

# **Is Race Really Controversial in the University Classroom?**

**Stephen Phillion**

**St. Cloud State University, Minnesota, USA**

In the US there is quite possibly only one more controversial statement one could make about race that exceeds the amount of controversy it *seems* to stir in the university classroom, namely that race is *not really a* controversial topic in the classroom. There is no doubt, however, that in the US it features prominently among topics that are said to be ‘controversial’ in the university classroom today.<sup>1</sup> In fact, it’s fair to say that race is widely perceived to be the one of the most contentious and risky for any professor to take on in the classroom. Teaching race and, more to the point, anti-racism *were* both risky and controversial in very concrete ways throughout most of US history. One need only consider how little curriculum addressed such issues prior to the Civil Rights Movement or what happened to the careers of some of the greatest of African American educators such as W.E. Dubois, C.L.R. James, or Oliver Cox who challenged the core ideologies and political-economy of capitalism that engendered racial inequality in the US.

Today, however, even though ‘social justice’ programs exist as a virtual growth industry on US campuses and many universities have incorporated classes on race and racism into their curricula, we continue to be faced with the perception that race is a ‘controversial’ topic that has to be broached with care due to its ‘sensitive nature’. This is even more so in a day and age of nervousness about political discourse becoming ‘uncivil’. In this article, I open up the following questions: How can we account for the perception that, in the university classroom, racism is perceived as uniquely controversial? Why are race and racism promoted as uniquely ‘controversial’ topics on American campuses? How has this belief been shaped by and used ideologically to reproduce the accommodation of American higher education to the political economy of neo-liberalism? What alternatives to this ideological orientation in the university classroom exist that more effectively address the basis of racial inequality as a historically shaped social phenomenon in American capitalism?

### **Controversial Sources of Sensitivity and Controversy**

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper, when it addresses itself to the ‘university classroom’, is focused on the US university classroom. Similar articles could be written on classrooms in other countries and a comparison with the US situation would only add to understanding how and why race comes to be understood as ‘controversial’ or ‘sensitive’.

It might appear that the effort expended in putting forth this unorthodox position is toward an ulterior end, namely *denying* that race and racism are important social phenomena in need of careful research and critique (not to mention struggles to eliminate). Suffice it to say that is not the goal. Rather, at stake here is whether or not it is pedagogically wise to assume that issues of race and racism are *necessarily* sensitive or controversial issues in the university classroom. It would be inaccurate to think that race and racism are considered controversial teaching topics due to hostility from the right alone. There is no question that classes on race/racism have come under attack for the past two decades from the American Right, especially as the right-wing experienced a renewed period of political dominance in the US since the Reagan “Revolution.”<sup>2</sup> However, professors offering a left critique of mainstream discourse on race can also find themselves subject to attacks from students who perceive themselves as both critical and anti-racist; so the problem is not simply one of right wing attacks on liberal or left academics. Tim Brennan (2005) has noted that the American academic environment is now shaped greatly by post-structuralist ideas that insist on the importance of every identity other than left-right.<sup>3</sup>

The analysis of capitalist political-economy that anti-racist movements of the past solidly harnessed themselves to and transformed is now lost or severely attenuated. How has this contributed to the ‘controversial’ veneer that teaching about race in the university classroom possesses today? At one level identity-politics run amuck has certainly contributed to the frayed nerves that the topic of race is reported to attract in the university classroom. While the stated end of identity politics has been to ‘empower’ marginalized groups, challenges from critics such as Walter Benn Michael have been levied against the tendency of identity politics to divorce anti-racism from any commitment to eliminating, much less reducing, class inequality:

---

<sup>2</sup> On how that ascendancy was generated through manifold shifts in class power and corresponding attacks on the gains of the civil rights movement, see Davis (1986). On how this only continued under the guise of a ‘new liberalism’ in the Clinton years, see Reed (1999).

<sup>3</sup> See also Ellen Wood (1986).

We like a country organized according to race. We like it even better now than we did when we were racist. ... The question is why. For me, that's the foundational question... Race gives a certain fantasy of what equality is, and that's the fantasy of a world that is equal if there are no racists and there is no institutional racism. ... It works tremendously well in the academic world because it gives you a kind of moral project at the heart of the whole thing, which is to educate people out of their racism, out of their intolerance<sup>4</sup>.

