Towards a Critical Race Theory of Information

Syed Mustafa Ali
Computing Department
The Open University (UK)

s.m.ali@open.ac.uk

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Motivation

Strike The Root

There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root.

Henry D. Thoreau
Questions

• What is the nature (root, foundation) of the world system?
  – Capitalism?
  – Neo-liberalism?
  – or something else?

• What is the nature of ICT?

• How should we think about the relationship between the world system and ICT?
  – Critical theory
  – or something else?
Outline

I. Critical Theories of Information
   – Lash (2002)
   – Fuchs (2009)

II. Critical Race Theory (CRT)

III. CRT Critique of Critical Theories of Information

IV. Critical Race Theory of Information

V. Further Work
Critical Theories of Information – I

• *Critique of Information* (Lash 2002)
  – Informational capitalism (IC)
  – **Power** (intellectual property)
  – Inequality
    • From *exploitation* (production) to *exclusion* (consumption)
  – **Immanent** Dialectics
    • *Fusion* of matter and idea in information
    • Informational order as *all-encompassing* (“Enframing”)
      – Loss of inside/outside distinction
        » **Q:** Is there a *top-side* / *underside* distinction?
    • Subversion of IC through *play* (ludic opposition)
Critical Theories of Information – II

• Critical Theory of Information (Fuchs 2009)
  – DEFINITION: “an endeavour that focuses ontologically on the analysis of information in the context of domination, asymmetrical power relations, exploitation, oppression, and control by employing epistemologically all theoretical and/or empirical means necessary for doing so in order to contribute at the praxeological level to the establishment of a participatory, co-operative society.”
Critical Theories of Information – III

- Critical theory (2.0) is necessarily
  - Historical (or dialectical)
  - Materialistic
    - Matter as dynamic, eternal (uncreatable, indestructible), processual (material event monism)
      - "Matter is the totality of objects that constitute reality and is itself constituted in space and time by an interconnected totality of bodies that react to one another (motion)..."
    - Matter develops higher levels of organisation ⇒ structural hierarchies
  - Anti-capitalist (Marxist class-struggle)

- Foundational Issues
  - Relation between base and superstructure
  - Relation between immanence and transcendence
  - Ideology critique (i.e. critique of society)
Critical Theories of Information – IV

• Base-Superstructure Relation
  1. Base
     • Nature, technology, economy
  2. Superstructure
     • Polity, culture

(1) is necessary, but NOT sufficient for (2)

• Immanence-Transcendence Relation
  – Distinction between appearance and essence
  – Societal existence as immanent under capitalism
    • Competition
  – Societal essence as immanent transcendental
    • Co-operation
Critical Theories of Information – V

• Social Systems Theory
  – Non-deterministic, non-mechanistic actors produce material structures which constrain actors

• Emergence
  – “Systemic contradictions [at one level] aggravate as a consequence of quantitative intensification such that a situation results where quantity turns to quality and the system sublates itself”

• Sublation *(aufhebung)* [Hegel]
  – systemic transformation
    • Preservation (of lower-level systemic qualities / properties)
    • Elimination (of lower-level systemic qualities / properties)
    • Elevation (of system to higher-level ⇒ new qualities / properties)
Critical Theories of Information – VI

• Transnational network capitalism (or global IC)
  – Modern world phenomena as dynamic networked forms of organisation
  – Unified – and unifying – logic of accumulation

• Inequality
  – Exploitation (production) and exclusion (consumption)
  – Emancipation
    • Inclusion, social justice, participatory democracy (cooperation)
## Critical Theories of Information – VII

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  (Fuchs 2009)
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    (hierarchy)
  – Immanent and transcendent dialectics

**Ontologically-autopoietic**
NOT closed or autonomous

**Dialectically-materialistic**
Scientific ⇒ atheist
Critical Race Theory (CRT)

• **DEFINITION**
  – “Investigates the shifting meanings of race and how it works in society, and proposes interventions in the name of social justice” (Nakamura and Chow-White 2012)

• **Precedents**
  – Roediger, Goldberg, Winant, Bonilla-Silva, Zuberi (sociology)
  – Eze, Bernasconi, Taylor (philosophy)

• **Decolonial Studies**
  – Dussel, Quijano, Mignolo, Grosfoguel, Torres (anthropology)
    • Decolonial Studies is **NOT** postcolonial studies

• **Black Radicalism**
  – Fanon (psychology)
  – Moore, Robinson, Mills (political philosophy)
What is Race?

- Race as a shifting social construct / formation
- Race as based on outer, physical characteristics...
  - ...with implications for inner, essential qualities
- Race as genealogically-related to racism
- Racism as prejudice and power
- Racism as
  - moral
  - attitudinal
  - intentional
  - volitional
  - cognitive
  - individualistic
Critique of Individualist Approach

• Racism can exist in a purely *structural* (or pattern-based) capacity, that is, in terms of differentially-embedded power relations that are at least not *explicitly* intentional.

