



**Social theory beyond whiteness**

**University of Cambridge**

**Department of Sociology**

**21 September**

9.00-10.00. Registration – Department of Sociology, Committee Room.

10.00-11.00. First keynote presentation, Professor Gurminder Bhambra: Desegregating Knowledge: From 'Ethnographic Charity' to Double Consciousness.

11.00-11.30. Coffee/Tea break, Committee Room.

11.30-13.00. First session, Decoloniality:

- a) Shey Fyffe, Birmingham City University: Whose truth? A Critique of 'white' Sociology.
- b) Annette Tony-Fadipe, University of East Anglia: The Decolonisation Project.
- c) Christopher Cunningham, University of Essex: Colonialism, Categorization, and Higher Education.

13.00-14.00: Lunch, Committee Room.

14.00-16.00. Second session, Redeveloping theories:

- a) Daphne Martschenko, University of Cambridge: Normalizing Race in Gifted Education Through Biopower: Public Education, Segregation, and Spaces of White Exceptionalism.
- b) Mariam Shah, University of Central Lancashire: A Phenomenological perspective of the potential decision making outcomes of a homogenous bench.
- c) Kwame Sekyere, London School of Economics and Political Science: How can we understand the recent animalisation of Black public figures, using W.G. Runciman's theory of 'social' equality?
- d) Jo Shah, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama: Situating Cultural Studies within the praxis of whiteness theory.

16.00-16.30. Coffee/tea break.

16.30-17.30. Second keynote presentation, Dr Brett St Louis: Reconsidering racial eliminativism

## **Paper abstracts:**

### **Professor Gurminder Bhambra, University of Sussex: Desegregating Knowledge: From 'Ethnographic Charity' to Double Consciousness:**

In this talk, I examine the relationship between race, segregation, and the epistemology of social science. I focus, in particular, on the community studies of 'Middletown' carried out in the United States across the twentieth century and draw connections between the epistemological narrowness that framed these studies and more recent ethnographic work such as Arlie Hochschild's *Strangers in their own Land*. I argue for the necessity of expanding the horizons within which we work - a task that also involves desegregating our intellectual traditions - and use DuBois's arguments for 'double consciousness' to critique the limitations of 'ethnographic charity'.

### **Shey Fyffe, Birmingham City University: Whose truth? A Critique of 'white' Sociology:**

This paper, in engagement with the epistemological position of 'Black sociology' as presented in Joyce Ladner's "The death of white Sociology" (1973), presents a critique of mainstream sociological theorisations of race. The argument presented details the failure of mainstream (alternatively referred to as 'white') Sociology in properly addressing the systemic nature of racism in western society when discussing social problems afflicting Black communities at higher rates than other ethnic groups.

The overall failure of mainstream sociology to effectively situate racial inequality in contemporary society within the historical context of European colonialism, imperialism and transatlantic African slavery highlights the epistemic privilege afforded to western structures of knowledge production. The institute of the university is cited as an active participant in the perpetuation of this privilege.

The paper presents the developing interdisciplinary field of Black studies in the UK as a tool that is imperative in the process of dismantling hegemonic narratives in sociological discourse surrounding race and inequality. The inclusion of Black studies in critical race research gives platform to emerging narratives of Black experiences, drawing attention to ongoing societal biases working against Black lives.

### **Annette Tony-Fadipe, University of East Anglia: The Decolonisation Project:**

Much of the discussion around decolonisation has remained theoretical and discourse-heavy; hence, this thesis seeks to move beyond the theoretical position and into a practical one. It argues that while many of those who are upheld as the key canons of decolonisation discourse are incredibly important in shaping our understanding of the concept, they are not as useful in helping us understand its practicalities and how to realistically implement decolonisation. Rather, those within the movement and academia should look to the knowledge being produced by activists and students of this current age who can offer clearer and more accurate insights as to how decolonisation would work within the specific context of the higher education institutions of today, and our current

political economy. It is from these insights, therefore, that ‘decolonisation’ can actually be developed from an idea to a reality. This thesis will first critically engage with the ‘decolonisation project’ in terms of why it is important and how it is understood; followed by interviews and conversations with Black decolonisation activists, from which practical solutions for decolonising curricula and higher education institutions are expounded in the conclusion.

**Christopher Cunningham, University of Essex: Colonialism, Categorization, and Higher Education:**

Dominance of whiteness within the academy is examined using recognition that universities within the UK are historically rooted in European conceptions of knowledge. Founded on principles of progress which not only justified the expansion of empires, but played a practical role in their execution, ideas built on division persist. In an act of academic deviance which aims to protest against what is commonly valued within the social theory canon, this paper is written in an essay style which purposely disregards the mention of individual social theorists, or indeed, any specific research. The linkages between colonialism, modernity, and neo-liberalism, which have shaped inclusion and exclusion within the university, are mapped on a historical timeline to demonstrate that the political workings of contemporary higher education institutions are systematically on par with the workings of empire, using methods of categorization and assimilation to ensure their continuation and success. I discuss how, within the changing landscape of higher education, categorization inadvertently disrupts the traditional power dynamics with which the university was built, leaving all people exposed to increased bureaucratic governance; it is within these changing power dynamics that ‘decolonizing’ projects arise, and the need for understanding the historical exclusion of people racialized as non-white within the social theory canon occurs. It is the power operating behind the categorization which has, and continues to cause exclusion, and this exclusion extends beyond ‘non-whiteness’. An open approach to what constitutes social theory, and to whose social theory is acknowledged, holds potential to build bridges across constructed divisions.

