

# Mills's account of white ignorance: Structural or non-structural?

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## Abstract

Recent philosophical secondary literature on white ignorance – a concept most famously developed by the late philosopher Charles W. Mills – suggests that white ignorance is, one way or another, a non-structural phenomenon. I analyse two such readings, the agential view and the cognitivist view. I argue that they misinterpret Mills' work by (among other things) committing a kind of structural erasure, and one which implies that Mills' account cannot capture, for example, cases where white ignorance (and white racial domination) involves historical erasure, especially when perpetrated by sociopolitical institutions. This is particularly salient in cases such as the recent movement against anti-racist education, now widely conflated with critical race theory, in the United States and United Kingdom, which I offer as a brief case study.

## Keywords

Charles W. Mills, critical race theory, education, structural racism, white ignorance

## Introduction

While controversy and contestation around what students learn is nothing new, 2020 was a standout year in what has been called by some the 'war on woke' in schools, universities and public institutions. In the summer of 2020, in the wake of global protests against racialised police brutality prompted by the murder of George Floyd, public discussion of racism as a widespread social problem intensified. Into this mix, right-wing activists in both the United States and Britain sought to contest what they saw as a problematic new epidemic of teaching about racism as a structural phenomenon—framed somewhat questionably as teaching children about 'critical race theory'<sup>1</sup> in schools, colleges and federal training programmes (Robinson, 2020; Trilling, 2020; Wallace-Wells, 2021). Groups like Moms for Liberty in the United States (Williams, 2022), and Don't Divide Us in the

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United Kingdom (Williamson, 2022), organised to lobby local education authorities for changes to the curriculum, seeking to excise offending material completely or otherwise insisting on teaching alternative viewpoints such as those denying structural analyses of racism or advocating for colour-blind approaches to anti-racism instead. On 22 September 2020, then President of the United States Donald Trump signed an Executive Order on ‘Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping’ intended to prevent federal tax dollars being spent on training materials which claimed that American institutions were implicated in structural racism (Morgan, 2022). According to UCLA Law’s CRT Forward project, by the end of 2022, local, state and federal government entities in all but one US state had proposed or enacted anti-‘critical race theory’ bills, resolutions, executive orders, opinion letters, statements and other measures (CRT Forward Tracking Project, n.d.).

Just one month later, on 20 October 2020, during the first debate in years dedicated to the celebration and commemoration of Black History Month in Britain’s House of Commons, then Minister of State for Equalities, Kemi Badenoch MP, stated,

I want to be absolutely clear that the Government stand unequivocally against critical race theory . . . We do not want teachers to teach their white pupils about white privilege and inherited racial guilt. Let me be clear that any school that teaches those elements of critical race theory as fact . . . is breaking the law. On the history of black people in Britain . . . our history of race is not America’s. (Hansard, 2020)

These state rejections of not only anti-racist education but the very public acceptability of concepts like ‘structural racism’ and ‘white privilege’, captured by critics under the banner of ‘critical race theory’, mark a significant, and significantly structural end of a spectrum of activity aimed at having a chilling effect on attempts to increase racial literacy in the British and US populations at large (Kingkade et al., 2021; Staufenberg, 2020).

What conceptual and theoretical tools are available for educators and scholars concerned with racial injustice to make sense of these recent events? I suggest that one useful resource for thinking about what’s happening here can be found in the notion of *white ignorance* as developed by the late political philosopher and critical philosopher of race, Charles W. Mills. Mills’ concept is helpful in cases such as the backlash against teaching about structural racism in schools because it encapsulates the way that individuals, groups, institutions, structures and systems can be recruited to work in concert to create conditions that systematically produce ignorance.<sup>2</sup>

However, recent philosophical secondary literature on white ignorance argues that white ignorance is, one way or another, a non-structural phenomenon. I want to argue that this reading misinterprets Mills’ work and does so, in part, by committing a kind of structural erasure which threatens to disconnect white ignorance from its context as part of the epistemology of white racial domination, undermining its explanatory power and theoretical usefulness in contexts where structures play a key role in efforts to manage racial knowledge and promote racialised ignorance.

