

TEACHING CRITICAL RACE THEORY IN PRISONS: A PROJECT OF CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS



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Framing the Project

When I decided to teach critical race theory in incarceration centers this summer, I knew the experience was bound to challenge me. I had previously taught similar classes in incarceration centers in the past, but this would be the first time the class would be specifically tailored to teaching critical race theory. As I began coordinating logistics for the summer, another challenge became apparent – this would be my first time, instead of teaching in a standard faculty, teaching in a juvenile detention center. While I did not quite understand exactly how it would change my experience, I knew I wanted to approach the summer prepared and ready to embrace the journey.

Critical race theory is a framework of legal analysis that is used to understand how American institutions and law create race. It was created by legal scholars in the 90s and has recently become politicized by conservative politicians in their attempt to paint critical race theory as a kind of anti-white identity politics. Personally, critical race theory has been a formative part of my academic experience since I was in middle school. I competed in Speech and Debate and was naturally drawn to arguments that encouraged me to factor systemic discrimination into policy issues. As a result, early on I started reading books like *A People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn and *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* by Derrick Bell. While I cannot attest to understanding all of such complicated works at the age of 11, I can say I learned early on how learning about systems of racism can have powerful consequences for how one processes racism and marginalization. As I navigated life as a woman of color, being able to articulate how the treatment I was receiving was due to systemic discrimination ensured that I did not internalize the negative images that people often forced onto me. Because of this experience, I knew that I wanted to teach critical race theory in prisons, because I believed in the transformative potential of knowledge, especially for marginalized people. During the summer, I hoped my class would have a similar impact and make a meaningful difference in the intellectual lives of my student.

Before I started teaching, I read several works by educational activists to create the principles that would inform my pedagogy for the summer. I started, of course, with Paulo Freire. The Brazilian educator and philosopher was the impetus for this project, with his works on critical consciousness inspiring me to dedicate my summers to teaching for the past three years (I previously taught debate to children and philosophy online in prisons). Freire believed in critical consciousness – the idea that education about systems of oppression could foster a belief of increased agency which would lead to critical action. Hence, for him, the right to learn was paramount and must be the foremost priority for those hoping to achieve liberation.

Throughout the summer, I also read works about the experiences of those who have also taught in prisons. Professor Cory Davia at Claremont McKenna College helped point me towards Duncan Pritchard's pilot study on teaching philosophy in prisons. The study found that teaching philosophy in prisons helped increase intellectual virtues as well as interpersonal skills, but I did wonder if that would hold true in my experience considering Pritchard's study occurred in Scotland, focused on online teaching, and used standard prisons as a case, not juvenile. I also read *Effective Teaching in Correctional Settings: Prisons, Jails, Juvenile Centers, and Alternative Schools* by R. Murray Thomas. The book mostly described how to teach around prison protocol and abide by content standards, and it was a helpful reminder about the kinds of regulations that occurred in prisons that affected the teaching experience.

Principles of Critical Pedagogy

1. Learning is a joint venture - the teacher learns as the student as the student does
2. Institutionally imposed power dynamics must be minimized to create an equitable learning environment
3. There are no stupid philosophical ideas - simply bad arguments. This is an open classroom.
4. Personal experiences do not belong outside of the classroom. Bring your lived experience into the classroom as much as you prefer.
5. Ask any question. Few ideas are incontestable. It can never hurt to try.

WEEK ONE: TEMPERING EXPECTATIONS

During the first week, I quickly realized what teaching juveniles actually entailed. I had planned for the first class to be an introduction to critical race theory and then have the students fill out a worksheet. However, it soon became apparent that was far too audacious of a plan. I quickly realized several of the assumptions I had about the course were incorrect. I had assumed I would be teaching people younger than me. However, most of my students were 20-22 years old, so they were around my age or older. I also assumed my students would have some prior exposure or interest in critical race theory that led them to take the class, but many of my students took the class simply because they had either exhausted the other course offerings or simply assumed the class would be easy.

