

Margaret Howard Essay Prize Submission: 'Methodological Whiteness' as a Demand of Normative Political Theorising

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“Methodological whiteness’[...] is a way of reflecting on the world that fails to acknowledge the role played by race in the very structuring of that world, and of the ways in which knowledge is constructed and legitimated within it” (BHAMBRA, 2017). With reference to your own academic field, do you find the concept of ‘methodological whiteness’ useful, and why?

The concept of ‘methodological whiteness’ is not only an insightful analytical tool; it is one that reflects epistemic realities constraining our very ability to produce knowledge dispassionately. It is not merely a useful concept: it is a crucial one. I argue that reflecting on methodological whiteness is *necessary* for normative political theory and wider normative theorising. Firstly, I develop Gurinder Bhambra’s conceptualisation: methodological whiteness is not characterised by essentialism about whiteness itself; it is the product of inevitable interpretive constraints and the hegemonic construction of knowledge. Through a close reading of Bhambra’s own study concerning methodological whiteness and the misrecognition of race and class, I draw out three mechanisms by which methodological whiteness is expressed: (1) “*white-myopia*”, (2) “*white-default*” and (3) “*white-predilection*”. It is through the elucidation of these mechanisms the impact of methodological whiteness becomes apparent. Normative political theorising without considering potential implicit methodological whiteness can further the very injustices it intends to combat. In all, awareness of methodological awareness is not only a useful inquisitive tool, but an essential one.

I. Methodological Whiteness as an Epistemic Reality

II.

Bhambra begins her explication of ‘methodological whiteness’ by questioning the widespread thesis that the outcomes of the Brexit Referendum in 2016 and the election of Donald Trump in the same year were delivered by the white working classes.¹ Much popular and academic commentary, she writes², advances this claim. However, she points to Danny Dorling’s observation that the ‘Leave’ vote was carried by southerners and the middle class.³ Data from the Pew Research Centre⁴ found it was the middle class that overwhelmingly shifted towards Trump in the 2016 US Presidential Election. Numerous other studies all confirm this account.⁵

Given the data, it is far more parsimonious to accept *race* and race-related factors as more substantial motivators for the outcomes in question. The most striking homogeneity across Trump Voters and supporters of ‘Leave’ campaigns is that they were disproportionately white. In turn, Bhambra asks why do so many renowned academics deflect these considerations and favour the empirically weaker white-working class backlash thesis? Bhambra’s answer is *methodological whiteness*. Beyond the title quotation, Bhambra adds only that methodological whiteness “*entails a denial of its own politics of identity and constitutes the standard social scientific discussion of race – which tends to understand it*

¹ Bhambra, G., (2017), “*Brexit, Trump, and ‘methodological whiteness’: on the misrecognition of race and class*”.

² Ibid.

³ Dorling, D., (2016), “*Brexit: the decision of a divided country*”.

⁴ Igielnik, R., and Kocchar, R., (2016), “*GOP gained ground in middle-class communities in 2016*”.

⁵ Bhambra also points to *Antonucci et al. (2017); Shilliam (2017); Becker, Fetzer, and Novy (2017)*, among other examples.

primarily in terms of issues of identity or inequality applying to the situation of non-white others."⁶ In other words, the systems, practices, and dominant paradigms within social sciences cannot help but to prefer explanations that affirm white biases. Methodological whiteness is 'methodological' insofar as it concerns itself not merely with observations and prescriptions, but the very processes and debates that generate arguments. 'Whiteness' indicates the content of these processes; in this case it is a 'white' perspective that leads to the deflecting of the role of race in giving rise to Brexit and the election of Donald Trump. Though Bhambra's elucidation of what constitutes methodological whiteness specifically largely stops here, the devil is in the details and her wider reflections on sociology. Methodological whiteness is not a present, fleeting, empirical fact of social science processes; it is the present expression of the inevitable relationship between interpretive constraints and the hegemonic construction of knowledge. Therefore, I charge that methodological whiteness is an epistemic reality we simply cannot ignore.

I first trivially, but crucially, note that methodological whiteness concerns itself with the interpretation of fact and processing of data about the world around us. The myth of the white working-class backlash begins with an attempt to understand observed statistical realities and piece together the most plausible story, and it is the interpretation of this data that gives rise to biased interpretation. Bhambra additionally points to the whitewashing of history as evidence of methodological whiteness: a process that occurs when certain facts are ignored, or their relevance downplayed, when observing the same set of facts about history.

