an explanation of racism that is grounded in the historical, political, and economic realities of capitalist societies. Drawing on recent developments from within Black radicalism, this paper defends the use of the CRT concept of 'White supremacy' but argues that this is an idea that is complimentary to the neo-Marxist notion of racialisation. 'White supremacy' when grounded in a Black radical understanding connecting it to the history of imperialism, colonialism, and the unjust social, political, and economic systems they have created, makes a useful, theoretical addition to neo-Marxist ontology, potentially making neo-Marxism more appealing to a wider, radical audience.

There have been many criticisms of CRT from a Marxist perspective, including those that suggest that the significance of race as a variable in explaining educational attainment disparities has been exaggerated by CRT scholars (Hill 2009), to those suggesting that the theoretical constructs used within CRT are flawed (Darder and Torres 2004, Cole and Maisuria 2007, and Cole 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d, 2011, 2012, 2016, 2017a, 2017b).

Replies from CRT scholars to these criticisms (including Gillborn 2009) have tended to focus

on more general matters of the interpretation of CRT and its mischaracterisation by scholars from outside of the CRT paradigm without directly dealing with issues of the veracity of the concepts that are central to CRT. This paper seeks to directly address these issues.

## **2. Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory (CRT) has its origins in the critical legal studies (CLS) movement in the United States of America of the late 1970s (Crenshaw et al., 1995, Cole 2009a, 2012, 2017a, 2017b). Critical legal studies was the product of a group of left-leaning legal scholars, including neo-Marxists, who shared a concern that the practice of North American law, and how law was taught in American universities, was perpetuating class (and economic) inequalities and hierarchies. Scholars who aligned themselves with CLS maintained that the inherently political nature of the law was responsible for this perpetuation of inequalities and that legal structures in the USA were both the product of, and mechanisms to maintain, the dominant right-wing political ideology of the times. That this political nature of existing legal structures was unacknowledged by contemporary law scholarship was perhaps the biggest barrier to the law's ability to sufficiently deal with the prevalent social injustices of the time (Crenshaw et al., 1995).

Critical race theory emerged shortly after the shift in legal theorizing brought about by CLS (Cole 2009a, 2017a). Because of CLS's narrow focus on issues of class and economic structures combined with the worrying slowing of civil rights advances, scholars adopting a CRT perspective sought to close the gap in CLS thinking by shifting their critical attention onto the persistent and deep-seated racial inequalities in American society (West 1995). Although it is difficult to pinpoint the birth of the movement precisely, the name "critical race theory" was first used at a workshop in 1989 (Crenshaw et al. 1995, Cole 2017b). By

expanding and critiquing CLS thinking, CRT scholars sought to create a theoretical base from which to understand the ways in which the law operates to construct and maintain racial inequalities in the USA. The emergence of CRT was the birth of a sophisticated, postmodern, critical, intellectual and political project organised around the concept of race. As part of this project, CRT has developed a range of powerful theoretical tools, including a re-conceptualising of 'White supremacy', through which to analyse and confront racism.

The application of CRT to areas outside of legal scholarship became obvious to the progenitors of the movement shortly after its creation. It was around the mid-1990s when CRT entered educational theory in the United States (notably with the publication of Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995) but it was not until a decade later when it became established in the scholarship of education in the UK (Cole 2009a, 2017a). The most comprehensive introduction to CRT in the UK, a discussion of its uses as an analytical framework in the context of education, and an application of such an analysis to the UK educational system is presented by Gillborn (2008). Today, CRT is used extensively in analyses of educational issues concerning race and racism in both the UK and USA.

Although CRT was influenced to some degree in its development by leftist thought (including neo-Marxism), because of the Marxist foregrounding of class, and the CRT focus on race, a tension has developed between CRT scholars and critical educators drawing primarily on the Marxist tradition. Marxism and CRT are not necessarily antagonistic: Mills (2009) argues that CRT and Marxism are compatible theories, and Leonardo (2009) argues that a Marxist analysis of racial inequalities is useful to race-centric critiques of educational inequality (including CRT) as it acts as a brake on such approaches tendencies to reify and essentialise race. Nevertheless, Cole and Maisuria (2007), and Cole (2009a, 2009b, 2009c,

2009d, 2011, 2012, 2016, 2017a, 2017b) have presented arguments to the effect that CRT analyses of racial inequalities are inferior to those that can be offered via a neo-Marxist analysis and maintain that CRT is ineffective in bringing about emancipatory change for oppressed groups. Many of these arguments centre on the concept of “White Supremacy” as employed by CRT as being theoretically flawed and ineffective for motivating action against racism.

