

# Philosophy & Social Criticism

<http://psc.sagepub.com/>

---

## **Towards a critical theory of whiteness**

David S. Owen

*Philosophy Social Criticism* 2007 33: 203

DOI: 10.1177/0191453707074139

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://psc.sagepub.com/content/33/2/203>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

**Additional services and information for *Philosophy & Social Criticism* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://psc.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://psc.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**David S. Owen**

# Towards a critical theory of whiteness

**Abstract** In this article I argue that a critical theory of whiteness is necessary, though not sufficient, to the formulation of an adequate explanatory account of the mechanisms of racial oppression in the modern world. In order to explain how whiteness underwrites systems of racial oppression and how it is reproduced, the central functional properties of whiteness are identified. I propose that understanding whiteness as a structuring property of racialized social systems best explains these functional properties. Given the variety of conceptions of whiteness in the literature, the several uses of the term are analysed and it is shown that there is a unifying concept underlying these various senses of whiteness. Lastly, some of the implications of this account of whiteness for anti-racist engagement are considered.

**Key words** critical theory · Anthony Giddens · Jürgen Habermas · race · racial contract · racism · social structure · white supremacy · whiteness

In this article I will argue that a critical theory of whiteness is necessary, though not sufficient, to the formulation of an adequate explanatory account of the mechanisms of racial oppression in the modern world, and that understanding these mechanisms is essential to the liberation of peoples of color around the globe. Although I would argue that whiteness has always been a central element in racial oppression, it is particularly salient in the post-civil rights era of formal (though not material) equality because it serves to underwrite perceptions, understandings, justifications and explanations of the social order that perpetuate distortions in the social system that are a legacy of our nation's history. As an element in a comprehensive theory of racial oppression, a critical theory of whiteness contributes an account of key socio-cultural mechanisms of the functioning and reproduction of racial oppression. This is a programmatic article, and as such is a first attempt

PHILOSOPHY & SOCIAL CRITICISM • vol 33 no 2 • pp. 203–222

Copyright © 2007 SAGE Publications (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore)  
and David Rasmussen

[www.sagepublications.com](http://www.sagepublications.com) DOI: 10.1177/0191453707074139

**PSC**

to sketch out some of the central concepts and parameters of a critical theory of whiteness. Although all aspects of such a theory cannot be fully explored in this article, I will indicate some dimensions for further development and will close by considering some of the implications of my arguments within the broader context of anti-racist practice.

The article is divided into four main sections. I begin by arguing for the need for a critical theory of whiteness as a necessary element in a more adequate account of racial oppression. In the second section, I consider the ontology of whiteness. Here, I identify the functional mechanisms by which whiteness reproduces a racialized social order followed by a preliminary account of whiteness as a structuring property of modern social systems. The third section engages in a semantic inquiry into the three basic senses of 'whiteness' that are used by critical whiteness scholars, and I propose a communications-theoretic framework for situating these disparate conceptions with respect to one another. Finally, I consider the objections that whiteness is indistinguishable from white supremacy, and that white supremacy and not whiteness should be the primary theoretical term. Since I maintain that a critical theory of whiteness is pragmatic in the sense that it is liberatory and aimed at disrupting and dismantling the system of white racial oppression, I also consider some of the implications this theory has for anti-racist engagement.

## I Why a critical theory of whiteness?

The growth of scholarship in the emerging field of critical whiteness studies has provided at least *prima facie* evidence for the significance of examining whiteness and its relation to systems of racial oppression. However, once whiteness is identified and recognized as a central support of racial domination, then why not simply attack whiteness directly; say, by attempting to 'abolish' whiteness by fiat? One group of proponents of this strategy, the 'New Abolitionists', urges those racialized as white to refuse the advantages and privileges associated with whiteness and thereby abolish whiteness.<sup>1</sup>

There are, however, multiple problems with this strategy. The new abolitionists presume that whiteness is the sort of thing that *can* be refused, like a gift. They also presume that it functions in a one-dimensional mode such that it does not colonize and infect all aspects of the social sphere. Furthermore, they presume that whiteness is – at least with self-conscious effort – something that is readily recognizable and identifiable such that it can be singled out to be refused. The new abolitionists also presume that whiteness is fundamentally, if not exclusively, a social identity, and as such it is in the power of whites to refuse.

I will argue below that these assumptions are mistaken. The new abolitionists fail to account for the hegemonic systematicity of whiteness and its colonization of every dimension of the social world. The new abolitionists understand whiteness primarily as a social identity, but if we understand whiteness as a structuring property of the social system, as I will argue we should, then it cannot be simply abolished or refused by force of will. Whiteness, understood as a structuring property of the social world can, however, be exposed, challenged, resisted and disrupted. And this is precisely why a greater degree of clarity is necessary concerning what whiteness is and how it functions in the reproduction of the system of racial oppression. If whiteness in fact is systematically embedded in the social world, then local micro-critiques and refusals will be insufficient to disrupt its power to reproduce racial domination. Only a theoretical understanding of its central operational properties will provide us with the insight and understanding to devise effective strategies to disrupt and dismantle its hold on modern social systems.

