



Critical Race Theory in Singapore

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Origins of CRT

- Derrick Bell, first tenured African-American professor at Harvard Law
- *Race, Racism, and American Law* (1970)
- The Third World Coalition (1980s)
- “Alternative Class” (1983)
- “New Developments in Critical Race Theory” (1987)
- Crenshaw: “Sometimes you gotta fake it until you make it”
- Critical Race Theory Workshop, Madison, WI (1989)
- Interdisciplinarity, radical change
- CRT now in many countries (Canada, UK, Australia, India, etc.) and disciplines (Education, Sociology, Comparative Literature, History, etc.)

Key Themes

- Critique of liberalism (as upholding inequality despite its supposed commitment to equality)
 1. Color-blindness
 2. Merit and Meritocracy
 3. Equality of opportunity over equality of results
- Interest Convergence
 1. *Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954
 2. Derrick Bell: Civil rights advances in the US for Black people tend to coincide with the self-interest of white elites.
- (Counter-)Storytelling
 1. Recognition that dominant narratives are constructed and can be opposed by counter-narratives.
- Intersectionality
 1. Against essentialism
 2. Focusing on intersecting vectors of oppression
- White Privilege
 1. Social, political, and economic privileges that benefit whites over non-whites.
- Microaggressions
 1. Casual, daily, cumulative harassment faced by minorities. Coined by psychiatrist Chester M. Pierce

Relevance to Singapore

- James Baldwin: “History is not the past. It is the present. We carry out history with us.”
- What’s Critical about Critical Race Theory?
 - Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach” (1845): “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.”
 - Mari Matsuda, ASA 2019: “We cannot talk about the history of race in the United States without confronting empire and without confronting capitalism and anyone who reads our work without doing this is misreading.”
- What’s race?
 - Stuart Hall, Du Bois Lectures, Harvard, April 1994: “When Europeans of the Old World first encountered the peoples and cultures of the New World in the 1400s, they put to themselves a great question: not “Are you not a son and a brother, are you not a daughter and a sister?” ... but rather: “Are these true men? Do they belong to the same species as us? Or are they born of another creation?”
 - Barnor Hesse, “Raceocracy” (2013): “[Race] is colonially assembled [...]”

Asking the wrong questions?

- David Roediger, *Class, Race, and Marxism* (2017): “Academics and even activists do not get to determine popular usages and social relations matter more than names for them.”
- Why do some people insist that antiracism or critical race theory are ‘American’ imports? Why does this only work in one direction? After all no one claims that Edward Said of ‘importing’ ideas from Southeast Asia when he extensively cited and drew on Syed Hussein Alatas’ work.

Discussion Questions

Does Chinese privilege exist in Singapore? If you think it doesn't, how do you account for government policies that appear to favor Chinese Singaporeans over minorities, such as the Special Assistance Plan or immigration policies designed to maintain the “racial balance.” Without a concept of Chinese privilege, how do you understand the cumulative, daily racism faced by minorities—whether in terms of microaggressions or employment and housing discrimination—that Chinese Singaporeans do not have to contend with? On the other hand, imagine a poor, Chinese single parent living in a rental flat, working multiple low-wage jobs, and struggling to survive. Does Chinese privilege have any meaning in this case? Is she privileged in some ways, but not others? How does the concept of racial privilege interact with class?

Discussion Questions

There are often cases in Singapore where jobs ads require candidates to speak Mandarin. Some see this as code for Chinese, especially when it isn't clear why that particular job would require Mandarin proficiency. Additionally, there are cases where employers have inquired whether candidates eat pork, claiming that the office often goes out for lunch together and it would be difficult to accommodate someone who doesn't eat pork. Moreover, certain jobs restrict employees from wearing the hijab/tudung. Are these requirements or preferences racist? Why or why not? Should minorities make more of an effort to fit in with the majority at work or in social situations? Does this place the burden of extra work on them? Do minorities already do this work? Should they refuse and, if so, what impacts might that have on them?

Discussion Questions

Race is Singapore is explicitly governed and policed. It appears on all our identity cards, it's present in our housing rules, it defines our GRCs, and so on. Race is clearly deeply embedded in our social fabric. CRT tends to hold that the concept of race is created and maintained as an instrument of domination and that racism is deeply embedded in society in such a way that benefits dominant groups. Some theorists, like Derrick Bell, have argued that significant improvement for racial minorities tends to only happen if it also coincides with the interests of dominant groups. Based on your understanding of Singaporean history and society, do you think that this concept of interest convergence is applicable to Singapore? Why or why not?

Discussion Questions

Like other “postcolonial” states, Singapore has been deeply shaped by colonialism and racial capitalism. Wealth inequality in Singapore is among the highest in Southeast Asia and roughly corresponds to racial lines. Given this context, has meritocracy failed? Alternatively, is the concept of meritocracy itself a fig leaf for the unequal distribution of opportunities, resources, and wealth? If meritocracy works, how do we explain persistent racial gaps?

Discussion Questions

In 2019, an advertisement for a government initiative to promote e-payments featured a Chinese Singaporean actor in brownface. This was only the most recent in a long list of brownface incidents in Singapore. Havas, the agency that created the ad, stated that the goal was to show that “e-payment is for everyone [and thus the actor] appears as characters from different walks of life in Singapore, bringing home that everyone can e-pay.” Preeti Nair and Subhas Nair later released a music video parodying and critiquing the ad. The reaction in the Singaporean media and by the government against the music video was far harsher than against the ad. Why does calling something racist enrage some people more than racism itself? As race critical scholar Alana Lentin writes, “defining racism has become a site of political struggle” (2020).

Discussion Questions

It is difficult to get reliable statistics on the death penalty in Singapore. However, it appears that those executed by the state for drug offences tend to be either racial minorities or poor, and often both. Why is this the case? If there is a pattern here, what is it about our society that makes certain groups of people more vulnerable to the death penalty in Singapore?

Discussion Questions

In 2019, there were 293,000 foreign workers employed in the construction industry, the vast majority of whom come from India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. Their working and living conditions are extremely harsh and unsanitary. Some have argued that the exploitation of migrant worker labor is accompanied by their racialization as inferior. Indeed, racist jokes and stereotypes about dark-skinned migrant workers are common and the state has been careful to house them far away from HDB estates. Do you agree that the racialization of migrant workers in Singapore serves to justify the exploitation of their labor? Why or why not? Would combatting racist discourse about migrant workers improve their material conditions, either in the short term or the long term?

Discussion Questions

Critical Race Theory is also Critical Race Praxis. What future do you see for a critical project that focuses on race and racism in Singapore? Do you think that working within or outside of the system is the best way to bring about change in Singapore? To what extent does working within the system always lead to cooptation and moderation? To what extent is it possible to work outside the system in Singapore without risking state repression?