Benn (2007) perceptively argues that the neglect of class inequality, which the shift to identity politics has facilitated over the last two decades, carries a price on the capacity of academics and students alike to appreciate the classed significance of race. However, does this sea change explain when and why race has become regarded as perhaps the most 'controversial' of topics to teach about in the classroom? This explanation is insufficient, since the 'identity wars' are hardly new on US campuses. Indeed, battles fought over racial identities were arguably far more intense in the 1970's and even in the 1980's, *before* concerns arose that race was a 'controversial' topic in the university classroom—as the 'controversy is understood in today's lexicon that is.

Consider the decade of the 1970's, a period in which many battles were fought on American campuses to secure African American, Chicano, Latino, Asian American studies programs, Multicultural student centers and associations, etc., which are now present on almost every major university campus across the United States. These were periods in which students of color were involved in and influenced by the politics of the Black Panthers, the Anti-war movement, the Civil and Welfare Rights movements, etc. That is to say, their activism was shaped by and reshaped social movements of the political left. Their political praxis was very militant in both language and actions. As concerned university curriculum, their key demand was the incorporation of such *political* movement constituencies' histories and perspectives into the classroom. The goal, broadly speaking, was to shake up the campus culture by including previously unheard *political* histories as part of the college experience.

Interestingly, it is not during this period that we find much trepidation about race being a 'controversial' topic that would need to be taught with the 'care' one accords to

---

<sup>4</sup> From an interview with Walter Benn Michael conducted by Jennifer Howard, in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 22, 2006.

tasks such as walking on eggshells. Furthermore, the reasons for this nervousness cannot be wholly understood within the frameworks such as Benn's that stress the lack of attention to class inequality on the part of identity politics. The nervousness about race as a topic in the US classroom, I would argue, is best explained with reference to the dynamics of capitalist political economy as a historically shaped social process, of which the generation of class inequality is but one important constant (Wood 1993).

### **Ideological Shifts Meet Institutional Turf Struggles**

Here's an interesting sociological puzzle: as classes on race have become more numerous and commonplace (even required in many instances) on American campuses, so to has their 'controversial' or 'sensitive' status. I would propose at least two helpful concepts, drawn from the tradition of historical sociology, as starting points of analysis that can help make sense of this: time and space (Abrams 1979; Smith 1991). Let us begin with timing, in the sense of why ideas about race as 'controversial' in the university classroom emerge when they did in the US. For one, race is not the only idea that is now considered 'controversial' in the classroom, virtually anything that smacks of liberal, much less left, 'bias' in the classroom today is under coordinated attacks from the rightwing. Well financed by corporate backers, figures such as David Horowitz have led endless campaigns against 'dangerous' academics who betray whatever rightwing vision is considered sacrosanct in the moment. Infotainment celebrities such as Bill O'Reilly have displayed the enviable capacity to lead mass-media orchestrated campaigns that lead to the firing of dissenting professors such as Ward Churchill or (non-left!) Sami Al Arian. This is especially the case in the post-911 environment.

Such shrill attacks on dissent in recent years merely reflect the culmination of a corporate consolidation of power that was realized in the 1980's. A reinvigorated American corporate class proved less and less willing to fund politicians committed to post-War welfare state type 'class compromise,' which contributed to the declining power of the leftwing of the Democratic Party (Fox-Piven and Cloward 1977; Ferguson and Rogers 1981). At the same time that universities 'found' funding to make it possible to expand curriculum and multi-cultural institutions that aimed to increase representation

of the perspectives of previously unwelcome racial/ethnic/gender/sexual identities, sentiment in the media reflected the general corporate opposition to the expansion of budgets for social-welfare spending to address the underlying causes of racial inequality. As Piven and Cloward (1977; 1982) argue, whereas in the 1960's corporate executives and corporate media were sympathetic to calls for some redressing of economic and cultural grievances with their roots in capitalist accumulation based on centuries of social (i.e. racial, gender, sexual) exclusion, by the late 1960's such constituencies and their (stereotyped) 'cultures' were more likely to be regarded as the *cause* of corporate America's deficit based sliding competitiveness<sup>5</sup>. Since the early 1970's, US corporate media endorsed such sentiments, broadcasting scary new images of minorities (especially African Americans who were concentrated in the 'inner' city) as a threat to America's economic and physical security. The impact was so great that no Democratic Party politician can today realistically expect to run for president without some calculated reproach of African Americans' 'pathologies'<sup>6</sup>.

