Race and Ethnicity hub

BHM WELS: Why it might be important for white people to talk about whiteness

Dr Rod Earle:

SPEAKER 1: So yeah, welcome everybody to this Black History Month talk. So, I'm going to do a quick introduction of Rod Earle, our speaker today. So, Rod is a senior lecturer in youth justice in the faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies. He has experience of working as a youth justice worker in Lambeth in London and has done various bits of research around restorative justice in the youth justice sector.

He's also did some research with Coretta Phillips who is based at the LSE. And that was an ethnography examining men's ethnic and social identities in prison. He's also established the British Convict Criminology Group, which encourages and supports ex-prisoners who are involved in criminology. And also, relevant to this book, has been an editor alongside Arthur Palmer and Coretta Phillips of a special issue of Theoretical Criminology, which is looking at questions of race and criminology, which I'm a massive fan of. So that's why I'm really excited about this talk today.

So yeah, just to sort of outline that we're going to have a 30-minute talk and then a Q&A. So, I'll let Rod get going. I'll turn my camera and mic off and enjoy the talk.

ROD EARLE: Well, thanks very much, Julia, for that introduction, and thank you and welcome to everybody who's turned up. I'm not very familiar with this sort of Team's format. So, I have no idea sort of in a sense of how many people there are or exactly who I'm talking to.

But I want to sort of try and do three things in this presentation. And broadly speaking, I want to explore what's meant by the term whiteness. Secondly and sort of following on from that, I want to explore how and why working with theories about whiteness might help us address questions of race, racism, and anti-racism. And thirdly, I want to ask how white people can talk about whiteness to counter racism. So, I see it very much as trying to start a conversation, which hopefully will continue elsewhere and for longer.

But the paper draws very much from the work I've been doing with Coretta Phillips from the LSE and Alpa Parma from Oxford University over the last few years. And some of that work is listed on the slide. It's all on RO, and please, feel free to get in touch with me if you want any copies that you can't get hold of.

I've got, I think, six slides to talk about. I think it'll take about half an hour. But from some sort of experience of teaching with OU and with OU students, I know that sometimes slides get in the way of discussion and questions and also that OU students are very good at asking questions and interrupting lecturers. So, feel free. If you want to stop me at any point, go through Julia or whatever if you want to ask a question. Or alternatively, you can give me a nice easy ride and let me present my slides, and then you can all pile in.

But I think that the conventional, sort of sociological wisdom about race is to think of it as a outdated social construct. It's a discredited artifact around which there may be a few controversies, but they're of relatively marginal significance in the modern world.

And I think white visions of race in the UK have tended to see it as a historical and conceptual anomaly and one that tends to be linked and thought through as it were other places and other times. So, for example, the USA sort of civil rights hero looms large, I think, apartheid regimes in South Africa.

And race is regarded as both a redundant and a toxic kind of concept. So it's best avoided, and this comes together in what's loosely known as a kind of post-racism. A post-racial country is a country where race is no longer regarded as a key determinant of life chances and social experience.

And Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, who developed this analysis particularly, says that white people's colorblind worldview is actually a kind of a state of enchantment, a fantasy of harmony and order which reflects only the lives particularly of white people. And so if the idea of post-racial societies is a fantasy mostly entertained by white people, it's probably important, I think, to talk about whiteness, which is what comes next. And that's fantastic. Julia is doing some great steering there.

So, this work that I've been doing draws really heavily from W.E.B. Du Bois' assertion at the start of the 20th century that the problem of the color line is the problem of whiteness. And there is a really unhelpful conceptual silence around whiteness, particularly among white people, who see it as a kind of presumptuous definition of themselves, of ourselves. It's a reduction to a singularity.

And this sensitivity is consistent with ways of thinking about race mainly as a kind of personal defect rather than as a social process of exploitation and extraction. It's seen as a moral flaw based on irrational prejudice and ignorance, and that if you're white, you will be immediately cast as a racist.

And I don't think that this is a really very helpful or conceptually adequate way of thinking about it, but on the other hand, because thinking about whiteness includes, implicitly includes white people in the racial frame and provokes this kind of discomfort, this rejection because of the nature of racial framing, it actually makes a good place to start talking about race and racism because it brings white people into contact with race. It's this sense of you're being erased if you're regarded as white.