**Daphne Martschenko, University of Cambridge: Normalizing Race in Gifted Education Through Biopower: Public Education, Segregation, and Spaces of White Exceptionalism:**

Canonical social theorist Michel Foucault’s biopower incorporates “strategies for intervention upon collective existence in the name of life and health” and “characteristically entails a relation between ‘letting die’ (*laissez mourir*) and making live (*faire vivre*)—that is to say strategies for the governing of life (Rabinow & Rose, 2006). Today, biopower can be adjusted to explore issues pertaining to race, racialization, and racism. This paper uses biopower to examine race and racism within systems of education—studying the critical historical events, political conflicts, and educational policies of segregation, which shape the underrepresentation of colored and poor bodies in the most academically coveted environment in public education: gifted education.

This paper argues that gifted education is built into the language of financed-driven biopower— a mode of regulating the politics of race, class, equity, and education. Gifted education has become a convincing means through which to perpetuate the

normalization of conceptions of race and class in schools and society which intrinsically value particular bodies at the expense of others. “Empirical” measurements of ability represent an enduring history of imperial (mis)uses and the medicalization of ‘ability’ to validate race and class-based differences in academic achievement. The legacy of this ‘empirical’ practice also informs current attempts to introduce genetics-infused research into education policy, which risk further solidifying the exclusionary borders of gifted education (Asbury & Plomin, 2013; Kovas et al, 2017). This paper uses biopower to explore how contemporary Scientific research may regulate and normalize the exiled positions of particular individuals within gifted education.

**Mariam Shah, University of Central Lancashire: A Phenomenological perspective of the potential decision making outcomes of a homogenous bench:**

This paper will review the potential impact to judicial decision making, in the magistrate’s courts, due to the over representation of magistrates who are white and middle-class. Phenomenology will be used to provide a framework and insight into how our individual perspectives shape our understanding of the world we live in, and everything which we experience within it. Phenomenology espouses that our individual perspective is tainted by our respective ‘lifeworlds’, which informs us of what is familiar and ‘normal’, and what is alien and ‘abnormal’. ‘Lifeworlds’ are unique and distinct to the individual, and are constructed by our own experiences, ideologies from the society/culture we live in or affiliate to, and the historical information which has been passed down to us. Individual ‘lifeworlds’ can result in collective understanding in instances whereby cultural or historical factors are shared by members of the same or similar group(s), or in instances of subscription to identical ‘spheres’ of ideology (i.e. religion, art, etc). When individuals ascribe to the same ideological ‘spheres’, or are members of the same groups, the prevalence of dominant ideologies appear at the fore. The homogeneity of the current magistracy results in meaning and interpretation which is bounded by a white and middle-class interpretation of the world. This paper will explore whether it is possible to understand or give meaning to experiences or situations which are beyond our own ‘lifeworlds’, and extend into the ‘alien’ or ‘abnormal’.

**Kwame Sekyere, London School of Economics and Political Science: How can we understand the recent animalisation of Black public figures, using W.G. Runciman’s theory of ‘social’ equality?:**

The issue being addressed is the recent animalisation of Black public figures. Three cases will be analysed: Michelle Obama being referred to as an “ape in heels”, Cécile Kyenge and Christiane Taubira being compared to a monkey. This essay argues that W.G. Runciman’s theory of Social Equality (Runciman, 1967) provides an effective framework through which we can understand the issue.

Runciman’s theory makes the claim that all inequalities of status are inequalities of respect unless they can be proved to be inequalities of praise, in his theory, ‘praise’ is analogous to ‘achievement’. It may be argued I have erred in using the theory of an early 20<sup>th</sup> century White male to understand the experiences of Black women.

My primary defence for using this theory is derived from the legal concept of a hostile witness, where a witness meant to be giving evidence supporting one argument actually

gives evidence that supports the opposing argument. The evidence gained from this witness, of course, carries more weight because the witness had no impetus or incentive to speak in favour of the opposing side.

I conclude that animalisation is used as a tool to justify views of racial supremacy. The Black women are animalised in order to remove their ability to prove that their high status is based on achievement, or praise. In seeing them as apes, no matter what they achieve, they cannot justify their high status, making their high status an inequality of respect and therefore socially unjust.

**Jo Shah, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama: Situating Cultural Studies within the praxis of whiteness theory:** The paper uses discourses on 'whiteness' as a framework to interrogate the contexts and evolution of the Cultural Studies discipline. Drawing on the ideas and life of Stuart Hall, the paper attempts to define a position for the discipline within the praxis of social and critical theories, and asks whether Cultural Studies original ideologies have become lost to the very cultural hegemony it once exposed? Or does the discipline still hold its original potential for challenging racialised cultural discourses?

**Dr Brett St Louis, Goldsmiths University of London: Reconsidering racial eliminativism:** This presentation evaluates critiques of racial eliminativism as deeply problematic. Within these reservations, racial eliminativism is regarded as at best an apolitical evasion of race or enabling dangerous notions of an already-existing postracial or post-racist society. I hope to offer a more nuanced view and specific defence of racial eliminativism as offering an important epistemological and methodological intervention: an eliminativist approach can insist upon conceptual clarification and ontological specificity with regard to race and also draw attention to the extra-theoretical function of race within political projects and racism. I demonstrate this propensity in relation to understanding certain contemporary appeals to whiteness, notably the travails of the 'white working class' and the supposed radicalism of attendant popular sentiments and anti-elite, anti-globalisation politics.