To do this, I will proceed as follows: first, I will offer a brief overview of the concept of white ignorance offered by Mills. I articulate two recent readings of Mills’ account of white ignorance as non-structural, the agential view and the cognitivist view, and offer reasons for thinking that they misconstrue Mills’ account. I focus in particular on the

cognitivist view and its purported limitations, to argue that any plausible account of Mills' view of white ignorance should interpret him as offering a structural analysis concerned with historical erasure and as offering a cognitivist account consistent with this. I conclude by offering further reasons for reading Mills as offering a structural account, and gesture at the significance of this within the context of cases like the backlash against teaching 'CRT' in schools.

## What is white ignorance?

White ignorance can take a number of forms: what we might call *propositional ignorance*, that is, an 'absence of belief, [or] a set of false beliefs' (Mills, 2015: 217); or what we might call *dispositional ignorance* involving the cultivation of epistemological practices and dispositions to ignore important information, such as 'self-deception, bad faith, evasion and misrepresentation' (Mills, 2007b: 17), which result in 'mistaken cognition', a 'non-knowing grounded . . . in white racial privilege' (Mills, 2015: 217). White ignorance thus emerges from the interests of white people and is said to be a 'cognitive tendency – an inclination, a doxastic disposition' (Mills, 2007b: 58) among white people. Although Mills (2015) sometimes seems to define white ignorance as an 'ignorance among whites' (p. 217), he emphasises throughout his account that white ignorance is not limited only to white people but can be 'shared by nonwhites to a greater or lesser extent' because of social relations (including power relations) and patterns of ideological conditioning (Mills, 2007b: 22, 2013: 40–42). For Mills, the existence of white ignorance is always 'causally linked to . . . whiteness', where 'whiteness' denotes the occupation of a social location and not a biological condition, a socially constructed position within a racialised social system that categorises some people as white and others as non-white in various ways. Racialised social categorisation confers various advantages, privileges, powers, opportunities and access to goods and resources, or not, depending on how one is racialised. The racialised social system which produces and maintains this categorisation and these outcomes is *white supremacy*.

Mills argues that white supremacy – a political system predicated on racialisation and corresponding racial domination, oppression and subordination – exists as both a global phenomenon inextricably interwoven with historical realities and contemporary legacies of European imperialism and colonialism, and also as a local phenomenon with geographical and temporal specificities. Contrary to enlightenment narratives about the illuminating powers of reason and science ushered in with modernity, the political economy of racial domination upon which European imperialism and colonialism was founded required a corresponding 'cognitive economy' to articulate and justify how it could be the case that the supposedly morally righteous could act so reprehensibly towards those over whom they claimed dominion precisely because of how the former had racialised the latter (Mills, 2007b, 2015).

The causality for generating and sustaining white ignorance must include whiteness and white supremacy in the right kind of way: white ignorance cannot 'merely be a matter of ignorance among people who are white', about any topic or via any causal process (Mills, 2015: 218). Mills suggests that the cause of white ignorance will be social-structural, driven by social and political structures of white racial domination, and 'expansive

enough to include both straightforward racist motivation and more impersonal social-structural causation' which may be operative even for those without racial prejudice or intent (Mills, 2007b: 21). As with other social-structural causes, the causal chains involved to actually produce white ignorance may be diffuse and difficult to isolate (Mills, 2007b: 21). The causal candidates are 'multiple': possible examples include 'socialization into a racist belief-set or Eurocentric normative starting point, inherited culture and tradition, inculcated social amnesia, typically skewed inferential pattern, deficient conceptual apparatus, material group interest, or epistemically disadvantaged social-structural location' (Mills, 2015: 218).

Finally, white ignorance is said by Mills (2007b) to be active, dynamic and resilient, 'an ignorance that resists . . . that fights back' and which 'presents itself unblushingly as knowledge' (p. 13). Far from a passive absence of knowledge that has just not yet been discovered, white ignorance involves the erasure, disavowal, denial, obfuscation, idealisation and mythologisation of facts about history, society and individuals, especially as they pertain to matters of race and racism. As a central component of the epistemology of white supremacy, white ignorance is a mechanism for the epistemological and cognitive transmission, reproduction, justification and maintenance of the racialised patterns of economic, social and political advantage and disadvantage that accrue (or not) to those racialised as white or non-white. Just as white racial domination is dynamic and resilient as a political system, with different periodisations and geographical manifestations, so too should we expect the same from white ignorance.