• Patterns of discrimination and/or domination associated with racial difference should not be understood as the *exceptional* behaviour of individuals deviating from a social norm, but rather, as providing the basis of a global socio-political *system* – *white supremacy*.
Racism as System

- Racism – or global white supremacy – is a political **system**, a particular power **structure** of formal or informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the **differential** distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties

The Racial Contract – I

• Formal and / or informal agreements ("contracts") made by those who self-classify as white to
  – classify others as non-white, and
  – differentially privilege and empower whites relative to non-whites

• All whites are beneficiaries of the Racial Contract, though some whites are not signatories.
The Racial Contract – II

Networked Social Contract
(Horizontal, Egalitarian)

Networked Racial Contract
(Vertical, Oppressive)
The Racial Contract is

• Political
• Moral

• Epistemological
  – Prescribes norms for cognition
  – Motivates selection of facts
  – Determines what counts as information...
    ... but also what counts as mis/disinformation
Epistemology of Ignorance

• Construction of dysfunctional “colour-blind” cognitive categories and classifications following the “signing” of the Racial Contract

• A particular pattern of localised and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional)

• White misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race

CRT Critique of Critical Theories of Information – I

• Dialectical philosophy (Hegel, Marx, Engels) fundamentally incorporates racist elements

• Revisiting Marx (alá Fuchs) is problematic
  – NOT because of his overt racism, which Marxists would consider regrettable, yet historically-contingent and peripheral to his philosophical project, but
  – because Marxism is fundamentally Eurocentric in orientation, concealing its colonial underside
    • Marxism as European universalism (Wallerstein 2005)
  – E.g. Emancipation is NOT liberation (contra Fuchs)
CRT Critique of Critical Theories of Information – II

Eurocentric Logic

modernity → postmodernity

coloniality → postcoloniality

decoloniality
CRT Critique of Critical Theories of Information – III

- **Emancipation** (Fuchs 2009)
  - Inclusion / assimilation
  - From Eurocentrism to **polycentrism**
    - *Eurocentric* critique of Eurocentrism (postmodernity)
    - *Ego*-politics (abstract / neutral / **colour-blind**)

- **Liberation** (Mignolo 2010)
  - De-linking / non-assimilation
  - From coloniality to de-colonial **pluriversality**
    - *Border* logics of transmodernity
    - *Geo*-politics / **body**-politics (situated / embodied \( \Rightarrow \) **raced**)
CRT Critique of Critical Theories of Information – IV

• Systems theory, cybernetics, chaos theory, complexity theory, network theory etc
  – These ‘sciences’ are **NOT** neutral – Eurocentric genealogy
  – “Scientific” rebranding of dialectical materialism
    • Mask / conceal the **ideological nature** of dialectical materialism
      – Is Marxism 2.0 a case of “old wine in a new (non-linear) bottle”?

• Self-organisation
  – Focus on self-organisation (**autopoiesis**) masks simultaneous other-organisation (**allopoiesis**)
    • The ‘other’ is conceived as coupled *environment*, i.e. *resource*
      – Does the self-other distinction **mask** an ‘us’-‘them’ distinction?
      – Does **autopoiesis** mask **Europoiesis**? Is **autopoiesis colonial**?
CRT Critique of Critical Theories of Information – V

• Emergent materialism – I
  – Does NOT – cannot – solve the “hard” / category problem
    • Dialectical emergent materialist approaches are “magical”
      – brain states : mental states :: molecular behaviour : liquidity
    • Need for alternative metaphysics
      – E.g. panexperientialism – “mind-dust”? (Van Cleve 1990)

• Emergent materialism – II
  – Racism and emergent materialism meet at the site of stratification / hierarchy since both conceptualise the latter in colour-blind / neutral terms
    • Is Fuchs’ proposal – and Hofkirchner’s UTI – yet another Eurocentric “Great Chain of Being”? 
      – WHO gets to identify / specify an “epoch’s inherent and dynamically developing potentials” (Fuchs 2009, p.259)?

Hegel’s “Law” of The Transformation of Quantity into Quality
In his post to discussion@lists.icts-and-society.net dated 2/03/12, Jonathan Beller maintains that

– “Just as [Aimé] Césaire saw the European metropoles as the product of third world labor, we are all products of the global south. It is internal to our being. How does one inventory those relations and produce them as formations of solidarity rather than as disavowed residuum?”

• Accept that ‘capitalism’ is a Eurocentric abstraction masking systemic racism (white supremacy) through the operation of an “epistemology of ignorance”

• Shift from Critical Theory of ICT to Critical Race Theory of ICT
Critical Race Theory of Information

i. Post-materialistic metaphysics

ii. Centrality of race (i.e. primary contradiction)

• PRECEDETS

• LIMITATIONS
  – Race is NOT understood in systemic terms, i.e. as global white supremacy (Ali Forthcoming)
Further Work

- Feenberg (2012) claims that the internet facilitates
  - Communicative **reciprocity**
  - Small-group empowerment
- However, Shirky (2003) argues that social (computing) networks evidence power law **distributions**, and De Leon (2007) claims that such networks are **segregated**
  - To what extent are **existing** power **relations** – specifically, racial stratification – in both the private (government, corporate) and public (civic) spheres responsible for the production of (alleged) power **law** distributions?
  - Does the ostensibly ‘scientific’ discourse on complexity and self-organising systems – which makes reference to power laws – **mask** the operation of these power relations?
    - Bureaucratic/corporate gatekeeping **and** civic gatekeeping
    - **Racial** contract masked by **social** contract