Towards a theoretical synergy: Critical race theory and decolonial thought in Trumpamerica and Brexit Britain

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Abstract
This article argues for a theoretical synergy between critical race theory (CRT) and decolonial thought. The author propounds that while CRT and decolonial thought have different scopes, we can synergize them in analysis. Specifically, decolonial thought’s transnational focus on coloniality complements CRT’s ‘presentist’ focus on national racialized social systems. The author displays the efficacy of this theoretical synergy by discussing Brexit Britain and Trumpamerica. While CRT is helpful for analysing how these political projects built upon contemporary post-racial ideology and racialized emotions, it struggles to deal with the postcolonial melancholia that runs through both political moments. Decolonial thought is thus required to tease out the transnational, historical dynamics of coloniality embodied in Brexit Britain and Trumpamerica. This is particularly apparent in the way both projects involve a desire to return the nation to its imperial glory, and to keep those who are deemed to be opposed to Western civilization – particularly ‘the Muslim’ – outside of the nation’s borders.

Keywords
Critical race theory, decolonial thought, postcolonialism, race and ethnicity, social theory

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Critical race theory and decolonial sociology: Building a dialogue

As a child, I used to enjoy eating two scoops of ice cream at the same time: one chocolate flavoured, the other strawberry flavoured. It never occurred to me that we ought to create a ‘strawberry-chocolate flavoured’ ice cream, rather, I appreciated the differences they both brought to the table. I think that we can do social theory in a similar way, acknowledging that theories have essential differences without attempting to hierarchize or synthesize them. I label this practice ‘theoretical synergy’, and in this article, I show the efficacy of this synergy by looking at critical race theory (CRT) and decolonial thought.

Central to my argument is that while CRT and decolonial thought have essential differences, we can synergize these traditions. In order to display the efficacy of this theoretical synergy, I discuss the political projects of Brexit Britain and Trumpamerica. While CRT is helpful for analysing how both these projects built upon contemporary post-racial ideology and racialized emotions, it struggles to deal with the postcolonial melancholia that runs through both political moments. Decolonial thought addresses these CRT blindspots through its transnational, temporally-connected focus on coloniality. Decolonial thought thus allows us to analyse how both the Brexit and Trump campaigns revolved around a desire to return the nation to its imperial glory, and to keep those who are deemed to be opposed to Western civilization – particularly ‘the Muslim’ – outside of the nation’s borders.

Decoloniality beyond the sociology of race

This article picks up on a tension that I have experienced in sociology. Namely, while various scholars have accelerated a ‘decolonial turn’ in sociology (for instance Alatas and Sinha, 2017; Bhambra, 2014; Connell, 2007; de Santos, 2014; Go, 2016; Rodriguez et al., 2016), others remain confused about what decolonial thought entails. In particular, many scholars conflate decolonial thought with a general ‘sociology of race’. This conflation is particularly apparent where I am based – in Britain – where discussions have treated decoloniality and ‘decolonizing’ as synonymous to ‘anti-racism’. Thus, we regularly see claims made that decolonial thought is needed in the social sciences because it ‘draws our attention to the whiteness of the university staff body’ (Doharty et al., 2020: 2), because minority scholars ‘work[] themselves into the ground by sitting on and contributing to, a disproportionate number of . . . Race Equality Staff networks, and Race Equality launches’ (Doharty et al., 2020: 9), and because ‘the knowledge producers within (UK) academic institutions are still disproportionately white’ (Johnson, 2020: 91). Through this idea of decoloniality as a synonym for anti-racism, we thus see claims that decolonization ‘goes beyond shoehorning POC [people of color] on to reading lists . . . so social scientists not only question but challenge structural racisms and sexisms’ (Begum and Saini, 2019: 200). What we see in Britain, therefore, is a slippage between a vocabulary of ‘decolonizing’ and ‘decoloniality’ with terms such as whiteness and anti-racism.

In order address this confusion, scholars have recently questioned the differences between decolonial thought and the sociology of race (see Go, 2018; Magubane, 2013).
A consensus in these debates is that decolonial thought is *transnational* and largely *historical*, seeking to trace the epistemic and material consequences and realities of coloniality. By contrast, it is not necessary for the sociology of race to adopt this transnational or historical approach, nor decolonial thought’s focus on imperial and colonial relations. Indeed, if we look at a dominant approach in the sociology of race – critical race theory (CRT) – it goes *directly against* decolonial thought’s global and historical focus. Indeed, the tension between CRT and decolonial thought runs deep.