## II Whiteness as structure

While there are various historical accounts of the origins of the use of 'white' in a racialized sense, and Charles Mills' theory of the racial contract can be read as an account of the generation of the system of white supremacy, what these lack is an adequate socio-theoretic account of how whiteness functions to underwrite and maintain the system of white supremacy.<sup>2</sup> An account of the reproduction of whiteness and the modes by which it maintains white supremacy is especially important to explain the persistence of racial oppression in the post-civil rights era. A liberatory project that seeks the liberation of all who are imprisoned by racial oppression must be grounded on an explanation of the reproduction of whiteness, for knowing the means and mechanisms by which whiteness reproduces the system of white supremacy will be essential if those operations are to be disrupted, deconstructed and delegitimized.

### 1 Functional properties of whiteness

To gain a deeper understanding of whiteness and how it functions to reproduce the system of white supremacy, it will be useful then to begin with an analysis of its modes of operation. A survey of the literature identifies certain 'functional properties' that characterize aspects of how whiteness operates or functions as a socio-historical phenomenon that reproduces white supremacy. The *first* functional property is that whiteness defines a particular racialized perspective or standpoint that shapes the white subject's understanding of both self and the social world. As

a structuring property, whiteness situates persons racialized as white in a social location that provides a particular and limited perspective on the world.<sup>3</sup> *Second*, whiteness defines a specifically racialized social location of structural advantage. Being located in a social position by whiteness is not merely a location of difference, but it is also a location of economic, political, social and cultural advantage relative to those locations defined by non-whiteness. A *third* property is that whiteness is normalized. What is associated with whiteness becomes defined as natural, normal or mainstream. This contributes to its transparency in the dominant cultural consciousness of the post-civil rights era. The *fourth* functional property is implied by the third: it is that whiteness is largely invisible to whites and yet highly visible to non-whites. Many critical whiteness scholars have argued that whiteness is invisible or transparent, but such a claim presupposes the perspective of whiteness. Whiteness is (largely) invisible only to whites, yet it tends to be less transparent to non-whites, as is suggested by the long history of African-American analyses of whiteness that includes W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Richard Wright and Toni Morrison.<sup>4</sup> This differential visibility for different racialized groups is significant and reflects its social and cultural dominance and hegemony. *Fifth*, although whiteness must be distinguished from mere skin color, it nevertheless is embodied. As I will contend, whiteness is grounded in the interests, needs and values of those racialized as white, so it is founded on the ascribed racial identity of being white. But, as Marilyn Frye argues, whiteness – or as she calls it, whiteness – is not the same as having light-colored skin. Rather, it is ‘a deeply engrained way of being in the world’.<sup>5</sup> Whiteness shapes actions, social practices and dispositions, and thus constitutes a part of that ‘know how’ or practical knowledge that competent social actors possess. By means of ongoing processes of socialization and acculturation, it becomes part of our bodily dispositions and comportment within the world. A *sixth* functional property of whiteness is that its borders are continuously being redefined, entailing that analyses of whiteness’s functioning must always be grounded in specific contexts of its manifestation. Whiteness is a socio-historical phenomenon, and theoretical analyses should not reify it as an essential form. Finally, a *seventh* functional property is that of violence; whiteness cannot be understood apart from the violence that it begets or apart from the violence that produced – and continues to produce – it. Not only does whiteness have its origins in the physical and psychic violence of the enslavement, genocide and exploitation of peoples of color around the world, but also it maintains the system of white supremacy in part by means of actual and potential violence.

A complete critical theory of whiteness will need to explain how each of these properties contributes to the reproduction of the system

of white supremacy. Doing so will require accounting for three key modalities of the functioning of whiteness: its nature as a structuring property of social systems; its complex relation to embodiment; and its instantiation and reproduction of power in the formation of the social order. Due to constraints of space, I will address only the first, that of whiteness as a structuring property, and even then I can do so only in a preliminary way.

## 2 Whiteness as structuring property

The fundamental explanatory figure of whiteness is that of a structuring property of modern social systems. To say that whiteness structures the social order implies several things: first, it conditions social practices; second, it conditions cultural representations; and third, it conditions the formation of identity. The notion of structure has a complex and troubled history in social theory; a history I will bracket here. As I use it, 'structure' refers to the ordering or patterning of the elements of a social system such that: the ordering serves as a binding force across space and time; the ordering defines the perceived horizon of thought and action; and the ordering provides the resources for social reproduction.<sup>6</sup>

In order to better understand the reproductive function of whiteness, a deeper account is needed of social structures that explains both how they condition practices, representations and identities, as well as how they are reproduced over time. Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration provides just such an account, and so is a useful place to start.<sup>7</sup> Giddens proposes that the notion of structure be understood temporally, as a continuous process of structuration. Thus, structures should be understood, not as the fixed girders of society, but as continuously subject to reproduction and alteration. They are reproduced by means of social practices, and, at the same time, these structures frame the social practices and unacknowledged conditions of action. For Giddens, social systems are constituted by social practices, where 'the structural properties of social systems are both the medium and the outcome' of those practices.<sup>8</sup> The performance of social practices, then, reproduces both social structures (which in turn inform social practices) and the consciousness of social agents.