Though trivial, it grounds methodological whiteness as potentially steeped in processes of unconscious bias and subconscious heuristics that govern the interpretation of *all* facts – and this is precisely what Bhambra espouses. Methodological whiteness *"treats a limited perspective – that deriving from white experience – as a universal perspective"*⁷. To make sense of this, we must note that western academia is disproportionately and historically white,⁸ and this historical whiteness has established certain white-centric paradigms of interpretation that intrude on all academic reasoning. We cannot, therefore, simply disregard the relevance of methodological whiteness. It is not a device we must remind academics to not engage with, but central to the process of academic reasoning itself.

However, the evocation here is that methodological whiteness functions like a bias; one that good academics know more than well to eschew when theorising anyway. Bhambra's claim is stronger than this. For academics who *have* presumably left many of their biases at the door have come to conclude the validity of the white working-class backlash thesis anyway. For Bhambra, the process is more pernicious. Academic spheres have taken these biased perspectives and established them as part of the methodological status quo. The social sciences is pervaded by a set of norms, practices, concepts, and ways of understanding issues such as class that lends theorists towards concluding the white working-class backlash thesis. Methodological whiteness is not simply the product of numerous individual biases, but is integral to the very way knowledge is constituted within the social sciences. Bhambra notes, for example, that to understand the white-working class backlash thesis in race-neutral terms and argue that the white-working class establish themselves as a voting

⁶ Bhambra, G., (2017), *"Why are the white working classes still being held responsible for Brexit and Trump?"*, LSE Blogs

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ HESA notes HE is 74.4% white. See <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/staff/working-in-he>. Of note, however, is that the intrusion of historical whiteness and consequent paradigms onto historic academia means even amongst an increasingly diverse field we can expect, at least for some time, these to intrude onto the present. Some of these biases, for example, might look like availability bias resulting in a disproportionately white field of examples for some matter. This is the sort of characterisation I have in mind of white biases and their historic foundations.

bloc strictly in light of perceived economic harms conveniently ignores that black individuals are *more* likely to be working class and in turn affected by the potential economic pressures that affect the working classes. The race-neutrality of class-issues breaks down at the very existence of *racial* self-identification within a class grouping. This problem is usually negated by assuming ethnic partiality and white partiality are equal in motivation and prior to class issues, licencing the analysis of strictly class-based dynamics. For example, as Ethan Kaufmann writes⁹, both are expressions of in-group identification. This does not hold, for minority partiality and white partiality are deeply asymmetric. Minority partiality is uniquely the product of historical oppression and ongoing systemic injustice. The causes for the existence of white partiality, at least historically, are steeped in *opposition* to minority partiality and often have racist origins. Whilst not *necessarily* true of white partiality, to ignore these observations entirely is to conveniently reject what turns out to be a *likely* narrative that racist history has at least somewhat intruded on the Brexit Referendum and the election of Donald Trump.

As Bhabra writes in *Postcolonial Reflections on Sociology*¹⁰, the construction of ideas within sociology is grounded in tradition, shaped ideologically, and comes to define how fundamental concepts are taken as a given even when a concept is replete with problematic assumptions and logical inconsistencies. It is this sort of mechanism that grounds methodological whiteness within the landscape of the social sciences. However, one would be mistaken to think it is the purely contingent trajectory of who dominates academia within the social sciences that is the cause. One would also be mistaken to understand ‘whiteness’ in essentialist terms. It is not the case, for example, that if white political sociologists were more open-minded methodological whiteness would cease to exist. Rather, we can make sense of the perniciousness by understanding this process as intrinsic to knowledge-forming itself across all disciplines, and this is given by the hegemonic construction of knowledge. The claim here is the fairly evident observation that the construction of knowledge in academia *necessarily* reflects underlying power dynamics. The banality of this claim lies in numerous uncontroversial facts about academia. Given the stringent demands and resources required to become an academic, academics tend to be better-educated, wealthier, and more privileged than average. Within a landscape of wider structural injustice, those who enter academia are more likely to stem from the relevant privileged groups.