Put simply, even though we live in an era in which it is fair to say no more progress has ever been made, in the sense of spreading acceptance of concepts such as 'inclusion' 'cultural sensitivity,' 'tolerance', and the like, the goals of the Civil Rights Movements, especially their Keynesian programmatic ones, are far less accepted in the halls of political power<sup>7</sup>. Thus, timing wise, since the mid-1970s, the experience of teaching race has been encumbered by negative attitudes in the business sector and the media toward the Civil Rights Movement's programmatic goals and stereotypes among the broad public about racial 'minorities' that are believed to 'explain' the 'causes' of poverty rates that significantly exceed those of whites. It is in this way that race and racism in the US, especially as they are shaped by the dynamics of capitalist accumulation since the 1970s, have in fact become very much more *controversial* and thereby sensitive since the mid 1970s.

---

<sup>5</sup> On that decline and the broader trends in global competition that generated it, probably the most important contribution in the last decade has come from Robert Brenner's (1999) *The Economics of Global Turbulence*.

<sup>6</sup> Barak Obama, touted as the next, and possibly first successful, Black candidate for president, has already made his obligatory nod in this direction with his 2004 Democratic Party Presidential Convention speech endorsement of Cosby's stereotype based attacks on African American cultural failings.

<sup>7</sup> Arguably, there has not been an American presidency informed by Keynesianism since Richard Nixon.

## Space

Still, timing helps account only partially for why teaching race has become widely perceived as a particularly ‘controversial’ topic. There is probably another factor that helps to construct a fuller explanation. For, after all, professors who teach race from the vantage of the Civil Rights Movement historical perspective are often enough not merely at odds with right-wing (usually white) students and their powerful backers. Those who teach race also find themselves having to be careful about not ‘offending’ students who consider themselves anti-racist, be they students of color or white. Indeed, race is perceived and framed now to not only be ‘controversial’, but ‘sensitive’ as well and thus requiring a certain type of ‘sensitivity’ in order to be taught well. And I’ve already suggested above that, as much as critics have levied powerful and convincing animadversions of cultural identity politics, targeting identity politics as the culprit fails to capture the full complexity of the social mechanisms that have generated nervousness about the issue of race in the classroom today.

There is a spatial explanation that combines with the temporal one just laid out to help make sense of the puzzle<sup>8</sup>. When racial justice was most militantly fought during the Civil Rights Movement period, which lasted until roughly the early 1970’s, racial issues primarily fell under the purview of the social sciences. By the 1980’s, this field included an expanded list of programs or departments such as Ethnic studies, African American studies, and the like. These reforms happened to dovetail with a period characterized by intensified commodification of education in the US, which stressed the need to develop new educational ‘products’ that could attract market investment (Noble 2001; Shumar 1997). Education departments expanded their curriculum with the goal of redesigning curricula and classroom approaches to meet the needs of increasingly diverse classrooms in both k-12 and post-secondary educational environments. Only now classrooms were seen as spaces that delivered products to customers (i.e. students) who needed to not only be attracted to purchase educational products, but also be *satisfied* with their acquisitions in the educational marketplace. Racial (and other forms of) diversity, stripped of earlier

---

<sup>8</sup> By space, I refer to location (physical or conceptual) that is defined by ‘situated’ social institutional imperatives that orient social actors to a range of activities, with consequences that might not necessarily be consistent with their intentions. (Smith1991, 142).

anti-capitalist content, became one part of a multi-faceted newfangled educational package that stressed universal comfort for those who supplied universities with tuition and other sources of capital to remain competitive in an increasingly privatized environment.