As a structure, however, whiteness does not simply situate elements of the social system relative to one another. Significantly, it also places those elements into a hierarchical relationship of superiority and subordination. The structuring property of whiteness locates whites in a structural position of superiority and advantage and non-whites in a structural position of inferiority, subordination and disadvantage. This hierarchical ordering is an essential aspect of the structuring function of whiteness.<sup>9</sup>

Thus understood, whiteness is a structuring property of modern social systems, and as such it shapes the formation of both the consciousness of agents in terms of their cognitive and evaluative frameworks and the patterning of social practices. Whiteness shapes the cognitive frameworks of agents because, first, it is a structuring property of the social system into which agents are socialized and acculturated, and, second, it constitutes part of the conditions (acknowledged and unacknowledged) of action. If the social world is systematically shaped by the needs, interests and values of whites, then individuals are always already being socialized and acculturated into whiteness, with the consequence that they will internalize cognitive and evaluative schemas that reflect this whiteness. Whiteness will condition the cognitive and evaluative presuppositions individuals possess, thus shaping their perceptions of and judgments concerning the social world. The dualistic nature as both medium and outcome of social practices also explains another commonly identified feature of whiteness: the fact that it is normalized and thus largely invisible to the dominant culture of the post-civil rights era. As a structuring property, whiteness is a fundamental feature of the way society is reproduced, and hence it typically does not give rise to the appearance of deviance from the norm. Therefore, whiteness *defines* the normal functioning of modern social systems. Moreover, we can now explain the persistence of structural racial inequalities in the post-civil rights era. When whiteness is normalized and overt forms of racial prejudice and discrimination are seen as extreme and rare, whiteness functions behind the scenes, so to speak, to shape the world to the advantage of those racialized as white. A normally functioning society becomes defined as one that is structured by whiteness, which therefore functions to reproduce a society that is understood to be free of fundamental racial contradictions. Thus, whiteness functions as a key support in reproducing the hegemonic racial order that is a legacy of our past. The critical theory of whiteness, then, is especially needed to account for the ways that a *de facto* system of white supremacy survives and thrives after the discrediting and dismantling of the formal *de jure* system of white supremacy.

Another significant consequence of understanding whiteness as a structuring property is that it can explain the *systematicity* of whiteness's structuring of the social system. As a structuring property, whiteness affects every aspect of the system. It shapes the consciousness of individuals and hence the cognitive and evaluative frameworks for action, the patterning of social practices, the terms and rules for the operation of social institutions of the economy, the educational system, the legal system, the representations of value that define the culture and so on. Thus, whiteness systematically informs – and deforms – every aspect of the social world.

Moreover, whiteness's dualistic nature – as medium and outcome of social practices – explains the *historical continuity* of the racialized social order. There is a fundamental ahistoricity in our culture that masks the ongoing very real and deeply structured effects of the past upon the present. Structuring properties are reproduced in every social practice, as well as modified or transformed. If whiteness is a structuring property of modern social systems, then it must be understood as deeply embedded in the everyday, normal functioning of those systems, and because of its hegemony within the system, it is reproduced largely behind the backs of social agents. Whiteness persists as a structuring property when nothing or little is done to disrupt it. Whiteness is the legacy of a racially fraught past and it functions in such a way that it maintains the legacy of racial inequality as a central aspect of modern social systems, while at the same time, masking the impact of that history upon the present.

Now, one of the defining features of any critical social theory is its reflexive historicity. A critical social theory abandons the historically transcendent point of view and explicitly takes into account its own embeddedness in history. The emphasis I placed above on the two virtues of systematicity and of accounting for the historical continuity of the system of racial oppression might suggest that this account reifies whiteness as a fixed social structure. But this is not the case. Whiteness should be understood as a structuring property of the social system that is co-original with the system of racial oppression. However, its degree of explicitness or invisibility varies with historical context. Prior to the civil rights era, whiteness functioned in part as an explicit ideology that was normalized, though certainly not invisible. In the post-civil rights era, whiteness functions in part as an implicit, invisible ideology that legitimates (and structures) the social order. Thus, a critical theory of whiteness is especially relevant in the present because whiteness now functions largely behind the backs of social actors to structure and legitimize the present (racialized) social formation.

### III Aspects of whiteness

Having a basic understanding of whiteness as a structuring property in hand, I want to suggest that this understanding of whiteness is useful for unifying the various senses of whiteness that are found in the literature. I will propose that the various senses of whiteness can be fruitfully unified and related to one another under a framework suggested by Habermas' theory of communicative action.

## 1 Conceptions of whiteness

As Paul Taylor suggests, there is a certain ‘definitional murkiness’ that pervades critical whiteness scholarship, and sometimes this seems intended to underscore the variable and contextualized meanings of whiteness.<sup>10</sup> So there may be a sense in which critical whiteness scholars self-consciously use this concept ambiguously. Nevertheless, I intend to show that the variety of uses of ‘whiteness’ can be understood as reflecting the various dimensions that constitute social life and that a communications-theoretic framework can provide a unity to this diversity. While I agree that the concrete modes of whiteness’s instantiations in specific contexts are highly localized and variable, I also think that a general theory of whiteness is necessary because, as I maintain, whiteness is a structural phenomenon and thus a general critique is required in order to identify effective means of disrupting its systemic effects.

