

The White working class, racism and respectability: victims, degenerates and interest-convergence

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Biographical Note

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Abstract

This paper argues that race and class inequalities cannot be fully understood in isolation: their intersectional quality is explored through an analysis of how the White working class were portrayed in popular and political discourse during late 2008 (the timing is highly significant). While global capitalism reeled on the edge of financial melt-down, the essential values of neo-liberalism were reasserted as natural, moral and efficient through two apparently contrasting discourses. First, a *victim* discourse presented White working people, and their children in particular, as suffering educationally because of minoritized racial groups and their advocates. Second a discourse of *degeneracy* presented an immoral and barbaric underclass as a threat to social and economic order. Applying the ‘interest-convergence principle’, from Critical Race Theory, the discourses amount to a strategic mobilization of White interests where the ‘White, but not quite’ status of the working class (Allen 2009) provides a buffer zone at a time of economic and cultural crisis which secures societal White supremacy and provides a further setback to progressive reforms that focus on race, gender and disability equality. The existence of poor Whites, therefore, is not only consistent with a regime of White supremacy they are actually an essential part of the processes that sustain it.

INTRODUCTION

Ordinarily, in an article focusing on a particular social class group (White working class people) it would be sensible to begin with a definition of the group drawing on demographic data. In this case, however, the very nature of who/what ‘counts’ as working class is one of the key issues at stake in the discourses that I seek to analyse. The term ‘White working class’ is a shifting signifier (Apple 1992) whose boundaries are drawn differently according to the context and the writer. Hence, at times the ‘working class’ is positioned in popular and political discourse as an undifferentiated mass of non-elite people, but at other times a distinction is asserted between ‘working class’ and poor/underclass Whites. These distinctions are fluid and often deployed in highly contingent and contradictory ways. In this paper I explore how a regime of White supremacy benefits from popular discourses that present the working class as, on one hand, innocent victims of unfair racial competition and, on the other hand, degenerate threats to social and economic order. Using the concept of ‘interest-convergence’, drawn from Critical Race Theory (CRT), it is possible to document the very real material and symbolic violence that White working class people experience, whilst recognizing that the existence of poor Whites is not only consistent with White supremacy, they are actually an essential part of the processes that sustain it.

Subsequent sections of this paper examine the construction of the ‘victims’ and ‘degenerate’ discourses. First it is useful to locate the discussion within wider debates about the nature of White supremacy in contemporary capitalist societies.

INTERSECTIONALITY IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Critical Race Theory and Class/Race/Gender Intersections

CRT is a radical inter-disciplinary approach to studying and resisting racial oppression. Having begun in US law schools in the 1970s and 1980s the approach moved into US educational studies in the mid-1990s and is now established as a growing and important strand in UK antiracist scholarship (Crenshaw 2002; Delgado & Stefancic 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995; Gillborn 2008; Preston 2007). CRT places an understanding of White racism and the experiential knowledge of people of colour at the heart of its approach. Not surprisingly, this perspective has drawn concerted attacks from both left and right. In the UK the most vociferous critics have been a small group of self-proclaimed Marxist writers^[1](Cole 2009; Cole & Maisuria 2007; Hill 2008) whose critique trades on a narrow and highly caricatured version of CRT (see Gillborn 2009; Stovall 2006). CRT’s detractors frequently assert that the perspective ‘*homogenizes all white people together as being in positions of power and privilege*’ (Cole 2009, 113 original emphasis). This is simply untrue: CRT does not imagine that all White people are uniformly racist and privileged. However, CRT *does* view all White-identified people as implicated in relations of racial domination: White people do not all behave in identical ways and they do not all draw similar benefits – but they *do* all benefit to some degree, whether they like it or not (see Gillborn 2008, 34; Gillborn 2009).

CRT is a developing approach with many internal dialogues and debates. One of the most important areas of continued discussion concerns the question of

intersectionality, that is, how multiple dimensions of oppression (such as race, gender, class, sexuality, disability) work relationally, sometimes in union, sometimes in conflict, sometimes in uncertain and unpredictable ways (Gillborn & Ladson-Billings forthcoming). As Patricia Hill Collins suggests, within a ‘matrix of domination’:

Cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society (Collins 2000, 42).

The notion of intersectionality is increasingly being embraced, especially by minoritized feminist writers (see Brah & Phoenix 2004).^[2] However, it is important to recognise that to *claim* an intersectional analysis is not necessarily to *accomplish* it. Serious critical work on intersectionality requires us to do more than merely *cite* the difficulties and complexities of intersecting identities and oppressions, it challenges us to *detail* these complexities and account for *how* categories and inequalities intersect, through what processes, and with what impacts? (Gillborn & Youdell 2009). This article is an attempt to add to the ongoing project of intersectional CRT by examining the discursive construction of the White working class in media and political debate, to show how apparently contradictory discourses maintain White middle class interests, silence and demonize minoritized groups, and reinforce traditional racialized, gendered and ablist^[3] notions of respectability and belonging.

What about poor White people?

Academics writing about class often make light of the racial privilege of the white poor. They make it seem as though it is merely symbolic prestige (...) Race privilege has consistently offered poor whites the chance of living a better life in the midst of poverty than their black counterparts. (hooks 2000, 114-115)

Critical race scholars will instantly recognize the phrase ‘What about poor White people?’ (Allen 2009). This phrase, or some version of it, is almost always present when White people are faced with CRT’s understanding of *White supremacy*. It is important to point out that CRT uses this term very differently to its general understanding. Whereas ‘White supremacy’ is commonly understood to refer to individuals and groups who engage in the crudest, most obvious acts of race hatred (such as extreme nationalists and neo-Nazis), in CRT the term refers instead to a regime of assumptions and practices that constantly privilege the interests of White people but are so deeply rooted that they appear *normal* to most people in the culture. The most important, hidden and pervasive form of White supremacy lies in the operation of forces that saturate the everyday mundane actions and policies that shape the world in the interests of White people (Delgado & Stefancic 2001). Many critical race scholars view White supremacy, understood in this way, as central to CRT in the same way that the notion of capitalism is to Marxist theory and patriarchy to feminism (Stovall 2006). However, many (in my experience *most*) White people find it impossible – or at least, too uncomfortable – to comprehend CRT’s view of White supremacy. Whether students in class or academics at conferences and in print, even self-avowed radicals often struggle to reconcile the existence of poor White people alongside a regime of White supremacy. As CRT scholar Ricky Lee Allen argues such a perspective touches upon some key intra-racial dynamics:

‘What about poor White people?’ ... [implies] that privilege cannot be assigned to all members of a particular group because some members of that group, in this case poor Whites, are not privileged. Therefore, privilege must be considered at the level of the individual, not the group ... It also signifies that poor and nonpoor Whites share a close bond: nonpoor Whites stand up for poor Whites when poor Whites are not around to represent themselves. (Allen 2009, 210)

Race and class interests intersect so that, under certain conditions, both middle class and working class Whites benefit from a shared White identity. Indeed, it can be argued that *the existence of poor Whites is not only consistent with White supremacy, it is actually an essential part of the processes that sustain it*. This article develops and exemplifies this analysis by examining the discursive construction of the British White working class at a specific point in space and time when White elite interests were under grave threat because of a crisis of capitalism that saw the near collapse of global banking, and related neoliberal assumptions, in late 2008.

Interest-convergence and the White working class

An exegesis of ‘What about poor White people?’ that is rooted in CRT assumes that texts created by Whites must be scrutinized for their political race implications. As Leonardo (2002) argues, it is crucial that we ‘dismantle discourses of whiteness’ by ‘disrupting ... and unsettling their codes’ (p. 31). (Allen 2009, 213)

In this article I focus on two contrasting discourses that project important popular and policy versions of the British White working class. In so doing, I aim to respond to Allen and Leonardo’s entreaties to help disrupt, unsettle and dismantle the codes by which White supremacy operates. Before I turn to the specific discourses themselves, however, I need to outline a CRT concept that is crucial to understanding how such apparently contradictory discourses can be understood as complementary in terms of their consequences for the regime of White supremacy.

One of the central concepts in CRT is the ‘interest-convergence principle’; put simply, this view argues that advances in race equality only come about when White elites see the changes as in their own interests (Bell 1980). It is important to note that interest-convergence does not envisage a rational and balanced negotiation, between minoritized groups and White power holders, where change is achieved through the mere force of reason and logic. Rather, history suggests that advances in racial justice must be won, through protest and mobilization, so that taking action against racism becomes the lesser of two evils for White interests because an even greater loss of privilege might be risked by failure to take action. Bell has always been clear that lower class White interests are likely to be the first to be sacrificed; indeed, Richard Delgado has described the interest-convergence principle as a theory that ‘explains the twists and turns of blacks’ fortunes in terms of the *class* interests of *elite* whites’ (Delgado 2007, 345 emphasis added):

Racial remedies may ... be the outward manifestations of unspoken and perhaps subconscious judicial conclusions that the remedies, if granted, will

secure, advance, or at least not harm societal interests deemed important by middle and upper class whites. (Bell 1980, 253).

Hence, the interest-convergence principle is centrally about an intersectional analysis of race/class interests. It views *non*-elite Whites as a kind of buffer, or safety zone, that secures the interests of elite Whites, especially when challenged by high profile race equality/civil rights campaigns. We can hypothesize that the same processes might also operate to sacrifice working class interests where elite interests are threatened (even in the absence of gains for minoritized groups): such a moment was presented by the global financial crisis of 2008.

VICTIMS: THE WHITE WORKING CLASS AS RACE VICTIMS

Late 2008 saw global capitalism in crisis. Governments in the global ‘north’ pumped billions into a banking system that stood on the verge of collapse and major multi-nationals went bankrupt. The economy dominated news coverage but was by no means the *only* story. On 12th December 2008, for example, Britain’s national daily newspapers echoed to the sound of White anger as newly published education statistics were quoted as showing that ‘poor’ and/or ‘working class’ White boys were among the lowest achieving groups in public examinations at the end of their compulsory schooling. The following headlines are from national daily newspapers:

Poor white boys fall behind (*Daily Express*, p.31)

Poor white boys fall behind again at GCSE (*Daily Mail*, p.17)

Poor white boys lagging at GCSE (*Daily Mirror*, p. 6)

Poor white boys falling further behind at school (*Daily Telegraph*, p. 16)

White boys on free meals fall further behind in GCSEs (*The Guardian*, pp.20-21)

Poor pupils fail to make the grade (*The Times*, p.25)

December 2008 also saw a slew of headlines *attacking* poor Whites as a threatening and degenerate presence (see below). The headlines about White working class educational failure repeated a line of argument that has become familiar in the UK whenever educational statistics are published. I examine this discourse of educational victimization in detail later in this section but first it is useful to place the discourse within its historical context: the idea of the White working class as victims of a minoritized racial Other is by no means a new idea.

Whites as an endangered majority in historic policy discourse

A common thread in British political discourse has been the view that White people in general, and the White working class in particular, are at risk because of the presence of minoritized ‘racial’ groups. An especially strong element in this discourse has been the argument that, regardless of the facts, if the working class *believe* themselves to be disadvantaged then the threat of unrest alone requires action against the minoritized groups.^[4]

This line of argument first came to prominence in the modern era following the post-War rise in migration into the UK when, in 1958, Nottingham and London witnessed a series of disturbances characterized by White violence against Black and South

Asian people.^[5] In both cities the police were clear that the violence was started by Whites but the ensuing political debate constituted the migrants (the victims of racist violence) as the *cause* of the problems and, therefore, as in need of greater control, leading ultimately to the imposition of harsh immigration controls targeted explicitly at Black and South Asian groups (Finney & Simpson 2009; Ramdin 1987, 204-10).

In the late 1970s Margaret Thatcher infamously sounded a similar chord when she argued that the perception of a threat to White interests justified further immigration controls:

People are really rather afraid that this country might be swamped by people with a different culture (...) if there is a fear that it might be swamped, people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in. (quoted in Barker 1981, 15)

Thatcher was not the first female head of state to invoke the fear of racist action by White people as a legitimate reason for racist action by the state itself: more than 500 years ago Elizabeth I issued a proclamation calling for the expulsion of ‘Negroes and blackamoors ... who are fostered and relieved here, to the great annoyance of her own liege people who want the relief which these people consume...’ (quoted in File & Power 1981, 6).