## **Reading Mills' White ignorance: Two non-structural accounts**

Within the recent philosophical secondary literature on white ignorance, there are two fairly well-received readings of Mills on white ignorance which interpret his argument as importantly non-structural: the agential view, exemplified by Nadja El Kassar (2018), and the cognitivist view, offered by Annette Martín (2020). Here, I want to argue for how and why I think they read Mills wrongly. After offering an objection to the agential view, I will focus particular attention on the second, cognitivist view, since the source material offers a more granular engagement with theory construction for white ignorance, and also because the article makes two claims with which I am in broad agreement. These are, first, that Mills' account of white ignorance is importantly cognitivist,<sup>3</sup> and second, that any optimal account of white ignorance ought to be structural. However, Martín goes wrong, I suggest, in her stipulative definition of the cognitivist account, which results in her positing what in my view is an untenable demarcation between cognitivist and structural causes of white ignorance. Moreover, such a definition commits Martín to the claim that Mills' account of white ignorance cannot capture cases involving historic erasure or similar 'external barriers to knowledge'.

### *White ignorance as non-structural: The agential view*

The agential view of white ignorance interprets Mills as offering a model of white ignorance which 'explicitly includes the epistemic agent as contributing to and maintaining

ignorance', and where 'the subject's motivation and attitudes' are taken into account as part of the causal and explanatory story of how it is that white ignorance comes about (El Kassar, 2018: 302). As El Kassar (2018) elaborates,

This kind of ignorance is manifest in people's outlook on the world and their actions, for example, in their avoiding evidence, their harboring false beliefs, in not listening to other people and so on. (p. 302)

So under this view white ignorance is a socially pervasive, and socially inculcated phenomenon, but is, nevertheless, something which emerges from and is driven by particular agents. This is exemplified by the inclusion of Jose Medina's conceptualisation of ignorance within this category, in virtue of his emphasis on active ignorance as a central component of pernicious racialised ignorance which in his view 'occurs with the active participation of the subject' (Medina, 2013: 39). This agential kind of ignorance is distinguished from ignorance as a mere lack of knowledge or true belief, and ignorance as a substantive, structural epistemic practice. Crucially for our purposes, then, Mills is here being represented as offering an account of white ignorance which, albeit social, is non-structural.

### *White ignorance as non-structural: The cognitivist view*

The cognitivist view of white ignorance interprets Mills as offering a model where white ignorance 'results from faulty reasoning, where, importantly, the faulty reasoning is explained by social practices that affect agents' reasoning about racial matters' (Martín, 2020: 9). What is meant here by 'faulty reasoning'? Martín (2020) elaborates:

Social practices may (a) promote faulty norms of reasoning that individuals mistakenly taken to be valid; (b) cast false premises (e.g. 'natives are savages') as 'common knowledge'; (c) leave agents hermeneutically impoverished for recognising the injustice at play; (d) set agents up for prejudicial testimonial sensibilities, so that they take marginalised knowers with insights about their oppression to be less credible than they actually are; (e) or incentivise individuals to engage in motivated reasoning and avoidance. (pp. 9–10, lettered list added)

So according to the Cognitivist View, white ignorance constitutes a racialised ignorance resulting from faulty reasoning that is caused by cognition-affecting social practices. Reasoning might go wrong in a number of ways, and for a number of reasons, but what matters is the causal aetiology can be traced back to not just social practices that generally uphold white racial domination, but only to those social practices specifically affecting cognition by the production of false beliefs, faulty inferential norms, gaps in conceptual understanding and so on. Why does Martín believe that this kind of cognitivist account is the correct way to interpret Mills' account of white ignorance? She explains her justification in a footnote:

Mills (2007b) characterises white ignorance as a 'structural group-based miscognition' (p. 13), a 'group-based cognitive handicap' (p. 15), a 'cognitive tendency' (p. 23), 'a cognitive

orientation to the world' (Mills, 2015: 18). All but one of his examples involve social practices that directly affect cognitive processes. (Martín, 2020: 9, fn. 23)

Martín argues that the Cognitivist View – the view of white ignorance that she attributes to Mills – is limited as an account of white ignorance insofar as she believes that it cannot accommodate instances of white ignorance involving 'social practices that promote domination-sustaining patterns of ignorance without directly affecting agents cognitive processes' (p. 11), such as by 'creating external barriers to knowledge' (p. 12). It is, therefore, 'too explanatorily narrow', especially in contrast with her own structural account.