There are three primary senses of whiteness found in the literature.<sup>11</sup> The first understands whiteness as a social identity. For example, George Lipsitz construes whiteness as ‘a social fact, an identity created and continued with all-too-real consequences for the distribution of wealth, prestige, and opportunity’.<sup>12</sup> For Lipsitz, then, whiteness is a particular social identity, but one with an especially profound effect on the individual’s well-being. Not only does this identity – or lack of it – have significant consequences for one’s life-chances, it also is an ‘unmarked category against which difference is constructed’.<sup>13</sup> Another well-known example of whiteness as social identity is Ruth Frankenberg’s analysis of the social construction of the racial identities of white women in *White Women, Race Matters*.<sup>14</sup> The second sense is whiteness understood as a cultural representation embodying a racialized meaning. A classic example of this is Richard Dyer’s examination of cultural imagery in the western world, and ‘how whiteness has been culturally constructed in those representations’.<sup>15</sup> He notes that whiteness is both ubiquitous and invisible to whites, consequently whiteness means that whites are represented everywhere, but not as white. Thus, Dyer examines the cultural significance or meaning of cultural representations of whiteness. Other examples of the use of whiteness as representation include Toni Morrison’s analysis of whiteness in the tradition of American literature, and bell hooks’ discussion of ‘representations of whiteness in the black imagination’.<sup>16</sup> Finally, a third use of whiteness is as an asset or form of property. Peggy McIntosh famously defines white privilege as ‘an invisible package of unearned assets which I [as a white woman] can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was “meant” to remain oblivious’.<sup>17</sup> Another influential example of this use of whiteness is Cheryl Harris’ legal analysis of it as a form of property.<sup>18</sup> She argues that race has always been entangled with property, and that the

law structures property rights simultaneously with the meaning and effects of whiteness. Essentially, Harris understands whiteness as a form of property that defines identities, is a resource to be used at will, and has systematic consequences for its possessor.

## 2 A communications-theoretic understanding of whiteness

These uses of whiteness – as a social identity, a form of representation and a valuable asset – overlap and are closely related to one another, and often they are used interchangeably, even by the same author. Despite the variety of meanings of whiteness and the contextual nature of these meanings, there is unity – a concept of whiteness – underlying these various conceptions. If whiteness is understood as a structuring property of the socio-cultural life-world, each of these conceptions of whiteness can be unified under one account and thus understood as expressions of the same socio-cultural structure in different dimensions of the social order. Thus understood, then, whiteness is a social structure that normalizes the interests, needs and values of those racialized as white. The consequence of a social system structured by whiteness is that whites occupy a location of structural advantage that generates material and psychological privileges and benefits.

Habermas' theory of communicative action is an explanation of the possibility of social order, and it provides the theoretical resources for a unified account of whiteness.<sup>19</sup> On this account, the social coordination of action occurs by means of two analytically distinguishable mechanisms: consent or influence. Consent is the foundational mechanism, while influence is derivative, and without an adequate conception of the consensual integration of individuals' actions, social order could not be explained. Actions are coordinated by means of consent when the actors achieve an intersubjectively valid understanding of the situation. Such an understanding would be nearly impossible if there were not a mass of shared background knowledge drawn upon by the actors in the process of achieving intersubjective understanding. Habermas refers to this as the background life-world, but he rejects Husserl's phenomenological conception of the life-world as subject-centered. Instead, Habermas proposes a communications-theoretic conception of the life-world that is constituted in and by communicative interaction and discourse. From the first-person perspective of the participant in communicative action, the life-world functions as a background of unacknowledged and largely unquestioned presuppositions drawn upon in communicative interactions. From the third-person perspective of observer, the life-world appears as the totality of socio-cultural facts. This totality is constituted by the structures of culture, society and

personality. Culture is the stock of (what counts as) valid knowledge that interlocutors use in communicative interactions; society refers to the institutions that regulate social interactions and generate solidarity; and personality refers to the competencies of speaking and acting, the development of which are necessary conditions for engagement in communicative action and identity formation.

There is a dialectical relation between individual actors' attempts to coordinate action through communicative interactions and the background life-world. On the one hand, the action coordinating effects and mutual understanding of communicative actions are possible only when a significant degree of background knowledge and sets of socio-cultural facts are shared. On the other hand, the background life-world, with its stock of cultural knowledge and representations, its institutions that normatively structure behavior and its competent social actors, is constituted in and through communicative interactions. Thus, communicative interactions and the background life-world form an analytically distinguishable, but practically inseparable, dyad of structures and operations.

The theory of communicative action is useful for explaining the concept of whiteness in its variety of senses. The form of whiteness present in the post-civil rights era is a legacy of past white supremacist beliefs, attitudes, behaviors and institutions. As such, it can be understood as a deforming set of presuppositions embedded in the background life-world that shapes the shared cultural stock of knowledge, the establishment and maintenance of what are seen as legitimate intersubjective relations and the formation of personality structures and social identity. Here, I use 'deformed' in the sense of a distortion of the social system to the unjust advantage of a particular group. Whiteness shapes the cultural stock of knowledge and representations that form the considerable reservoir of background presumptions we unavoidably draw upon in everyday communicative interactions. Dyer's analysis of whiteness uncovers how some of these representations are part of our cultural representations. Whiteness also structures the social institutions that normatively regulate behavior, and it serves as a set of deep presuppositions that underlie the functioning of the economic, political, legal and other systems. This was clearly shown in Harris' analysis of whiteness as a form of property, and can also be seen in Charles Mills' argument that race is the political system that has created the modern polity.<sup>20</sup> If I am correct, and whiteness is a structuring property of the socio-cultural life-world, then it also shapes the formation of personality that allows competent speaking and acting by social subjects and the formation of identity. As I have mentioned above, much of the critical whiteness scholarship has focused on whiteness as a social identity, and we can now see how its embeddedness in the life-world directly affects the formation of the identities of social actors. Moreover, since these