**CRT and decolonial thought: Star-crossed lovers?**

Much like the concept of ‘decolonizing’, CRT has become a buzz-term thrown around the social sciences to refer to any research on racism (Meghji, 2019a). By contrast, in this article, I am understanding CRT specifically through Bonilla-Silva’s (1997) racialized social systems approach. Racialized social systems refer to ‘societies in which economic, political, social, and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories or races’ (Bonilla-Silva, 1997: 469). Racism is thus conceptualized as a material structure of inequality, involving the unequal distribution of societal resources across the racial hierarchy. Importantly, CRT is not content with just leaving us with this structural definition of racism, but it also seeks to analyse how this system is reproduced. Two reproductive mechanisms are of particular interest to us in this article: racial ideology and racialized emotions. Racial ideologies are ‘the racially based frameworks used by actors to explain and justify (dominant race) or challenge (subordinate race or races) the racial status quo’ (Bonilla-Silva, 2010: 9). Connected to such ideologies are racialized emotions, described as ‘the socially engendered emotions in racialized societies’ (Bonilla-Silva, 2019: 3). These racialized emotions – such as white people’s fear of the ‘Black thug’ or ‘Muslim terrorist’ – form the basis for generating a sense of group membership in the racial structure. Through these concepts of racial ideology and emotions, therefore, CRT allows for the simultaneous analysis of the macro, meso and micro levels of racism.

Beyond its contributions to the study of racism, CRT has offered a disciplinary home for those who have been marginalized by mainstream sociology’s desire to move ‘beyond race’. Indeed, I was initially one of those residents of the CRT disciplinary home. However, I soon became interested in processes that I was struggling to comprehend through CRT’s racialized social system approach; questions pertaining to global issues of climate catastrophe, or the Global North’s exploitation of the Global South. I realized that these are processes requiring a more globally oriented paradigm of thought than CRT. It was this desire for a more globally oriented paradigm that pushed me towards exploring decolonial thought; in this exploration I quickly appreciated that there are essential inconsistencies between CRT and decolonial thought.

One of the biggest tensions is between decolonial thought’s focus on coloniality, and CRT’s focus on contemporary racism. As Bonilla-Silva (2015: 74) states, CRT argues that we must study the ‘contemporary foundation’ of racial inequality outside of its colonial foundations, thus turning away from ‘the sins [of the] past (e.g., slavery, colonization, and genocide)’. This is a legitimate endeavour from CRT; reducing racism to a
legacy of the past obfuscates how people still benefit from racism in the present day, and consequently maintain an interest in reproducing the present racial structure. Nevertheless, in virtue of its strong desire to study contemporary racism outside of its colonial roots, CRT is in tension with decolonial thought’s focus on coloniality.

Decolonial scholars have used the concept of ‘coloniality’ to signal how the relations of power born in colonialism outlived the collapse of colonial administrations. As Maldonado-Torres (2007: 243) clarifies:

[Coloniality] refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism.

In contrast to CRT, therefore, the concept of coloniality links the historical events of colonialism with contemporary inequalities. Such a continuity between the past and the present is well typified by how ‘the West’ has consistently positioned itself as being the epistemologically and materially dominant ‘centre’ of the globe even after the decolonization of most of the world. Thus, the logic of coloniality underlying the West’s mission to ‘bring civilization’ to the rest of the world during colonialism hundreds of years ago, is precisely the same logic that underlies more recent Western economic, political and military intervention in the ‘unruly’ Global South. As Grosfoguel (2017: 158) thus describes the past half-millennium:

During the last 520 years of the ‘European/Euro-North-American capitalist/patriarchal modern/colonial world-system’ we went from ‘convert to Christianity or I’ll kill you’ in the 16th century, to ‘civilize or I’ll kill you’ in the 18th and 19th centuries, to ‘develop or I’ll kill you’ in the 20th century, and more recently, the ‘democratize or I’ll kill you’ at the beginning of the 21st century.

This divergence between decolonial thought’s focus on coloniality, and CRT’s focus on contemporary racism, creates a methodological difference between historical analysis and presentism. One reason why CRT is so appealing to scholars in the United States is because it provides immediate critiques to the status quo. From Crenshaw’s (1988) call for legal reform, through to calls for educational reorganization (Ladson-Billings, 2003), CRT has offered analysis, and suggested reformations, of the here-and-now. By contrast, decolonial thought denies that the present exists as a discrete temporal event, instead arguing that ‘it is impossible to conceive of the present and the future as separate and distinct from the past, for the past is constitutive of the present and, as such, is inherently reconstituted within the future’ (Stewart-Harawira, 2005: 42). Through such temporal linking, decolonial thought embraces an historical approach which traces how the logics, processes and practices put in place during colonialism continue to shape the present and future world. This may involve, as Dussel (1999) shows, linking the current climate crisis with the desire for unlimited capital accumulation set in motion by European colonialism.

Through these temporal links, decolonial thought adopts a more transnational scope than CRT. CRT has mostly analysed racialized social systems as nationally discrete social structures, and argues that to study these distinct structures one must be specific to each
nation’s ‘own racial situations’ (Bonilla-Silva, 2007: 192). This nation-based style of analysis has buttressed a tradition of CRT in the US which concerns itself with analysing the US’s racialized social system divorced from the nation’s global, past and present relations (Meghji, 2020). Indeed, Goldberg and Essed (2002: 4–5) originally applied this critique of state-centrism to CRT as it emerged in legal studies, and their critique remains appropriate when we consider its development in education studies and sociology. As the authors state:

‘Critical race theory’ foremostly has been a theoretical exercise identified strongly with the one discipline of law in the United States of America. . . . At the same time, critical legal race theory is unfortunately marked by an American parochialism, with being caught up with the more or less restricted considerations of legal structures, conditions, and rationalities in the US context. Scant attention is paid either to the applicability and implications of its key concepts outside of that context, or perhaps more importantly . . . to thinking its central concepts through their globalizing significance and circulation.