In line with the dominant ideological framework of globalization that reached its apex during the Clintonian 1990's, openness to multicultural differences was considered no less critical to economic development than embracing global 'free' trade (Melamed 2006). A new emphasis known as 'critical pedagogy', which ostensibly borrowed from the works of Paulo Freire (1970), energized the education studies field throughout the 1990s and well into the first years of the new millennium. And a space developed in which race and racism in US universities could be conceptualized and debated. As a result, the field of education increasingly competed with the social sciences in conceptualizing the significance of race and racial inequality. Notably, the former tended to focus much more on creating successful classroom strategies to make previously unheard constituencies feel more 'comfortable' and 'heard'. It would not be an exaggeration to state that how education departments reframed the significance of race and racism in the US impacted the social sciences' understanding of how issues of race should be taught. At the same time, the two seem to have fed each other; much of the thinking on race that education departments utilized originated in a social sciences that often blindly embracing the ideological cant of identity politics and post-everythingism during the 1980's and 1990's (Reed 1997).

A search of 'race' 'sensitive' 'teaching' 'university' on *Google* provides numerous examples that suggest vast amounts of institutional resources are being spent to make US university classrooms on race more 'sensitive' because they are so 'controversial'. Much of this energy is expended by education associated departments or 'centers of instructional training.' Their priorities and framing of issues befit a period of university privatization, which, in order to secure greater amounts of corporate investment in post-secondary education, stresses the need to show 'results' in attracting and maintaining customer 'interest'. They also coincide with the institutional interest of education departments in rationalizing the bureaucratic need for their own existence *and* expansion.

## **Instructional Workshops, Conferences, as Means of Nervousness Production**

With increased competition for students' tuition and corporate investment, campus based centers for instructional training have become virtual growth industries and, it is safe to say, bureaucratic side-arms of education departments. Workshops start with the presupposition that race/racism classes are inherently controversial and in need of *pedagogical methods* that *credentialed experts* can provide to anyone teaching the topic, regardless of field. For example, notes posted to an online discussion among university educators about a workshop on "Developing Strategies for Discussing Race in the Classroom," sponsored by University of Santa Barbara's *Office of Instructional Consultation*, show the heightened level of concern that professors need to 'learn to be sensitive' before classes on race can be taught:

*It was agreed upon that before TAs can even handle race, they need to learn to be sensitive.*

- 1. Workshops would be ideal for helping TAs begin to be self-reflective of their own thought processes*
  - 2. Sensitivity should be honed, as well as overall pedagogical tools*
    - a. such as how to build a comfortable learning atmosphere*
    - b. how to use questioning skills constructively in the classroom*
- B. Could this be a paradox? There need to be steps taken to redress problems, but suggestions either marginalize the efforts, overemphasize them, or are too idealistic (and not feasible)<sup>9</sup>*

A 2005 conference held in the Minneapolis titled "Diversity here and now: Holistic and sustainable approaches to multicultural learning," sponsored by *The Collaboration for the Advancement of College Teaching & Learning*, typifies such gatherings. Teaching methodologies are the central issue when it comes to matters of race;

---

<sup>9</sup> <http://lists.isber.ucsb.edu/pipermail/praxisproject/2006-June/000001.html>

content secondary. A panel set up by a social work professor sets up the parameters of forums at this conference:

Reflection circles are a method of generating open dialogue on sensitive topics such as whiteprivilege (sic) and racism and making students' thinking on these topics visible. The facilitator will lay the foundation for the session by sharing the results of a research project that was designed to study the effectiveness of diversity reflection circles in the classroom environment. Participants will then engage in an actual diversity reflection circle dialogue. Following the exercise, participants will be provided with materials and training on how to facilitate the diversity reflection circle process in the classroom and other campus settings.

The dialogic prescription for the 'sensitivity' that teaching issues of race ostensibly takes on in the classroom fits education departments' own bureaucratic need to have input on matters of how race is taught in the classroom at the 'how to' level. In the process, they move to prioritize classroom gimmicks over content as a key to analyzing what is taught about race in the university classroom. Further, given a deathly fear of hierarchies of determination, almost any kind of ideological content is acceptable. This leads conference participants to avoid exploring whether course content actually leads one to learn much about the origins of or practical solutions for racism under capitalism, in the US or elsewhere.