And so, I quite like him. Here, I've used Ghasan Hage's description of whiteness as not being so much about the colour of your skin as about the way the accumulated cultural capital of certain modern civilized people operate with the distinctive social dividend, sometimes referred to as the white privilege, because people with these attributes often and usually are white. So, it's situates whiteness in history rather than character.

And white privilege is not so much, I suppose, about personally enjoying unearned economic advantage as it is about the daily existential benefits of not having to deal with race. It doesn't mean that your life hasn't been hard. It's just that the colour of your skin isn't one of the things making it hard. And that-- in terms of good referencing and attribution-- that's from Twitter. Again, it's one of the wonders, I think, of Twitter that sometimes these wonderful things turn up. I can't attribute it any further than that. But it's not my definition exactly as such.

But whiteness is a term that's developed more fully in critical race theory and various streams of post-colonial studies. And my relationship to it is developing a bit like my relationship to feminism developed in the 1980s. And this involved being made aware of various aspects of the social world in the way that I exist in that world. It changed the way that I wanted to be in the world.

And that's because there are things that I have taken for granted or kind of were invisible to me-- because I'm a man-- became more visible. And as I started reading about feminism and through various women I knew, they offered new ways of seeing things, new ways of connecting daily life to abstract theory, if you like. And I guess that's captured in this idea of esocentral feminism, that the personal is political.

But sometimes, this was really mundane ordinary stuff. Like going to the pub, I remember friends asking as we got close to the pub if I'd ever wondered would I be the only bloke in the pub. And she knew she usually would be, if not the only one among a small minority. And that

affects how she was in the world and how the world appeared to her in ways that it didn't appear to me. So familiar spaces, all spaces carried this stamp of gender, of masculinity, and so on.

And something similar happened when I started working with Coretta Phillips, who's a Black mixed-race scholar, on race and ethnicity and social relations in men's prisons because over a period of two years, we were working together closely on the research questions.

And I was made aware of my whiteness, for example, by the way prison officers appeared to ignore her, the senior academic, and address me first as if I were leading the research rather than being the research assistant. And the more we talked about it and compared our various perspectives, the more these things fed through as to how we view the world, how we experience the world, how we experience difference, how we saw the prison and prisoners operating in different ways according to our positions in relation to race, her Blackness and my whiteness as it were.

So, the assumptions of whiteness and race, like those of masculinity and gender, were always around, were present, kind of visible but unspoken, and thus, unidentified and mysterious. And I honestly thought I had some pretty good ideas about how race and racism manifested in everyday life, but they turned out inadequate.

I tended to think of race as being about explicit kinds of antagonism and conflict and tensions. It was about hostility and aggression and so on. And it is about that. But it's also about much, much more. And it's this haunting presence that makes me feel uneasy, unsure about what I'm experiencing and what I see. And race, I think, one of the things is acknowledging how much more complex race is than it seems, and that it's definitely not something that just used to exist in the past or just elsewhere.

And I think a lot of the contemporary theorizing around race talks about these contradictory and elusive properties, how it's kind of there one minute, gone the next. It's something and then nothing, like a ghost. And some of the work in this field, Karen and Barbara Fields' book is called Racecraft, which really, I think, cleverly positions this idea, evokes witchcraft, an archile concept, with statecraft, the idea of how societies are built and managed.

Vron Ware [and Patricia Williams] talk about the alchemy of race. Avory Gordon and Toni Morrison talk about hauntings and enchantment. It's these qualities which I think make race difficult to work with, but its pervasive presence means that it can't be neglected.

So, talking about whiteness, I think, can be a way of reopening this discussion on race and taking it back from the rather dormant position that it currently occupies, particularly for white

people. If we don't, then whiteness would operate as a form of collectively maintained ignorance and a moral indifference that confines questions of race to people who are Black or from minority ethnic communities. And in that way, it becomes always somebody else's business. And if there is one thing that history tells us, it's that race is white people's business, and that's what the next slide is about.

I think asking what we understand by whiteness is important because the central founding principle of racism is the superiority of the white race, although it tends to go largely without saying, again, amongst white people. Whiteness is an important issue because all the prevailing literature on white identities reveals that one of their determining characteristics is their invisibility.