### **3. White supremacy**

In CRT, the concept of White supremacy is invoked to describe a process and persistent state of affairs that is prevalent in the Western world where the interests of White-identified people are given precedence over the interests of other groups through political, social, economic, and cultural structures and practices that have evolved over centuries and are maintained and continually recreated by these structures and through individual actors and actions (conscious and unconscious). These structures and practices are generally taken for granted and ‘invisible’ in the normal, day-to-day operation of western societies, particularly to White people. Thus conceived, ‘White supremacy’ takes on a more nuanced and wide-ranging meaning than it is ascribed in everyday parlance where it is usually reserved only to describe the attitudes and actions of extreme racist and right-wing groups and individuals such as the Ku Klux Klan, British National Party, National Action, and their respective members (Gillborn 2006).

In an often-quoted passage, Ansley (1997) offers the following description of the CRT concept of White supremacy:

[By] ‘White supremacy’ I do not mean to allude only to the self-conscious racism of white supremacist hate groups. I refer instead to a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites

overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily re-enacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings. (Ansley, 1997, p. 592)

Even though CRT is a broad church, with a diverse array of CRT scholars using different concepts in their efforts to analyse and challenge racial inequalities, the above characterisation of White supremacy is perhaps the most fundamental and widely accepted concept within the doctrine. And, while this contemporary idea of White supremacy is not exclusive to CRT (similar conceptions of White supremacy have been voiced by, for example, Gilroy (1992) and hooks (1989) writing from different theoretical perspectives) it is within CRT where the concept has been most fully expounded and has gained most currency. Gillborn (2008) asserts that amongst critical race theorists, White Supremacy is a concept that is indispensable to their doctrine: 'Some critical race scholars argue that White Supremacy... is as central to CRT as the notion of capitalism is to Marxist theory and patriarchy to Feminism' (Gillborn, 2008, p. 36).

Characterised in this way, the concept of White supremacy performs an important, triple function within CRT theorising. Firstly, it foregrounds and emphasises the prevalence and insidiousness of racism in Western societies. In doing so, 'White supremacy' captures both the structural element and the features of racism that manifest through individual and group actions, attitudes, and beliefs. Secondly, it highlights the nature of an important power relationship in the Western world: racism is overwhelmingly detrimental to people who are identified as non-White (and particularly to those identified as Black). Conversely, being White (i.e. being perceived to possess Whiteness) confers a plethora of privileges on individuals and groups that fall under this label (McIntosh, 1992). White supremacy is

responsible for the benefits associated with its correlate, 'White privilege' and denotes a *one-way* flow of power, whereby benefits accrue to White people, to the detriment of non-White people.

Finally, the concept of 'White supremacy' captures the idea that racism in Western societies is a form of *domination*, by one racially-identified group (Whites) over others. As such, White supremacy captures the reality that racism operates, in part, as a *process* that is constantly re-established by White agents (consciously and unconsciously), acting within societal frameworks that encourage and facilitate this re-enforcement of an unequal, racist *status quo*. Leonardo describes this feature of White supremacy like so:

[W]hite domination is never settled once and for all; it is constantly re-established and reconstructed by whites *from all walks of life*. It is not a relation of power secured by slavery, Jim Crow, or job discrimination alone. It is not a process with a clear beginning or a foreseeable end (Bell, 1992). Last, it is not solely the domain of white supremacist groups. It is rather the domain of average, tolerant people, of lovers of diversity, and of believers in justice. (Leonardo, 2004, p. 143)

In other words, White people are complicit in the construction and recreation of their own racial supremacy (from which they benefit in a number of ways), sometimes knowingly, sometimes unknowingly.

This final component of "White supremacy" that captures racism as a form of *domination* is an important one because it highlights a crucial dimension of racism that is often overlooked in narratives that emphasise contemporary racist inequality as a form of *dominance*, where racial dominance is characterised as a state of being rather than as a process, for example, in discourses that primarily dwell on "White privilege" (Leonardo, 2004). While racist structures and behaviours certainly do engender dominance, discourses



that foreground racist states of affairs, at the expense of the processes that create these states of affairs, often present racist societies in a way that minimises or even obliterates the role that actors play in perpetuating racism (through, for example, presenting the benefits of White privilege as being passively received by White people (Leonardo, 2004)). Although there may be some heuristic value (particularly when discussing racism with White audiences) in focussing on the ways in which racial dominance manifests it is vital that we also ultimately deal with how White dominance is reproduced and sustained, and why it persists. Racist structures do not exist only through historical precedents, divorced from contemporary agents. Leonardo explains:

If racist relations were created only by people in the past, then racism would not be as formidable as it is today. It could be regarded as part of the historical dustbin and a relic of a cruel society. If racism were only problems promulgated by 'bad whites', then bad Whites today either outnumber 'good whites' or overpower them. The question becomes: Who are these bad whites? It must be the position of a good white person to declare that racism is always about 'other whites', perhaps 'those working class whites'. This is a general alibi to create the 'racist' as always other, the self being an exception. Since very few whites exist who actually believe they are racist, then basically no one is racist and racism disappears more quickly than we can describe it. We live in a condition where racism thrives absent of racists (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). There must be an alternative explanation: in general, whites recreate their own racial supremacy, despite good intentions. (Leonardo, 2004, pp. 143-44)

So, the concept of 'White supremacy' as understood by CRT scholars, encapsulates racism as it exists in Western societies as normal and persistent, benefiting Whites to the detriment of non-Whites, and as being sustained, in part, through the actions of individuals and groups who gain a range of benefits from its continued existence.