As a marketing strategy, such conference sponsors suggest a putative linkage between their emphasis on race teaching devices and more 'critical thinking'. A panel by a professor of 'organizational leadership' reveals the ideological vectors that presenters point their presentations in:

As the world becomes more interdependent and globalization increases, the United States is experiencing major demographic shifts. Effective teachers of global competence need to focus on theoretical and experiential approaches. This session will explore the use of critical thinking in teaching these competences, review characteristics of collectivist and individualist cultures, and apply Kolb's model of experiential learning to experiences with local cultural groups. Participants will read two articles from local cultural newspapers and discuss applications of cultural experiences for classes they teach.

This approach to ‘critical’ thinking actually accommodates the last few decades of intensified global capital’s mobility and its insatiable search for profit maximization across borders; the expansion, that is, of the neo-liberal project (Harvey 2005). Further, although the call is for both ‘theoretical’ and ‘experiential’ approaches, the move here is plainly experiential; theory is at best peripheral. This is apparent in the preference for ‘dialogue’ as the means to both teach and resolve contradictions of race in and outside the university classroom; dialogues that are depoliticized, or at best linked to a neo-liberal ‘movement’ that seeks to make globalized markets more ‘fair.’ (Phillion 2005)

### **‘Critical’ Pedagogy as Ideology**

As I’ve alluded, the ideological boundaries that place this growth-industry in motion (and indeed that make it possible to retain its credibility) are often over-determined by a field within education studies known as ‘critical pedagogy’. This theoretical orientation has attracted followers who regard the problem of classroom methods as fundamentally flawed at the level of student consciousness and empowerment. It has also sought, in almost missionary like fashion, to shape pedagogical approaches across the social sciences, natural sciences, and even business schools. Underlying this theoretical posture is the presumption that employing a more ‘critical’ approach to teaching issues such as race will inspire (or ‘empower’) students to challenge unequal and oppressive power relations. However, this presumption has come under sharp challenges from established developers of this pedagogy such as Peter McLaren (1998), who laments the way critical educators have embraced postmodernism’s tendency to avoid or challenge the structurally informed dynamics of late capitalism. Cho (2007, 130) notes the correlation between identity politics and critical pedagogy’s move away from an analytical focus on capitalism or politics informed by a critique of political economy. Instead, critical pedagogy has opted for pushing a bastardized version of the ‘politics is personal’ that focuses on ‘who am I’ over collective class based politics. With this move, collective movements from the 1960s and 70s that sought to give voice to class-based demands for economic and cultural empowerment are displaced in the critical pedagogy

literature and classrooms by celebrations of individual experience often divorced from any political commitment:

In the search for and honoring of genuine voices, their sources become more important than their content. In other words, 'who speaks is what counts, not what is said.' In critical pedagogy classrooms, who talks in the classroom and what one can say can become a very sensitive issue, to the point that it creates an atmosphere of fear and reluctance. Nobody wants to be regarded as interrupting, let alone challenging, the genuine voices of others (especially of minorities and women). Rather than make us more open and free, this can actually create tensions and hamper honest communication and rigorous analysis. (131)<sup>10</sup>

Critical pedagogy has prized self-centered 'dialogue' and 'consensus' in the classroom, again stripped of the collective types of movement organization that made dialogues between oppressed and powerful groups translate into reforms that redistributed wealth and social power downward:

The non-hierarchical, participatory forms of authority is very prevalent in critical pedagogy literature and praxis. There is a strong tendency to negate any structure or any possible hint of authority in critical pedagogy classrooms as a way to achieve total freedom and the elimination of domination. Dialogue and consensus are regarded as the only legitimate and desirable form of decision making. In reality however, the idealization of total freedom and total elimination of domination are utopian and subject to naivete...(As)...Gur Ze'ev...(argues)...“the consensus reached by the reflective subject taking part in the dialogue offered by critical pedagogy is naïve, especially in light of its declared anti-intellectualism on the one hand and its pronounced glorification of 'feelings,' 'experience,' and 'self-evident' knowledge' of the group on the other.” (Cho 2005, 123)

Cho points to a fundamental weakness that derives from this apolitical approach, which rewards a commitment to cultural-identity politics of 'voice' and 'experience', a

---

<sup>10</sup> See also Phillion (2005).

methodological individualism which befits, rather than challenges, a ‘post-modern’ regime of flexible accumulation and weakened class based solidarism<sup>11</sup>