### *Against the agential and cognitivist views of white ignorance as non-structural*

Both the agential and cognitivist views, then, deny that Mills' account of white ignorance is structural. Under the agential view, Mills is attributed a social ontology which prioritises agents over structures, and under the cognitivist view, Mills is attributed an account of causation which requires a tight relation between cognitive outcomes and the causes of those cognitive outcomes, such that social practices which are not directly cognition-affecting fall outside of the purview of white ignorance. This includes social practices that would constitute 'external barriers to knowledge'. I maintain that both of these readings are implausible given what Mills actually offers as part of his argument for white ignorance and against white supremacy in general.

*Against the agential view of white ignorance.* Against the agential view, I think while it's clearly true that Mills is concerned with agents' cognitive states and doings, motivations and attitudes, the worry here is that any attempt to frame Mills' account as *primarily* agential sits in tension with his overarching commitment to a social ontology which situates agents as non-voluntary members of inter-group social relations of domination and oppression (Mills, 2007a: 96). This is a central contention of his argument for the non-ideal, descriptive model for social relations which he calls the 'domination contract' (Mills, 2007a). The totality of those social groups and social relations functions as a political system, which in the case of racialised social groups and social relations is the political system of white supremacy.

A possible objection here might be to claim that Mills' commitment to such a social ontology in terms of how we ought to think about and describe society may not extend to his approach to how we ought to think about epistemology and epistemic phenomena like white ignorance. It is possible that Mills might eschew a structurally oriented or systems-centred account when switching political theory to epistemology. Nevertheless, I think that Mills' specific insistence on the importance of theorising white supremacy as a political system with a strong and often ignored epistemological dimension should give us reason to think otherwise<sup>4</sup> (Mills, 2003: 45–46). One of the great innovations of *The Racial Contract* is the explicit identification of an 'epistemological contract' within traditional but especially domination contracts like the racial contract (Mills, 1997, 2007a). So it is unconvincing to me to construe Mills' project in arguing for white ignorance as

one primarily concerned with agents *over and above* structures or systems, even if it is true that Mills recognises the importance of agents to white ignorance's functions, operations and configurations, and to the existence and operations of structures and systems in general.

*Against the cognitivist view of white ignorance.* Against the cognitivist view of white ignorance, I have three main objections. First, I think that Martín goes wrong in how she defines the cognitivist account, particularly in terms of the requirement that for an ignorance to count as an instance of white ignorance, it must be caused directly by a distinctively cognition-affecting practice. While I agree that Mills' account is cognitivist,<sup>5</sup> I think Martín's formulation threatens to exclude a range of important cases that Mills included as cases of white ignorance, including those which Martín also believes should count as such. Second, and relatedly, I think that drawing hard lines of demarcation between social practices which are directly cognition-affecting, and those which aren't, may be much more challenging than Martín thinks. And third, I believe that the case Martín chooses to elucidate this undermines her argument since it turns on claiming that the Millsian cognitivist account cannot capture plausible cases of white ignorance involving 'external barriers to knowledge' like historical erasure, something which is easily challenged by reference to Mills' texts. Fortunately, the arguments for these three objections overlap, since if we can find examples of historical erasure Mills would likely have considered cases of white ignorance, especially if they're at least partly interpretable as involving cognition-affecting practices, this should be sufficient for all three objections to go through.