#### **4. A Marxist critique of 'White supremacy'**

Despite the theoretical utility of the concept of “white supremacy” employed by CRT as described above, it has been repeatedly criticised from a Marxist perspective (Cole and Maisuria, 2007, and Cole, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d, 2011, 2012, 2016, 2017a, 2017b).<sup>1</sup>

The Marxist critique offered is wide ranging and comprehensive. Cole (2016, 2017b) identifies seven substantial problems with “White supremacy” as utilised by CRT scholars.

According to Cole, White supremacy:

1. Diverts attention from modes of production.
2. Homogenises all White people.
3. Cannot explain non-colour-coded racism.
4. Cannot explain newer forms of racism such as hybridist racism (e.g. Islamophobia, where ‘traditional’ racism based on skin colour is combined with attitudes of religious intolerance).
5. Cannot explain racism that involves non-White actors discriminating against other non-White actors.
6. Has a historical usage that does not refer to the everyday racism described by CRT scholars and, in this usage, is associated with such things as fascism and other extreme right-wing ideologies. A comprehensive account of racism should maintain a theoretical distinction between fascism and racism.

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<sup>1</sup> Cole and Maisuria’s, and Cole’s is not the only possible Marxist interpretation of the workings of racism and how whiteness is implicated in racial discrimination in modern, capitalist societies. Preston (2010) offers an alternative Marxist interpretation of racism where whiteness is construed more abstractly as being a form of capital, the presence or absence of which is responsible for the racist divisions we see in the West. This contrasts with Cole and Maisuria, and Cole’s interpretations which are rooted in treating the racialisation of people as an ideological process, driven by a relationship to modes of production and the changing needs of capitalist economies.

7. Is damaging in motivating action against racism (particularly for White people).

(Adapted from Cole 2017b).

These criticisms are interconnected, but they can be grouped into four broad categories.

Category one: Cole's point number one, is really the theoretical crux of this particular Marxist critique, lamenting the lack of connection contained in the concept of White supremacy with the material base of production in capitalist societies and the structural and historically specific conditions that have enabled racial inequalities to arise and persist. For Cole, using 'White supremacy' to explain and characterise the nature and continued presence of racism and the inequalities that it generates in the Western world simply misses the mark in locating the fundamental cause of inequality and lacks any explanatory power: 'While, for Marxists, it is certainly the case that there has been a *continuity* of racism for hundreds of years, the concept of "white supremacy" does not in itself *explain* this continuity, since it does not need to connect to modes of production and developments in capitalism' (Cole, 2017a, p. 37, emphasis in original).

Category two: Cole's criticisms numbers two and seven focus on how the use of 'White supremacy' characterises White people (regardless of their social class) and how they do, or do not, benefit from racism. Specifically, Cole is concerned with economically disadvantaged Whites being conflated with the White economic elite as the beneficiaries of racism. Cole is also concerned with the need for an inclusive theory that does not alienate a potentially revolutionary class (the White working class) on the grounds that it is (mistakenly) labelled as 'white supremacist' and, therefore, part of a homogenous, oppressive, elite with little or nothing in common with oppressed Black and other racially minoritized groups.

Category three: criticisms numbers three, four, and five concern a different aspect of the explanatory force of 'White supremacy', essentially pointing out that the concept is not fine-grained enough to explain a whole range of different forms of racism that are not (at least at face value) based on a black/white binary distinction. Category four: criticism number six is more than a semantic point. Cole (2019) points out that fascists (including the alt-right) are racist in many ways, including being deeply anti-Semitic (a form of racism not based on a Black/White binary). Furthermore, since the ascendancy of Donald Trump, White supremacy in its traditional sense has become increasingly more prevalent. It is not useful to subsume fascism (including that of the alt-right) and the racist micro-aggressions and other subtle forms of racism described by Critical Race theorists all under the same label of 'White supremacy'. It is the first two categories of Cole's criticisms with which this paper is primarily concerned.