While Goldberg and Essed (2002: 5) called for CRT to ‘face outwards in its conceptual disposition’, the internationalization of the paradigm has not shifted its commitment to state-centrism. In Britain, for instance, CRT has rapidly grown as a distinct paradigm – separate to the sociology of race – since the turn of the 21st century (see Warmington, 2020). However, even in this iteration, CRT has overlooked Britain’s many ‘anti-colonial’ sociologies of race, and instead prioritized analysis of the nation’s educational institutions in a way that elides the possibility of transnational enquiry (Warmington, 2020).² Perhaps, therefore, decolonial thought would claim CRT is guilty of methodological nationalism, described by Go (2009: 783) as:

. . . understanding a ‘society’ or its forms, relations, and processes by looking only within the spatial confines of that society, i.e. the confines of the particular nation-state.

Contrastingly to CRT, decolonial thought unearts global interlinkages. For instance, consider the case of the militarization of the police in the US – a key issue in contemporary racism. As Go (2020) shows, such militarization of the US police started in the early 20th century primarily as a means of punitively surveying and controlling the racially sub-dominant. However, the tactics used by this police – such as the creation of mobile squads and police intelligence divisions – derived from US military practices in its colonies (Go, 2020). In this regard, Go’s (2020) decolonial approach creates not only a temporal link between a contemporary issue of police militarization with its historical origins, but also a transnational link between ‘racism at home’ with US ‘imperialism abroad’ in a way that transcends CRT’s bifurcated understanding of racialized processes.

So here we are, sailing between the Charybdis of CRT with its presentist focus on the ‘contemporary racial structure’ and its emphasis on the US’s racialized social system, and the Scylla of decolonial thought with its focus on coloniality, and its historical, transnational approach. Despite these inconsistencies, I argue that we can adopt a ‘both and’ approach with decolonial thought and CRT.

By this ‘both and’ approach, I am not advocating a synthesis, but a theoretical synergy. Social theory has largely been concerned with synthesizing disparate paradigms, as seen, for instance, in the repeated attempts – from Bourdieu and Habermas, through to
Goffman, Giddens and Archer – to bring subjectivism and objectivism together in a single framework. Indeed, there have even been attempts to synthesize CRT with decolonial thought. Christian (2019), for instance, calls for analysis of the ‘global racialized social system’. Within such a global system it is argued that between a global white/Black hierarchy, there are a range of intermediary groups, such as Brahmin Indians, that receive forms of racialized privilege (Christian, 2019). However, we need to ask why we desire such syntheses in the first place. This question exposes a belief in sociology that a theory must be a ‘theory of everything’, and that if a theoretical paradigm cannot explain something, then it either needs to be revised through a synthesis, or simply thrown away.

However, it is this very belief that a theory must be a theory of everything that decolonial thought has critiqued as being an extension of colonial logic (Bhambra, 2014). An epistemic principle of coloniality is that Western theories are able to achieve universality, whereas non-Western theories cannot speak beyond their provincial contexts (Bhambra, 2014). By contrast, decolonial thought fosters a practice of ‘pluriversality’. Rather than espousing a hierarchy between different theories, or claiming that some theories can achieve universality, pluriversality involves ‘a horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions’ (Mbembe, 2016: 37). Pluriversality thus involves different theories ‘meeting’ one another to reach the common goal of critical knowledge production; this dynamic is captured in the practice of theoretical synergy.

Towards theoretical synergy

Theoretical synergy starts from the premise that social reality can be studied from different theoretical viewpoints, and that this theoretical pluralism is essential for understanding certain phenomena in their full complexity. In particular, I am interested in developing a synergy between CRT and decolonial thought, where I believe that the two can be used in tandem to provide lucid analysis of social realities. While I believe this synergy can be used to study a variety of phenomena, in this article I focus in on Trumpamerica and Brexit Britain.3

Trump, Brexit and CRT

The first half of our ‘synergy’ comes from CRT. In particular, CRT is useful because it shows how Brexit Britain and Trumpamerica were fuelled by, and reproduced, specific racialized emotions and ideologies.