aspects of the life-world (culture, society and personality) are integrated with one another in communicative interactions, we can better understand the connections between whiteness as an identity, as a form of domination and as a set of cultural representations and meanings. Insofar as we also have an explanation for its ubiquity and hegemony as a fundamental entity in the social system, it structures the life-world as a whole. And if the life-world is so thoroughly structured by whiteness, then it is clearer just how whiteness impacts particular communicative interactions, distorts the communicative understandings that are achieved and also is reproduced in the mechanisms that reproduce the socio-cultural life-world.

Of course, there are various objections that might be raised concerning the adequacy of Habermas' theory. Some have suggested that it has weaknesses and blind spots in explaining the functioning of power and domination; others have been concerned with its inadequate account of embodiment.<sup>21</sup> For my purposes here, however, these worries need not concern us. I am interested in simply drawing on its theoretical resources, not as a complete account of whiteness, but only to situate the uses of whiteness in a unified account. The comprehensive critical theory of whiteness certainly will need to give an account of the embodiment of whiteness and the means by which whiteness instantiates power. However, these aspects of the theory are beyond the scope of this article.

But why should we think that a unified account of whiteness is adequate or even that it will be more useful for liberation than an account that begins from the contextual differences in the meaning of whiteness? First, I contend that theorizing whiteness in a unified way is necessary if effective strategies are to be devised and actions to be taken to disrupt its functioning and dismantle its hold on modern social orders. One of the more significant features of whiteness is its hegemonic colonization of all aspects of the social world, and so microanalyses of how it manifests itself in highly specific locations and contexts, while useful, will not address its systemic nature. Moreover, this Habermasian analysis of the concept of whiteness emphasizes the reproduction of whiteness in the social order, and especially the way that it can be reproduced 'behind the backs' of social actors. This is a particularly important feature of whiteness. Only a comprehensive theoretical approach will uncover the root system of its functional properties so that it can be dug up and destroyed. Second, although a critical theory of whiteness must include an account of the ways whiteness intersects gender, class and sexual orientation, I do think that it is both possible and productive to say something general about how whiteness functions to reproduce a system of white supremacy. It is not clear how beginning with the multiple inflections of whiteness will yield critiques that can effectively disrupt its reproduction as a system-wide social structure.

In my judgment, then, Habermas' theory is useful for making sense of the diverse uses and meanings of the concept of whiteness by showing how each use of whiteness primarily represents one of the three dimensions of the life-world. Whiteness as a social identity highlights the structuring of competent social actors; whiteness as asset or property highlights the structuring of normative social relationships and practices; and whiteness as cultural representation highlights the structuring of meaning, knowledge and values. There are two significant implications of this account. First, whiteness infuses and infects all aspects of the life-world. Its effects are not restricted to one domain or another; instead, we are immersed in whiteness, as fish are immersed in water, and we breathe it in with every breath. Second, whiteness is fundamentally integrated into the structures and processes of social reproduction. As whiteness is integral to the life-world, it gets drawn upon as a resource and context-forming background in everyday communicative interactions; and in turn, these communicative interactions reproduce the structuring effects of whiteness upon the life-world. It is this feature of whiteness that I want to argue is especially important to examine and to understand if its largely invisible mode of operation is to be unmasked.

#### **IV Contextualizing the critical theory of whiteness**

I now want to situate the critical theory of whiteness within the wider context of the struggle against racial oppression, for it is crucial that such a theory be developed not merely as an intellectual exercise but always in view of engaging with the struggle against racial oppression. I will begin by distinguishing the concept of whiteness from that of white supremacy; then I will argue that a critical theory of whiteness does not necessarily recenter the interests of whites; and finally, I consider further implications of such a theory.

##### **1 White supremacy and whiteness**

I have maintained throughout that a critical theory of whiteness is necessary to account for the ways that whiteness is reproduced as it functions to maintain white supremacy. There are two concerns that might be raised about this. First, one might have doubts about the distinction between whiteness and white supremacy, and second, one might question the priority given to whiteness. In this section I want to address these two concerns.

(a) *Mills* In a series of papers that build upon his groundbreaking *The Racial Contract*, Charles Mills has argued that political philosophers

ought to reclaim the concept of white supremacy and make it central to their theorizing.<sup>22</sup> He suggests that ‘one strategy for developing a critical race theory within political philosophy will entail self-conscious theorizing of a *racial polity* – in this case, a *white supremacist polity* – and a rethinking of the political around the axis of race’.<sup>23</sup> Such a shift in perspective would make visible the system of advantage and disadvantage in which whiteness ‘is not merely full personhood, first-class citizenship, ownership of the aesthetically normative body, membership in the recognized culture; [but] it is also material benefit, entitlement to differential moral/legal/social treatment, and differential rational expectations of economic success’.<sup>24</sup> Thus, in a white supremacist polity, one characterized by a system of white advantage and non-white disadvantage, whiteness is equated with the benefits, entitlements and advantages attached to members of the class racialized as ‘white’.