## **5. Neo-Marxist racialisation**

Cole, (2016, 2017a, 2017b), following Miles (1987), suggests that a more apt (neo-Marxist) concept for explaining the persistent, everyday nature of racism in modern, capitalist societies is that of *racialisation*. According to Cole:

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

Specifically, the neo-Marxist concept of racialisation makes the connection between racism and capitalist modes of production, as well as making links to patterns of migration that are themselves determined by economic and political dynamics. (Cole 2016, p.14)

Within this neo-Marxist framework Cole (2012, 2017a) explains that racialisation is an *ideological* process, the purpose of which is to provide a racialized labour force which maintains capitalist structures, attendant inequalities, and divisions amongst the working class. In this formulation of the processes of racialization, Cole draws on Miles' (1987) account whereby social relations between people are structured according to biological differences (real and imagined) combined with cultural characteristics. Building on Miles' account, Cole incorporates a number of other factors, along with biological and cultural markers, that comprise and drive the racialization process: Intentional and unintentional racist attitudes and acts; 'seemingly positive' attitudes to racial minorities with ultimately racist implications; dominative racism (racism aimed at oppressing racial minorities); aversive racism (racism aimed at excluding racial minorities); and overt as well as covert racism (Cole 2017a).

Again, following Miles (1987), Cole (2009a, 2012, 2016, 2017a) maintains that the racist, social relations that exist and are continually (re)constructed in contemporary Western societies via the racialization process cannot be fully understood without recognising the role that the modes of production play in motivating this process, and that these racist, social relations are a function of the processes of material production. Racialisation thus construed is an inherently neo-Marxist concept. Leonardo (2013) contends that this account of racialisation, although recognising the need to maintain concepts directly relating to race and racism, ultimately rests upon the Marxist concepts of class and capitalism:

'[Racialization and racism] do not point to race relations as such but rather to the class antagonisms found in capitalism, whose forms may take a different shape, such as "race", but whose ultimate function remains the same, which is the extraction of surplus value' (Leonardo, 2013, p. 55).

Employing this neo-Marxist concept of racialisation instead of the CRT concept of White supremacy to characterise and explain racism within contemporary, Western societies has the benefit (according to Cole, 2016a, 2017a, 2017b) of avoiding the shortcomings of 'White supremacy' listed above. Specifically, for Cole, 'racialisation' is a concept that provides the political, historical and material underpinnings necessary to *explain* the prevalence of racism and to provide an impetus to take action against it.

#### **6. Homogenising White people and motivating anti-racist action**

The presence of White supremacy within contemporary, Western societies accounts for, in large part, (for CRT scholars at least) the unequal distribution of wealth and privilege across Western societies (along with other forms of inequality not related to material wealth). The life chances and material wealth of White people are better, on average, across the populations of the Western world compared to those of non-whites (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). While recognising that claims of inequality driven by White supremacy are not assertions that *all* White people are better off than *all* non-White people, Cole objects to the CRT concept of 'White supremacy' because it treats all White people as being the beneficiaries of racism and does not give sufficient credence to the role that social class plays in the unequal division of privilege and material resources in Western, capitalist societies. The plight of working class Whites should not be ignored: '...we should not lose sight of the life chances of millions of working-class white people, who along with racialized groups, are part of the 99 per cent, not the 1 per cent' (Cole, 2016, p. 16). For Cole, the White working class share, to a large degree, their identity with Black and other racialized minority groups as being on the receiving end of capitalist inequalities.

Cole goes on that not only does the CRT usage of 'White supremacy' create narratives that do not recognise that there are poor Whites who also suffer under capitalism, but it also locates these poor Whites as a major contributing *cause* of racial and economic inequalities that exist in capitalist countries, and it overstates the benefits that they accrue from being designated as White: '[The concept of White supremacy] ...at least implicates all white people as part of some hegemonic bloc of "whiteness"' (Cole, 2016, p. 16). Objecting to characterisations of White supremacy (such as Mills, 1997) as a global political system in which all Whites are beneficiaries, Cole contends that this pre-occupation with racial divisions obfuscates the more deep-seated, and fundamental causes of inequality and poverty: 'The devastating effects of social class exploitation and oppression are masked by CRT blanket assertions of "white supremacy" and "white privilege"' (Cole, 2017a, p. 40). And, 'Attempts to do this [homogenising white people using "white supremacy"] ignore capitalist social relations, which are infused with the crucial dimensions of social class, power, and ideology' (Cole, 2017a, p. 42).