So what case does Martín have in mind to ground the claim that the Cognitivist View she attributes to Mills would be too explanatorily narrow? She asks us to consider the following case:

***Racial Exclusion Redux:*** Recall *Racial Exclusion*.<sup>6</sup> To adequately cover what is going on . . . we must not only capture the fact that social practices supply Rebecca with false premises, but also the fact that she is affected by upstream processes of *historical erasure* . . . institutional policies have curated the contents of her curriculum so as to exclude lessons about institutional racism. These practices promote Rebecca's ignorance, not by supplying her with faulty premises or norms of reasoning, but by keeping important information away from her and her peers – or at least, making it more difficult to access. These practices don't work by intervening on Rebecca's reasoning. Rather, these practices intervene upstream of her cognitive processes by shaping what information is available for her to reason about to begin with. (Martín, 2020: 11, some italics added)

On the one hand, this seems plausible enough: any account of white ignorance which could not capture cases where historical erasure led to the omission or exclusion of important information about structural racism from educational settings would be an impoverished account.

But it's not whatsoever clear that Mills' account of white ignorance cannot, or does not, capture such cases. In fact, we can find a number of places where Mills references historical erasure within educational or curricular contexts as part of a discussion either of white ignorance specifically or white supremacy in general. Take, for example, Mills' (2015) elaboration of the claim that white ignorance involves a central principle of 'racial



erasure', and the manifestation of this through 'whitewashing white atrocity, [and] eliminating nonwhite contribution'. He offers a rich palette of examples of what is tantamount to historical erasure, including at least two which relate to education:

[A] reconstructed and racially sanitised past is crucial for the pre-emptive blocking of the question of the dependence of current white wealth and privilege . . . on the historic racial exploitation of the labor, land and techno-cultural contributions of people of colour . . . Argentinians, citizens of the 'whitest' country in Latin America, are not educated about the explanation for this whiteness, which is the genocide of the Amerindian population . . . and the deliberate sending of Afro-Argentines to the frontline as cannon fodder in the country's . . . conflicts with its neighbours . . . Schoolchildren in Belgium do not learn that in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries King Leopold II presided over the deaths of ten million people in the Belgian Congo. (Mills, 2015: 223–224)

Consider too Mills' attempt to begin to map white ignorance in earnest, and its section on the significance of memory and memorialisation to the operations of white ignorance. Mills writes,

Social memory is then inscribed in textbooks, generated and regenerated in ceremonies and official holidays, concretized in statues, parks, monuments . . . there will be official memory and counter-memory, with conflicting judgements about what is important in the past and what is unimportant, what happened and does matter, what happened and does not matter, and what did not happen at all . . . applying this to race, we will find an intimate relationship between white identity, white memory, and white amnesia, especially about nonwhite victims. (Mills, 2007b: 64–65).

The reference to textbooks here is more than a glancing remark. Mills exemplifies the point by referencing scholarship on the 'silences and misrepresentations of the standard American history textbooks' regarding white settler violence and expropriation from Native American peoples as well as 'whitewashing the atrocities of slavery', all of which encourages a 'feel-good history for whites' (Mills, 2007b: 30, citing James Loewen 1996).

And finally, in *The Racial Contract*, Mills offers a fairly extended discussion (pp. 81–89) of the role played by educational settings in the installation, cultivation and maintenance of white ignorance in the form of ideological conditioning:

Originally denied education, blacks were later, in the postbellum period, given an education appropriate to postchattel status – the denial of a past, of history, of achievement – so that as far as possible they would accept their prescribed roles of servant and menial labourer . . . Likewise, in the colonial enterprise, children in the Caribbean, Africa and Asia were taught out of British or French or Dutch schoolbooks to see themselves as aspirant (but of course, never full) coloured Europeans, saved from the barbarities of their own culture by colonial intervention. (Mills, 1997: 89)<sup>7</sup>

The textual evidence indicates that Mills was very much concerned with cases involving historical erasure in curricular contexts as instances of white ignorance and manifestations of the epistemology of white racial domination, both as part of the historical



formation of white supremacy and as a contemporary practice with contemporaneous effects. So either Mills isn't cognitivist in the way that Martín wishes to stipulate or Martín needs to give us reason to believe that these cases somehow fall outside of the purview of Mills' analysis of white ignorance. Since the latter seems unlikely given the textual evidence in context, the former option seems more probable.

