

Caste and the Eternal Recurrence of the Orthodox Marxist Debate in Educational Theory

Clayton Pierce

Western Washington University

Derek R. Ford's and Nino Brown's essay raises an important set of questions concerning the political implications stemming from theoretical frameworks educators, scholars, and organizers choose to utilize in their work. According to them, one such implication is that "the most radical sounding theories," such as Afropessimism, help create a political context most "desirable for white supremacy, capitalism, and imperialism" to flourish unabated.¹ The overarching goal of their critique is to "correct the anti-communist and anti-revolutionary premises on which so much 'anti-racist' critique is premised today in the educational literature." They also aim to provide political clarity around revolutionary movement building and pedagogy lacking in work which drifts too far afield from a marxist center of gravity. While I am positioned by the authors as a proxy for an immensely diverse and complex set of "anti-racist" positions in the educational literature, my response can only focus on two main areas of critique in their essay.

I respond first to the authors' critique that Afropessimism, as a theoretical framework, "reproduce[es] eurocentrism and anti-communism" while also reflecting a neoliberal entrepreneurial trend in academics who choose to engage with new "sexy" and "trendy" theories.² Ultimately, Ford and Brown assert, using theories that challenge orthodox marxist formulations of exploitation and expropriation creates distracting political ambiguities and fails to provide the necessary tools of analysis needed for organizing against continued forms of capital accumulation and imperialism. Secondly, I take up the authors' connected arguments that (1) Marx and marxist revolutionary theory is not limited by Eurocentric moorings and (2) that Du Bois remained consistent with the tenets of orthodox marxism throughout his scholarship, political writings, and organizing work. Readings to the contrary, Ford and Brown warn the reader, are "dangerously incorrect and premised on misreadings of Du Bois and an

active ignorance of the global struggles of the oppressed.”

In response to these two assertions, I take up the question of political clarity the authors raise as it relates to the concept of caste in the work of Du Bois. Specifically, I emphasize the importance Du Bois’s concept of caste has for educational theory and practice, especially in a historical moment in the U.S. when white rage, terror, innocence, and fragility continue to compose the terrain of how the “wages of whiteness” circulate and reproduce in our contemporary racial capitalist society. Du Bois’s concept of caste, I argue, is indispensable for modifying and reorienting orthodox marxist understandings, particularly how we teach and learn about the deep underlying psychic and material wages of whiteness that maintains the color line while dividing the class line. Engaging Ford’s and Brown’s critique of Afropessimism will help put into relief the pedagogical usefulness of caste and specifically how using a caste analysis in a racial capitalist society moves beyond important limitations of orthodox marxism.

THE USE VALUE OF AFROPESSIMISM

Joining many others debating the merits of Afropessimism during the past decade from *The New Yorker* to *The Nation* as well as various academic journals and within social movements,³ Ford’s and Brown’s essay similarly highlights important problems and limitations of the theoretical movement.⁴ Focused largely on the work of Frank Wilderson III and Jared Sexton, who some have dubbed Afropessimism 2.0, one shared critique of Afropessimism is how it frames being black as an ontological and political dead end in relation to the ontology of whiteness. The ontology of whiteness in the Afropessimist framework, in other words, thrives and gains its life forces through the “fungibility” of blackness built on black suffering and violence. Lewis Gordon, for instance, points out that Afropessimism in the work of Wilderson and Sexton creates a type of political theology that crystalizes antiblackness into a finished totality. Gordon asserts that “‘an antiblack world’ is not identical with ‘the world is antiblack.’” Instead Gordon argues “that such a world is an antiblack racist *project*.”⁵ Kal Alston, in this very journal, makes a similar and equally trenchant critique of the ontological and pedagogical implications stemming from this feature of Afropessimist thought: “If I do not believe that there is any future

in any wish, any action, any conception of Black that can elide ontological negation, then I cannot continue to think about education, much less philosophy, in any serious way.”⁶ Alongside these ontological critiques of Afropessimism and its reliance on the concept of fungibility, other critiques focus on its shift away from marxist understandings of oppression and exploitation “rooted in the Marxist proletariat or (neo)colonial subject” to “the distinction between the Human and Slave.”⁷ Michael Dawson argues, for example, that without a critique of political economy, Afropessimism is “an ahistorical narrative that distorts the relationship of white supremacy to capitalism — insisting despite all historical and contemporary empirical evidence to the contrary that the core logics of slave-based anti-blackness exists outside of, and ultimately invariant to, the dynamics of the capitalist political economy.”⁸

