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### From race to racism: The politics of “race” language in “postmodern education”

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**From Race to Racism:  
The Politics of "Race" Language  
in "Postmodern Education"**

There has been a tendency in postmodern and poststructuralist appraisals of the multicultural project and "race relations" to neglect or ignore profound changes in the structural nature and dynamics of US late-capitalism. At a time when an analysis of capitalism is needed more than ever before, many radical writers (as Ellen Meiksins Wood argues) are busy conceptualizing away the very idea of capitalism. Recent structural changes in the US political economy have made the issues of "race" and racism much more complex than ever before. Rather than occupying a central position, these historical and socio-economic changes serve merely as the backdrop to the contemporary theoretical debates on the meaning of "race" and "representation" in a "postmodern" society. This represents a significant point of contention, given the dramatic changes in US class formations during the last thirty years. These changes include major shifts in perceptions of social location, prevailing attitudes, and contemporary views and representations of racialized populations.

Recent works in cultural studies, multicultural education, and critical pedagogy have brought new theoretical perspectives to the study of racism and education in society. US scholars such as Cornel West, Michael Omi, bell hooks, Henry Giroux, and others have attempted to recast the debate on the nature of "race" and racism in this country and its implications for social change and educational reform. Although it cannot be denied that these provocative works represent a challenge to the mainstream analysis of "race relations" and have made contributions to our understanding of the significance of racism, they have failed to reconceptualize the traditional social science paradigm that relies on the reified category of "race" to interpret racialized social relations. In the final analysis the conceptual framework utilized

by these scholars is entrenched in the conventional sociology of "race relations" language.

### **Critique of Multicultural Education Discussions**

Nowhere has this theoretical shortcoming been more evident than in contemporary discussions of multicultural education which have been fundamentally shaped by parochial notions of "race," identity, ethnicity, and culture. Despite an expressed "transformative" intent, much of the multicultural education literature has only peripherally positioned public education within the larger context of class relations. Conspicuously absent from much of the writings of even critical multicultural education scholars is a substantial critique of the social relations and structures of capitalism and the relationship of educational practices to the changing conditions of the US political economy. The absence of an analysis of the capitalist wage-labor system and class relations with its structural inequalities of income and power is a serious shortcoming.

A lack of imagination in multicultural education discussions is highly evidenced by a discourse that continues to be predominantly anchored in the Black/White dichotomous framework that has for over a century dictated 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 differing forms of racism around the globe. Further, this conflation of racialized relations into solely a Black/White paradigm has prevented scholars from engaging more fully with the specificities of particular groups and delving more fully into the arena of comparative ethnic histories of racism and how these are linked to class forms of social oppression.

Although some would be quick to object to our critique of the multicultural literature, we can see the above at work, for example, in the manner in which critical education scholars have focused their studies in Latino communities. Overall, studies with Latino populations have placed an overwhelming emphasis on linguistic questions tied to identity and culture. This is illustrated by the large body of education literature that focuses on

issues of "language-minority" students, while only marginally discussing the impact of racism and class position on identity and cultural formations – as if somehow the problems of Latino students can be resolved through simply the enactment of language policy.

### "Race" as a Social Construct

We would be hard-pressed to find a progressive social scientist in this day and age who would ascribe to the use of "race" as a determinant of specific social phenomenon associated with levels of intelligence or personality characteristics. Nevertheless, traditional arguments about "race" dominate 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 educational discussions of theory or practice? The use of "race" as an analytical category means to position it as a central organizing theoretical principle in deconstructing social relations of difference in the world. For this reason, the idea of "race" should not be employed as a analytical category within the social sciences, and it follows from this that the object of study should not be described as "race relations." Hence, we reject the race relations problematic as the locus for analysis of racism. But we do not reject the concept of racism. Rather, we critique the "race relations" problematic in order to retain a concept of racism which is constructed in such a way as to recognize the existence of a plurality of historically specific racisms, not all of which employ explicitly the idea of "race."

Unfortunately, the continued use of the notion of "race" in education research, whether intentional or not, upholds a definition of "race" as a causal factor. In other words, significance and meaning is attributed to phenotypical features, rather than the relationship of difference to the historically reproduced complex processes of racialization. The disturbing "scientific" assertion that race determines academic performance made by Richard J. Herrnstein & Charles Murray in their book *The Bell Curve*, illustrates the theoretical minefield of perpetuating such an analytical category in the social sciences and the potential negative consequences upon African-American students and other racialized groups. The use of term "race" serves to hide the truth that it is not "race" which 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 to effect exclusion in the classroom and beyond.