Turning to Cole's seventh criticism of 'white supremacy', which is connected to criticism number two discussed above, Cole further contends that the problem with 'white supremacy' is 'that it is totally counter-productive as a political unifier and rallying point against racism' (Cole, 2009c, p. 32). One reason for this is that, 'Telling working class white people that they are "white supremacist", for Marxists, totally undermines the unification of the working class which is necessary to challenge capitalism and imperialism' (Cole, 2009c, p. 32). Cole (2009a, 2009c, 2016, 2017a, 2017b) goes on to link 'white supremacy' with the 'race traitor' (RT) movement, which seeks the abolition of 'whiteness' as a necessary step towards moving beyond capitalism and capitalist inequalities (Ignatiev and Garvey, 1996, Preston and Chadderton, 2012). The RT movement is ultimately rejected by Cole for three

reasons: that it is vulnerable to being misunderstood and mischaracterised as a political ideology with parallels to fascism; it over-emphasises a black/white binary when analysing race and racism; and that it has no vision of what its own goals are for the future.<sup>2</sup>

Cole's scepticism of the RT movement should be welcomed by CRT scholars on the grounds that the RT movement does not fully appreciate the multi-faceted nature of White supremacy. Indeed, as Leonardo (2004) points out, the renunciation of Whiteness by White subjects as advocated by the RT movement is, at best, only a partial solution to problems posed by the existence of White supremacy. The structural components of White supremacy remain despite individual acts of dis-identification with Whiteness. White privilege will continue to be granted to White identified subjects, whether or not they themselves choose to accept the label of 'White'. More recently, Andrews (2018) has dismissed the RT movement from a contemporary Black Radical tradition, asserting that the RT movement underestimates the force of White supremacy globally, and places far too much emphasis on the role of White agents as being the drivers of anti-racist, emancipatory action. Acknowledging the existence of White supremacy should not lead us inexorably to the RT movement as the only response.

However, the question remains as to whether the neo-Marxist concept of racialisation is less problematic than the CRT concept of White supremacy and if it should replace it in our theorising about the nature of racism.

## **7. Racialisation and White supremacy**

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<sup>2</sup> See Cole (2017b, Chapter 3) for a thorough discussion of the race traitor movement, its relevance to CRT, and a detailed Marxist analysis.



It is relatively uncontroversial amongst both Marxists and CRT scholars that racialisation is a real phenomenon and that recurrent and persistent attempts are made in advanced capitalist societies to categorise people into distinct races with distinct characteristics, to the benefit of the White economic elite. A recent example of a CRT analysis of one way in which racialisation is facilitated is given by Gillborn (2016). Gillborn compellingly argues that pseudo-scientific ideas about the genetic heritability of intelligence which assert a biological basis for the Black/White academic attainment gap in the UK education system are, to this day, being put forward by seemingly credible genetic scientists, despite overwhelming scientific evidence running contrary to such claims. Perhaps more worryingly, Gillborn (2016) goes on, these pseudo-scientific ideas claiming that Black pupils are genetically less academically able than White pupils are disproportionately influential with educational policy makers in the UK and that scientists peddling these ideas are given far too much credence by White politicians, particularly those operating in the educational sphere.

In a similar vein, Gillborn (2018) has also argued that, particularly in the UK and USA, there is a persistent drive to establish a scientific basis for the belief that White people are genetically pre-disposed to have higher IQ scores than Black people, regardless of how many times these ideas are debunked and exposed as being the products of flawed scientific method. Furthermore, these attempts to establish genetic reasons for differences in IQ and academic attainment between White people and Black people are couched in 'racial inexplicitness' (Gillborn, 2018) and have become ever subtler, with proponents of these ideas, rarely, if ever, mentioning race directly in an effort to avoid accusations of overt racism or of indulging in racial pseudo-science (accusations that had previously been highly damaging following the publication of the notorious, pseudo-scientific text, 'The Bell Curve')

(Herrnstein and Murray, 1994)). Nevertheless, such claims strongly imply a genetic difference in the intelligence levels of different racially identified groups and seek to reify and give scientific credibility to racial categories that became scientifically obsolete decades ago. The consequences for educational policy and practice of this pseudo-science driven racialization is potentially devastating for Black pupils (Gillborn, 2018).

The processes of the ongoing attempts to (re)racialize people according to outdated, biological categories (primarily, but not entirely, based on a Black/White or European/African binary) described by Gillborn (2016, 2018) are not entirely analogous to the racialization processes described by Cole (see above), although their potential outcomes are similar. Crucially, Gillborn makes no appeal to modes of production when describing these contemporary processes of racial categorisation, nor does he appeal to any other uniquely Marxist concepts. Yet, Gillborn's account of these new attempts to provide a scientific basis for previously discarded, biological racial categories does show that the concept of racialisation is consistent with a CRT analysis of racism and is a contributor to the continuous recycling and renewing of racist ideas and practices.

The crucial difference between Gillborn's CRT informed example of a racialisation process discussed above, and Cole's neo-Marxist conception of racialisation is that, for Gillborn, racialisation is, in part, a *consequence* of White supremacy and not a concept that can replace it. For Cole, as we have seen, racialization is an alternative explanation for the persistent racism experience by people of colour in the Western world, and a concept that, when fully explicated, will include no reference to the CRT notion of White supremacy.