An equally important dimension to Dawson’s critique is the way Afropessimism “homogeniz[es] the experiences of the various racially subordinated populations — including the experiences of people of African descent,” thus erasing how “the processes of racialization, domination, dispossession and exploitation associated with white supremacy differed within and across regions.”⁹ And finally, as Gloria Wekker points out, Afropessimism in the work of Wilderson reflects a theoretical positionality where “Black, heterosexual, middle-class masculinity is the unspoken, unquestioned, starting point” which ignores the intersectional way systems of violence and suffering take place outside the default positionality built into Afropessimism.¹⁰ Each of these areas of critique raise serious questions about the viability and usefulness of Afropessimism as a theoretical and political framework to draw upon in struggles against intersecting forms of exploitation and expropriation. Which begs the question, what is it good for and is there anything redeemable about it as a theoretical tool, especially for educational theory engaging in trying to better understand how the structures white supremacy and capitalism have shaped and continue to shape schooling in the U.S.?

While one answer to this question may be “nothing” and in fact using it at all only reflects an exercise in neoliberal academics, a point various authors have made before Ford and Brown, my position is that Afropessimism does

have some use value.¹¹ The use value for me is pedagogical because it challenges white scholars, teachers, students, and organizers who work within and/or with the marxist tradition in this way: Afropessimism forces the question of what the *material and psychic* relationship is between people who identify as white and Black suffering — as well as the suffering of other historically racialized communities within a racial capitalist society and schooling system. Afropessimism is a useful theoretical tool in this regard because it clarifies Du Bois's insight on whiteness: as an accumulatory caste identity, it is integral to how racial capitalist society expresses processes of exploitation and expropriation — think neoliberal city/school gentrification (expropriation) and what Noliwe Rooks calls educational “segrenomics” (exploitation): profiteering from the educational needs of black and brown communities.¹² Thus it's not a question for me of whether Afropessimism is a neoliberal academic fad or not, it's that as a white male scholar and teacher who values and draws upon the marxist tradition in my teaching and research, the existential challenge it poses to my caste positionality and work is educative and politically clarifying. Learning from the challenge Afropessimism offers the white world doesn't mean we also need to accept the ways Afropessimism, as Angela Davis puts it, can create “barriers to developing solidarity, to develop the kind of empathy we are talking about.”¹³ It is educative precisely because the unearned forms of value whiteness accrues to someone who shares my caste positionality in a racial capitalist society slips past traditional marxist nets without a focus on how whiteness and antiblack racism (and other forms of racialization) is built into the developmental DNA of capitalism in the U.S. and across the globe. Afropessimism is another way to learn and think about not only antiblack racism in relation to white supremacy, but also challenges white folks to grapple with the accumulated material and psychic “wages of whiteness” that underpin white caste positionality in racial capitalist society and how it is involved in the ongoing processes of exploitation and expropriation ravaging oppressed communities throughout the world.

RACIAL CAPITALISM AND MARXISM: CASTE OR CLASS?

Ford's and Brown's essay also takes up a lengthy argument attempting to demonstrate how antiracism is built into Marx's revolutionary thought (the

method of dialectical materialism in particular) and movement building. Here Ford and Brown assert that Du Bois's body of work examining the failures of marxist and socialist movements in the U.S. was largely focused on "critiques of the white labor movements, some of which called themselves socialist but disobeyed Marx's directives."¹⁴ I don't have the space or inclination here to address at length the arguments around whether Marx and "authentic" marxist thinkers and movements over the past century were or are adequately antiracist. There is a massive literature taking up debates around the privileging of race and/or class in critical theories of society and education that spans decades and disciplines — I cite just a few below.¹⁵ What I am focusing on here, however, is how inherent to both lines of critique is a rejection of the growing body of work on racial capitalism that I argue provides important "modifications" to European strains of marxism, particularly how it is used to analyze capitalism and schooling in the U.S.

Writing on the limitations of a European centered marxism and socialism in his essay "Marxism and the Negro Problem," Du Bois stated it thusly:

...what shall we say of the Marxian philosophy and of its relation to the American Negro? We can only say, as it seems to me, that the Marxian philosophy is a true diagnosis of the situation in Europe in the middle of the 19th century despite some of its logical difficulties. But it must be modified in the United States of America and especially so far as the Negro group is concerned.

