

West Genealogy of Racism

John Sprague, Theory of Knowledge author

Many have characterised the IB as “Eurocentric”, and over the last few months I’ve made some attempts to understand how. Many of us have also spent the summer educating ourselves about anti-racism in the wake of George Floyd’s murder and the Black Lives Matter protests worldwide.

Serendipitously, one of my sources ticked both boxes, Corel West’s 1982 *Prophesy Deliverance!* where, in chapter 2, he offers a “genealogy of modern racism.” His purpose there is to unpack the intellectual discourse, meaning the categories and ways the “modern West” makes *sense* of the world in order to explore how those ways have created the conceptual garden from which the notion of “white superiority” has grown. His point is not to condemn this “western” tradition but rather to point out that the historical and conceptual contingencies which birthed the concept of “white superiority” need not continue into the future.

In terms of TOK, West’s genealogy is close to the heart of the course though on a very abstract level – rather than looking at the practical methods of any existing knowledge community or body of knowledge, he is attempting to unpack the theoretical structures around which our modern notion of “knowledge” are built. Concepts like *truth, evidence, objectivity, certainty, interpretation, justification, values* and others are so deeply woven into the heart of what we mean by knowledge that we can’t seem to talk about it without using them. Indeed, they are codified in the new subject guide as “key concepts” which are now given “particular prominence” in the course (TOK Subject Guide, page 6).

West’s genealogy of modern racism is supported by what he calls three “historical processes”: the scientific revolution, the Cartesian transformation of philosophy and the classical revival. What follows is a *very* summarised (and therefore necessarily incomplete and less compelling) version of West’s understanding of how the interplay between these processes resulted in the emergence of the concept “white supremacy.”

Firstly, the rise of science in the Renaissance produces new methods of how we gain knowledge and a new understanding of what we mean by truth. The new obsession with *method* held by the likes of Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes shifts the notion of truth away from the authority of the Church and Revelation and onto a process characterised by *observation* and *evidence*. No longer do we accept truth from an authority, instead we *observe* the world around us through a process which prioritises *seeing* and seeing *differences*. These differences then are structured into different categories of objects and processes and *measuring* these differences then also becomes the basis of the scientific method’s central notion of experiment.

Secondly, the Cartesian transformation of philosophy, West argues, is characterised by the prioritisation of mental *representations* of the world (i.e. beliefs, thoughts, ideas...) in our identification of “truth”. Identifying what is “true” or knowledge (what we’d call “justified” or “credible” or “reliable” or “true”) is a matter finding those ideas which are consistent with the visual evidence that our observations provide. Here then we find the other main elements of the scientific method we teach in our TOK classrooms: *hypothesis, prediction, interpretation, conclusion*. These are all mental phenomenon and stand as *the goal* or the ‘product’ that the scientific method creates. We aim for the proper mental representations of the world, and the scientific method creates them.

West then argues that with the advent of these new processes for observing, identifying, describing and understanding the world, came a new set of *values*: the classical revival. A system of creating knowledge build on identifying and measure observable *differences* must have at the core a sort of starting point – a norm – from which differences can be *different from*. The early Renaissance (1300-1500) found these values and starting points in the ancient Greek cultural perspective. From aesthetics to mathematics, the ancient Greek perspectives of harmony, mathematical rationality and beauty became, quite literally, the *ideal*.

So, on the one hand you have a system of understanding the world based on classifications identified through observable and measurable *differences* and on the other you have a Greek aesthetic and cultural ideal. “The creative fusion of scientific investigation, Cartesian philosophy, Greek ocular metaphors, and classical aesthetic and cultural ideas constitutes the essential elements of modern discourse in the West” (53).

With these three elements at work, it does not take long before you begin to assume that being *different* from a Greek ideal is somehow less-than-ideal and this is the discourse which West argues gave rise to the idea of “white superiority”. He suggests that these three historical processes result in a “normative gaze,” a process of understanding built on observations of the world (“gaze”) and a creation and application of values (“normative”) in the world.