Mills understands white supremacy as ‘a multidimensional system of domination, encompassing not merely the “formally” political that is limited to the juridico-political realm of official governing bodies and laws; but . . . [also as extended to] white domination in economic, cultural, cognitive-evaluative, somatic, and in a sense even “metaphysical” spheres’.<sup>25</sup> As a system of domination, white supremacy consists of interlocking elements that work in complementary ways to oppress, just as in Marilyn Frye’s famous description of how the bars of a birdcage work together in a systematic way to contain and constrain a bird.<sup>26</sup> Mills, however, stresses that the dimensions of white supremacy include not only the ‘formal’ political institutions of the state such as the government, the law and the criminal justice system, but also the informal political dimensions of the economic, cultural, cognitive-evaluative, somatic and metaphysical. These are categorized as (informally) political by Mills in the sense that they are contributing factors in the collective distribution of goods, opportunities and burdens, and also in the sense that each of them contributes to the domination of one group over another.

Mills presents a powerful argument for a much needed racial revision of political theory. But there is an ambiguity in Mills’ understanding of white supremacy that undercuts his intention to develop a ‘critical race theory within political philosophy’.<sup>27</sup> The concept of white supremacy is comprised of two elements, each signaling an important aspect of modern racialized social formations: ‘supremacy’ refers to the role of domination and power in structuring the social formation; and ‘white’ refers to the particular social identity marked as superior and advantaged in that social formation. Mills, however, emphasizes and develops an analysis of one of these aspects – that of the political domination of ‘supremacy’ – while leaving the other – whiteness – relatively unexamined. Mills fails to develop an independent analysis of the *racial* dimension

of white supremacy; such an analysis would be constituted by an examination of the social, cultural and historical dynamics that generate, transform and reproduce whiteness. Indeed, in *The Racial Contract* Mills recognizes the need to understand how white supremacy is reproduced. He says: 'What we need to do, then, is to identify and learn to understand the workings of a racialized ethic. How were people able consistently to do the wrong thing while thinking that they were doing the right thing?'<sup>28</sup> He goes on to suggest cognitive science as a possible resource for this inquiry, but I want to argue that a more adequate explanation would be grounded in an account of whiteness as a social construct that structures the social order such that it results in the de facto social, economic, political and cultural supremacy of those racialized as white. In deeply structuring the social formation, whiteness generates *as a consequence* the effects described by the concept of white supremacy.

Mills' descriptive conception of white supremacy, including its extension to the informal dimensions of racial domination, is useful as an organizing concept, but it does not explain the underlying socio-cultural processes that reproduce the white supremacist social order. This is *not* to say that 'white supremacy' is neither useful, nor necessary, simply that it is not sufficient for a complete analysis of systems of racial oppression. Further analysis of the concept of whiteness and how it functions to reproduce a white supremacist social order is needed.

More recently, Mills has conceded this by acknowledging that the concept of white supremacy 'should be an overarching category for critical race theory', and as such it leaves room for a variety of 'theoretical options' to be developed, just as in feminism the organizing concept of patriarchy encompasses a variety of theoretical orientations.<sup>29</sup> Thus, one might think of the concept of white supremacy to be descriptive of modern social formations, but as a descriptive term it still requires a theoretical account that explains the generation and reproduction of white supremacist social orders. This explanatory need, I argue, is precisely what a critical theory of whiteness can satisfy.

(b) *McClendon* The second concern that might be raised is whether beginning with an analysis of whiteness is not beginning from the derivative rather than the primary term. John McClendon makes such an argument in claiming that the recent philosophical interest in whiteness privileges the wrong concept. Placing whiteness at the center of the analysis, he argues, results in the 'dangerous . . . inclination to ascribe attributes that are more appropriate to white supremacy than to whiteness'.<sup>30</sup> For McClendon, whiteness is a social category that defines the properties and social location of persons racialized as white, and as such 'a description and definition of a white person does not of necessity entail a description and definition of a white supremacist'.<sup>31</sup> So while

whiteness is a descriptive property possessed by whites, white supremacy 'entails an evaluation of particular practices and values connected to how certain white people relate to racialized social conditions within a complex of power relations and within determinate historical conditions'.<sup>32</sup>

McClendon is certainly correct that the focus of the analysis needs to be on the critique of the social formation of white supremacy as it is historically instantiated in modern social orders. But his claim that analyses of whiteness fail to account for the complex of power relations and the concrete historical conditions of white supremacy is predicated upon too narrow a conception of whiteness. Whiteness certainly is a social category of identity, but it also shapes social practices and cultural representations and meanings, thus an analysis of whiteness and its privileging in every dimension of the social order the interests, needs and values of persons racialized as white is more substantive than McClendon supposes. Indeed, the critique of white supremacy presupposes the analysis of whiteness and an explanation of its functioning in deforming the social order to privilege whites.