Du Bois goes on to point out that

The reformist program of socialism meets no response from the white proletariat because it offers no escape to wealth and no effective bar to black labor, and a mud-sill of black labor is essential to white labor's standard of living... There is not at present time the slightest indication that a Marxian revolution based on a united class-consciousness proletariat is anywhere

on the American far horizon. Rather race antagonism and labor group rivalry is still undisturbed by world catastrophe.¹⁶

Cedric Robinson also reminds us in his *Black Marxism* that by the time he wrote *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois's racial capitalist critique of the Socialist Party and the labor movement in the U.S. in general was "no longer simply a warning to a negligent labor movement, but an indictment."¹⁷ Citing Du Bois's chapter on "the white worker" in *Black Reconstruction*, Robinson points out that, for Du Bois, the indictment grew from how "[t]he resulting color caste founded and retained by capitalism was adopted, forwarded and approved by white labor, and resulted in subordination of colored labor to white profits the world over."¹⁸ Du Bois's focus on color caste in his critique of European marxism is important because it shows how a racial capitalist analysis of revolutionary change emphasizes the racial character of capitalism. Du Bois's modification of marxism to a racial capitalist analysis of race and class in the U.S. through the lens of caste, in other words, shifts how we think about classic marxist problems around labor and accumulation for example. Situating these core marxist categories, for instance, within the framework of caste helps us learn how white supremacy, settler colonialism, and heteropatriarchy is imbricated within the development of capitalism in the U.S. It provides greater historical complexity and nuance and therefore greater political and pedagogical clarity around what caste *abolition* might look like.

I want to conclude by sketching an example of the pedagogical potential of caste over a class reductionist approach. Specifically, one that demonstrates how shifting to a racial capitalist framework modifies orthodox marxist understandings of labor and accumulation within the context of a capitalist, white settler nation state such as the U.S. or Canada. One problem orthodox marxist and neo-marxist theorists of education confront is the contradiction of the revolutionary subject (proletariat) and the state. In order to reject capital, workers need to learn critical consciousness and organize their labor power against capital. The state in turn becomes the contested ground through which to redistribute the means and modes of production via some egalitarian and

democratic process perhaps. Note how in this simplified process of revolutionary social transformation the wages of whiteness remain: white workers still benefit materially and psychologically from labor and land redistribution, as do other non-indigenous workers in some cases. As Shona Jackson's work on postcolonial Guyana illustrates, even in anticolonial revolutionary contexts, labor retains its modern liberal social and political quality by becoming a conduit for new nation state subjects to access and accumulate land in the ruins of the colonial capitalist state and emergence of a postcolonial one.¹⁹ Applying Jackson's analysis to the context of the U.S., we can see how the wages of whiteness would still be paid through the continuation of settler colonial processes of indigenous erasure and dispossession in a newly won socialist or communist state. So how can the concept of caste intervene into the problem of how the wages of whiteness continue after revolution?

Caste, used to analyze the white settler subject and state, resituates marxist categories of labor and accumulation in a way that ties the wages of whiteness to "the history and experience of *dispossession*, not proletarianization," which "has been the dominant background structure shaping the character of the historical relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian state."²⁰ Articulated through a white settler positionality, caste analysis also prevents an automatic transit of the wages of whiteness from revolutionary labor organization and socialist or communist models of accumulation to the postcolonial or post-capitalist society. Instead, using a caste analytic forces us to confront from the outset how and why the wages of whiteness can carry over even after revolutionary moments in history because the formation of white caste positionality in the context of the U.S. and Canada (and other settler colonial nations) is deeply rooted in the processes of expropriation, ownership, and land accumulation against indigenous peoples. In highlighting this multidimensional aspect of caste in white settler societies, it also illuminates how white terror and violence constitute the history of white settler identity and is part of the "recursive logic of dispossession" within the racial capitalist landscape of settler colonial nations.²¹ Caste, as an analytic and pedagogical tool, therefore rearticulates alienation as the problem of labor in capitalist society to one also tied

to expropriation and dispossession — key accumulatory motors of the wages of whiteness. Put differently, a caste analysis captures and holds in view a key characteristic of white caste positionality in the U.S. that a class-focused analysis misses: a subject position shaped and driven by a possessive and accumulatory ethic that is a product of racial capitalist society. Caste does the conceptual heavy lifting class cannot because, as a concept, it was developed by Du Bois as a mode of analysis that takes into account how race is not a product of capitalism but rather racialization is what capitalism has always grown from. Returning to the question of political clarity, one of the primary goals of Ford's and Brown's essay, I am in agreement with them that now more than ever developing critical pedagogies against white supremacy, imperialism, and capitalism is desperately needed. Where I differ on this point, however, is how political clarity is defined and what concepts can count as useful if racial capitalism is also relegated to the dust bin of academic fads and marxist disobedience.