White people don't tend to think of themselves as white, or they don't anymore. And this is surprising because for most of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, the idea of a white race and of white supremacy was absolutely mainstream. It was essential, foundational, and integral to all the major political powers of Europe and the USA and to most white peoples themselves.

The British empire and all the European empires were established to secure the prosperity of people who declared themselves white. And that involved belonging to something that was known as the White race, and it's really only comparatively recently in the second half of the 20th century that the grip of white supremacy began to be loosened. And those widespread subjective identifications, the way we think of ourselves as white, and that propelled it through history became less tenable.

And of course, this followed the defeat of fascism in Germany, which we finally and undeniably exposed the horrific logical consequences of racism and colonialism to European societies. That's this way of seeing in a sense the conflagrations of the Second World War and of fascism as the introduction of colonialism to Europe.

And after the war, resurgent anticolonial struggles developed, and wars of National Liberation followed hard on its heels. But even so, France was fighting to suppress independence movements in Algeria in 1962. Portugal only ceded its last African colony, its last African territory in 1974.

And again, because I can't see everyone one, I don't know the age of the people I'm talking to but put that in context. That was the year that Freddie Mercury and Queen started to become a massive rock group. And 1974 was when David Bowie released Diamond Dogs, weird album. The Rolling Stones released It's Only Rock and Roll and I Like It. The original line up of Bob Marley and the Wailers released Catch a Fire, one of their best albums. And that's 1974. So, to me, this is really recent history.

But in the last quarter of the 20th century, white supremacy and this link between whiteness and racism has come to be seen as an exceptional characteristic of extremism in a way that erases its historical and political ubiquity. It's become something associated only with a minority position, a hangover from fascism, the atavistic trademark of the political fringe and likely to be located in the passions of the popular classes as it's sometimes put or the so-called left behind white working class.

And what this does is it forgets that for 300 or more years of history that was behind this notion and development of these white identities and of white supremacy. It fosters a sense of innocence that amounts to a lie, I think. It's a misrepresentation of the historical truth that for much of the 19th and 20th century, races, just as much as states or nations, were seen absolutely as one of humanity's foundational political units.

And people used it in everyday language in their talk of themselves in conversation. Thinking in race terms was something that was, it was very mundane. And so, I think we can't just snap our fingers and imagine this no longer exists as it were.

I think, again, if we look at the next slide, we can see why that might not be the case because this map shows the reach and extent of European colonialism, just how much of the world that we know of today as it were was constructed through this period.

And nothing about it was peaceful. The violence and brutality of the colonial project that's mapped out here is what racism is about. So, it's violence on a global scale, and it is this structuring regime of the modern world. It's this decisive antagonism which seems to have shaped. And again, if you look at that map of these shapes we want to say don't exist, it's the decisive antagonism that shaped the world that we live in.

And I think we're at a time now, I think, with just recently this year, we've seen the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. We've seen the global pandemic, which has placed the world before us almost. It's made us look at the world again. And it's, again, in terms of-- I suppose Stuart Hall would use it-- it's a moment of conjuncture. What does this mean?

And it reminds me a little bit about a very old joke, forgive me, but there's that joke that more than any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other to total extinction. Let's pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly.

And I do feel that we are in a very special time to think about race, about colonialism, the way the world is, as it were, and I think that our ideas about race need an upgrade. We need new

coordinates. We need new vocabularies. I think we need to think about questions of Europe, because again, that map above this is Europe is implicated in this, and whiteness and how they're part of them.

So, I'm nearly done now. I'm just going to move on. Got a couple more slides. So, I don't want to say too much more, I suppose. And I think this picture for me captures some of the paradoxes that we face about the relationship between the old and the new, between the way some things have changed, and some things haven't.

And I think it is important to think about whiteness and skin colour, but it's not just about skin colour. Again, to go back to Ghasan Hage's idea, it's about the way the accumulated cultural capital of certain modern civilized people operates within a distinctive social dividend that arises from their colonial history. That arises from their colonial history-- it's a shifting position in a set of social relations established by colonialism. So, it's not simply a Black and white, simple chromatic distinction. And this, I think it is difficult to think things through.

And one of the things that-- and I don't the best way of approaching it, but one of the way when I was preparing this talk was to think about Irishness because being Irish, if you're Irish in Ireland, if you're American Irish, or if you're Anglo Irish-- Irish in Britain-- they all have really different connotations about whiteness, about whiteness and Blackness, supremacy and subordination.