Not surprisingly, the main focus of critical pedagogues has been the project of re/making individuals or subjectivities... Not only is the individual enlightenment project naïve, but it also can lead to a moralized, rather than a politicized project. This moralized approach fails to address the issue in broader social, political, economic, and cultural contexts and thus prohibit us from searching for practical and structural solutions. (133-135)

Finally, given the influence that critical pedagogy has had on those teaching about race and racism, its core postulates are often the standard bearers by which classes on race are ‘assessed.’ This has encouraged a cottage industry for authors of ‘readers’ on race, which exist to ‘help’ the professor ensure that they, in smorgasbord like fashion, have covered every racial and ethnic group and made them feel ‘comfortable’ or ‘safe’. On the one hand, these readers enable educators to cover more diverse experiences with racism. However, a key drawback pedagogically is the methodological individualism that pervades readers on race, compounded by an ahistorical insistence that all experiences should receive equal attention in order to avoid ‘privileging’ one group over another. The political costs of such an approach are transparent, though too rarely acknowledged:

...Especially since (these readers’ editors reject) hierarchies of any sort, it is impossible to establish hierarchies of responsibility. The result is a kind of finger pointing that cannot discern between a working class white college student at a public university who enjoys this or that element of white privilege and a Bill Gates. The latter’s white privilege, of course, encompasses the power to influence politicians who make decisions on budget policies that affect directly the capacity of millions of inner city minorities (and poor whites) to escape poverty. For all the critiques of unequal power relations that a smorgasbordist makes, many quite eloquently, they too often lack a carefully thought out explanation for how those differences in responsibilities arose historically or how they might affect

---

<sup>11</sup> For the most thorough exposition and critique of the link between the dynamics of late capitalist accumulation patterns and the post-modern condition, see Harvey (1989).

strategies for organizing to make the kinds of social structural change needed to end racial inequality under capitalism. (Phillion and Mhando 2006, 108-109).

Notably, Cho does not reject outright critical pedagogy's potential for reform. Cho's powerful critique leads to her proposal that critical pedagogy can only contribute to a transformative politics if it drops its methodological individualism and instead "explore(s) and produce(s) real, feasible alternatives by linking the micro to the macro, the subject to the structure, the culture to the economy, and the local to the global (Cho 2006, 138). In other words, the tools of a Marxist social science that takes seriously the dynamics of capitalism are needed to move beyond the gap between critical pedagogy's goals and outcomes.

### **Critical Social Science as the Alternative that Confronts the Sensitivity of Race and Racism under Capitalism**

Race and racism as social phenomena are not anymore sensitive or controversial than a whole host of others that attract great amounts of emotional upset, political rebellion, or sanction. Treating these topics as though they are especially sensitive ones that 'sensitive' approaches in the classroom will sufficiently address is unrealistic and likely to fall far short of the goal of actually achieving a better understanding of or transformations beyond racial inequality. However, race and racism *are* both controversial and sensitive matters under capitalism. In fact, as Oliver Cox (2000) so carefully laid out, they didn't even exist until the emergence of capitalism. The sensitivity that race and racism bring to the table is historically structured by the imperatives of capitalist accumulation and shaped by the patterns of perceptions that are unpredictable but always at the surface. These are matters that critical realist social science can best make sense of with its emphasis on social phenomena, including ideas, as socially generated processes (Manicas 2006).

Merely noting that current approaches ignore or underemphasize the link between race and class inequality is not enough if we hope to provide a real alternative to pedagogies that overstress the 'sensitive' or 'controversial' nature of race and racism in the university classroom.. To begin with, to answer the 'why' race is controversial, we

need to examine why it's a controversial or sensitive form of exclusion *under capitalism*, while other forms are less 'sensitive'—even though they remain hugely contentious (like, say, class inequality). Why wasn't stratification on the basis of non-meritorious characteristics a matter of controversy or sensitivity under pre-capitalist modes of production? In fact, race and racism are sensitive precisely because capitalism ideologically requires us to believe in the 'freedom' of competition in markets as its operational rationale and foundation. It is for this reason that, actually, it is a relatively universally held belief that racism is bad and race should not be a means to distribute surpluses in capitalist markets. And the task of educators' vis-a-vis issues of race and racism is to make sociological sense of the gap between that ideological call for meritocracy in capitalism and the actual role of race and racism as part of capitalist accumulation for centuries.