1 Derek R. Ford and Nino Brown, "The Happy Marriage of Afro-Pessimism and U.S. Universities: Eurocentrism, Anti-Communism, and an Educational Recipe for Defeat," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 4 (2022).

2 As Lewis Gordon et al point out, Afropessimism without the hyphen makes an important distinction between "pessimistic people of African descent" and "theoretical pessimism." The non-hyphenated term, according to Gordon et al, is "what proponents often have in mind in their diagnosis of what I shall call 'the black condition.'" Lewis R. Gordon, Annie Menzel, George Shulman and Jasmine Syedullah, "Thoughts on Afropessimism," *Contemporary Political Theory* 17, no. 1 (2017): 105.

3 Vinson Cunningham, "The Argument of 'Afropessimism,'" *The New Yorker*, 13 July (2020). Accessed September 15, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/07/20/the-argument-of-afropessimism>; Greg Tate, "Afropessimism and its Discontents: A guide for the perplexed, the puzzled, and the politically confused," *The Nation*, 17 September (2021). Accessed October 4, 2022, <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/afropessimism-wilderson-critical-race/>.

- 4 Annie Olaloku-Teriba, "Afro-pessimism and the (un)logic of anti-blackness," *Historical Materialism* 26, no. 2 (2018): 1.
- 5 Gordon, Menzel, Shulman, & Syedullah, "Thoughts on Afropessimism," 106.
- 6 Kal Alston, "To Live in the Wake, to Wade in the Water, to Sleep (and Wake) with Anger: A Response to Ronald Glass," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 2 (2022): 30.
- 7 Kevin Ochieng Okoth, "The Flatness of Blackness: Afro-Pessimism and the Erasure of Anti-Colonial Thought," *Salvage*, 16 January (2020). Accessed October, 10 2022, <https://salvage.zone/the-flatness-of-blackness-afro-pessimism-and-the-erasure-of-anti-colonial-thought/>.
- 8 Michael C. Dawson, "Against Afropessimism," *Ideology Theory Practice*, 17 May (2021). Accessed September 20, 2022, <https://www.ideology-theory-practice.org/blog/against-afropessimism>.
- 9 Dawson, "Against Afropessimism."
- 10 Gloria Wekker, "Afropessimism," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 28, no. 1 (2020): 94.
- 11 Rahul Rao, "Neoliberal antiracism and the British University," *Radical Philosophy* 208 (Autumn 2020): 47-54.
- 12 Noliwe Rooks, *Cutting School: Privatization, Segregation, and the end of Public Education* (New York: The New Press, 2017).
- 13 Angela Davis and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in conversation with Nikita Dhawan, "Planetary Utopias," *Radical Philosophy* 2.05 (Autumn 2019): 73.
- 14 Ford & Brown, "The Happy Marriage of Afro-Pessimism and U.S. Universities."
- 15 Reiland Rabaka, *W.E.B. Du Bois and the Problems of the Twenty-First Century: An essay on Africana Critical Theory* (Boulder, CO: Lexington Books, 2007); David Stovall, "Forging community in race and class: critical race theory and the quest for social justice education," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 9, no.

3 (2006): 243-259; Anthony L. Brown & Noah De Lissoy, "Economics of racism: Grounding education policy research in the complex dialectic of race, class, and capital," *Journal of Education Policy* 26, no. 5 (2011): 595-619; Zeus Leonardo, "The unhappy marriage between Marxism and race critique: Political economy and the production of racialized knowledge," *Policy Futures in Education* 22, no. 3&4: 483-493.

16 W.E.B. Du Bois, "Marxism and the Negro Problem," *The Crisis* 40, no. 5 (May 1933): 104, 118.

17 C. J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983; rpt. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 203.

18 W.E.B. Du Bois in Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 203.

19 Shona N. Jackson, *Creole Indigeneity: Between myth and nation in the Caribbean* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

20 Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin White Masks: Rejecting the colonial politics of recognition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 13.

21 Robert Nichols, "Theft is Property!: The Recursive Logic of Dispossession," *Political Theory* 46, no.1 (2018): 15.