As examples, West cites early attempts at *human* classification which were built on measurable differences from the Greek ideal, particularly in the “facial angle” developed by Pieter Camper, who argued that the Greek facial angle (about 97 degrees) represented an “ideal” which the African angles of what he determined was 60-70 degrees could never achieve. While Camper’s primary goal seems to have been to promote better *drawing*, the inherent valuing of the Greek ideal left little distance to cover before the West developed a science of character and capacities based on outward appearance.

The attempts at early taxonomical divisions in human beings developed by Carl Linnaeus the Swedish botanist in the 18th century (the foundational principles which are still in use today) serve as an example:

“European. White, Sanguine, Brawny. Hair abundantly flowing. Eyes blue. Gentle, acute, inventive. Covered with close vestments. Governed by customs.

African. Black, Phlegmatic, Relaxed. Hair black, fizzled. Skin silky. Nose flat. Lips tumid. Women’s bosom a matter of modesty. Breasts give mild abundantly. Crafty, indolent. Negligent. Anoints himself with grease. Governed by caprice. (56)

So much for value free observation. Linnaeus’s observations of the European and African ‘races’ bridge the gap between appearance and character, which the later “science” of Phrenology further codifies.

Even Enlightenment heavy-weights like Hume and Kant, were viciously racist. In a reply to a correspondent querying the reliability of some advice received from a black man, Kant noted “but in short, this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid” (63).

What might we make of West’s genealogy? One of the challenges of a genealogy such as this is that it makes quite definite historical claims which are difficult to assess. West’s tracing of the development of these ideas can’t be pinned on a particular individual of course; it is meant to expose the structures behind a huge swathe of European intellectual development over a huge span of time so will inevitably struggle against arguments critical of the precise historical accuracy.

Another challenge is that there is no clear *alternative*. If the “intellectual discourse of the modern West” has the seed of the concept of the supremacy of white (read: “Greek”) what should we be shifting to? What other choices do we have? West admits that the development of the idea of “white supremacy” is *contingent* – it didn’t have to be this way. Nevertheless, a couple of centuries of using the scientific method for the incalculable benefit of the world had deeply embedded it the way that we understand the world and it’s neigh on impossible to consider an alternative. Indigenous knowledge systems which might use narrative to make sense of the world, to an Enlightenment mind, seem bound to pale in significance.

But perhaps West’s genealogy is not meant to offer an alternative. I don’t think the target is the scientific method itself, but rather the point seems to be to pay careful attention to the assumption that our observations can be value-free. Finding and categorising differences is a dangerous business: the classical revival once provided the “norm” from which the differences could be identified, but we can, presumably, learn to find new norms.

The “Eurocentrism” of the Scientific Method, then, on West’s view, might be simply that it was European thinkers who codified the method. But constructing the knowledge by looking at the world does not seem too suspect; and any alternatives will lack the power and effectiveness of *observation* and *evidence*. Rather when “Eurocentric” is used as an *accusation*, it’s because of the use of Europe or European as if were the norm: we’ve seen it clearly in Linneaus’s list of human characteristics, we see it in many maps of the globe (why is northern Europe at the centre of many maps?), we see it in the ways we describe the world (what are the “middle east” and the “far east” east of?), we see it in the core curricula and in the pantheon of names and voices in much of the IB’s core curricula where non-European thinkers are often give pride of place only in optional papers. Here then is one place where we might focus our attention – developing ways of shifting the core or shifting what we see a ‘normal’ and opening up our curricula and classrooms to new voices and ideals.

--John Sprague

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Professor Cornel West is Professor of the Practice of Public Philosophy at Harvard University and holds the title of Professor Emeritus at Princeton University.

West, Cornel. *Prophesy Deliverance!: an Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*. Westminster Press, 1982.

For more on Professor West’s current projects including his current podcast “The Tight Rope” where he unpacks current anti-racism issues see:

<http://www.cornelwest.com/>

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