Recent arguments advocated from a contemporary Black radical perspective suggest that Marxist approaches for explaining and confronting racism in the modern world are

inadequate for a number of reasons (Andrews, 2018). These arguments carry over to the neo-Marxist concept of racialisation and provide compelling reasons, contra Cole, for not jettisoning the CRT concept of 'White supremacy'. These arguments do not show that Cole's neo-Marxist perspective on racism is invalid, or has been superseded. Rather, they show that a more nuanced, colour-sensitive Marxism needs to be developed, and that CRT concepts such as 'White supremacy' can be treated as useful additions to Marxist theory. 'White supremacy' and 'racialisation' are complimentary, not competing, theoretical notions.

#### **8. Black Radicalism, White supremacy and neo-Marxist racialisation**

Acknowledging that Marxism, as it is taught and practiced in the West, is a predominantly White endeavour that needs some degree of modification before it is able to adequately capture the experiences of Black workers under capitalism is nothing new (Robinson, 1983). However, in a re-invigoration of the Black radical tradition in academia, Andrews (2016, 2018) shows why we should not dismiss 'White supremacy' as a concept or try to subsume the struggle of Black workers within an intellectual framework that primarily functions as an emancipatory tool for the White working class.

From a Black radical perspective there are (at least) two reasons why we should be wary of solutions to the problems posed by racism offered from within a Marxist framework (Andrews, 2018). Firstly, and historically, Marxists have ignored, or downplayed, the impact of Western imperialism in defining the different relationships to capitalism in which White workers and their Black counterparts stand, and the extent to which White workers have been complicit in the exclusion of their non-White counterparts from working class movements. For Andrews (2018), this is a comment on the historical practices of Western

Marxists and Marxist scholars in general and should not be read as a necessary feature of Marxism *per se*. Indeed, the body of Marxist scholarship produced by Cole, is an example of a nuanced and comprehensive account of the racism inherent in imperialism and discusses at length the complicity of Western labour in the imperialist project (see in particular, Cole, 2018a and 2018b). However, Andrew's (2018) point is that, as a consequence of how many Marxist movements have operated in the past, in conjunction with the differences in the distribution of the benefits of capitalism across different racial groups, it is difficult for non-White groups to identify with the struggles of the White working class:

...[T]he Western working class has benefitted from imperialism and forged political movements that mostly aim to distribute the wealth gained from the exploitation of darker people equitably between Whites. Trade unions have largely operated to “defend the short term interests” for their members within the framework of the nation state. On top of this, the unions have been a bastion of racism and exclusion. When Caribbean and Indian workers came to Britain they found themselves subject to colour bars from both the unions and workers’ organisations like social clubs. Groups like the Indian Workers Association had to form because they had no representation in the mainstream unions. Even now, though we are welcome to pay our fees, I don’t remember anyone ever expressing the feeling that their union was particularly supportive over issues of racism. If we are honest, the history of working class movements in the West has largely been one based on self-interest, and these interests do not align with the victims of imperialism. (Andrews, 2018, pp. 189-90)

So, considered from a Black radical standpoint, there is a good historical, political, and economic reason to regard White workers as being in a relatively privileged position in comparison to their Black (and non-White) counterparts. The history of imperialism and the economic, social, and political legacy that this history has created ensures that any advances

enjoyed in the (predominantly White) Western world are made possible by exploitation of the (predominantly Black) developing world. For the Black radical, 'Gains for [White] workers in the West have always been secured off the backs of those in the underdeveloped world. This is a necessary feature of capitalism' (Anderws, 2018, p. 192). There are also good reason for Black workers to be wary of emancipatory movements that are led by White workers, who have historically excluded them.

Secondly, Marxism has been unable to overcome what Andrews (2016, 2018) calls the 'psychosis of Whiteness', a feature of virtually all of Western thought. This phenomenon has parallels to Said's (1978) notion of 'orientalism', whereby Eastern populations are alienated through a sustained tradition of academic writing that systematically portrays them as fundamentally 'other' to their White, Western counterparts. The psychosis of whiteness drives a similar meta-narrative within (White) western societies but focused on Black people, their history, and the legacy of colonialism and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The psychosis of Whiteness infects academic discourse but also extends more widely to all areas of public pedagogy including film and other forms of story-telling (Andrews 2016).

The psychosis of Whiteness represents an irrational mind-set and collection of ideas that downplays and denies the responsibility of White people for the horrors of imperialism, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and the unjust political, social, and economic systems that have followed from them. Again, it should be noted, that Andrews' comments about the meta-narrative created by the psychosis of Whiteness does not entail that this is a feature *essential* to Marxist thought, nor does it entail that every Marxist scholar falls prey to this psychosis. For example, Cole (2018a, 2018b) deals at length with the British Empire and its' lasting legacy of racism, while Cole (2016, pp. 97-108) explicitly deals with the slave trade in

the USA and its' persistent consequences. Cole's work here draws on Marxist scholarship beginning with Marx and Engels themselves, through to contemporary Marxist thinkers.