Because in America, the story of how the Irish became white-- and the short story is that they joined the police force or they joined trade unions-- can be contrasted with discussions over here certainly in the 1970s and the 1980s about how the Irish became black because of the signs that popped up in rental properties and in shops or pubs which said no Irish, no Blacks. They were conflated.

And this is obviously an argument about racialization, how the processes of race worked through in social processes of identification. And I haven't really got time to go into the argument. As I say, I haven't fully developed it very much. But I do think it's interesting that when I grew up hearing jokes about the Irish and how stupid they were, how simple they were, how primitive and backward they were, how what a terrible country it was and stuff, I don't hear them now. And why is that? Why is it the issue of anti-Irish racism isn't an issue, as it were?

And that's not to say that it's completely disappeared. Again, Irish traveller communities are amongst the most highly represented in prison populations, certainly in other areas of exile and marginality. But I think it's because Ireland's relationship to Britain has changed really dramatically over the last 50 years and particularly in the last 30 years.

So, it's no longer in a subordinated economic relationship to a more powerful colonial country. It joined the EU as the UK did in 1973. But it sees itself in an equal partnership notionally in the European Union. It joined the euro. It dumped the currency that was linked to the pound sterling in 2002.

So nearly 20 years on and 100 years since the partition of Ireland in May 1921-- next year's the centenary of that-- there is a general absence of anti-Irish racism. And that isn't a post-racial fantasy. It doesn't make white British people feel superior any more to diminish and ridicule Irish people. They don't refrain from doing so, I think, because of the extent of diversity training, or they don't do it because they've completed an online course in unconscious bias.

I think anti-Irish racism is untenable because it doesn't reflect the social relations of colonialism anymore. It has no traction, and anti-Irish racism doesn't make sense in that way. Colonial relations have changed. So, the Irish in Britain are more fully white. They're not subject to racism as they were. And I think that's problematic. Is that a good thing that the Irish have become white, as it were, and that they've done this through joining the club of whiteness that's represented by the European Union? And that doesn't feel so good, as it were.

But I think it does-- it frames thing. And again, I think that all forms-- there's not less bad forms of racism and stuff like that. It is important, I think, to think of racism in specificity. And that's the message that Stuart Hall developed really is these specificities that are attached to race and racism, how they are located in particular dimensions of colonial history.

And I wasn't really sure, again, how to finish this talk, as it were, but then, incredibly again in these Black History Month and this development of this decolonize the curriculum, I attended a workshop where my colleague Jenny Douglas presented or discussed this paper by Stuart Hall about teaching race. I had never heard of it, and it's from 1980.

Please excuse the expletive there. But it's, how long ago is that? And I thought I knew his work reasonably well. And it's this fantastic, fantastic essay about teaching race, which addresses all of the things that I've come across in my current reading around racism and ethnicity in contemporary prison environments and subsequently. It's like Stewart was saying this 40 years ago, and it's one of the reasons for that in a way is the way he worked. His work is dispersed across so many different areas in little essays here and little contributions there and stuff like that.

But he says here, "We have to uncover for ourselves in our own understanding, as well as for the students we're teaching, the often deep structural factors which have a tendency to persistently not only generate racial practices and structures, but reproduce themselves through time and which account for the extraordinarily immoveable character." And again, I suppose that this exactly addresses this fantasy of post-racism, the way racism in a particular society manifests itself, and how its deeply resistant character to attempts of amelioration, good feeling, gentle reform, and so on.

So, I feel Stuart Hall has as ever an enormous amount to teach us. I think a journey is a nice way of looking at ways of perhaps retrieving this article from the depths of the British Library where it seems to be buried behind a paywall and stuff.

But I started this lecture saying I wanted to do three things. I'm not exactly sure if I've done those three things, but I end it, I suppose, by saying I want to ask how white people can talk about whiteness to counter racism. Are we at a crossroads? Is this a particularly significant time to be having these discussions? And how can we begin them? So, I guess that's my question to you. And I'll shut up for a bit, take a gulp of water. And if there are questions and a discussion to follow, that would be great Thank you very much.

[MUSIC PLAYING]