The long history of this discourse is testament to its enormous popular appeal. Typically this line of argument is used to promote both more restrictions on the number of migrants able to enter the UK in the future, and to justify greater surveillance and/or control of minoritized people already in the population. Within education the consequence is frequently to promote aggressively assimilationist policies. In the 1960s this led to a ‘dispersal’ policy that restricted the number of minoritized children in any single school, in order to safeguard White children against ‘the undue preoccupation of the teaching staff with the linguistic and other difficulties of immigrant children’ (DES circular 7/65, in Swann 1985, 194). Since the 9/11 attacks and the London bombings of 2005 education policy has mirrored the changing policy environment more generally, with ‘multiculturalism’ being pronounced a failure and a renewed emphasis on English language teaching (Gillborn 2008, ch. 4; Tomlinson 2008). The most high profile and persistent discourse currently surrounding race and education in contemporary Britain projects an image of White working class children as victims of ethnic diversity.

Victims in the Classroom: race, education and White ‘working class’ boys

For more than a decade discussions of educational inequality in England have given a prominent role to the experiences and achievements of boys. A variety of studies have sought to quantify and understand the generally higher average achievements of girls at the age of 16. Feminist researchers have been especially critical of the way that boys are often viewed as a single homogenous group, ignoring key differences in social class and ethnic origin (Archer & Francis 2007; Arnot et al 1999; Youdell 2006). Since the mid 2000s a particular focus of popular discourse (in radio, TV and newspaper coverage) has been White *working class* boys. This is how the second-highest selling national newspaper reported official data on exam results in 2007:

White boys falling behind

White, working-class boys have the worst GCSE results

... Just 24 per cent of disadvantaged white boys now leave school with five or more good GCSEs.

This compares with 33.7 per cent for black African boys from similar low-income households.

There were fears last night that the figures could hand votes to the far-Right British National Party [BNP] because additional funding is available to help children from ethnic minorities. (*Daily Mail*, 13 January 2007)

There is a great deal of ideological work going on here, even in so short a quotation. First, note the misleading assertion that ‘additional funding is available to help children from ethnic minorities’: in fact, local authorities and schools have to *bid* for dedicated funding towards minority education projects: any additional funds are not simply handed out, automatically privileging minoritized children as the story seems to suggest. Second, the story argues that the results could fuel support for extreme political parties like the BNP. This repeats the familiar racist argument of previous decades (and centuries) where a perceived threat to White interests is used to discipline minority groups: by warning of the danger of inflaming support for racist parties, politicians and commentators invoke the threat of racist violence as a means of re-centring White interests and rejecting calls for greater race equality. This can be seen clearly in the following quotation from the specialist educational press:

Cameron Watt, deputy director of the Centre for Social Justice (...) said: ‘There’s a political lobby highlighting the issue of underachievement among black boys, and quite rightly so, but I don’t think there’s a single project specifically for white working-class boys. I don’t want to stir up racial hatred, but that is something that should be addressed.’ (*Times Educational Supplement*, 12 January 2007)

It is important to recognise what is happening here. Official statistics reveal that most groups in poverty achieve relatively poor results *regardless* of ethnic background. As Figure 1 illustrates, the achievement gap between White students in poverty (using receipt of free school meals – FSM – as an indicator) and more affluent Whites (non-FSM) is more than *three times* bigger than the gaps between different ethnic groups who are equally disadvantaged: there is a 32 percentage point gap between N-FSM and FSM White boys, compared with a 9.7 percentage point gap between FSM White boys and the most successful of the Black FSM boys (categorized as Black African). And yet it is the race gap that is highlighted both in the *Daily Mail* story and in the *Times Educational Supplement*. It is significant that despite the larger income-related inequality, media commentators and policy advisers do not warn of an impending class war: they do not raise the spectre that failure on this scale will promote action against private schools or the ‘gifted and talented’ scheme, which receives millions of pounds of extra funding and is dominated by middle class students (see Gillborn 2008). The *race* dimension is deliberately accentuated in the coverage.

[Figure 1 about here]

The media image of failing White boys goes further than merely highlighting a difference in attainment, it includes the suggestion that White failure is somehow the *fault* of minoritized students and/or their advocates. This is implicit in the newspaper coverage (above) but was explicit in other parts of the media including, for example, an award winning news and current affairs programme.

Described as ‘one of the success stories in the recent history of British broadcasting’ (Tolson 2006, 94) *Radio 5Live* is a national radio channel run by the BBC. The BBC enjoys exceptionally high levels of public trust in relation to its news content; receiving more than five times the rating of its nearest rival (YouGov 2005). The BBC’s news coverage is, therefore, highly significant; it is the most trusted news provider and caters to a national audience. In addition, the programme in question (*Radio 5Live’s Breakfast Show*) is held in high regard professionally: it won the Sony Radio Academy Award for the Best News & Current Affairs Programme (Sony 2007). On 22 June 2007 the programme led its news bulletins with a story claiming that white ‘working class’ boys were now the lowest achieving group in English schools. At around 6am Nicky Campbell, one of the programme’s two main hosts, interviewed a researcher who was introduced as having contributed to the study behind the headlines:[⁶]

Nicky Campbell: Isn’t the problem that - the race relations industry has, some would argue, *compartmentalized* people. And if we had *less* concentration on race, more on *individuals*, we took colour out of the equation: it wouldn’t be “oh Black boys do this, white boys do that, Chinese boys do this, Asian ”- it should just be looking at children *as individuals*. Isn’t race part of the problem here in a sense?

Despite the host’s suggestion that ‘the race relations industry’ is somehow culpable, the researcher responded that ethnicity is an important variable and should not be ignored. Nevertheless, Campbell returned to the same theme an hour later when he interviewed a London headteacher about the story:

Nicky Campbell: ...there’s the inescapable conclusion, according to some of our listeners, a- a-and indeed according to some experts too, that the school system has been focusing *disproportionately... too much* on children from other ethnic backgrounds.