Central to the CRT framework is that racial ideologies are not concerned with deception as much as perception. Racial ideologies thus ‘set paths for interpreting information’ concerning racial matters (Bonilla-Silva, 2010: 26), acting as conceptual schemes that shape social practice. Of importance for understanding Trumpamerica and Brexit Britain is the ideology of post-racialism. Post-racialism refers to the belief that we have transcended racism. Importantly, post-racialism does not deny the existence of racial inequality, but – as a frame through which people view reality – allows actors to explain racial inequality away as being the result of non-racist events (Meghji, 2019b). For instance, this may involve:
Black educational disadvantage [being] recast as Black students being ‘unacademic’ . . . and Black overrepresentation in the criminal justice system [being] reinterpreted as Black criminality. (Meghji and Saini, 2018: 673)

Both Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign and the campaign for Britain to leave the EU in 2016 played upon such post-racial schemes of perception adopted by many white voters. In particular, both campaigns cultivated arguments that whites were becoming victims of racial injustice in their respective nations. Such representations of whites as racial victims only makes sense through the lens of post-racialism; by arguing that we have moved ‘beyond racism’, whites are able to paradoxically claim that all racial groups start on an equal level playing field, and consequently that any perceived preferential treatment given to racialized minorities (affirmative action, preferential hiring, educational scholarships) is thus anti-white.

In Trump’s 2016 campaign, we see this post-racial frame of white victimhood taking centre stage. A well-known example of this is recounted in Hochschild’s (2016) Strangers in Their Own Land, a book which was retrospectively labelled as being a key text for understanding Trump’s electoral success. Focusing on Louisiana, Hochschild (2016) examines how white people (in the working and middle classes) were experiencing growing levels of deprivation, and blamed these declining standards on ‘line cutters’: Black Americans and immigrants who were receiving preferential treatment in education and hiring. Furthermore, Hochschild shows that such white people construed themselves as being stigmatized through being labelled as ‘red-necks’ and ‘bigoted’. It was through this perceived combination of material and symbolic exclusion that white voters then construed themselves as – in Hochschild’s language – strangers in their own land.

Such emotions of white marginality were further galvanized in Trump’s 2016 campaign. In his electoral speeches, as Lamont et al. (2017) show, Trump directly drew symbolic boundaries towards lower-income white voters to make them feel valued rather than marginalized in their own nation. Of course, this boundary work relied on drawing sharp divisions between ‘indigenous’ white folks with racialized outsiders. Thus, when addressing lower-income white voters at rallies, Trump would often make reference to protecting their jobs from foreign invasion, such as at West Bend, Wisconsin:

[Hillary Clinton] is proposing to print instant work permits for millions of illegal immigrants, taking jobs directly from low-income Americans. I will secure our border, protect our workers, and improve jobs and wages in your community.

Trump’s campaign thus fostered an image that ‘hard-working’ white families were being excluded in their own nation, and that his political programme could restore valuations to these groups (Lamont et al., 2017). It was this logic that underlined Trump’s famous response to Clinton labelling his supporters as ‘deplorables’, with Trump reframing them as ‘hard-working’ patriots:

While my opponent slanders you as deplorable and irredeemable, I call you hard-working American patriots who love your country and want a better future for all of our people . . . Every American is entitled to be treated with dignity and respect in our country.
The post-racialism underlying Trump’s 2016 electoral campaign was similarly iterated in British discourses deployed in garnering voter support to leave the EU. As Virdee and McGeever (2018) show, a central argument deployed by the ‘Leave campaign’ was that the EU’s policy of open borders was leading to a situation where racialized outsiders – ‘the migrants’ – were above ordinary Brits in the material hierarchy. An example of such reasoning is captured in this quote by Nigel Farage (2016), a key figure in the Leave EU campaign:

Open-door migration has suppressed wages in the unskilled labour market, meant that living standards have failed and that life has become a lot tougher for so many in our country.

Indeed, another key politician supporting the Leave campaign – Boris Johnson (2016) – directly evoked the concept of indigeneity when he criticized how the EU’s policy of ‘open borders’ marginalized British workers:

We also need to ask ourselves some hard questions about the impact of 20 years of uncontrolled immigration by low-skilled, low-wage workers – and what many see as the consequent suppression of wages and failure to invest properly in the skills of indigenous young people.

Similarly to the US, therefore, Brexit was presented as a project that could redistribute value back to the victimized, hard-working white families whose social status had been relegated by racialized immigration. In Britain, this narrative gained further traction after the referendum, when the Prime Minister, Theresa May (2017), declared that Brexit was an opportunity to build a Britain that values residents of the (almost exclusively white) towns that voted in high numbers to leave the EU, thus addressing the ‘everyday injustices that ordinary working class families feel are too often overlooked’. Of course, as Shilliam (2020) points out, by using the examples of white constituencies and towns – from Margate to Whitby – to refer to the ‘ordinary working class families’ who feel overlooked and face daily injustices, May simply bolstered the already ascendant post-racial ideology that ‘ordinary’ white folks were the new Black. Indeed, May’s quote shows how post-racialism and racialized emotions of devaluation were not just a pretext for Brexit, but also gained legitimacy as the political project developed.