A key starting point at making sense of what is sensitive or controversial about race is the question, "What is capitalism?" Historically, how do we account for the gap between the structurally imperative orientation *against* distributing rewards for labor along non-meritorious lines and the critical role of race/racism as an actual means of doing exactly that for centuries in American capitalism and, indeed, globally (Wood 2006, 105-106)? It is, I would argue, in the works of tradition of historical-materialist oriented social science, which emphasize the dynamics of capitalist accumulation as a specific historical process, that we find the most eye-opening treatment of such matters that shape how and when 'race' and 'racism' not only came into existence, but came to be so 'sensitive.' Ellen Wood (1995, 268-269), addressing herself to the origins of slavery in early capitalism writes:

It is tempting to ask, then, what it was about capitalism that created this ideological need, this need for what amounts to a theory of natural, not just conventional, slavery. And at least part of the answer must lie in a paradox. While colonial oppression and slavery were growing in the outposts of capitalism, the workforce was being increasingly proletarianized; and the expansion of wage (labor), the contractual relation between formally free and equal freedom, carried with it an ideology of formal equality and freedom...In a sense, then, it was precisely the structural pressure *against* extra-economic difference which made it

necessary to justify slavery by excluding slaves from the human race, making them non-persons standing outside the normal universe of freedom and equality.<sup>12</sup>

Even when we've tackled such questions, which all require the tools of Marxist social science to break open, there are whole puzzles that the tools of Marxist social science put educators in a great position to not only raise levels of clarity, but also, frankly, to reduce the anxiety about its 'controversial nature' inside or outside classrooms. Racism, for example, has engendered what was possibly the most volatile class based counter-hegemonic movement in American history, namely the Civil Rights Movement. It is a Marxist social science with its emphasis on the dynamics and history of capitalist development that makes it possible for students to answer questions such as "why was a Civil Rights Movement necessary?", "Why didn't the labor movement take up this mission?", "Why did the Civil Rights Movement align itself with the Democrats, the party of southern white racism throughout the Jim Crow period of post-Civil War Segregation?" "Why did the New Deal fail to go south?", "Why did the Civil Rights Movement emerge in the 1940's, a period of unprecedented economic growth for African Americans? Why not the 1920's" "Why were Blacks at the forefront of this movement? Why not Native Americans, who, of all the racially marginalized and oppressed groups were the most militant in the sense of willingness to engage in armed conflict with the US military?", "Why were the demands of Native Americans so different from the African American led Civil Rights movement?" "Why were the Great Society Programs that were supposed to address depression-like rates of unemployment in poor urban areas shelved and never carried out with the same zeal or budgetary support as the New Deal?" "Why is race still so fraught with contention even after so gains have been made in the cultural arena?" "Why is the labor movement more supportive of organizing immigrant workers today than it was in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century?"<sup>13</sup>

Finally, a Marxist oriented social science provides university educators with the rudimentary tools to ask questions about the ways consciousnesses of race emerge in

---

<sup>12</sup> See also Barbara Fields (1990) "Slavery, Race, and Ideology in America."

<sup>13</sup> One excellent source for teaching a class on race that delves into such questions is Michael Goldfield's (1997) *The Color of Politics*.

specific time periods. As Carter (2000, 45) in *Realism and Race: Concepts of Race in Sociological Research* argues:

If ethnicity (race) is constructed, it can only serve as a sociological concept under certain conditions, namely describing those situations in which actors come to interpret the world in terms of ethnic (racial) ideas, self-understandings, and so on. In this case a critical sociology remains possible (and vitally necessary) since these ideas and understandings can be evaluated on the basis of a sociological account: we can examine the social and historical conditions of their production, assess their content, suggest and identify alternatives, make informed judgements about their consequences.

The anti-voluntarist orientation Carter conceptualizes enables us to practically realize that we cannot remove the socially constructed (and thereby ‘real’ appearing) sensitivity of race and racism as topics in the classroom. However, asking the right historical questions about the (specific and coercive) dynamics of capitalist development helps to ‘make sense’ of what is otherwise insensible and, indeed, controversial about race and racism past and present. We must not, however, begin with ahistorical ideas about the ‘sensitivity’ or ‘controversial nature’ of race and racism in the classroom that have little to say to such questions, and which actually *underdevelop* students’ capacities to develop the theoretical tools needed to find practical means to supersede race relations as they are constituted in the here and now.

