



Towards a Critical Race Theory of Information

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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

A collage of various digital and social concepts including an '@' symbol, a hand typing on a keyboard, a computer screen with 'Entire Network' and 'IDEOLOGY INC.' text, a 'http' logo, a handshake, and a sign that says 'REAL DEMOCRACY'.

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

- *Critique of Information* (Lash 2002)
 - Emergence
 - Materialism
 - **Networks**
 - Self-organisation
 - Non-linearity
 - Complexity
 - **Layering**
(hierarchy)
 - **Immanent dialectics**
- *Critical Theory of Information* (Fuchs 2009)
 - Emergence
 - Materialism
 - **Networks and systems**
 - Self-organisation
 - Non-linearity
 - Complexity
 - **Structuring**
(hierarchy)
 - **Immanent and transcendent dialectics**

Critical Theories of Information – VII

- *Critique of Information* (Lash 2002)
 - Emergence
 - Materialism
 - **Networks**
 - Self-organisation
 - Non-linearity
 - Complexity
 - **Layering** (hierarchy)
 - **Immanent dialectics**
- *Critical Theory of Information* (Fuchs 2009)
 - Emergence
 - Materialism
 - **Networks and systems**
 - **Self-organisation**
 - Non-linearity
 - Complexity
 - **Structure** (hierarchy)
 - **Ontologically-autopoietic**
 - **NOT** closed or autonomous
 - **Dialectically-materialistic**
 - **Scientific** ⇒ atheistic
 - **Immanent dialectics**



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

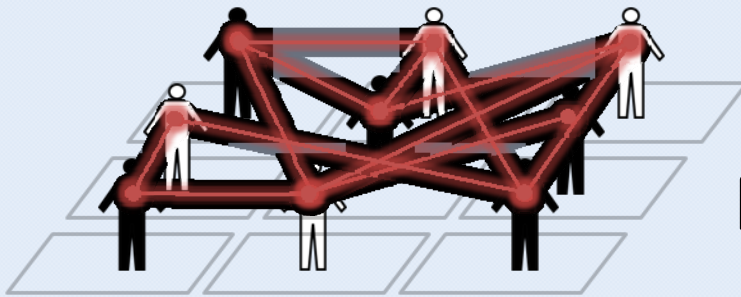
Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (1997)



The Racial Contract – I

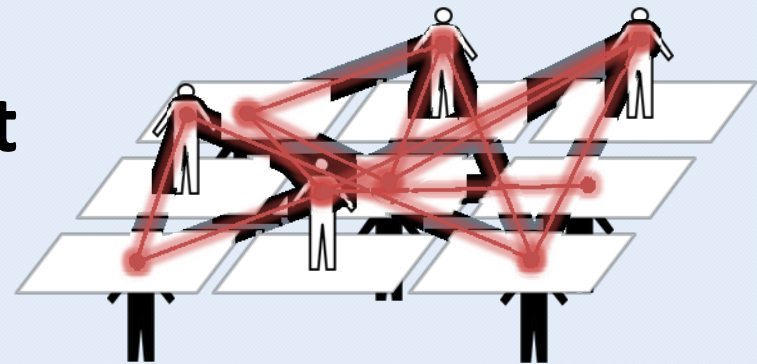
- Formal and / or informal agreements (“**contracts**”) made by those who self-classify as **white** to
 - classify others as **non-white**, and
 - differentially **privilege** and **empower** whites relative to non-whites
- **All** whites are *beneficiaries* of the Racial Contract, though **some** whites are not *signatories*.