This legitimacy of post-racialism and emotions of victimhood were further bolstered by mainstream media and political discourse in the aftermath of Trump’s and Brexit’s electoral success. Rather than framing these two projects as instances of racialized nationalism, focusing on the two project’s significant number of (white) middle class supporters, or questioning why racial minorities in both nations did not significantly vote for either project, this discourse simply gave further credence to the idea that Trumpamerica and Brexit Britain were driven by a need to redistribute value to the forgotten ordinary white families and the white working class (Bhambra, 2017). Thus, in Britain there were claims that ‘Brexit voters are not thick, not racist: just poor’ (O’Neill, 2016), that ‘Brits who demand migration control are NOT “motivated by racism”’ (Dixon, 2017), that ‘“Racial self-interest” is not racism’ (Kaufmann, 2017), and, indeed, Skelton (2019) dedicated a book, *Little Platoons*, to the argument that Brexit happened because poor white people in English towns felt excluded. Across the pond in the US,
Trump’s electoral success was described as a ‘revolt of the masses’ (Fallows, 2016), where Trump secured victory ‘by a ... wave of support by the white working class’ who ‘were alienated, forgotten by the political establishment [and] their status challenged by the country’s growing racial diversity’ (Jardina, 2019: 91). In both cases, dominant discourse thus framed the success of Brexit and Trump through the very post-racial, emotive logic from which the two projects emerged.

CRT thus brings a lot to the analytical table when looking at Trumpamerica and Brexit Britain. In particular, CRT enables us to see that both projects stemmed from their respective racialized social systems, within which many white people were increasingly viewing their realities through the lens of post-racialism, and experiencing emotions of devaluation. Trumpamerica and Brexit Britain effectively rode this wave of post-racialism, fostering emotive bonds among ordinary, ‘indigenous’ whites who were increasingly feeling alienated in their own country. The electoral success of both projects merely deepened the legitimacy of these already existing racial ideologies and emotions.

However, the story does not end here. Both Brexit Britain and Trumpamerica connect with transnational and historical processes that CRT is not geared to study. For instance, if we look at two of the most famous slogans from the Leave and Trump campaigns – ‘Take Back Control’ and ‘Make America Great Again’ – we see that they both make reference to imagined national histories. However, it is debateable as to whether CRT is conceptually fit to analyse such instances of nostalgia. While CRT may offer prescient analysis of the racial ideologies and emotions embodied in Trumpamerica and Brexit Britain, in order to fully comprehend the transnational, historical dynamics of the two projects, I argue we need to turn to decolonial thought.

From racialized social systems to postcolonial melancholia

More than a decade before the Brexit campaign fostered imagery of ‘taking back control’, Gilroy (2004: 111) theorized the notion of a British postcolonial melancholia, characterized by an ‘inability to mourn its loss of Empire and accommodate the Empire’s consequences’. Taking Gilroy’s concept, Ashe (2016) describes this melancholia as involving a ‘mixture of guilt and pride which prevents Britain from being able to mourn its imperial history without facing up to the barbarity that this entailed’. Such a postcolonial melancholia was embodied in the Trump and Brexit campaigns, and strengthened in the aftermaths of their electoral victories.

Central to Trump’s campaign, for instance, was the argument that the US used to be a global superpower, but that this imperial greatness had been taken away from the nation. Trump’s campaign, therefore, was not only committed to giving back valuation to white citizens who felt marginalized in their own country (as CRT shows), but also giving valuation back to the nation on a global scale (which decolonial thought can show). This representation of the US’s dwindling imperial power is captured in Trump’s statement when announcing his presidential bid:

Our country is in serious trouble. . . . We don’t have victories anymore. We used to have victories, but we don’t have them. When was the last time anybody saw us beating, let’s say, China in a trade deal? They kill us. I beat China all the time. All the time. . . . When do we beat
Mexico at the border? They’re laughing at us, at our stupidity. . . . The US has become a dumping ground for everybody else’s problems.

In contrast to this apparent state of affairs, Trump thus proposed that his political project could get the US out of its ‘serious trouble’ and restore the nation to its greatness – thus the birth of the ‘Make America Great Again’ slogan (Schaefer, 2020). As Trump clarified in a later speech at the US Naval Academy:

> But we know the truth, we will speak the truth, and we will defend that truth. America is the greatest fighting force for peace, justice, and freedom, in the history of the world. . . . We are going to stand up for our values. . . . We won two world wars, defeated communism and fascism, and put a man on the face of the moon. We cured disease, pioneered science, and produced timeless works of art that inspire the human soul.

From a decolonial perspective, what we see in such arguments are attempts by Trump to reinscribe the coloniality of power, and the coloniality of knowledge. The coloniality of power is seen in the way that Trump attempts to place the US at the centre of the world system as ‘the greatest fighting force for peace, justice, and freedom, in the history of the world’. However, as Dussel (1999) points out, this ‘coloniality of power syndrome’ overlaps with epistemology (knowledge). In his speeches, Trump does not just want to restore US imperial power (‘We won two world wars, defeated communism and fascism’), but also to highlight how the US ought to be the central knowledge producer in the world system (‘We cured disease, pioneered science, and produced timeless works of art that inspire the human soul’). It is this interplay between power and knowledge that we also see in Britain’s postcolonial melancholia.