After asking the students to introduce themselves and engaging in quick pleasantries. I asked them to fill out a quick benchmark worksheet that I would use to understand the starting point of their critical race theory knowledge. I then began the 15-minute speech I prepared on the importance of philosophy, critical consciousness, and the basics of critical race theory, and I soon realized that I was losing the attention and interest of my students. The class structure of PEP worked so if students did not enjoy the class they signed up for, they were not required to continue coming and could easily drop. Therefore, their waning interest did not bode well for the future attendance of my class.

I quickly abandoned my lecture and attempted to make the class more interactive. I started asking the students what they thought critical race theory was and what they hoped to take away from this class. My students explained that their faculty marked the class as a philosophy class. They did not think critical race theory would be such a large component of it. They assumed they would be learning philosophy that would help them improve themselves and would be a kind of self-help education. They did not think they would be deconstructing power structures and institutions.

I decided to set aside any discussion about critical race theory and focused on establishing the relevancy of the material and retaining the interests of my students. I challenged them to think through the thought experiment of the trolley problem and explained how thought experiments like these could be used to challenge common democratic notions of following the majority and “the greater good.” I also explained to them Socrates’ dream argument and illustrated how philosophical arguments could also have implications for how we pursue life and value our experiences.

By relating the content to more easily understood and common topics, my students began to see more value in philosophy. I then asked them what they would like to learn about for the next class. I explained that any and all material would be on the table. It did not have to be critical race theory, just any philosophical topic they were interested in. My priority switched from jumping into content to simply establishing why philosophy was even a subject worth studying to my students.

Why do we Study Philosophy and Learn – Paulo Freire

Conscientização is often described as the process of becoming aware of social and political contradictions and then to act against the oppressive elements of our sociopolitical conditions. This entails developing a critical attitude to help us understand and analyze the human relationships through which we discover ourselves. Conscientização usually begins with the individual person becoming aware of her own social context, political context, economic context, gender, social class, sexuality, and race and how these play an important role in the shaping of her reality. The process of conscientização also entails becoming aware of our agency to choose and create our reality.

What is Structural Violence

Structural violence refers to a form of violence wherein social structures or social institutions harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. Although less visible, it is by far the most lethal form of violence, through causing excess deaths—deaths that would not occur in more equal societies. Not only is it the deadliest violence, greater in scope and in implication than any other type of violence, it grows exponentially as unequal power differentials are used to create more unequal structures. Yet, because these limitations are embedded within social structures, people tend to overlook them as nothing more than the ordinary difficulties of life. Examples of structural violence include health, economic, gender, and racial disparities. Derivative forms include cultural, political, symbolic, and everyday violence. Structural violence is also the most potent stimulant of behavioral violence in the form of homicides, suicides, mass murders, and war. It is therefore one of the most critical areas of violence studies to examine in our time. Conceptualizing structural violence can help guide peace research through the consideration of conditions that might add positively to peace, rather than merely aid the cause of peace in the negative way of reducing violence and war.

Critical Race Theory – A way to study structural violence on the basis of Race

Critical race theory is based on the premise that race is socially constructed, yet it is *real* through social constructions.” In other words, ask yourself, what is a “Black” neighborhood? Why do we call “the hood” the hood? Labels like these were strategically produced by American policy. Critical race theory says the idea of a Black person—who I am in this country—is a legal concept. “Our enslavability was a marker of our degradation,” Crenshaw explains. “And our degradation was a marker of the fact that we could never be part of this country. Our Supreme Court said this”—in the *Dred Scott v. Sandford* ruling of 1857—“and it wasn’t a close decision.”

Critical race theory pays attention to the ripple effects of such decisions. It asks us to scrutinize how and why society looks the way it does. “These are the kinds of questions the other side doesn’t want us to ask because it wants us to be happy with the contemporary distribution of opportunity,” Crenshaw says.

Example: The Concept of Whiteness as Property by Cheryl Harris

Following the period of slavery and conquest, whiteness became the basis of racialized privilege - a type of status in which white racial identity provided the basis for allocating societal benefits both private and public in character. These arrangements were ratified and legitimated in law as a type of status property. Even as legal segregation was overturned, whiteness as property continued to serve as a barrier to effective change as the system of racial classification operated to protect entrenched power.