The host’s analysis was now backed by the invocation of ‘some of our listeners’ and ‘some [un-named] experts too’ but again the interviewee failed to support the idea. Undeterred by his guests’ refusal to confirm the editorial line, at 8am the same topic led the news headlines and was explored with new guests, including Professor Gus John (one of Britain’s leading campaigners on race equality):

Nicky Campbell: ‘Professor Gus John-’

Gus John: ‘Good morning.’

Nicky Campbell: ‘Some are saying that too much attention has been given to African and Caribbean boys to the *detriment* of young white boys.’

Gus John: ‘Well the facts don’t bear that out you see. An-and I think this discussion is pretty *distorted*, certainly as far as facts are concerned...’

The interviewee steadfastly rejected the proposal that White boys’ low achievement was somehow the fault of Black students. But the damage was already done. Listeners and un-named ‘experts’ had been cited to support the argument and its constant repetition made it a key aspect of the morning news broadcast. At 9am the *Breakfast Show* was followed by an hour-long phone-in on educational failure and the presenter read out a familiar sounding view:

Presenter: [reading from listeners’ text messages] ‘Somebody else says, er, “White youngsters fail because PC [politically correct] teachers and the media are more interested in Black and Asian children”.’

In this way the country’s most trusted news service effectively promoted the view that White children are the *victims* of ethnic diversity in general and race equality in particular.

A tendency to present White people as race victims has been commented upon by writers in both the USA (Apple 2001; Delgado & Stefancic 1997) and the UK (Rollock 2007). The particular manifestation of White victimology in recent media analyses of examination performance is especially dangerous for several reasons. The discourse presents Whites as the victims of race equality measures. Consequently, moves that have been inspired by a commitment to social justice become recast as if they represent a competitive threat to White people; social justice campaigns are thus redefined as a sectional (racialized, even racist) activity. Simultaneously, this refrain of racial competition has the effect of erasing from sight the possibility that members of *all* ethnic groups might excel in a single educational system. The prominence given to these arguments and the strategic citation of far right groups (such as the BNP) has the clear effect of sounding a warning to everyone involved in education: *make sure that White children are catered for – don’t let race equality go too far*. The threatened price of de-centring White children is racial violence – both symbolic (in threats and insults) and physical (it is known, for example, that racist harassment often increases after prominent news stories on race issues).^[7]

What goes un-reported in the news coverage is that the statistics which dominate stories of White *working class* failure actually relate to the *most disadvantaged fraction* of the working class: every one of the news stories cited above (in the newspapers and the radio coverage) relate exclusively to the attainments of children in receipt of free school meals (FSM). A good deal of educational research uses FSM as a crude measure of disadvantage, mainly because the information (which is routinely collected by schools) is easily accessed and analysed. But FSM does not equate to what most people imagine when they hear the phrase ‘working class’. For example, the *Daily Mail* story (above) drew on official data where 13.2% of all pupils were in receipt of free school meals (DfES 2006a, table 32). And yet 57% of UK adults described themselves as ‘working class’ in a recent survey by the National Centre for Social Research (BBC News Online 2007). The discursive slippage from ‘free school meals’ to ‘working class’ has the effect of inflating the significance of the data: statistics on a relatively small group of students (13% of the cohort) are reported in a

way that makes it appear descriptive of more than half the population (57%): a slippage that reoccurs even in broadsheet headlines:

White working-class boys are the worst performers in school
Independent, 22 June 2007

Half school 'failures' are white working-class boys, says report
The Guardian, 22 June 2007

The focus on pupils in receipt of free school meals has become increasingly pronounced in recent years. The media's exclusive use of the FSM statistics reflects the way that the data are presented by the Education Department itself. In 2006, for example, the department published a 104 page digest of statistics on race and education (DfES 2006b). Amid the 19 tables and 48 illustrations, the document focuses a good deal on the significance of FSM and, for example, includes *three* separate illustrations detailing different breakdowns of exam attainment among FSM students (DfES 2006b: 65-68): in contrast there is not a single table nor illustration giving a separate breakdown for non-FSM students. This absence is highly significant because the image of White students as relative under-achievers cannot be sustained when the focus moves to the 86.8% of the school population who do not receive FSM. In the official data that supplied the basis for the *Daily Mail* story, for example, White British students who do not receive free meals are more likely to attain five higher grade passes than their counterparts of the same gender in several minoritized groups; including those of Black Caribbean, 'Mixed (White/Black Caribbean)', Pakistani, Black African and Bangladeshi heritage. Clearly, race inequality of the more familiar variety (where minoritized students achieve less well) remains a key characteristic of the English education system and affects students of *both* genders.^[8] The largest inequalities relate to Black Caribbean N-FSM students, where girls are 9.7 percentage points less likely to achieve the benchmark than their White peers and the figure for boys is 17.2 percentage points.

An exclusive focus on FSM students, therefore, has the effect of erasing from sight the very significant inequalities of achievement that remain for most minoritized groups (N-FSM). In addition, the FSM statistics provide the basis for media and political commentators to repeat a view of White 'working class' boys as a racially victimized group who need urgent attention for fear of generating support for extreme racist political causes. Those arguing for greater race equality in education find themselves rendered silent by a discourse that rewrites reality; if White children are racial victims, then moves to address race inequity for minoritized groups are not only redundant, but dangerous. Antiracist and multicultural education initiatives are positioned as a problem, their funding threatened, and a new focus on White students is promoted. This focus is now reflected in policy debates and promoted via numerous special initiatives. In 2009, for example, a parliamentary debate on '*White Disadvantaged Pupils*' was told by a Birmingham MP that:

White pupils are the largest underachieving group in Birmingham and across the UK. (...) If we stop talking about proportions and start talking about real numbers, the picture is even more disturbing. Why? Because quite simply there are a lot of white pupils. (*Hansard* 19 May 2009: Column 397WH).