Britain’s postcolonial melancholia is expressed through its paradoxical ‘little Englander’ spirit. As Valluvan and Kalra (2019) point out, the ‘little Englander’ spirit is paradoxical because on the one hand it is based around the premise that Britain ought to withdraw itself from international affairs, but on the other hand, it is crystallized around the belief in British self-determination and Britain being a global superpower despite its ‘plucky underdog’ status. The fact that Britain colonized one-quarter of the world is seen as emblematic of this little Englander spirit, as Britain is construed as a miniscule island that – despite the odds – managed to create a global empire. The empire, therefore, is a source of national pride as it supposedly signals Britain’s unrivalled work ethic, philanthropy and esteemed civilizational values. Indeed, it was this little Englander spirit and conviction in self-determination that allowed Leave campaigners to argue that the EU eroded the strength of British governance; as Boris Johnson (2016) claimed:

> The independence of this country is being seriously compromised. It is this fundamental democratic problem – this erosion of democracy – that brings me into this fight.

Through crafting ‘little Englander’ utopias of self-determination, the Brexit campaign thus created its own imagery of Britain itself being a European colony; as Johnson (2016) put it, the EU wanted to ‘build a country called Europe’. It was this logic that allowed for MP Anne Widdecombe to describe the decision to leave the EU as a ‘slave revolt’. Of
course, it is in Widdecombe’s comment that we see how Britain’s postcolonial melancholia does not just rely on a longing to return to a status of imperial greatness, but also on what Hall (2017: 145) refers to as a ‘profound historical forgetfulness’ in terms of how Britain ‘knows’ and represents its empire. Britain has an imperial nostalgia because it believes that its empire was a force of good (Meghji, 2020). It was for this reason that during the Brexit referendum, Leave campaigners consistently argued that Britain would be economically sound post-Brexit because they would return to their free trade arrangements with Commonwealth nations. For instance, as Johnson (2016) clarified:

It is absurd that Britain – historically a great free-trading nation – has been unable for 42 years to do a free trade deal with Australia, New Zealand, China, India and America.

Indeed, the ‘profound historical forgetfulness’ is seen here in the fact that Britain did not have ‘free trade’ with such prior colonies so much as an ‘open season’ over their resources. Nevertheless, even in the aftermath of Brexit, Britain’s economic plans revolved around creating what the government officially labelled as an ‘Empire 2.0’, characterized by greater free trade links with African Commonwealth countries (Virdee and McGeever, 2018). While many commentators thus represented Brexit as a turn away from globalization (see Mondon and Winter, 2019), what we really see in Brexit Britain is a plea for a return to a globalization where Britain was – as the (mis)representation holds – a benign, democratic empire, praised in all corners of the world.

Indeed, this colonial nostalgia was echoed by Trump, for instance when he addressed the US Naval Academy by stating:

Together, there is nothing that Americans can’t do. In recent years, and even decades, too many people have forgotten that truth. They’ve forgotten that our ancestors trounced an empire, tamed a continent, and triumphed over the worst evils in history. In every generation there have been cynics and critics who tried to tear down America. It’s not working too well lately. But in recent years the problem grew worse. A growing number used their platforms to denigrate America’s incredible heritage, challenge America’s sovereignty, and weaken America’s pride. (emphasis added)

Just as with Brexit Britain, Trumpamerica positioned the nation as having its ‘sovereignty’ challenged by the current world order, and argued that it could restore a collective ‘pride’ by returning the nation to its former imperial glory. Furthermore, similarly to Brexit Britain, this nostalgia omits histories of colonial violence. When Trump comments that America ‘trounced an empire’ and ‘triumphed over the worst evils in history’, for instance, we overlook how upon independence, the US continued projects of indigenous genocide, exploited the enslaved, and grew into a violent global empire with territories across Asia and Central America (Go, 2020); to many, America was ‘the worst evil[] in history’. Nevertheless, this profound historical forgetfulness is what allows for the US and Britain to position their former empires as being benign and charitable – it allows for these two respective nations to argue that they were at the heart of the modern, democratic world, and despite losing status in recent years, this central location is their rightful place.
We thus see a clear connection between Trumpamerica, Brexit Britain and the logic of coloniality; a logic that CRT is not geared towards understanding. Both projects embodied a desire for a ‘centralization within the world-system’ (Dussel, 1999: 5). Through committing itself to a presentist analysis, CRT loses sight of these links between how ideas and practices of Western centrality and universalism – set in motion in the 15th century – continue to shape contemporary political projects. This limits CRT’s analysis of Brexit Britain and Trumpamerica, because in both cases, the two nations not only positioned themselves as central to the modern world, but also construed certain other populations as being an explicit threat to this logic of Western modernity and centrality. This is particularly apparent when we consider Islamophobia.