1. What is Philosophy to you?
2. What do you think philosophy for you personally? How will it develop you as an individual? As a citizen?
3. What do you think is critical race theory?
4. Do you think critical race theory is something that should be studied in schools?
5. What is a right to learn? Do we have a right to learn?
6. Did you enjoy this class? Why or why not?

1. What is Philosophy to you?

Different believes

2. What do you think philosophy for you personally? How will it develop you as an individual? As a citizen?

How Peoples Think Bout Life

1. What is Philosophy to you?

~~NA~~

~~AS~~

Like mythology or learning about the world

3. What do you think is critical race theory?

I Don't Know

4. Do you think critical race theory is something that should be studied in schools?

IT REALLY Don't MATTER.

5. What is a right to learn? Do we have a right to learn?

Yes

WEEK TWO: ESTABLISHING RELEVANCY

After the first class, I quickly realized the content for Week 2 would have to temporarily move away from critical race theory. Before my students used philosophy to examine power structures and law, I needed them to see the value of philosophy itself. At the end of the last class, my students said they wanted to learn more about how philosophy and mythology relate, so I decided to create a lesson plan surrounding that. Before teaching critical race theory, I needed to establish the relevancy of philosophy and incentivize my students to become interested in philosophy itself. Only then I could move onto applying its methodology to issues of systemic discrimination.

I related the lesson to pop culture to make it more digestible. After the previous class, I quickly realized that I could not teach my students the same way I taught in standard prisons. My students in standard prisons had very thorough backgrounds and experience with philosophy, so it was easy for them to jump into discussion because they knew the basic concepts and jargon. Many times my students in standard prisons would reference thinkers and ideas I never read before. However, my current students did not have that same expertise, so I needed to help them build it. I used less verbose language and made sure I did not have any overly complicated thought experiments, sticking to basic ones like the trolley problem.

For the first class, I taught my students about how both mythology and philosophy seek to explain phenomena, but myth uses story while philosophy uses argumentation. I asked them to then try to use myth to explain why society formed and then create a philosophical argument to explain that. The exercise allowed them to understand the method behind philosophy, and I saw them begin to enjoy the material. Toward the end of the class, for a bit of fun, I utilized Jean Baudrillard's argument of the simulation to explain the prevalence of plastic surgery and the Kardashians.

During this class, I realized the importance of establishing the relevancy of philosophy to my students. Without any reason to study the subject, they would simply view it as a field where ivory tower academics made abstract arguments that have no consequences for their lives, but my efforts during the second class opened their perspectives and better set their expectations to start talking about more critical theory.

What do you believe is the purpose of myth?

What do you believe is the purpose of philosophy?

How do myth and philosophy operate in similar ways?

What can myth show us in a way philosophy cannot? What can philosophy show in a way myth cannot? How do the two work together?

What is a myth you were told growing up? Can you extract any philosophical principles that relate to it or are embedded in it?

Mythology is a way of dealing with that space of unknown, and it has been there from time immemorial. Just that with changing time and we have other tools to deal with this heightened propensity of the unknown. Nothing more discomfiting than not knowing what surrounds our own world, and then comes the unknowns of world at large.

The unknown can be terrifying. But if there are good reasons behind the unknown then it is easier for the mind to reconcile. The more we know about the world and what makes it work, the less fear we have and the better we become in coping with the world around us. There are certain things that even these modern developments of science and technology cannot address.

Hence, we have developed myths and legends. It is the multitude of mythical gods and mystery of goddess that we attribute to the many strange phenomena of unknown. How things change in the nature and how things within us change the way it does. At a fundamental level, the question of why things happen the way it happens. We use myths and fables to connect with people of those time and communicate using the language of metaphors. The language that we use has limitation. We cannot limit the power of imagination and restrict our communication due the constraints in the vocabulary of language. We need a creative extension to expand our horizon of expression...art to metaphors plays it part.