The Racial Contract – II

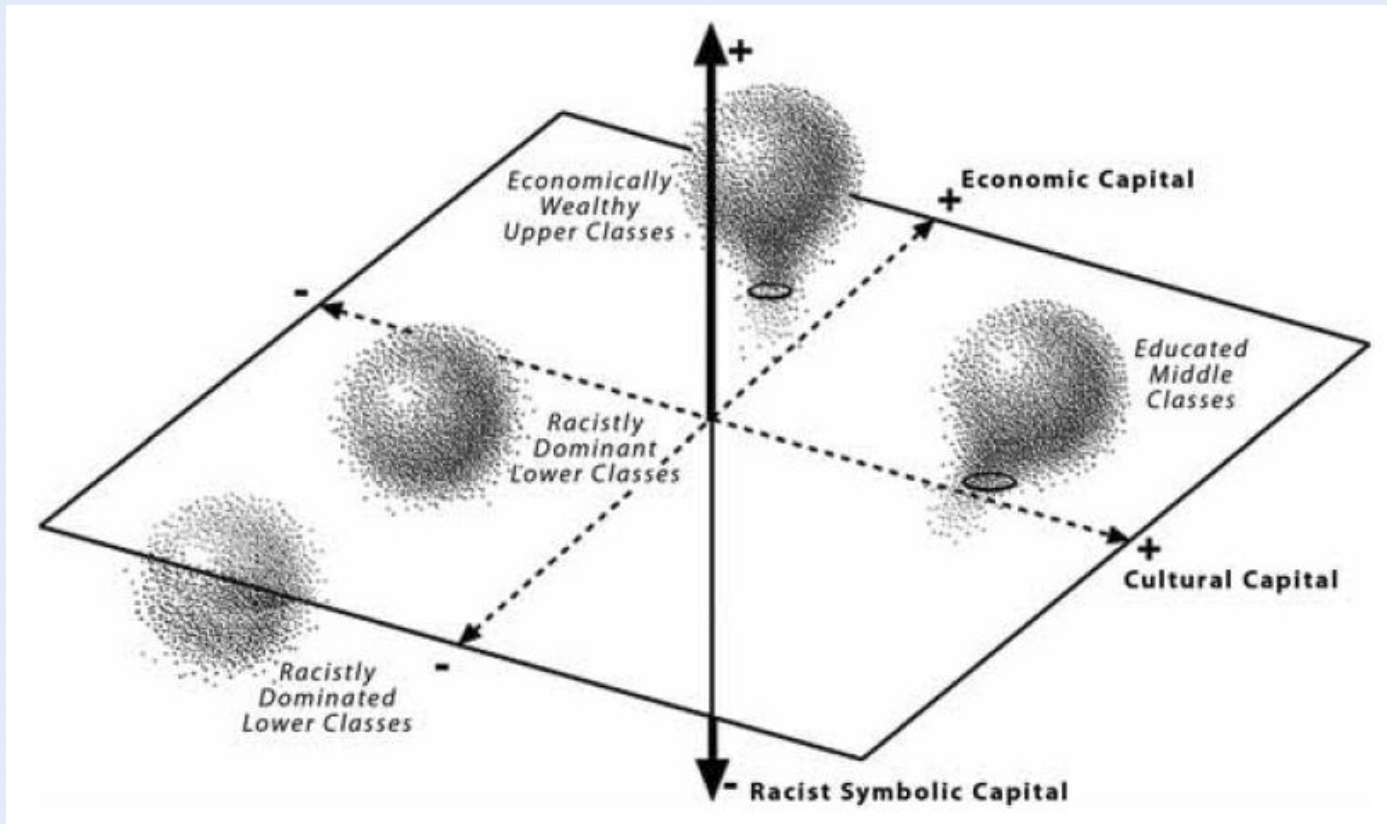


Networked Social Contract
(**Horizontal**, Egalitarian)

Networked Racial Contract
(**Vertical**, Oppressive)



The Racial Contract – III



Wei, A. (2010) Racist Symbolic Capital: A Bourdieuan Approach to the Analysis of Racism. In *Wages of Whiteness & Racist Symbolic Capital*. Wulf D. Hund, Jeremy Krikler, David Roediger (Eds.) Berlin: LIT Verlag, pp.37-56.