Significantly, both the Brexit and Trump campaigns deployed imagery of Muslim immigrants as a simultaneous security and cultural threat. This reflects what postcolonial scholars – notably Said (1978) – have referred to as Orientalism, whereby the figure of ‘the Muslim’ is seen to be antithetical to progressive, modern Western values. Thus, one of Trump’s first acts as president was the so-called ‘Muslim ban’ (Executive Order 13769), an anti-terrorism legislation which placed restrictions on citizens from Muslim-majority countries such as Iran, Syria, Libya and Yemen to settle in the US. This ‘security measure’ directly built upon Trump’s electoral campaign. Analysing Trump’s 2016 electoral speeches, for instance, Lamont et al. (2017) found that the majority of times Trump mentioned ‘immigration’, it was in relation to the dangers of Islamic terrorism. Furthermore, Trump framed Islam as a security threat in virtue of representing the religion as a monolithic pre-modern culture which directly opposes Western civilization. This is typified by his comment in Charlotte, North Carolina:

We will screen out anyone who doesn’t share our values and love our people. Anyone who believes Sharia law supplants American law will not be given an immigrant visa. If you want to join our society, then you must embrace our society, our values and our tolerant way of life.

Trump’s comment also iterates across Britain, with the growing belief that many areas across the nation are now governed by Sharia law (Dearden, 2018). Brexit campaigners effectively capitalized upon this fear of the crumble of Western civilization at the hands of Islam. While Farage used the terrorist attacks in France and Belgium to argue that the ‘EU’s open borders make us less safe’, other Brexit campaigners consistently argued that Turkey’s impending EU membership would be a threat to Britain; as Boris Johnson put it (BBC, 2019):

The public will draw the reasonable conclusion that the only way to avoid having common borders with Turkey is to vote leave and take back control on 23 June.

Frankly, I don’t mind whether Turkey joins the EU, provided the UK leaves the EU.

Such political mobilization around the figure of ‘the Muslim terrorist’ and ‘pre-modern Islam’ in the Brexit campaign was epitomized by Farage standing in front of a billboard picturing male Syrian refugees, with the caption ‘Breaking Point: We must break free of the EU and take back control’. Such imagery, just as with Trump’s electoral speeches,
successfully moulded a centuries-old discourse of Islam as the inverse to the West – a discourse seen in Marx and Weber’s dismissals of the Muslim world as pre-modern and static, and used by the French and British to justify their colonization of the backwards North African and ‘Eastern’ worlds – and applied this discourse to the current political moment. Such a discourse has roots in the logic of Western modernity, and while it was applied in contemporary political projects, it would be a mistake to analyse it as a contemporary innovation of Western thought. This is another reason why decolonial thought, which links the past to the present, and focuses on the enduring logic of coloniality, can capture dimensions of our current political projects and predicaments that CRT struggles to reach with its presentist focus. Thus why, to come back to the theme of this article, I am calling for a theoretical synergy between CRT and decolonial thought.

Concluding thoughts: A plea for theoretical synergy

Nowhere in this article have I developed the argument that decolonial thought or CRT is ‘better’ than the other. I have, by contrast, pointed out that both offer particular benefits when looking at specific case studies – such as Brexit Britain and Trumpamerica. In such a case, we see that CRT helps us to understand how both political projects stemmed from, and reproduced, contemporary racial ideologies and racialized emotions. However, we also have to note that CRT is a framework focused on the ‘contemporary foundation’ of racial inequality. Given this presentist focus, there are dimensions of social reality that CRT struggles to comprehend. With Brexit and Trump, for instance, CRT overlooks the centrality of the postcolonial melancholia in both projects. This longing to return the nation to imperial greatness exemplifies the logic of coloniality; this is why decolonial thought needs to be brought to the table. Decolonial thought is able to show how the epistemic and material power relations that were born in colonialism continue to shape the present. This is particularly apparent with Trumpamerica and Brexit Britain, as both projects embodied ideas of Western modernity and centrality and discourses of Islam as being antithetical to Western civilization. Despite their differing methodological, theoretical and empirical scopes, therefore, CRT and decolonial thought can be used in tandem with one another in order to address each other’s blindspots.

Underlying this article, therefore, is a logic that just because a theory has a blindspot, this does not necessitate we turn away from this conceptual framework, or attempt to ‘synthesize’ it. As Lamont (2004: 171) argues, ‘social life cannot be studied whole, and . . . knowledge production requires cutting into it with a scalpel that often does violence to it’. Theoretical synergy, therefore, becomes a way of doing social theory that acknowledges that different paradigms can comprehend different aspects of social life, and that to do minimal ‘violence’ with our conceptual scalpel, we ought to embrace a theoretical pluralism. A theory does not need to be a theory of everything; we need to collectively embrace this tenet in the social sciences if we are to deepen the analytical capacities of our disciplines.