The habitual practice of framing social relations as "race relations" in discussions of racialized groups and schooling 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 conditions in which students must achieve. The unfortunate absence of this critique veils the real reasons why students underachieve, perform poorly on standardized tests, are overrepresented in remedial programs, underrepresented in gifted programs and magnet schools, and continue to dropout of high school at alarming rates. As a consequence, educational solutions are often derived from distorted perceptions of the problem.

The politics of busing in the early 1970s provides an excellent example to illustrate this phenomenon of distortion. Social scientists studying "race" relations concluded that proximal contact among Black and White students would decrease the incidence of prejudice and that the education conditions of Black students would improve if they were bused to White (better) schools outside of their neighborhoods. Thirty years later, there are many progressive parents and educators who adamantly condemn the busing solution (a solution based on a discourse of "race") as not only fundamentally destructive to the fabric of Black and Latino communities, but an erroneous social experiment that failed to improve the academic performance of the children in these communities.

Yet, despite the dangerous forms of distortion which arise from the use of "race" as a central analytical category of theory making, critical education 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 metaphor in our work, quickly is met with major resistance among even progressive intellectuals of all communities – a resistance that is expressed through anxiety, trepidation, fear, and even anger. Often these responses are associated to fear of delegitimizing the historical movements for

liberation that have been principally defined in terms of "race" struggles. Such responses 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.

### **Racisms: Breaking Out of the Black/White Dichotomy**

The unproblematized "common sense" acceptance of "race" as a legitimate way to frame social relations finds its way into the classroom. Since the school mirrors the ideological and material structure of the society at large, it is an institution that is powerful enough to socialize and condition students' "racial" perceptions of subordinate groups through the hidden racialized dimensions of the curriculum, textbooks, and classroom life. These racialized perceptions are then projected and internalized by both students of subordinate and dominant populations and, in turn, are used to frame or make conclusions about social relationships, including how they define racism and how they perceive and respond to different forms of racialized discourses and events that involve African-American, as well as other subordinate populations.

To address the issues raised above requires a willingness to shift from talking about "race" to talking about racism (s) and the concept of racialization as a historically specific ideological process. In other words, progressive scholars should not be trying to seek a critical theory of "race," for this can only lead us down a dead end road that will leave us intellectually bankrupt and further disillusioned by our failure to effectively struggle against conditions of racism in this country and abroad. Instead critical scholars should seek to retrieve a global perspective of historically defined racialized relations and acknowledge the plurality of racisms at work. We are not playing semantics, but proposing an alternative analytic framework in identifying the structures and representations of the contours of racialization. To construct a new language for examining the nature of these racisms requires an understanding of how complex relationships of exploitation and resistance, grounded in differences of class, gender, and ethnicity, give rise to a multiplicity of ideological constructions of the racialized other. This knowledge challenges the traditional notion of racism as solely a Black/White dichotomous phenomenon and directs us toward a more accurately constructed,

and hence more politically useful, idea of racisms and the relations of power that shape the social conditions racialized groups face in schools and society.

### Implications for Culturally Democratic Education

It is impossible to move schools toward culturally democratic forms of education if the impact of racialized relations and the political economy upon subordinate populations is overlooked. One of the best examples of this blindspot is apparent in the manner in which violence is racialized and systematically identified, defined, and addressed in different schools and communities. For example, when one of the authors was living in Boston a few years ago, a professional, White woman was raped and killed in Cambridge. The Boston community was up in arms. In the midst of all this movement, little attention was given to the fact that several homicides and rapes of Black women had occurred during the same month in Roxbury, a low-income African-American community. The racialized and class-based message inherent in the response of the larger community was that women in Cambridge were deemed more important and valuable, while women in Roxbury were considered disposable. The same dynamics are often present in the racialized expectations held by teachers toward students of different communities and their attitudes toward the achievement potential of these students.

In considering a shift from talking about "race" to talking about racisms, what is clear is that we need a new language by which to construct culturally democratic notions of educational theory and practice. This entails the recasting and reinterpretation of education issues in a language with greater specificity, which explicitly reflects anti-racist notions of society. Such a language must unquestionably be linked to global histories of social movements against inequality and injustice. Although we fully recognize that a new language will not necessarily alter the power relations in any given society, it can serve to more accurately articulate how power is maintained through the systematic racialization of subordinate populations. As such, a new language can provide the foundation for developing effective educational policies that are directly linked to emancipatory principles of cultural and economic democracy.

What we are arguing for is a new theoretical language that



reflects the existence of a plurality of racisms – a new language from which educational scholars can reconstruct school curriculum and education programs to more accurately reflect and address the different forms of social and material inequities that shape the lives of students from subordinate groups. Most importantly, this calls for a new language that reinforces and supports our common anti-racist struggle for social justice and economic democracy across ethnic communities in the United States and throughout the world. 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 new 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.