

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Little white lies: Whiteness, reflexivity, race and criminology

Other

How to cite:

Earle, Rod (2019). Little white lies: Whiteness, reflexivity, race and criminology. British Society of Criminology Newsletter, 84. pp. 5-14.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2019 British Society Criminology

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<https://www.britisoccrim.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/BSCN84-Winter-2019.pdf>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Themed articles

Little white lies: Whiteness, reflexivity, race and criminology

Rod Earle, Open University

I was shocked when I read that the country of my birth was thoroughly tangled up in racism (Pierre 2013). Modern Ghana, I had thought, would have had no place for race. After all, it was the first country in Africa to declare its independence from British colonial rule in 1957, the year before I was born. But Ghana, it turns out, is divided along a colour line that prizes the lightening qualities of whiteness, a lightening that can determine access to jobs, higher incomes, prestige and position, just as it does in the UK. Perhaps it's got something to do with the fact that more than half the population of black Africa live in countries where English is an official language (Appiah 2004). Whiteness seems to be global in its power yet very personal in its meaning, invisibly forging a subjective sense of self and yet also capable of building geo-political alliances spanning history and continents.

Being born in Ghana I've always known I'm not black but my whiteness is not something I see easily in the mirror. If I look away from the mirror, I can see it in the story that took my Irish father and English mother to what was then called The Gold Coast to work in the colonial education service in the early 1950s. My birth certificate from Ghana's capital, Accra, has the words 'Gold Coast' crossed out in several places and Ghana hand written in ink above it. Follow the money, as the saying goes. That golden thread of whiteness breaks, unexpectedly, when I complete the 'place of birth' part of the application form to register for a PhD with the LSE in London in 2006. I get billed an astronomical fee as a foreign student, despite declaring my Irish nationality. 'Accra, Ghana' appears to have overridden the 'Irish' in the 'Nationality' box. And then the simplicity of the correction, my whiteness restored, the fee reduced. The wages of whiteness (Du Bois 1935) is a useful concept here, but no one's life is simply black and white.

Revising his first conceptualisation of the 'colour line', Du Bois (1910) asserted the problem of the colour line was the problem of whiteness, and whiteness is complicated. I live with the accumulated benefits of an emergent class system that crossed the Irish Sea centuries ago, went beyond the Pale and spread across the globe (Linebaugh 2019). In Africa, the Irish have always been unequivocally White even when to the English in England they have been a bit less than white, and possibly a bit Black (Ralston 1999). It is some of these personal and political complications of whiteness that I explore autobiographically in this introduction so as to help establish the significance for criminologists of the pulse of Empire that flows so silently through our discipline. Our engagements with criminology are formed through events we have experienced directly but write about infrequently because they are considered 'ultra vires', out of scope for being intimate, private or domestic.

No imagination but the nation: Whiteness

Phenotypical whiteness and structural Whiteness are often conflated and regularly confused. What I see in the mirror is not causing divisions and hierarchies in one of the most iconic states of black Africa, a country where W.E.B Du Bois is buried, that provided a home to Maya Angelou and that made Frantz Fanon a government minister (James 2012). The Whiteness bringing this division and hierarchy to Ghana is functional to the structure of racial capitalism that survives the colonial period. Ghana is no one's Gold Coast anymore thanks to Osagyefo Dr Kwame Nkrumah, but the dreams of his generation of African leaders remain unfulfilled, frustrated by Cold War manoeuvres (Sherwood 2019; James 2012) and the obduracy of racial capitalism.

In the 21st century Whiteness is assuming a mutely belligerent pose against the dawning realisation that the old martial rules of colonialism, 'Whites rule, non-whites are ruled over', no longer apply. This comes from a recognition that globalisation implicitly 'provincialises' Europe from its erstwhile pre-eminent position as the central and defining colonial force of the planet (Chakrabarty 2000). As a result, the political alliances of Whiteness have entered an unsteady state which brings them more into view and closer to personal experience. The phenotypical whiteness of prominent

political figures, such as Boris Johnson, Donald Trump, Nigel Farage and the British royal family recognisably aligns with the structural Whiteness of their political projects to make both profoundly unsettling.

Asking what we understand by whiteness is important because a central, founding principle of racism is the superiority of the white race, although this goes largely without saying (among white people). As James Baldwin (1998:122) points out '...there is a great deal of will power involved in the white man's naïveté'. Making explicit reference to whiteness challenges the disavowal of race as a prevailing, defining but unspoken feature of white identities (Garner 2007). This disavowal can only be disingenuous because for most of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries the idea of whiteness was completely mainstream. It was essential, foundational and integral to the major political powers of Europe and the USA. Race was the language of international politics and domestic policy, openly and extensively referred to as an ordinary fact of life. Races, just as much as states or nations, were seen as one of humanity's foundational *political* units and were spoken of as such (Vitalis 2015; Lake and Reynolds 2008). The history of all the various nation states from north America, western Europe, southern Africa and Australasia were underpinned by racial ideas that licensed genocide, dispossession, exclusion and slavery. White frontier masculinities were valorised as representing and embodying the new democratic and utopian spirit of the age, 'liberating' all that came into their Imperial path. Race offered a theory of human hierarchy that licensed the brutality and violence involved in excluding from the fully human all those who were not fully white. The expansion of Euro-imperialism from 1884-1914 – sometimes referred to as the scramble for Africa – could not have been accomplished without it.