Let us return to the question of whether Martín's claim that we can strongly demarcate between cognition-affecting social practices and more indirect social-structural practices holds. Martín (2020) defines the Structuralist View of white ignorance – the one she believes is not attributable to Mills – as one which refers to ignorance that meets two conditions: first, it 'systematically arises' as part of any social process that 'systematically gives rise to racial injustice', and second, such ignorance is not an 'incidental by-product, but is rather than active player'. In other words the 'systematic epistemic effects' of these social processes 'systematically contribute to and help sustain white racial domination' (p. 12). The social processes that contribute to white ignorance under the Structuralist View are, according to Martín (2020), open to include '*any kind of social process*' (p. 12, emphasis original) and are therefore more general than the specific subsets of social processes identified by the Cognitivist View, – which involves social processes which produce ignorance and injustice 'by way of cognition-affecting social practices' which, recall from earlier, involves those which directly produce faulty reasoning (p. 12).

Consider, for a moment, a case not too distant from the education case but suitably far enough away to allow us room to reflect:

**Operation Legacy**<sup>8</sup>: A European colonial-imperial power, seeing the writing on the wall of its dwindling power and growing liberation movements within its colonies, begins a long process of reducing its bureaucratic footprint in its colonial territories in Africa and India. Over the course of multiple decades, it refines the process of incinerating, drowning, or depositing into a large, secret repository in its imperial homeland, all colonial records which document any kind of violence, brutality or atrocity meted out by colonial agents or powers, as well as any colonial records which could be used to prove the existence of those records which document such things.

I think it's reasonable to suggest that this is the kind of case that Mills would consider as falling within the purview of white ignorance as a social phenomenon. We might want to quibble whether the multi-decade activities of an imperial government and its colonial offices constitute a 'social process' in the relevant sense, but I think a charitable reading of the term permits it. Is the social process depicted within *Operation Legacy* a cognition-affecting social process or a general social process with systematic epistemic effects? Unquestionably, it is a social process which is systematically implicated in the production and reproduction of white racial domination. And unquestionably, it is a social process with systematic epistemic effects, since it constitutively involves the systematic removal of information not only from public or even private record, but in some cases from the possibility of ever being retrieved again (should anyone, say, seek restitution or even mere recognition for the atrocities recorded in the documents in question).

On one reading, this is clearly the kind of case Martín wants to capture with her Structuralist View of white ignorance, since it seems obviously a case of a very literal

historical erasure constituting an external barrier to knowledge. But it's not whatsoever clear that this kind of case is one that Mills' account isn't set up to handle, even in the absence of any kind of formalised account of white ignorance. It is therefore peculiar that Martín fails to attribute such scope to Mills' account. *Operation Legacy* seems, for example, very much to be consistent with Mills' (2007b) epigraph:

Imagine an ignorance . . . that is active, dynamic, that refuses to go quietly – not at all confined to the illiterate and uneducated but *propagated at the highest levels of the land*, indeed presenting itself unblushingly as knowledge . . . (p. 49, emphasis added)

On another reading, I suggest that such a case – state erasure of historical records of colonial atrocities – would, in fact, constitute a cognition-affecting social process likely to directly encourage faulty reasoning. Recall Martín's list of exemplar ways that social processes can affect cognition. These include the casting of false premises as common knowledge, hermeneutical impoverishment with respect to the recognition of injustice and promoting prejudicial testimonial sensibilities such that testimonies about injustice are unduly discredited. In the *Operation Legacy* case, we might reasonably imagine that all three of these kinds of phenomena count among the epistemic effects of this kind of state activity: promoting the common but false view that 'The Empire did not perpetrate atrocities against its colonial subjects, and even if it did, it would never cover them up', depriving both colonial subjects and citizens of hermeneutical resources appropriate to make sense of atrocities perpetrated against colonial subjects when they happened by warping conceptualisations of what might be constituted by 'colonial violence' or 'state secrecy', and depriving especially colonial subjects of the evidentiary basis to render their testimonials about colonial atrocities credible to those under sway of the aforementioned false premise and hermeneutical lacunae and, more likely than not, negatively prejudicial stereotypes about colonial subjects as irrational, vindictive or dishonest.

So the hard demarcation between cognition-affecting social practices and more general social practices which systematically uphold white racial domination via the systematic production of ignorance seems implausible, troubling the distinction Martín wants to draw between the Cognitivist and Structuralist Views of white ignorance she provides.