The idea of philosophy has been to expound the universal principles of existence of universe and the expansion of humanity. The role of an astronomer who studies the position, movement, and origins of celestial bodies to that of a biologist who studies the structure, function, and evolution of human body and both are deeply guided by experience, observation, and experiment.

Philosophy is the foundation of critical thinking. The essential embodiment of human existence is in power of thinking. We stop thinking. We stop existing. It brings myriad questions to the fore while making a fundamental foray into working towards an appropriate answer. Philosophy encourages to think critically, and it is foundation of all knowledge. It may not tangibly change the world around us like science does, but it has the innate potential to intangibly change the person within us who we are and how we are living our life.

Philosophy was exploring the same set of problems as that of mythology i.e., the origin of the world to the secrets of the universe to the human and nature relationship to the explanation of beauty and truth. With the passage of time philosophy, however, took a different approach to these problems.

Mythology continued to see any form of action from that of basic in terms of imaginative images to that of supernatural power. On other hand philosophy evolved as the idea of a universal cosmic reason as the law i.e., the real logic of things and events. Although philosophy immensely contested with mythology for a long time and in some forms of idealism, it continues to be a captive of the mythological idea.

Every society and culture have some form of mythology and philosophy. Mythology tries to answer the fundamental aspects of tradition and beliefs. Philosophy tries to answer the fundamental nature of knowledge and reality. In the ancient time it was largely believed that with the limitation of science, the purpose of a myth was to give the society with a truth for the people to interpret.

In modern times with the evolution science, it is the logical offshoot of philosophy i.e., science providing the truth to the people with any scope for interpretation.

What can myth show us in a way philosophy cannot? What can philosophy show in a way myth cannot? How do the two work together?

The secrets of the universe to the human and nature relationship to the explanation of beauty and truth which myth and philosophy focus on.

What is a myth you were told growing up? Can you extract any philosophical principles that relate to it or are embedded in it?

I was told about la Morona to scare me to keep me from doing bad things

What can myth show us in a way philosophy cannot? What can philosophy show in a way myth cannot? How do the two work together?

myth can show us more about things that we know are not real on the other hand philosophy wants to find out the facts about what we as humans want to know.

What is a myth you were told growing up? Can you extract any philosophical principles that relate to it or are embedded in it?

my grandmother told me that if I go out late at night there is this huge human looking monster that would take me away but she only said that to keep me from going out at night.

How do myth and philosophy operate in similar ways?

Both mythology & philosophy operate in similar ways to find out about what we don't know.

we

How do myth and philosophy operate in similar ways?

I think they're both around the same thing

WEEK THREE: MARX

During Week 3, I decided to be ambitious and teach a class on Marx. During the last class, I had made an offhand comment on how money is fake, and my students inquired as to why I would say that. I asked if they would be interested in learning about theories of capitalism and they said yes, so I took that as a chance to finally start teaching some critical philosophy.

I realized that asking my students to read Marx on their own would be a bit much, so I decided to print out the important passages, write summaries in my own words, and ask guiding questions. The worksheet structure seemed effective, with the students being able to answer the questions and participate in a thoughtful discussion about how our fixation on money and success is being guided by the interests of elite business classes who benefit from hustle culture.

This class seemed particularly poignant for them because many of the students had ambitions of becoming rich and gaining success through capitalism, but during the discussion they began to admit that it was a dream they had because they were told it would be the only way to achieve success and have a stable life, something they all craved due to their incarceration. By the end of the class they did not set aside these ambitions, but they did conclude that a sole fixation on money could lead to an unfulfilled life and began to discuss the other ways they would find fulfillment in life.

It was also interesting to see how the students interacted with the arguments, considering how one of the guiding questions I raised was “Why do we accept a world where we are commodities and have no agency?” Their answers were incredibly reflective, with one person noting how we simply need to delude ourselves that we have free will in order to cope with a world that does not see us as fully human. We also involved considerations of race into the discussion, asking whether it is easier to view people of color as commodities hence why their bodies are something to use and exploit.