## 2 Not a re-centering of white interests

McClendon's argument suggests another objection: namely, that white people have once again become the central focus of theorizing, replacing the proper object of concern – white racial domination. This is a familiar criticism of critical whiteness scholarship. When Du Bois at the beginning of *The Souls of Black Folk* examines the question 'How does it feel to be a problem?' he articulates a common assumption: that the so-called race problem is really a problem of people of color.<sup>33</sup> This assumption has been challenged by black social thinkers since at least Du Bois, and the rise of critical race theory has made influential the view that racial injustice is not a problem of people of color, but one, as Richard Wright once said, of whites.<sup>34</sup> But an adequate critical theory of whiteness does not place the interests and needs of white people at the center of its reflections. Rather, as I have stressed throughout this article, the *telos* of an adequate critical theory of whiteness (and this is one of the necessary conditions of its adequacy) must be the disruption of the structures and mechanisms that function to maintain racial oppression; its purpose must be in the service of liberation. A critical theory of whiteness that is grounded in the broader project of racial justice does not place whites on a pedestal for admiration and veneration; rather it turns a critical eye towards the consciousness and practices of those in the racially dominant position in a white supremacist society. Although a critical theory of whiteness is a necessary part of the struggle against racial justice, it does not itself constitute a comprehensive theory of racial oppression (or of racial liberation, for that matter).

Although whiteness is a primary functional support for contemporary racial oppression, racism and how it operates to reproduce racial injustice cannot be fully explained by whiteness. A comprehensive theory of racial oppression would also need to account for, among other things, the historical rise of hierarchical racial classifications, the system of white supremacy, and the psychological functioning and impact of race and racism.

### 3 Implications for struggles against racial oppression

If I am correct, and the usefulness of a critical theory of whiteness is to contribute socio-theoretic clarity to the struggle to disrupt and dismantle the structures of racial oppression, then what are the implications of this theory for anti-racist engagement?

To begin with, given the systematicity of the functioning of whiteness, disrupting its operations will require a pluralistic strategy. Structures of whiteness will need to be unmasked, challenged, disrupted and dismantled in the material dimensions of social life, in the ideologies that shape consciousness, and in the cultural representations that transmit its meaning. Whiteness' functioning in the legal system, economic institutions, the political process and other means of coordinating social interaction will need to be transformed. Whiteness' coloring of the representations, significations and meanings that circulate in the cultural sphere through various modes of discourse, literature, art and mass media will need to be called out and critiqued. And finally, perhaps most importantly, whiteness' colonization of the epistemes, cognitive and evaluative frameworks and epistemological presuppositions that constitute the modern collective consciousness of individuals will need to be resisted and challenged.

But is whiteness to be eliminated? Exposing, challenging, resisting and disrupting structures of whiteness have the purpose of dismantling the system of racial oppression, and insofar as whiteness contributes to this system, it too needs to be dismantled. However, focusing too much on the idealized *telos* of a world where racial distinctions no longer exist is misguided. A critical theory seeks to identify the concrete possibilities contained in the present in order to reshape the social order so that it possesses a greater degree of justice, if not perfect justice. Given that whiteness is implicated in all dimensions of the social world, it would be ineffective, and perhaps even reactionary, to insist on its outright abolition as an immediate practical goal. Instead, the critical theory of whiteness implies that the structures of whiteness that generate racial oppression need to be exposed, challenged and re-formed.

Who does the critical theory of whiteness suggest is responsible for creating change? This theory implies that the responsibility for change, the responsibility to engage, challenge, unmask, disrupt and attack the

structures of whiteness that shape *all* aspects of modern social systems, lies with each and every member of those social systems. However, because of differential racializations, which means individuals occupy differential social locations, some members bear a greater responsibility for generating change because they also possess greater power to do so. Namely, whites, who are advantaged and benefited by unjust structures of whiteness, who have a 'possessive investment in whiteness', bear a greater responsibility to engage in projects of deconstructing those structures.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, whites can be especially effective in promoting the necessary structural transformations because they are in a structural position of power. This should not be understood to imply, however, that people of color are not capable of generating the necessary dismantling of whiteness, nor that people of color themselves bear no responsibility.

Despite having the greater moral responsibility, and dominating the means to create change, whites must not imagine that they possess adequate understanding and knowledge to work for change on their own. The structures of whiteness differentially situate individuals according to ascribed racial status, consequently not only do whites stand in a location of advantage, but their perspective is limited by that standpoint.<sup>36</sup> Whites must work to disrupt the structures of whiteness only on the basis of the insight and knowledge of those marginalized and oppressed by those structures. This is not to say that whites cannot be effective allies, only that they cannot imagine that their own resources are sufficient to ensure that their actions will produce effective and just outcomes.

My primary argument, then, has been that one essential element of the struggle for liberation from white supremacy is a critical theory of whiteness, where such a theory not only clarifies what we mean by the concept of whiteness, but also explains the mechanisms by which whiteness functions to reproduce a system of white supremacy. The value and fruitfulness of any such critical theory of whiteness, however, will necessarily be grounded in its capacity for concrete and effective guidance for liberatory praxis.

*Department of Philosophy, University of Louisville,  
Louisville, KY, USA*

---

**PSC**

## Notes

An earlier version of this article was presented to the Philosophy Department of the University of Kentucky, and I am grateful for their insightful comments. Also, this article has been greatly improved by comments from Nancy Potter, Avery Kolers, David Mosley, Brian Cabbage, Guy Dove and Christopher F. Zurn. In the end, however, all errors remain solely my own.