Nevertheless, for Andrews (2016, 2018), like the CRT concept of White supremacy, the psychosis of Whiteness encapsulates the idea that Whiteness is all-pervasive and invisible in Western societies, and that it is deeply embedded and fundamental to the functioning of these societies and for maintaining the ongoing and unjust status quo. The psychosis of Whiteness also entails an omission of the significance of Whiteness from our accounts of historical injustices and the creation and continued re-creation of racial inequality, where, in reality, it has played a central role:

Whiteness is actually rooted in the political economy; it is in the fabric and the institutions of social life. You cannot work the natives in the Americas to death without Whiteness. You do not enslave millions of African people and kill millions more without Whiteness. You do not steal the resources from the places of the world you have underdeveloped and then create a system of unfair trade practices without Whiteness. The modern world was shaped in the image of Whiteness. (Andrews, 2018, p. 194)

The major fallacy committed historically by many Marxist thinkers (including some Black Marxists) is to fall prey to this psychosis of Whiteness and not to recognise the fundamental role that Whiteness played in the exploitation of Africa, the development of capitalism, and the role that it continues to play in the impoverishment of both the developing world and of Black people in the Western world. In other words, this is the fallacy of not recognising the essential role that White supremacy plays in shaping the evolution of modes of production within capitalism. For Andrews, Black people are not racialized *as Black* because of capitalist modes of production and the ideological forces that they create and which serve interests of an economic elite. Rather, Whiteness and White supremacy are ontologically prior to

capitalism and create the circumstances in which Black people can, have, and continue to be racialized and exploited to a far, far greater degree than other groups, including the White working class. Whiteness, and the racism that it engenders are, in large part, responsible for the creation of the Western socio-political system and the nature of its modes of production that, in Marxist thought, are necessary for a move towards communism: 'In fact, racism actually pre-dates class in a Marxist sense, shaping the development of the system that will eventually lead to the Proletarian revolution' (Andrews, 2018, p. 200).

So, rather than, 'diverting attention from modes of production' as Cole's first criticism of 'White supremacy' states, we see that Whiteness and White supremacy are intrinsic to a proper understanding of capitalist modes of production, of how they are created, how they evolve, and of how Black people and White people, because of their divergent histories, stand in different relationships to them. Attempting to explain the presence of racism as the *product* of modes of production, without recognising the role of White supremacy in the formation of capitalist modes of production, is to put the cart before the horse: capitalist modes of production are not themselves explainable without recourse to White supremacy. That capitalist modes of production play a role in the continuing processes of racialisation is not in question. But we must not lose sight of the fact that capitalism and capitalist modes of production are, in large part, already the products of, and infected with, White supremacy and that this is contributing factor in the capitalist, racialisation process.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cole (2016, pp. 206-207) acknowledges that that the phenomenon of racism pre-dates capitalist modes of production. At this juncture, there is nothing inconsistent in Cole's thinking about racism and its' relationship to Marxism, and the concept of White supremacy (although, as we have seen, Cole decides not to use this concept). We should, perhaps, read Cole's first criticism of 'White supremacy' not as denial that racism is ontologically prior to capitalist modes of production. Rather, we should see it as the claim that capitalist modes of production are now more important for a thorough understanding of racism in its' current form and of the processes by which racism is continually recreated.

This being so and turning to Cole's second criticism of 'White supremacy', that it homogenises all White people, we see that by including 'White supremacy' in our explanation of racialisation alongside reference to capitalist modes of production, we are able to give a more complete account of the nature and extent of racism and the workings of racialisation processes. Indeed, rather than homogenising all *White* people, an account of racialization that does not include reference to White supremacy homogenises all *people* because it simply does not recognise that racialisation under capitalism, because of its in-built White supremacy, historically and contemporaneously creates worse outcomes for Black people. White people are simply not at the same risk of being racialized into a racial category that has such overwhelmingly negative characteristics ascribed to it as are Black people. Such an account of racialisation that omits White supremacy as part of its workings is, in effect, a manifestation of the psychosis of Whiteness, falsely characterising racialisation processes as equally damaging to both White people and Black people.