Thirdly, that the function of academia is to *create* knowledge lends itself – even if unintentionally – towards the use of academia by privileged classes to advance and entrench their own power. The reliance of many academic institutions on donations, for example, ensures policies and practices within said institutions remain favourable towards their donors; donors who are disproportionately wealthy. Finally, knowledge within academia is established through consensus, and knowledge is advanced by developing prior consensus: lending academia towards conservatism and status quo bias that entrenches historic paradigms – thus all of the above becomes resistant to the vagaries of shifting social landscapes.

Therefore, when Bhabra notes that norms, dispositions, biases, heuristics, ideas, and values that reflect a narrow slice of life become “*embedded and reproduced within conventional understandings of the discipline*”, this is a *necessary* process whereby whatever constitutes the underlying power dynamics of academia is transfigured into the very paradigms under which knowledge-forming operates. Therefore, ‘*methodological whiteness*’ is only contingent insofar as many of the aforementioned ideas that constitute methodological whiteness, such as affirming a race-neutral class narrative, are not necessary to whiteness itself but have contingently developed. This, therefore, could

⁹ Kaufmann, E., (2017), “*Racial Self-Interest’ Is not Racism: Ethno-Demographic Interests and the Immigration Debate.*”

¹⁰ Bhabra, G., (2016), “*Postcolonial Reflections on Sociology*”.

change. But the changing composition of what constitutes whiteness does not matter. Methodological whiteness remains a part of the very construction of knowledge as long as structural injustice favours those who are white.

Consequently, methodological whiteness is not merely an empirical observation, or a sophisticated bias, nor even a contingent reality given by the ideas in question Bhabra elucidates. As long as power dynamics favour those who are white, methodological whiteness shapes what is determined as truth. It is an epistemic reality. Inasmuch as we are interested in arriving at truth, we must concern ourselves with the reliability and accuracy of the processes by which we formulate theories about the world. This, therefore, demands the consideration of methodological whiteness as much as we should consider the validity of empirical observation itself or the reliability of certain methods of reasoning.

III. Methodological Whiteness and the Adverse Perpetuation of Injustice in Political Theory

In light of the above, I aim to demonstrate why methodological whiteness is not merely a useful concept, but failure to consider its presence can be deeply problematic. I draw out three specific mechanisms in which we can observe methodological whiteness: *white-myopia*, *white-default*, and *white-predilection*. In elucidating these mechanisms, it becomes evident how methodological whiteness can further the very injustice that political theorising intends to combat.

Considering the psychological underpinnings of methodological whiteness, we see the white-working class backlash thesis as the expression of attempting to understand the world through a limited set of experiences shaped by whiteness. For example, it seems very plausible from the perspective of a white individual why white partiality and ethnic partiality would be equal. However, from the perspective of those who continue to value racial identification *because* of the solace it provides them in light of persistent discrimination, the asymmetry is obvious. What we see, therefore, as an expression of methodological whiteness is simply greater familiarity in seeing the world through a white frame of reference. I term this “*white-myopia*”.

White-myopia establishes a “*white gaze*”, yet recall that at the heart of methodological whiteness is the transfiguration of bias into methodological norms. In turn, white-myopia establishes “*white-default*”, whereby the conclusions that stem from white-myopia are simply taken as fact, or at least highly plausible, in light of the lack of deference to non-white perspectives. This is precisely the story Bhabra tells regarding the default to a race-neutral construction of class. As aforesaid, the race-neutrality of class can only be established when one assumes the equality of white and ethnic partiality. However, this is a highly controversial proposition. Yet, it is controversial for reasons missed when white-myopia consumes one’s entire perspective. In turn, the race-neutrality of class is taken as a starting point.

Finally, if we revisit the whitewashing of history we can explicate one final important expression of methodological whiteness. Here, note again that we begin with a set of facts and empirical observations. One argument from activist Akala, for example, looks at the path to the emancipation of slaves in Britain. The history is characterised by conflicts such as the Haitian Revolution and Orange Revolution; the role of ex-slave activists such as Ignatius Sancho, and activism from abolitionists such as William Wilberforce. However, Akala points to the construction of a narrative of British emancipation that neglects the former two aspects.¹¹

¹¹ Akala (2019), “*Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire*”.

In one sense, the Wilberforce narrative represents the success of British democracy and liberal ideals in contrast to non-Western forces of violent resistance and anti-statism. Yet, it is precisely that British democracy was not fully accessible to those that were non-white that necessitated the need for resistance. However, in light of white-default and white-myopia, our reasoning for independently prizing certain norms is done so without such consideration of the non-white perspective. Because our reasons given to value ideals ignore the failure of such systems to represent the interests disprivileged, we disproportionately value that which benefits the privileged. In turn, this aggrandisement of the democratic mechanism is an expression of 'white-predilection'.