- 1 See Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey (eds) *Race Traitor* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
- 2 Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).
- 3 This implies only that there is a structural difference in social location between those racialized as white and those racialized as black, Asian-American, Latino/Latina, American Indian and so on. Some historians have argued that there is a ranked ordering within whiteness; that it is not a homogenous category with the sole distinction being between whiteness and non-whiteness. (See, for example, Thomas A. Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890–1945* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2003].) I maintain simply that there is an underlying unity to the racialized structuring of the social system that is denoted by whiteness. Exploration of internal distinctions within the structure of whiteness is undoubtedly a necessary task for a critical theory of whiteness, but one that is beyond the scope of the present article.
- 4 See David R. Roediger (ed.) *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White* (New York: Schocken, 1998).
- 5 Marilyn Frye, 'White Woman Feminist: 1983–1992', in *Willful Virgin* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1992), p. 151.
- 6 My conception of structure draws significantly from Giddens' conception (see Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979], pp. 64ff.).
- 7 See Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
- 8 Giddens, *Central Problems*, p. 69.
- 9 One might ask at this point: why is an account of white supremacy then necessary if whiteness also accounts for relations of domination and subordination? White supremacy is still necessary to account for: the generation of the system of white racial domination (the critical theory of whiteness accounts for only its reproduction), as well as the normative critique of the hierarchical structure of domination/subordination that is instantiated in and reproduced by whiteness. I address this further in section IV.
- 10 Paul C. Taylor, 'Silence and Sympathy: Dewey's Whiteness', in George Yancy (ed.) *What White Looks Like* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
- 11 In an article critically examining the use of the concept of whiteness in labor history, Eric Arneson describes the concept as a 'moving target', that is, 'variously, a metaphor for power, a proxy for racially distributed material benefits, a synonym for "white supremacy", an epistemological stance defined by power, a position of invisibility or ignorance, and a set of beliefs about racial "Others" and oneself that can be rejected through "treason" to a racial category' ('Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination', *International Labor and Working-Class History* 60 [Fall 2001]: 3–32 (p. 9)).
- 12 George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998), p. vii.
- 13 *ibid.*, p. 1.
- 14 Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

- 15 Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. xiii.
- 16 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (New York: Vintage, 1993); bell hooks, 'Representations of Whiteness', in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992).
- 17 Peggy McIntosh, 'White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack', in *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, 2nd edn, ed. Paula S. Rothenberg (New York: Worth Publishers, 2005). The notion of white privilege was arguably theoretically foreshadowed by Michael Omi and Howard Winant's concept of racial formation. See their *Racial Formation in the United States*, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 1994).
- 18 Cheryl Harris, 'Whiteness as Property', *Harvard Law Review* 106(8) (1993): 1707–91.
- 19 See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 2 vols, trans. T. McCarthy (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994, 1997).
- 20 Mills, *The Racial Contract*.
- 21 See, for example, the essays collected in Axel Honneth and Hans Joas (eds) *Communicative Action* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); Johanna Meehan (ed.) *Feminists Read Habermas* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Lewis Edwin Hahn (ed.) *Perspectives on Habermas* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2000).
- 22 See Charles W. Mills, 'The Racial Polity', in *Blackness Visible* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 119–37; Charles W. Mills, 'White Supremacy and Racial Justice', in *From Class to Race: Essays in White Marxism and Black Radicalism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), pp. 195–218; Charles W. Mills, 'White Supremacy as Sociopolitical System: a Philosophical Perspective', in *ibid.*, pp. 177–94; and Charles W. Mills, 'Racial Exploitation and the Wages of Whiteness', in Yancy, *What White Looks Like*, pp. 25–54.
- 23 Mills, 'The Racial Polity', p. 123.
- 24 *ibid.*, p. 135.
- 25 Mills, 'White Supremacy as Sociopolitical System', p. 186.
- 26 Marilyn Frye, 'Oppression', in *The Politics of Reality* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1983), pp. 1–16.
- 27 See Mills, 'The Racial Polity', p. 123.
- 28 Mills, *The Racial Contract*, p. 94. I would extend this question to include the present: How *are* people able consistently to do the wrong thing while thinking that they *are* doing the right thing?
- 29 Mills, *From Class to Race*, p. 174.
- 30 John H. McClendon III, 'On the Nature of Whiteness and the Ontology of Race: Toward a Dialectical Material Analysis', in Yancy, *What White Looks Like*, p. 218.
- 31 'I take it that whiteness derives from the more general category – race – just as blackness results from such a general category. What we mean by race entails offering concrete specifications about whiteness (and blackness) as a social category' (McClendon, 'On the Nature of Whiteness', p. 218).
- 32 *ibid.*, p. 219.
- 33 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 7. I argue elsewhere that Du Bois rejects this assumption in his

reflections on this question. He goes on to uncover its unacknowledged assumptions, and in doing so, Du Bois presents one of the earliest analyses of whiteness. See David S. Owen, 'Whiteness and Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, unpublished MS, on file with the author.

34 Quoted in Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, p. 1.

35 *ibid.*

36 This is similar to the arguments of feminist standpoint theory. See Linda Alcoff (ed.) *Feminist Epistemologies* (New York: Routledge, 1992), and Sandra Harding (ed.) *The Feminist Standpoint Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies* (New York: Routledge, 2004).