The Racial Contract – IV

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/dis**information



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

Charles Mills, *White Ignorance* (2007)

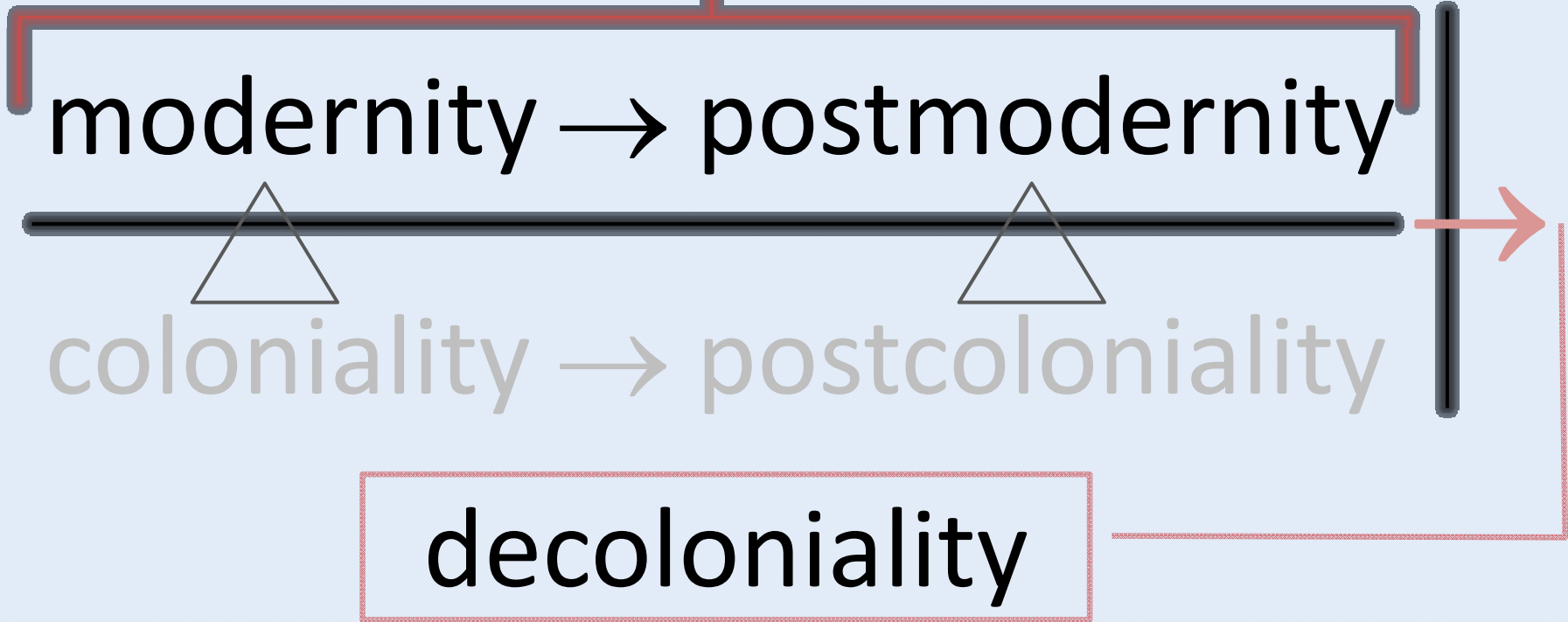


CRT Critique of Critical Theories of Information – I

- Dialectical philosophy (Hegel, Marx, Engels) **foundationally** incorporates racist elements
 - Moore (1972), Eze (1997, 2008), Mills (1997), Bernasconi (2003), Tibebu (2011)
- 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
 - Moore (1972), Robinson (1983), Mills (1997), Mignolo (2010)
 - Marxism as **European** universalism (Wallerstein 2005)
 - E.g. **Emancipation** is **NOT liberation** (contra Fuchs)

CRT Critique of Critical Theories of Information – II

Eurocentric Logic





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 ⇒ **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

Hegel's "Law" of
The Transformation of
Quantity into Quality

- **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)?



Question

- 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 metropolises 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)
- PRECEDENTS
 - Nakamura (2004), Chun (2009), Nakamura and Chow-White (2011)
 - 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