Returning to Cole's seventh criticism of 'White supremacy': that the concept is damaging in motivating action against racism (particularly for White people), obviously there are consequences for both theory and practice for recognising its existence. Cole is correct in his contention that by incorporating 'White supremacy' into our ontology we create another layer of complexity with attendant problems to be overcome. It may well be that White working class radicals find this a tough concept to assimilate within a Marxist framework that seeks to emancipate both themselves and their Black counterparts from the oppressions of capitalism. However, as Andrews has argued, without recognising that White supremacy plays a fundamental role in disadvantaging Black and other non-White people under capitalism, it may well be difficult to motivate Black radicals to take action. Telling the White working class that they are 'White supremacist' may be something that needs to be



worked through, explained, and separated from its non-CRT usage, but it may well be equally damaging to emancipatory movements to tell Black people that they are part of the same 99 per cent of the population (as opposed to the 1 per cent economic elite) as the White working class. A comprehensive and nuanced theory of race and class should be explicit about all the variables at play in the oppression of different groups, as complex as this may be.

## **Conclusion**

The CRT concept of 'White supremacy' has played a key role in analyses of racial inequality in the USA and UK over the last 30 years or so. Increasingly, this concept has been applied within the academic discipline of education studies and is taken for granted by CRT scholars who incorporate it as a fundamental assumption in their analyses of educational (and wider) inequalities. A long-running argument about 'White supremacy' between Marxist thinkers and CRT scholars has centred on (amongst other things) the concept being inadequate as an explanation for the persistence of racism in the Western world and as being counter-productive in motivating emancipatory action, primarily for White people. It has been suggested that the neo-Marxist concept of 'racialisation' provides a better way of explaining the persistent presence of racism in the Western world as it links the idea of racism to capitalist modes of production and grounds the existence and continued presence of racism in historical, political, and economic realities.

Recent arguments presented from a Black radical perspective show that the phenomenon of White supremacy is itself rooted in the historical, political, and economic realities of imperialism, colonialism, and ideas of Whiteness that precede capitalism. Not only do these arguments highlight the historical and material basis of White supremacy, but they show the

need to recognise that White people and Black people are affected differently by capitalist modes of production and that they have historically, and continue to be, disadvantaged to different degrees as capitalism evolves. Without recognising the existence of White supremacy and how it operates within capitalism to create a unique set of problems for Black (and other non-White) people, any Marxist analysis of inequality will be incomplete and unlikely to appeal to Black radicals.

The purpose of this paper has not been to champion either CRT, neo-Marxism, or Black radicalism as being superior for analysing or challenging racism. Rather, it has been to show the potential synergies between these different traditions and to show how one CRT concept (White supremacy) should be adopted by neo-Marxist scholars to enable a more nuanced, Marxist analysis of racism to be given that appeals to potentially wider, radical base. However, tensions remain between the three theoretical camps considered in this paper. Both Marxist and Black radical thinkers consider CRT to be a primarily academic pursuit, largely impotent with regards for its capacity to bring about any real-world change. And CRT and Black radical thinkers remain sceptical about Marxism as being overwhelmingly social class obsessed and failing to take the reality of race seriously. Theoretical questions also remain: If we accept the reality of White supremacy, how do we account for non-colour coded racism, or hybridist racism, or racism between non-White groups? Although a comprehensive answer to this question is beyond the scope of this paper, there are (at least) three broad strategies that could be employed here.

Firstly, a CRT-based answer that employs 'Whiteness' as a shifting signifier, that does not necessarily entail white skin. Gillborn (2010) uses whiteness in this way to characterises poor whites as 'white but not quite', insofar as their whiteness is sacrificed and re-gained

within narratives that are beneficial at any given time for the White, economic elite.

Secondly, a Black Radical-based answer which places somewhat severe restrictions on what might be properly characterised as racism and limits the concept of racism to cases that involve a Black/White binary. Andrews (2018) takes such a view of racism that denies that White-identified people ever really suffer *racial* discrimination in the way that Black people do. While discussing anti-Irish racism (a form of non-colour coded racism) Andrews contends:

It is vitally important to distinguish analytically between racism and xenophobia in this discussion. The Irish have undoubtedly historically experienced xenophobia in America and Britain. As foreigners they have been derided, scorned and faced discrimination. In competing for resources with those already inside the nation state they have faced marginalisation and had to overcome this to become part of the respective societies. This is a process that any migrant community has to go through and is distinct from racism, which works on a different set of metrics. Those groups that are not White will face the xenophobia of being a foreigner, but racism is more elemental than this. (Andrews, 2018, p. 197)

Finally, there is answer that is consistent with the arguments presented in this paper: White supremacy is a concept that should not be dismissed, but which needs to be incorporated into a broader, neo-Marxist framework for conceptualising and explaining racism, in all its manifestations. The concept of White supremacy must feature in any analytical framework of racism for its power in accounting for what, for many, is the fundamental form of racism: racism based on the Black/White or European/African distinction. Yet, while the concept of White supremacy is indispensable in our theorising about racism, it cannot, in and of itself, account for the multifaceted nature of racism. As critical scholars committed to opposing

racism, CRT theorists, Marxists, and Black radical thinkers should be open to a dialogue aimed at enriching and expanding each theory with concepts from theoretical frameworks outside of their own.

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