From Australia to the United States white men talked (and wrote) at great length and with great conviction, about themselves as a race, as 'white men' building countries for other 'white men' (Lake and Reynolds 2008). This is not a semantic accident or a kind of vernacular innocence. Whiteness, and ideas about the white race, were as explicit as they were central to such forms of transnational community. Whiteness was a widespread, self-styled form of transnational racial identification, an explicit and deliberate mode of subjective identification that crossed national borders and shaped global politics. It has only relatively recently lost its voice and come to be seen as the defining characteristic of political extremism, the atavistic trademark of

the political fringe. This political laryngitis silences its historical and political ubiquity and removes the conceptual handles that might allow us to bury it properly. It was only in the second half of the 20th century that the grip of white supremacy began to be loosened and the widespread subjective identifications that propelled it through history became gradually less tenable and less publicly endorsed. This followed the defeat of fascism in Germany and the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights which repudiated 'race as science'. However, the political implications of replacing the theoretical engine of race with social constructionism did not reverse the historical momentum of race because it has never been primarily propelled by scientific justifications.

The second world war finally, undeniably, exposed the horrific consequences and intrinsic violence of racism to European societies and sensibilities. Nevertheless, Aimé Césaire condemned white Europeans' complicity in the rise of Nazism as 'they tolerated Nazism before it was inflicted on them...because, until then, it had only been applied to non-European peoples' (Césaire 1972: 14), whilst Frantz Fanon described Nazism as 'a colonial system in the very heart of Europe' (Fanon 1967: 33). The legacies of the defeat of fascism are post-colonial but their implications for contemporary anti-racism remain contested and profoundly unresolved as Susan Neiman (2018) makes clear in her provocative juxtaposing of post-slavery USA and post-war Germany. Nowhere is this more obvious and problematic than in the disintegrating political consensus and infrastructure of the United Kingdom. The truth is that nobody's ways of being in the world are innocent of race, least of all white people's in Britain. Nobody's imagined community, their nation or any other form of fellow feeling is free of race.

Criminology's poltergeist and Europe's whiteness

Few people will defend racism but many people continue to misunderstand and underestimate it. Whiteness operates as a form of collectively maintained ignorance for which there are a number of alibis to cover the way white people benefit from the subordinate status of black people. One of these is that racism is simply an individual moral failure, a flaw of personality or character rather than an economic, extractive, exploitative social relationship. Race, according to Avery Gordon (2008), is a haunting presence in our personal lives and social relations because its effects are everywhere felt but nowhere specified: the machinery moves while the engine is

declared dead. Black Caribbean pupils are more than three times more likely to be permanently excluded from school; those who identify as Black or Black British are four times more likely to be stopped by the police than their white counterparts; and in 2016 for young people aged between 16 and 24 years, the White ethnic group had the lowest unemployment rate of 12%, a figure which more than doubles when it comes to young people of Black (25%) and Bangladeshi/Pakistani (28%) backgrounds respectively (Nayak 2018). These patterns that recur throughout the social structure indicate that even as race becomes a discredited concept it continues to structure society. From segregated housing to selective criminal justice, race is experienced like a poltergeist – objects are moved by an unseen, inexplicable force for malign, life-limiting and unsettling effect.

The neglect of the way race produces tangible results from intangible sources restricts the development of ways of resisting and challenging its toxic social presence. Criminological scholarship needs better tools to bridge the gap between the ontological subjectivity of race and its epistemological objectivity; tools that can account for the way it appears as a solid ‘social fact’ in our work, but then disappears as a ‘social fiction’ from our personal lives. As is often the case, Stuart Hall put his finger on it when he reflected on how Marxism morphed into cultural studies in the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies in the 1980s:

We had to develop a methodology that taught us to attend, not only to what people said about race but... to what people could not say about race, it was the silences that told us something; it was what wasn't there, it was what was invisible, what couldn't be put into the frame, what was apparently unsayable that we needed to attend to (cited by Rodman 2006, in Smith 2016)

Making race and racism more intelligible involves the generation of narratives that can displace this functional silence, limit the productivity of the ‘invisibility’ of race. This narrative potential is radically under-developed in UK criminology (Phillips et al 2019). What spaces and places are there for focussing on and discussing race in criminology, what special conferences are held, what symposia are convened, what journals are launched, what Special Issues are curated, what teaching curricula are adopted or developed that address the recurring, resilient and pervasive presence of race and its mysteries? Unlike in sociology, and despite the proliferating sub-disciplines of criminology, these have hardly developed at all within British

criminology. This seems like wilful neglect or careless indifference to Stuart Hall's warning that 'it is only as the different racisms are historically specified in their difference - that they can be properly understood' (Hall 1980: 337). Without these specifics in the UK, the prevailing criminological understandings of race and racism risk becoming derivatives of, and defer to, the monstrous scale of the US experience of race, sheltering behind its grotesque penal brutalities (Phillips et al 2019). Exposing and condemning American racism tends to reproduce a deep seated and longstanding habit of minimizing and obscuring racism in Britain by contrasting it to the US, even when its racial disparities in criminal justice are greater than in the US.