### *Mills' white ignorance as structural, and why it matters*

In analysing these two influential readings of Mills' white ignorance as non-structural, I've offered a number of reasons in support of my critical response that, in fact, Mills' account of white ignorance ought to be read as importantly structural: Mills' social ontology, or picture of society, is one which prioritises situating individuals within sociohistorical contexts especially non-voluntary group membership within inter-group relations of domination and oppression; Mills' origination of the concept and argument for white ignorance as emerging from an attempt to delineate the epistemological dimension of white supremacy as a political system; textual evidence of Mills' focus on historical erasure combined with colonial mythmaking and the reconstruction of memory, especially in educational contexts; and a case which would plausibly constitute white ignorance under Mills' account which problematises attempts to draw hard lines between

social practices which create ‘external barriers to knowledge’ and those which affect cognition.

We might offer yet more reasons too. Consider, for example, the possibility that white ignorance is intended to be sufficiently capacious to track the very processes of racialisation – and the subsequent ethical and metaphysical hierarchies attached to ascriptions of race – itself. Within the theoretical frame of *The Racial Contract*, Mills argues that the project of rendering signatories to the racial contract ‘white persons’ while reconstructing ‘objects’ of the contract (‘nonwhite subpersons’):

requires labor at both ends, involving the development of a depersonizing conceptual apparatus through which whites must learn to see nonwhites and also, crucially, through which nonwhites must learn to see themselves. (Mills, 1997: 87–88)

And where the eventual, ‘ultimate triumph’ of this education for imperial-colonial powers is that

it eventually becomes possible to characterize the Racial Contract as ‘consensual’ and ‘voluntaristic’ even for nonwhites. (Mills, 1997: 89)

Such labours – including educational labour such as those described in earlier sections – surely constitute a part of what he terms a ‘cognitive economy’ that would ‘darken the light of factual and normative inquiry’ (Mills, 2015: 217), ‘psychically required for conquest, colonization and enslavement’ (Mills, 1997: 19) central to the history and contemporary legacy of the corresponding political economy of white supremacy. Unmentioned so far is the fact that Mills, throughout his works, suggests that he would be equally satisfied rendering the concept of white ignorance through the lens of ‘white racist ideology’ (following Shelby, 2003) and the Marxian insight that ‘social class oppression negatively affects social cognition’, and which perhaps more obviously suggests the significance of material, socioeconomic structure in generating racialised cognition (Mills, 2017: 101–104; see also Mills, 2013).

One might object that this last set of remarks seems more gestural and impressionistic than providing any kind of precise, formal account of Mills’ argument for white ignorance as a structural account. This may be fair, and more work remains to be done, although hopefully the absence of a formalised positive account will not undermine the somewhat sharper critical remarks I’ve offered above as to why existing denials of Mills’ account as structural ought to be treated with care.<sup>9</sup>

This thought returns us neatly to where we began, and to a contention which surfaces throughout Mills’ work: part of how white ignorance operates is through the erasure of the work of structures, sometimes – often, perhaps – while structures do the work of white ignorance. In the case of the backlash against CRT, one of the key refusals is precisely the teaching (‘as fact’) of the claim that racism is a structural, rather than merely interpersonal or ideational, even while the enactment of that refusal is actively sought through structural means both in terms of educational institutions but also, and importantly, state legislatures. Disconnecting our understanding of white ignorance from the structural contexts and systems of white racial domination which give rise to it risks

rendering it untethered from precisely that which lends it the most practical, theoretical and explanatory significance, at yet another time in history when we might find it most useful.

## Conclusion

While efforts to teach concepts like ‘structural racism’ in schools in Britain and the United States come under attack from individuals, groups and structures including local and state authorities as part of a purported backlash against ‘CRT’, one potentially invaluable theoretical tool for making sense of such attacks – Charles W. Mills’ account of white ignorance – has been rendered in recent literature as a non-structural account. By analysing and evaluating two such readings of Mills’ white ignorance, the agential view and the cognitivist view, I have argued that such readings are implausible. The agential view fails to adequately situate Mills’ account of white ignorance within the context of the broader philosophical commitments and analyses from which it emerges, and the cognitivist view stipulates a hard and arguably untenable demarcation between cognitivist and structural causes of white ignorance which problematically ignores Mills’ concerns about historical erasure as a form of white ignorance in educational settings. More work remains to formalise a structural reading of Mills’ account of white ignorance. For now, I hope to have given good reasons for rejecting these non-structural readings, as well as showing one way that Mills’ account of white ignorance is useful for making sense of and resisting the backlash against ‘CRT’ in schools.