With these mechanisms explicated, we can look to political theory to see why methodological whiteness can be deeply antithetical to the very ends that reasoning about justice seeks to achieve.

Firstly, note that liberal egalitarianism aspires to principles, values, and systems that treats everyone equally. Yet what does it look like when in aspiring to certain ideals we cannot avoid white-myopia and white-predilection? We, in turn, actively value ideals and modes of reasoning with the intent of advancing equality, yet we are blind to the many ways in which doing so might have adverse consequences for the disprivileged. Literature on epistemic injustice is precisely what this establishes. The aggrandisement of logical reasoning and clear formulations of injustice in political theorising is supposed to facilitate rectification, yet the high standard for the recognition of injustices it sets often leaves the injustices experienced by the disprivileged without the language to express them. This is precisely what Miranda Fricker terms an 'epistemic injustice'¹². These are often seen in two ways. Firstly, the hermeneutical injustice: whereby both the victim of injustice and everyone else lacks the language to make sense of a present state of injustice. The victim of a hermeneutical injustice is in effect silenced, misunderstood, and their cries for help are often unintelligible. In turn, testimony they do give is simply less likely to be believed – a testimonial injustice. Epistemic injustices are precisely generated because the forms of reasoning that do give rise to awareness about injustice – the analysis of 'lived experience' – does not meet the established consensus for an epistemic ideal; for the ideal itself is forged in the fires of methodological whiteness.

Secondly, if we cannot avoid white-predilection and white-default, we value ideals based on their normative content and take these as uncontroversial assumptions and prima facie truths. We may, for example, prize the absolute value of free speech, not realising that free speech in light of hegemonic social dynamics leads to the suppression of disprivileged voices. It is not accidental that certain forms of 'equality of opportunity' neglect how colour-blind processes in light of historic injustice disfavours minorities.¹³

Finally, what does it look like when we cannot avoid white-default and white-myopia? We see the mutual reinforcement of the 'white gaze' and the biases that give rise to it. It is white-myopia that establishes white-default, yet critical reflection on what is taken as default in itself utilises white-myopia. This is the conclusion of the story regarding the equality of ethnic and white partiality. In critically reflecting on whether the parity of partiality is truly the case, we might look to the intuitive possibility of non-discriminatory, ahistorical, partiality to assume this grounds both forms of partiality. White-myopia, in turn, confirms the white-default. Yet, as aforementioned, this account simply is not the case for ethnic partiality.

The consequences of methodological whiteness, therefore, are not limited to inaccurate and biased characterisations of normative concepts. Rather, methodological whiteness shapes the very nature of what is deemed just, right, and morally obligatory. In turn, methodological

¹² Fricker, M., (2007), *"Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing"*

¹³ See, for example, *Apfelbaum et. al (2012)* or *Plaut et. al (2018)*.

whiteness may lead us to proclaim as just a wealth of ideas and practices that are deeply unjust. We continue to perpetuate epistemic injustice if we hold high a certain epistemic ideal that cannot be captured by the lived experiences of those who experience injustice. We continue to aggrandise principles in which their furthering necessarily harms entire minority groups. Yet, we lack the ability to point out the injustices in question for our very concept of justice is blind to non-white perspectives.

I conclude by noting the obvious: interpretive constraints and the hegemonic construction of knowledge do not only give rise to methodological whiteness, but methodological masculinity, methodological heteronormativity, and so on. Methodological whiteness is one form of how privilege and its consequent hegemonic entrenchment shape the very way knowledge is generated. However, noting the plurality of the ways in which hegemony generates methodological limitations is not at all problematic. It simply gives us a straightforward prescription: when it comes to political theorising there is a need for constant critique, reflection, and assessment of the dominant paradigms we use to construct ideas. Bringing about justice demands due diligence with respect to our own theorising. This is uncontroversial, and the risk of not doing our due diligence is undermining the very states of affairs we hope to bring about. Methodological whiteness, therefore, is not merely one useful tidbit of analysis that Bhambra provides us with. Rather, the consideration of methodological whiteness is a demand of justice itself.

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