## **Acknowledgements**

I'd like to acknowledge the helpful comments and suggestions made on earlier versions of this article by Grant Arndt, Tim Brennan, Seehwa Cho, Peter Manicas, Lindah Mhando, and Doug Porpora.

## **References**

- Benn-Michaels, Walter. (2007). *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*. NY: Holt Paperbacks.
- Brennan, Timothy. (2006). *Wars of Position : the Cultural Politics of Left and Right*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Brenner, Robert. (1998). The Economics of Global Turbulence. *New Left Review*, 1 (229).
- Carter, Bob. (2000). *Realism and Race: Concepts of Race in Sociological Research*. London: Routledge.
- Cho, Seehwa. (2006). On Language of Possibility. In *Reinventing Critical Pedagogy: Widening the Circle of Anti-Opression Education*, edited by C. A. Rossato, Ricky Lee Allen, and Marc Pruyn. Lanham, Maryland: The Rowman and Little Field Publishing Group.
- Cox, Oliver C. (2000). *Race : A Study in Social Dynamics*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Davis, Mike. (1986). *Prisoners of the American dream : Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class*. London: Verso.
- Ferguson, Tom and Joel Rogers, ed. (1979). *The Hidden Election : Politics and Economics in the 1980 Presidential Campaign*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Fields, Barbara. (1990) Slavery, Race and Ideology in the USA. *New Left Review*, 1 (181).
- Freire, Paulo. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Goldfield, Michael. (1997). *The Color of Politics : Race and the Mainsprings of American Politics*. New York: New Press.
- Harvey, David. (1989). *The Condition of Postmodernity : an Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford [England] ; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell.

Stephen Phillion

- . (2000). *Spaces of Hope*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Manicas, Peter T. (2006). *A Realist Philosophy of Social Science : Explanation and Understanding*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- McLaren, Peter. (1998). Revolutionary Pedagogy in Post-revolutionary Times: Rethinking the Political Economy of Critical Education. *Educational Theory*, 48 (4).
- Melamed, Jodi. (2006). The Spirit of Neoliberalism: From Racial Liberalism to Neoliberal Multiculturalism. *Social Text*, 24 (4).
- Michaels, Walter Benn. (2006). *The Trouble with Diversity : How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Noble, David F. (2001). *Digital Diploma Mills : the Automation of Higher Education*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Phillion, Stephen. (1998). Bridging the Gap Between New Social Movements and the Language of Class. *Rethinking Marxism* 10 (4).
- . 2005. "Unsustainable Dialogues." *MRZine*, (December 17).  
<http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/phillion171205.html>
- Phillion, Stephen and Linda Mhando. 2006. "From Smorgasbord Pedagogy to Critical Pedagogy: Rethinking How We Teach about Race." In *Critical Pedagogy in the Classroom: Second Edition*, edited by P. Kaufman. NY: American Sociological Association.
- Piven, Frances Fox and Richard A. Cloward. 1977. *Poor People's Movements : Why They Succeed, How They Fail*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- . 1982. *The New Class War : Reagan's Attack on the Welfare State and its Consequences*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Reed, Adolph L. 1997. "Token Equality - Class Politics," *The Progressive*. (February)
- . 1999. *Without Justice for All : the New Liberalism and Our Retreat from Racial Equality*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press.
- Smith, Dennis. 1991. *The Rise of Historical Sociology*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Shumar, Wesley. 1997. *College For Sale: A Critique of the Commodification of Higher Education*. Washington, D.C.: The Falmer Press.

Wood, Ellen Meiksins. 1986. *The Retreat from Class : a New "True" Socialism*. London: Verso.

—. 1995. *Democracy Against Capitalism : Renewing Historical Materialism*. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press.

—. 2003. *Empire of capital*. New York: Verso.

## **Writers' Details**

### **Correspondence**

Stephen Phillion  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
St. Cloud State University  
[sephillion@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:sephillion@stcloudstate.edu)  
<http://stephenphillion.efoliomn2.com/>