



“A Welcome Critique of CRT from the Left”

a review by Dick Burkhardt of

Critical Race Theory and Education: A Marxist Response

By Mike Cole (2009)

This book is a welcome anti-dote to the ideological finger-pointing by some in the Critical Race Theory (CRT) community who want to blame “white supremacy” for all oppressions. The author is a British Marxist academic, a strong activist for anti-racist education, but more focused on the underlying economics of oppression than philosophers of CRT like Charles Mills, who conjure up concepts like “racial contracts” or “white liberalism” to stoke the fires of the cultural wars.

In particular, Cole is right to point out the “white supremacy” is simply inaccurate: it “homogenizes all white people as being in positions of power and privilege”. That is, it ignores lower class whites. Even the white working class has not experienced “white supremacy” or “white privilege” in recent decades, as this group has been the hardest hit by escalating inequality (loss of good industrial jobs, etc). And, of course, certain politicians use this accusatory rhetoric to whip up resentment in their base. Cole’s conclusion is that “white supremacy” phraseology “should be restricted to conventional usage”.

In addition Cole points out that Mills’ rhetoric diverts attention from harmful “modes of production”, i.e., exploitation by the economic system, now referred to as neoliberal capitalism. It also ignores the British experience of “non color-coded racism”, such as poor whites from Eastern Europe today, or from Ireland in the past, and is “counterproductive as a political unifier and rallying point”.

More philosophically, Cole quotes Gillborn is quoted as saying that “CRT argues strongly against nay comforting belief in the essential goodness of the human spirit”. Thus CRT is morally identified with the Christian doctrine of original sin, opposed to a key value of the Enlightenment and of progressive religion.

Where Cole is weakest, in my judgement, is in his analysis of capitalism and economic growth. He ignores the foundational role of cheap energy. Thus the Marxist “labor theory of value” is simply wrong, as long recognized by Steve Keen, Charles Hall, and others who understand fossil fuels and biophysical economics. In addition, the notion of “worker control of the means of production” doesn’t scale to massive corporate enterprises, nor even to broad public accountability. This suggests that a better focus would be on broad-based ownership, not management by “worker councils”. Marxism may not be yet be on life support, still able to offer valuable insights on issues like race, but its failure to adapt creatively to critical contemporary economic realities suggests that it needs a big wake up call.