In reply, the government spokesperson agreed on the importance of highlighting White students in need and, just two years since Cameron Watt lamented the absence of White-focused projects, they listed several initiatives aimed exclusively at them:

I agree that we need to acknowledge the problem of underachievement among white children from disadvantaged backgrounds and to make the issue more visible at national and local level (...) examples of good practice in supporting disadvantaged communities are included in the “Breaking the link” document, in the recent Ofsted report “White boys from low-income backgrounds: good practice in schools” and in the National College for School Leadership publication “Successful leadership for promoting the achievement of white working class pupils”. (*Hansard* 19 May 2009: Column 401 WH- 402WH)

DEGENERATE: THE WHITE WORKING CLASS AS THREATENING OTHER

Part of the enormous power of Whiteness comes from a façade of apparent obviousness and naturalness which hides a reality of complex and shifting political identifications. History offers numerous examples of groups (such as the Irish and Jews in the US) who have ‘become’ White, not in the sense that their skin tone (or any other phenotypical marker) has changed but in the sense that they have been welcomed within the White camp by the White elite that defines and polices the borders of Whiteworld (Bonnett 1997; Brodtkin Sacks 1997; Ignatiev 1995). Similarly, the White poor have long existed on the boundaries of Whiteness, what Ricky Lee Allen (2009, 214) terms ‘White but not quite’.

Respectability and the White working class in history

No single definition of social class enjoys universal agreement: Raymond Williams traces the emergence of the ‘modern’ use of the term to the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Williams 1983, 61). Although the term is used a great deal in social research there are multiple competing definitions. Nevertheless, official statistics testify to the significance of ‘class’ in relation to what Michael Apple (2001, 63) calls the ‘gritty materialities’ of life. For example, in the UK people in the lowest income levels are less likely to attend high achieving schools, more likely to die as infants, and more likely to experience all major forms of crime (from burglary to physical violence)(ONS 2008). The lack of a single clear definition of social class signals its fundamental quality as a discursively constructed and regulated phenomenon:

...class is a discursive, historically specific-construction, a product of middle-class political consolidation, which includes elements of fantasy and projection. (Skeggs 1997, 5)

These constructions have very real impacts on the ways in which people think of themselves (and Others) and constrain the range of policy directions that are considered possible/desirable. As Beverley Skeggs notes, these ‘representations ... are not straightforwardly reproduced but are resisted and transfigured in their daily enactment’ (1997, 6). One of the most important elements in providing a critical understanding of how class is defined discursively at different historic moments is to

understand how such representations serve the perceived interests of middle class people. Skeggs (1997, 42-9) shows how the regulation of women's bodies and attitudes was central to Victorian discourses that sought to distinguish between 'respectable' working class folk on one hand and, on the other hand, the 'undeserving' poor. Both Finch (1993) and McClintock (1995) have explored the gendered and racialized elements that were powerfully at work in the development of the Victorian cult of domesticity which defined the 'respectable' working class as sexually restrained, hard working and docile insofar as they accepted their role in servicing their supposed middle class 'betters'. By presenting the alternative as morally bankrupt, questions of structural oppression and conflict were discursively erased and replaced with questions of personal responsibility (Skeggs 1997, 43-4).

Feral, Feckless and Promiscuous: the uncertain Whiteness of the White working class^[9]

In December 2008 two criminal prosecutions dominated the national news agenda and became the platform for a sustained attack on a section of the working class who were portrayed as welfare-dependent, dangerous and criminal.^[10] The first case concerned Karen Matthews; a 33 year old woman from the north of England, who was jailed for eight years for her part in the faked kidnapping of her 9 year old daughter Shannon. Shannon had been reported missing on 19 February 2008, sparking a major police investigation and generating spontaneous searches of neighbouring areas by up to 200 members of the local community desperate to help find the missing girl (BBC News Online 2008a). Shannon was discovered alive 24 days later in the flat of Michael Donovan, a relative of Shannon's step-father. The 'abduction' had been staged by Donovan and Karen Matthews in the hope of generating money. Chemical analysis revealed that Shannon had been given sedatives over a prolonged period, possibly to make her less demanding of attention during breaks from school (BBC News Online 2008a). Much of the press coverage focused on Karen as a welfare-dependent, immoral and abusive mother. The most important aspect, however, was not the portrayal of Matthews as an individual but as a symbol of a presumed 'underclass' threatening the very fabric of economic and social order:

Karen Matthews is the personification of that terrifying growing phenomenon: a feckless, amoral, workshy, benefit-dependent underclass. All this woman has done with her life is make money out of her children. She's had seven children by five or six fathers (she's lost count) because to her, children mean cash. (Platell 2008)

The second case concerned 'Baby P' – the court pseudonym given to a 17 month old boy who died after months of vicious abuse at the hands of his mother, her partner and a male lodger. After the trio were jailed more details were released into the media and it emerged that the child had died despite being on the 'at risk' register and having 60 contacts with police, health and social work professionals over the last 8 months of his life (BBC TV 2008). Baby P's killers were jailed while the Matthews prosecution was still in court and press coverage initially focused on the mismanagement of the case by the child protection services. However, when Karen Matthews' verdict was announced (just over 3 weeks after Baby P's killers were jailed), the case re-emerged in the news media and was frequently cited as further evidence of the threat posed by a growing immoral and cruel underclass.

The dominant discourses surrounding these cases replicate the familiar historic tropes of attacks on the social dangers posed by working class people. Sexual promiscuity, laziness and criminality were all present as the police, media and politicians scrambled to proclaim their disgust, not merely at the two individual cases, but at what they asserted was a growing national presence. An especially important element in the development of the story was the repeated assertion that these two extraordinary cases were, in fact, merely the tip of an iceberg of depravity.

The rush to cite Matthews as a symptom of a wider social problem was started by the police officer in charge of the investigation. In a TV programme charting the case, and aired to coincide with the court's verdict, the Chief Constable of West Yorkshire, Norman Bettison, stated that Matthews lived 'without the sense of having to answer for the consequences of her actions':

'They aren't socialised in the way that society is generally socialised in terms of norms of behaviour.' He said their normal standard of behaviour was 'whatever they could get away with'. Mr Bettison added: 'You see flotsam and jetsam drifting in, people who are sort of feckless and sort of ambitionless coming in and plonking themselves down on the sofa, having a can of beer.' (BBC News Online 2008b)

Significantly, in a language that directly echoes Victorian distinctions between 'respectable' (hard working, disciplined, compliant) and 'undeserving' poor, Bettison appears keen to distinguish between such 'feckless' and 'ambitionless' folk and 'good people' whose ambition marked them out for praise:

'There are good people bringing up kids as you and I would recognise is a right way to bring up kids,' Mr Bettison said (...) 'Being poor, does not make people bad. I've been in many poor households where children are brought up wonderfully well and given, right from birth, the idea of right and wrong. And given the hope and ambition to strive.' But he said that a dependence on benefits was partly to blame for Matthews' behaviour. 'The more kids you have, the more welfare you get, the less opportunity there is to contribute to society and to the economy and the less you need to,' he said. (BBC News Online 2008b)

Bettison's comments on welfare dependency were gleefully repeated and extended by the right wing press. In its editorial column the *Daily Mail* explicitly combined the two cases as evidence of an 'ever-growing subculture':

...on council estates, children who have never known their fathers are being brought up in an ever-growing subculture of neglect, violence, drugs, pornography, crime and unemployment. Consider that brutal, filthy, feckless woman Karen Matthews, churning out seven children by six fathers and subjecting her daughter Shannon to years of abuse before kidnapping her in the hope of cash for more drink and drugs. The more children she had, the more money she got from the state. Consider the couldn't-care-less mother of Baby P, who allowed her child to be tortured to death for the gratification of a sub-human job with whom she happened to be sleeping. (*Daily Mail* 2008)

Predictably the women in the cases are singled out for special attention, with open revulsion at a woman ‘churning out’ children following sex with different men. This became a key issue – an unquestionable mark of deviance – a fact so powerful that it often featured in *headlines* as if the mere fact alone was disgusting:

Shannon’s mother and seven babies by six men (Platell 2008)

Seven children, six fathers (and a ring from Argos): lazy, sex-mad Karen Matthews symbolises broken Britain (Brooke 2008)

The *Daily Mail*’s editorial continued in this vein but extended the attack to blame the supposed ‘subculture’ for virtually every social ill, neatly removing structural inequalities and systems of raced and classed oppression from the scene:

... behind the overwhelming majority of cases of child abuse, crime, educational failure, drug addiction and teenage pregnancy lies a pattern of wantonly irresponsible parents and broken homes (...) far from rescuing children from the feral underclass, too often our welfare system traps them in it for life. The tax and benefits system offers no inducements to responsible behaviour. On the contrary, it rewards fecklessness and promiscuity, while penalising married couples. (*Daily Mail* 2008)

And so it was that two extraordinary cases became the platform for the construction of a moral panic asserting the dangers posed by a growing ‘underclass’ whose personal lack of responsibility and effort was asserted as the cause of ‘educational failure’ (among other things) and where the obvious solution is to reform tax laws (benefitting the middle class) and reduce social assistance (disciplining the working class). This theme was taken up by numerous right-wing commentators, including Melanie Phillips who added an attack on feminism to the trope of a welfare-fuelled underclass. Describing child benefit as ‘the seminal link between man-hating feminism and welfare dependency’, she argued that:

By providing welfare payments for women on the birth of every child, regardless of whether or not they were married, it [child benefit] became the biggest single incentive for lone parenthood (...) it is clear that child benefit, and all the multifarious other welfare incentives to irresponsibility, are intrinsically linked to the emergence of households where, in truth, civilisation has given way to barbarism. (Phillips 2008)

It is worth remembering that this ‘biggest single incentive for lone parenthood’ currently stands at £20 per week for the first/only child and falls to £13.20 a week for each subsequent child – hardly a passport to financial security. Once again the disciplinary tropes of ‘respectable’ versus ‘undeserving’ are mobilized against working class women (especially those who dare to be unmarried and have children). Significantly, Phillips still found space mid-rant to acknowledge the existence of *some* respectability even among lone parents:

... such [feral] children are concentrated in housing estates where two-thirds of households are occupied by lone parents and — notwithstanding those who do a heroic job single-handedly raising their children properly and lovingly —

where children are many times more likely to suffer abuse as a result. (Phillips 2008)

The ‘notwithstanding’ caveat is so brief as to barely interrupt the flow of invective but its presence is important because it maintains the vital argument that this attack is not on working class people per se, but merely on deviant (unambitious, unmarried, unemployed) working class people. Indeed, the frequent use of the term ‘underclass’ offers a neat discursive trick to those whose bile might be taken personally by their readers – after all, as I noted earlier, more than half the UK population consider themselves ‘working class’. Writing in the best-selling newspaper, *The Sun*, John Gaunt was at pains to repeat the centuries old distinctions:

Whole estates are infested by this underclass. They are not working class — the clue is in the title — they don’t and won’t work. They have no pride in their homes or areas. They have no respect for themselves, let alone their neighbours or children. They have a moral code that would make an alley cat blush. They have a lawyer’s expert knowledge of their rights but, sadly, no idea of their responsibilities to their kids or society in general. This is an underclass (...) these people aren’t equal to you and me, and they need to be told so before they are allowed to breed another generation that will only be more irresponsible and useless. (Gaunt 2008)

All the hallmarks of the classic respectable/undeserving discourse are present: the respectable working class contribute to society (they have pride and a moral code) while the undeserving merely take (they know their rights and claim benefit). Gaunt also managed to include a particular national and racial inflection to his views. Although the guilty parties in both the Matthews and Baby P cases were White people, he went on to include ‘new arrivals’ among those who must no longer burden ‘the decent majority of Brits’:

Only those who have paid into the system through NI [National Insurance] or tax contributions should be allowed to claim anything out of the pot. If this were applied, it would soon rule out junkies, new arrivals or people like Karen Matthews. (...) These people have chosen a life of benefit dependency because they have been allowed to do so. *Never before, with the world in economic crisis, has there been such a need for urgent reform.* With hard-working people facing the prospect of losing their homes and their savings, I don’t see why the decent majority of Brits should shoulder the responsibility of the bone idle any longer. (Gaunt 2008, emphasis added)

Gaunt’s reference to a ‘world in economic crisis’ is telling; attacking poor White people (alongside ‘new arrivals’) identifies a useful scapegoat at a time when White middle class interests are directly threatened.