The class was very difficult to prepare for, but I found that the preliminary work paid off in droves, with the discussion being very meaningful for my students and even prompting introspection because of it. It made me realize that while some of the goals I set for my class were very lofty, not all of them were out of sight and I could make a meaningful difference in the intellectual development of my students this summer.

What is money? What do we use money for?

According to Marx, money performs different functions including a measure of value, a means of purchase/exchange, a means of payment, and a means of hoarding, which are independent of money's concrete forms. The functions of money as a means of purchase and means of payment relate to each other as money (income) and credit (money), which are fundamentally different. The quantity and availability of credit (money) may be influenced by the activities of the central bank and the private banking system. Credit (money), however, can only become money (income) if and when it enters the domain of social production as an embodiment of the value of social labor and social purchasing power. This inextricable link between money and social production sets natural limits to the ability of monetary policy to influence both monetary and non-monetary developments in contemporary capitalism. An analysis grounded in Marx's theory of money can provide insights into a range of contemporary monetary phenomena including hoarding, the rush to liquidity during financial crises, the scramble for government debt as a source of ultimate liquidity, and the limits to conventional and unconventional monetary policy.

What are the advantages of money? The disadvantages?

In modern economies, we have consumers, who are the customers who buy or consume products, and producers, who create or produce products. This is the relationship that many argue defines the capitalist system. Do you believe in this relationship, do consumers hold the power or do producers? Do consumers drive production or do producers drive consumption?

Neoclassical economics portrays production as responding to consumer demand—that there is “consumer sovereignty.” However, evidence contradicts this relationship and supports the **Marxist notion of structured consumption, where the profit-seeking behavior of firms drives increases in production and, secondarily, worker consumers play a key role in keeping aggregate consumption high to maintain the growth of the economic system.** He explains that consumption “cannot be treated as independent of the changing structure of producer power and producer technology,” and therefore there are “limits to a consumption oriented environmental reform policy” (ibid.:161). Schnaiberg (ibid.: 192) concludes his analysis by stating that **“consumption cannot be the leading factor in the expansion of production. Increased consumption may permit expanded production, but it does not generally cause it.”**

Anwar Shaikh further explains this relationship when he says firms engage in production (create supply) on the basis of short-term profitability. To produce, they must buy raw materials, hire workers, purchase investment goods, and distribute dividends and interest to their owners and lenders. **So, profit-based decisions to create supply generate the demand for raw materials, and through the payments of wages, dividends, and interest, generate the consumption demand.** At the same time, long-term profitability regulates investment demand. In other words, profitability regulates both supply (production) and demand.

So, what does this mean for us as individuals? Why do we care if production determines consumption?

Enzo Paci argues that in an affluent society . . . **men become consuming animals or a commodity which consumes those commodities that abstract capitalism needs to have consumed.** From the very beginning, capitalism has put aside use-value in order to produce commodities needed not by consumers but by exchange value. . . **The [consumer of the affluent society] is forced to become a machine for preestablished consumption. Eventually, he spontaneously desires what capital wants him to desire, even alienation, on every level of life.** (1972: 436–437, emphasis in original)

Do you think our desires are shaped by capitalism and advertisers? Or do you think that human beings are truly autonomous (they have freedom and can make choices solely for themselves and by themselves) and are desires are truly our own?

Why do we accept a world where we are commodities and have no agency?

The Marxist conception of ideology has been applied primarily to explain why workers willingly accept an alienated existence, involving low wages and demeaning work, rather than revolting to create a system where they can have a liberated and satisfying existence (Langman 2015). Marx argues that the ruling class, benefiting from the labor of others, perpetuates ideas that mystify, elude, and deceive workers into falsely believing that they benefit from the current system, can move up in the system, and have freedom in the system, as well as that no other system is possible. As described by Herbert Marcuse ([1964] 2013: 145), this represents a “false consciousness responding to and contributing to the preservation of a false order of facts.”

In modern economies, we have consumers, who are the customers who buy or consume products, and producers, who create or produce products. This is the relationship that many argue defines the capitalist system. Do you believe in this relationship, do consumers hold the power or do producers? Do consumers drive production or do producers drive consumption?