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## Notes

1. Technically, critical race theory refers to a body of legal scholarship which emerged in the United States in the mid to late twentieth century, involving key figures like Derrick Bell and Kimberlé Crenshaw, and it remains somewhat of an open question whether teaching concepts like structural racism and white privilege are tantamount to ‘teaching critical race theory’. Conspiratorial as it may sound, that more general anti-racist education has come to be conflated with critical race theory is supposedly attributable to a right-wing activist named Christopher Rufo, who has both tweeted and discussed in the *New Yorker* how this ‘rebranding’ is a deliberate capitalisation on a term likely to be off-putting to middle America (Rufo, 2021; Wallace-Wells, 2021).

2. See also Leonardo (2013) for an alternative discussion of how Mills' work offers useful tools for thinking about and through racism in education.
3. In just *The Racial Contract* alone, Mills (1997) gives cognition a central role in his account. The epistemology of ignorance, the epistemological dimension of the racial contract, is described as 'an idealized consensus about cognitive norms' (p. 17), involving 'a particular pattern of localized and globalized cognitive dysfunctions . . . producing the ironic outcome that whites will be unable to understand the world they have made' (p. 18), as well as 'a cognitive and moral economy psychically required for conquest, colonization and enslavement' (p. 19). For Mills, racialising how we think about and conceptualise space and ourselves and our relations to one another – that is, how we cognize about the world including other cognizers, to borrow language from him – is central to the epistemology of white supremacy as a political system. So Mills is definitely cognitivist about white ignorance.
4. In his works dedicated to theorising white supremacy, including 2003's 'White Supremacy as a Sociopolitical System', Mills explicitly includes an epistemological dimension concerned with thinking and knowing but, consistent with elsewhere in his work, he refers to it explicitly as the 'Cognitive-Evaluative' dimension of white supremacy. The content of this section maps almost exactly onto, for example, the argument in 'White Ignorance' (Mills, 2007), albeit with additional material about cognition and psychology. I think this is fairly characteristic of Mills' conceptual architecture, and insofar as it indicates the tight relationship he perceives between the epistemic and the cognitive, counts in favour of the reading of him as a cognitivist.
5. See notes 2 and 3 for justification for this claim.
6. Here, Martín builds on an earlier case, *Racial Exclusion*, where Rebecca is an American who believes the 'popular patriotic narrative that America . . . has historically welcomed all people, regardless of colour or creed', and where Rebecca is ignorant of facts relating to a 1952 Immigration Act before which non-white residents could not become naturalised citizens and which implemented racial immigration quotas (Martín, 2020: 9).
7. It is perhaps worth noting that unlike the preceding examples, these focus on the role of historical erasure in education for people racialised as non-white. These constitute cases of white ignorance and strong evidence in support of Mills' (1997, 2007b, 2013) claim that white ignorance structures cognition and knowledge for the entire sociopolitical system and everyone in it, not just white people, even if non-white people have greater material interest in seeing through white ignorance's falsehoods and absences.
8. This is a schematic of a real case, perpetrated by successive British governments over the middle part of the twentieth century. For more information, see Cobain, 2016, chapter 4, and Elkins, 2014.
9. I know of one account which reflects Mills' argument for white ignorance as both cognitivist and structural, offered by Alcoff (2007), which emphasises the production of cognitive norms that permit dismissing evidence which countervails against the claim promoted in oppressive societies that they not in fact oppressive and are basically just and fair. While Alcoff captures important details of Mills' argument, it is noteworthy that her formulation seems to lack the capacity to track cases where countervailing evidence is removed from public spaces, such as in cases like *Operation Legacy* or historical erasure-type cases, and not just dismissed or undermined while present.

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### Author biography

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