Politicians were no less ready to seize the initiative and use the cases to promote their own – already existing – policies. David Cameron, leader of the opposition Conservative Party, used the Matthews case to simultaneously present every person in receipt of a state benefit as a potential ‘Karen Matthews’ while also repeating his party’s education proposals. In an article entitled ‘*There are 5 million people on benefits in Britain. How do we stop them turning into Karen Matthews?*’ he stated:

The verdict last week on Karen Matthews and her vile accomplice is also a verdict on our broken society. The details are damning. A fragmented family held together by drink, drugs and deception. An estate where decency fights a losing battle against degradation and despair. A community whose pillars are crime, unemployment and addiction. (...) Another challenge is reforming our schools. (...) Turning this around won't happen overnight – it needs long-term change. Not just tougher discipline and stronger standards, but radical reform. That's why we're planning 1,000 new academies with real freedoms, and why we'll allow people with a passion for education to set up their own schools. (Cameron 2008).

The facts contradict Cameron's analysis and his solution: the 'community whose pillars are crime, unemployment and addiction' provided a clear picture of a close-knit and generous spirit when more than 200 locals spontaneously organized searches for the missing child. Similarly, the academies that Cameron sees as a panacea are known to accept a shrinking proportion of FSM children – precisely the group he expects them to reform (PriceWaterhouseCoopers 2006, 9).

The ruling Labour party also sought to use the prevailing mood as a chance to push ahead with its chosen policies, not least by introducing tougher rules on benefit eligibility by arguing that, in the words of a Minister, 'virtually everyone has to do something in return for their benefits' (BBC Online 2008c). Part of these changes, a new sickness benefit test, raised the threshold for people with disabilities to qualify for additional support. The following year initial figures, leaked to the press, suggested that the previous pattern (where around 65 per cent of applicants were approved) has been reversed, with 'more than two thirds of applicants ... being rejected' (Barker 2009).

It is clear, therefore, that police, right-wing commentators and politicians (from both main parties) each indulged in a contemporary version of the centuries old disciplinary discourse of 'respectable' working class versus 'undeserving' poor. The flexibility of the discourse, its lack of precision, is one of its strengths. Hence, even in the midst of the most vitriolic of attacks, there was frequently a caveat noting the existence of a respectable section of the working class. But the caveats are vague and shifting in a world where the negative class signifiers encompass an increasingly large proportion of the 'working class' and where *any* welfare benefit can become a sign of deficit. In the summer of 2009, for example, another right-wing national newspaper, the *Daily Express*, ran the following front page headline:

SHAMELESS: 60% of council house tenants don't pay rent (Hall 2009)

The story pressed all the familiar rhetorical buttons, describing 'a benefits-dependent underclass' enjoying a 'massive benefits handout' which 'is costing hard-working middle-income families a total of £10billion a year' (Hall 2009, 1). Hence, everyone in receipt of housing benefit (including disabled people and low paid workers) is implicated in a parasitic underclass. The underclass/undeserving label is a sliding signifier which serves a disciplinary purpose: it is not a simple descriptor of any single class fraction (with or without jobs), it is a tool whereby any proportion of the working class can potentially find themselves Othered.

CONCLUSIONS

Historically there is ample evidence to show that the bodies of the British urban poor were regularly compared with African natives of Empire in terms of physique, stature, posture, facial mannerisms, intelligence, habits, attitudes and disposition ... The designation of the British working classes as white is then a *modern* phenomenon. (Nayak 2009, 28 & 29).

The constitution of the White working class is a much more fluid and complex matter than is usually recognized. In this paper I argue that critical race theory offers important insights into the present construction and deployment of the White working class in popular and political discourse. In late 2008, as global capitalism reeled from an international banking crisis unlike anything experienced since the Great Depression, it seemed as though neo-liberalism had been dealt a catastrophic blow. And yet, within the British media, apparently contrasting discourses focused on the White working class as by turns victims and deviants. At one moment White working class pupils (especially boys) were victims of political correctness, the forgotten backbone of a country that needed special attention if they were not to be 'left behind' and driven into the arms of fascism. The next moment these same children were 'being dragged up in a life of grime that leads to a life of crime' (Gaunt 2008), their parents (especially their mothers) vilified as welfare dependent, immoral scroungers who breed for money and live without ambition or effort. These discourses are superficially very different but their effects are powerful and flow in a unified direction:

- *White middle class normality is celebrated*: the White middle class is assumed to represent the normal, moral core of society providing economic and social leadership despite the burden of lesser groups;
- *Anti-minority*: statistical slippage between a small group (the 13% in receipt of free school meals) and the majority (who self-define as 'working class') provides the basis for a rejection of race equality policies in education while resources are focused on the newly under-achieving 'White' group. Race equality issues are not simply marginalised, they are erased from the policy agenda;
- *Anti-immigration*: a romanticized picture of the respectable working class, pushed towards far-right sympathies as they see 'their' country alter around them, blames immigration for changing Britain, lowering standards and multiplying the burden on 'the decent majority of Brits' (Gaunt 2008);
- *Patriarchal assumptions are re-centred*: both the 'victims' and 'degenerate' discourses are highly gendered. The first places male achievement at the top of the education policy agenda while the second repeats centuries old disciplinary tropes that focus on the regulation of women's labour and sexuality.
- *A neo-liberal world view is re-asserted as economically and morally essential*: emphasis on personal responsibility and respectability positions state aid as

corrupting and dangerous. ‘Good people’, we are told, work hard and have ambition; inequality is therefore due to personal (often moral) failings not structural matters of class, race, gender and disability.

The CRT concept of interest-convergence is useful here because it helps explain the operation of these victim/degenerate discourses that seem at one level to split the White group and yet, ultimately, they help secure White supremacy overall. For the *White middle classes* the benefits are clear and unambiguous; the resurgent neo-liberalism of personal responsibility and individual effort means that their privilege merely reflects their greater merit; race inequality is erased from the policy agenda; and moves to cut welfare payments promise tax breaks in the future. The benefits for the *White working class* are more mixed but, on balance, remain clear: they may face a tougher time qualifying for benefits but they know that their interests will be secure against those of minoritized groups because the solidarity of the White middle classes ensures that the spectre of racial violence (both symbolic and real) will be mobilized if, for example, their educational or employment prospects dip below those of key (especially Black) minoritized groups. In addition, this group can always console themselves that they are part of the respectable class fraction rather than the degenerate section.