With regard to CRT and decolonial thought, there are endless possibilities for such theoretical synergy. Research could, for example, investigate alternative contemporary populisms to what I have considered in this article. In Brazil, for instance, Bolsonaro’s 2018 campaign clearly drew upon the national racial ideology of ‘racial
democracy’ in order to argue that indigenous people and Afro-Brazilians impeded the Brazilian state project of mixture and racelessness. Concurrently, however, Bolsonaro also drew explicitly on much older colonial logics by describing indigenous people as a barrier to Brazil’s economic development, and arguing that Brazil ought to celebrate its European roots (Pachá, 2019). Just as with Brexit and Trump, therefore, such a case needs an interplay between CRT and decolonial thought. Furthermore, such a synergy can be fruitful for analysing cases far beyond the political sphere. As one example, the climate crisis is amenable to such synergized analysis. The climate crisis is something that clearly interacts with national racialized social systems – as seen, for instance, in the fact that in countries like Britain and the US, those towards the bottom of the racial hierarchy disproportionately live in heavily polluted areas (Fecht et al., 2015). Such cases show that environmental resources are distributed unequally across national racial hierarchies. However, this crisis is also connected to coloniality, whether that be through the US military being a global leader in carbon emissions, Western responses to climate change reinscribing global inequalities (such as veganism and the switch to electronic cars relying on child labour in the Global South), or simply the fact that the Global South suffers disproportionately from climate change (Meghji, 2020).

I believe the future of analysis of many of our social problems lies in this ‘both and’ approach to CRT and decolonial thought. While there have, of course, been decolonial sociologists of race who have always analysed connections between racism, imperialism and colonialism (Go, 2018), this article has been concerned specifically with the racialized social systems approach of CRT and decolonial thought. Such an interplay between these two approaches creates a perfect way of balancing the study of national racialized social systems, with their own internal logics and processes, with the transnational focus of decolonial thought, which stresses the continuity of the past in the present through the concept of coloniality. The onus is now on all of us to test how effective this synergy can be as we move forward in the social sciences.

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**Notes**

1. Of course, colonialism has not ended, with colonies still existing such as Puerto Rico, as well as settler colonies more generally.
2. In this regard, such contemporary criticism of British CRT rearticulates earlier criticisms of a methodologically nationalist sociology, emerging in the postwar era, that failed to link the structure of Britain’s empire with the situation of those ‘postcolonial’ citizens moving in large numbers to the ‘mother country’ (see Wimmer and Schiller, 2003).
3. ‘Trumpamerica’ and ‘Brexit Britain’ refer to the contemporary structural arrangements of the US and Britain.
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**Résumé**

Dans cet article, je plaide en faveur d’une synergie théorique entre la théorie critique de la race (Critical Race Theory en anglais, ou CRT) et la pensée décoloniale. Bien que la CRT et la pensée décoloniale aient des portées différentes, j’explique que nous pouvons les mettre en synergie à travers notre analyse. Plus précisément, l’accent transnational mis
par la pensée décoloniale sur la colonialité complète l’accent « présentiste » de la CRT sur les systèmes sociaux nationaux racialisés. Je démontre l’efficacité de cette synergie théorique en analysant la Grande-Bretagne du Brexit (Brexit Britain) et l’Amérique de Trump (Trumpamerica). Si la CRT est utile pour analyser la manière dont ces projets politiques ont été élaborés sur la base d’une idéologie post-raciale contemporaine et d’émotions racialisées, elle peine à traiter de la mélancolie postcoloniale qui traverse ces deux moments politiques. La pensée décoloniale est donc nécessaire pour dégager la dynamique transnationale et historique de la colonialité incarnée par Brexit Britain et Trumpamerica. Cela est particulièrement manifeste dans la manière dont les deux projets impliquent un désir de redonner à la nation sa gloire impériale et de maintenir ceux qui sont censés être opposés à la civilisation occidentale – en particulier « les musulmans » – en dehors des frontières de la nation.

Mots-clés
Pensée décoloniale, postcolonialisme, race et ethnicité, théorie critique de la race, théorie sociale

Resumen
En este artículo, se defiende una sinergia teórica entre la teoría crítica de la raza (Critical Race Theory o CRT) y el pensamiento decolonial. Se sostiene que, si bien la CRT y el pensamiento decolonial tienen diferentes alcances, en el análisis se puede generar una sinergia entre los dos. Específicamente, el acento transnacional puesto por el pensamiento decolonial sobre la colonialidad complementa el acento ‘presentista’ puesto por la CRT sobre los sistemas sociales nacionales racializados. El artículo demuestra la eficacia de esta sinergia teórica analizando la Gran Bretaña del Brexit y la América de Trump (Trumpamerica). Si bien la CRT es útil para analizar cómo estos proyectos políticos se basaron en la ideología posracial contemporánea y en las emociones racializadas, tiene dificultades para explicar la melancolía poscolonial que atraviesa ambos momentos políticos. Por ello, se requiere un pensamiento decolonial para desentrañar la dinámica histórica transnacional de la colonialidad encarnada en la Gran Bretaña del Brexit y Trumpamerica. Esto es particularmente evidente en la forma en que ambos proyectos implican el deseo de devolver a la nación su gloria imperial y mantener a quienes se considera que se oponen a la civilización occidental, en particular a ‘los musulmanes’, fuera de las fronteras de la nación.

Palabras clave
Pensamiento decolonial, poscolonialismo, raza y etnicidad, teoría crítica de la raza, teoría social