Getting Africa in the house

James Baldwin (1998:122) offers a few clues as to how we might begin, so late in the day, to look into our European souls to find an answer:

For the history of the American Negro is unique also in this: that the question of his humanity, and of his rights therefore as a human being, became a burning one for several generations of Americans, so burning a question that it ultimately became one of those used to divide the nation. It is out of this argument that the venom of the epithet Nigger! is derived. It is an argument which Europe has never had, and hence Europe quite sincerely fails to understand how or why the argument arose in the first place, why its effects are so frequently disastrous and always so unpredictable, why it refuses until today to be entirely settled. Europe's black possessions remained, and do remain, in Europe's colonies, at which remove they represented no threat whatever to European identity. If they posed any problem at all for the European conscience, it was a problem which remained comfortably abstract: in effect, the black man, as a man, did not exist for Europe. But in America, even as a slave, he was an inescapable part of the general social fabric and no American could escape having an attitude toward him.

Stuart Hall, lucid as ever, picked up on Baldwin's critical insight that White Europeans might have dodged the bullets that criss-cross the American racial divide, but they provided the guns and ammunition. Hall's evocation of the condition of 'being in, but not of, Europe' (Hall 2003) is richly suggestive of the proximities Europe's white people regularly refuse. Those proximities need a narrative thread as surely as any social fabric (Anderson 2018) and white people in criminology, such as myself, have to start somewhere, and perhaps with ourselves.

References

- Anderson, C. (2018) 'Empire Made Me – the autobiographical pulse in British Imperial History' in A. Burton and D. Kennedy (Eds) *How Empire Shaped Us*, London. Bloomsbury.
- Appiah, K. (2004) 'Language, Race and the Legacies of the British Empire' in P. Morgan and S. Hawkins (eds) *Black Experience and The Empire*, Oxford. Oxford University Press.
- Baldwin, J. (1998) *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, New York, Literary Classic
- Césaire, A. (1972) *Discourse on Colonialism*, New York, NYU Press.
- Chakrabarty, D. (2000) *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton. Princeton University Press.
- Du Bois, W.E.B (1935) *Black Reconstruction In America*, New York. The Free Press.
- Du Bois W.E.B. (1910) 'The Souls of White Folk', in *Darkwater: Voices from within the veil*, New York. Washington Square Press
- Fanon, F. (1967) *Black Skin, White Mask*, London. Pluto Press
- Gordon, A. (2008) *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, London. University of Minneapolis Press
- Hall, S. (1980) 'Race, articulation and societies structured in dominance', *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism*, Paris. UNESCO.
- Hall, S. (2003) 'In but not of Europe': Europe and its myths, *Soundings*, 22; https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/s22_08hall.pdf
- James, C.L.R. (2012) *A History of Pan-African Revolt*, Oakland, Ca. PM Press
- Lake, M. and Reynolds (2008) *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality*, Cambridge. Cambridge University Press
- Linebaugh, P. (2019) *Red Round Globe Hot Burning: A Tale at the Crossroads of Commons and Closure, Love and Terror, of Race and Class, and of Kate and Ned Despard*, Berkeley. University of California Press.
- Nayak, A. (2018) 'Children, young people and race' in H. Montgomery and M. Robb (eds) *Children and young people's worlds*, Bristol. Policy Press
- Neiman, S (2018) *Learning from the Germans: Confronting Race and the Memory of Evil*. London. Random House
- Pierre, J. (2013) *The Predicaments of Blackness: Postcolonial Ghana and the Politics of Race*, Chicago. Chicago University Press

Phillips, C; Earle, R.; Parma, A. and Smith, D. (2019) 'Dear British criminology: Where has all the race and racism gone?', *Theoretical Criminology*, on-line first: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480619880345>

Ralston, W. (1999) 'Are the Irish Black?', *Race and Class* Vol. 4 No.1.

Sherwood, M. (2019) *Kwame Nkrumah and the Dawn of the Cold War*, London. Pluto Press

Smith, A. (2016). *Racism and everyday life: Social theory, history and 'Race'*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Vitalis, R. (2015). *White world order, Black power politics: The birth of American International Relations*. New York: Cornell University Press.