For *minoritized racial groups* the consequences of the discourses are also clear: educational policy and practice becomes even more aggressively White-focused (including special programmes exclusively targeting White students) and social welfare cuts will have a disproportionately negative impact on minoritized groups (because a higher proportion of Black children live in single parent households, often with carers holding down several low paid jobs). Although the ‘degenerate’ discourse trades on images of the *White* working class, therefore, the policy impacts will likely hit minoritized groups the hardest.

In conclusion, an intersectional analysis reveals that far from ignoring social class inequalities, CRT provides an important lens for understanding the shifting and sometimes contradictory discourses that might seem to show Whites fundamentally divided along class lines while actually strengthening White supremacy. The White working class are beneficiaries of Whiteness (seen clearly in the ‘victims’ discourse) but also at times in a liminal position, where they can be demonized when necessary or useful: ‘White but not quite’ (Allen 2009, 214) they provide a buffer, a safety zone that protects the White middle classes.

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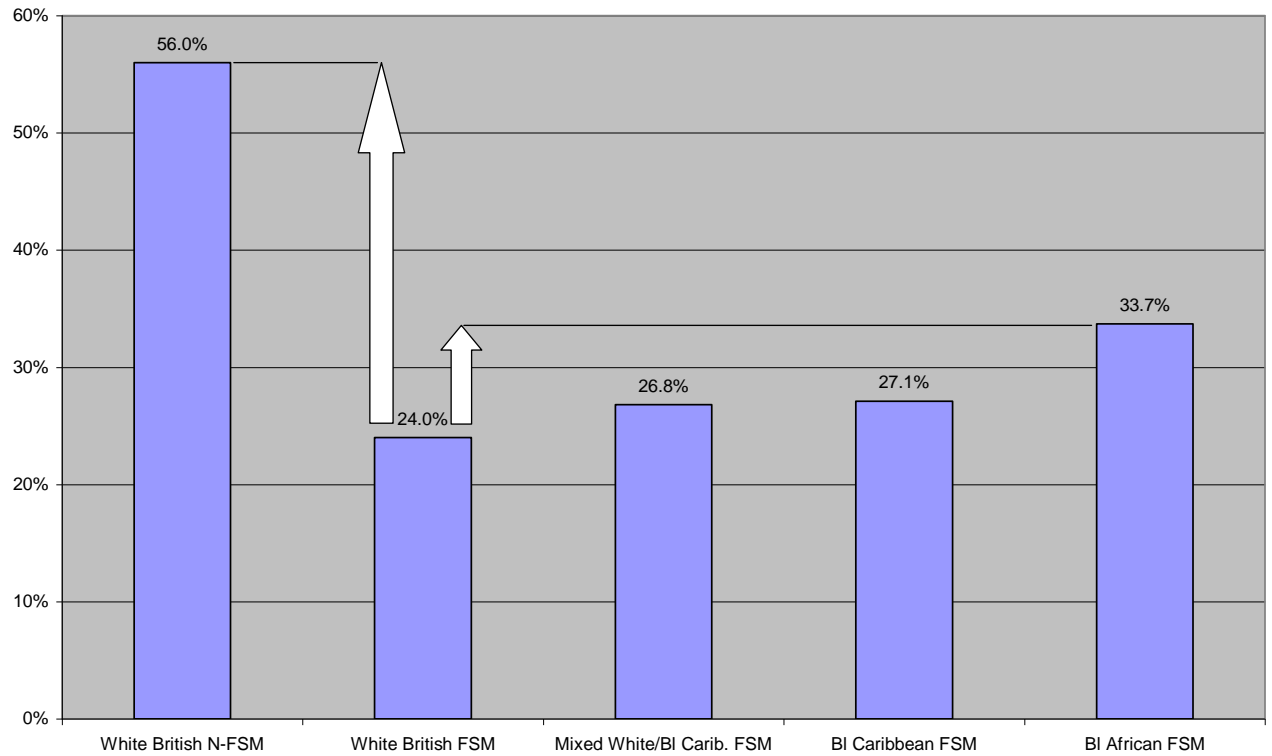
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FIGURE 1: Five or more Higher Grade (A*-C) GCSEs (any subject) Boys by Ethnic Origin and Free School Meal Status, England 2006



Source: DfES (2006a): table 32

Notes

- ¹ It has been argued that Marx himself demonstrated considerably more complexity than is sometimes evident in work done by those who claim his legacy (Leonardo 2009; Mills 2009).
- ² I use the term ‘minoritized’ in preference to the more usual ‘minority ethnic’ because the former draws attention to the social processes by which particular groups are defined as lesser or outside the mainstream.
- ³ See Beratan (2008) for a CRT analysis of ‘institutional ablism’.
- ⁴ It is significant, of course, that racist logic dictates that action be taken against the minoritized groups rather than the majority group that is threatening unrest.
- ⁵ By ‘Black’ I mean those people who would most likely self-identify according to this term: in the UK presently that usually includes people with family origins in Black Africa and/or the Caribbean.
- ⁶ All quotations from *Radio 5Live* are my own verbatim transcriptions from an audio recording of the programmes. I use standard transcription notations:
 (...) denotes that speech has been edited out;
italicized text denotes that the speaker stressed this word/phrase;
- ⁷ ‘Officers in the Race and Violent Crime Task Force ... were shocked to discover a direct relationship between political rhetoric, such as Tory leader William Hague’s “foreign land” speech, and an increase on attacks on asylum-seekers.’ (Ahmed & Bright 2001, p. 1). The British playwright, novelist and film director Hanif Kureishi recalls similar reactions on the street and in school when he was a child (Kureishi 1992, 3-10).
- ⁸ Students of Chinese and Indian ethnic heritage are the only principal minoritized groups who are *more* likely to achieve five higher grade passes than their White N-FSM peers: for a detailed account of these groups and an analysis of racism within their school experiences see Gillborn (2008: ch. 7).
- ⁹ Feral, feckless and promiscuous are labels attached in a single comment piece in the *Daily Mail* (2008).
- ¹⁰ I want to make clear that I am not, in any way, questioning the seriousness of the horrific crimes that were committed by the imprisoned adults in these cases. Rather, my concern is to examine the wider ‘degenerate’ discourse that was built upon these two exceptional cases.