I think producer holds power because they can change the price and at any moment claim to have a shortage which raises cost

Neoclassical economics portrays production as responding to consumer demand—that there is “consumer sovereignty.” However, evidence contradicts this relationship.

big load to carry
In modern economies, we have consumers, who are the customers who buy or consume products, and producers, who create or produce products. This is the relationship that many argue defines the capitalist system. Do you believe in this relationship, do consumers hold the power or do producers? Do consumers drive production or do producers drive consumption?

The producers hold the power coz without the product there would be no consumption.

In modern economies, we have consumers, who are the customers who buy or consume products, and producers, who create or produce products. This is the relationship that many argue defines the capitalist system. Do you believe in this relationship, do consumers hold the power or do producers? Do consumers drive production or do producers drive consumption?

Products got the power because they are the one making

So what does this mean for us as individuals? Why do we care if production determines consumption?

We are being used by the people who own big businesses

Do you think our desires are shaped by capitalism and advertisers? Or do you think that human beings are truly autonomous (they have freedom and can make choices solely for themselves and by themselves) and are desires are truly our own?

shaped by capitalism and advertisers nobody is really ~~the~~ truly autonomous

Why do we accept a world where we are commodities and have no agency?

Nobody can really be autonomous the government tells us ~~what~~ the laws we have to abide by.

Why do we accept a world where we are commodities and have no agency?

Because we all have wants and some sort of greed

WEEK FOUR: REFLECTION

During Week 4, I did not necessarily teach any new content. To celebrate my students being so diligent and regularly attending class, we decided to have a small party. I asked my students what foods they missed from the outside and brought them to class. One class requested a pizookie party, where we put ice cream on top of cookies and ate them. The other class simply wanted various kinds of chips and dip.

After passing out the snacks and chatting idly for a bit, I passed out my worksheet for the class. Unlike the previous two classes, where the worksheet was a mixture of passage, summary, and guiding questions, this worksheet was simply a list of questions for my students to answer. The questions were meant to prompt the kind of reflection I saw occurring after the Marx class last week. I realized that part of the reason why philosophy was so valuable for me, was due to the way in which it challenged a lot of the principles I formed about myself and the way in which I wanted to live my life. I was able to develop these notions through my schooling but also through extracurricular intellectual involvements like speech and debate. Many of my students had not been in school for years due to their incarceration or being forced to drop out years prior, so they did not have ample time to do this kind of interrogation. When your concern is surviving, it seems trivial to contemplate how you would ideally like to live your life.

The worksheet was incredibly difficult for my students. Some asked why they had to do this because they did not see how it related to philosophy or race. Others, flat-out insisted the kinds of questions I asked could not be answered. However, I did my best to explain how the questions were relevant to our discussions in class. For example, I asked, “What matters in life?” This was a question that was inspired by an answer one of my students wrote on the intake form I had them fill out during Week 1. In response to the question, “Do you think critical race theory should be taught in school,” a student wrote, “it doesn’t matter.” Today, I asked them to articulate what does.

The worksheet exercise was incredibly successful. I did not collect my students’ answers, because I believe those were thoughts, they should be able to keep to themselves and share selectively. However, even the discussions we had while they filled out the worksheet were incredibly insightful and showed how the exercise helped the students begin to think through and process these larger questions. As they answered, I challenged them to remember the lesson on Marx and try to define their aspirations solely by their own interests and not what they were told to aspire to.

1. What matters in life?
2. Do you believe life has a purpose? Are we set on this earth to accomplish something?
Does humanity have a purpose?
3. How do we find the good life? What is the good day?
4. What do you want happiness to look like for you?
5. Do you think we can find authentic happiness outside of society's expectations for us?
6. If you wake up tomorrow having gained one quality, what would it be?

*I did not collect my students' filled out worksheets because I believed their answers were personal insights that they would be able to keep to themselves.

WEEK FIVE: CRIME AND MODELS

During Week 5, I decided to finally teach some critical race theory. The class would be on the book *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform* by Tommie Shelby. Shelby was a particularly formative piece of literature for me, and I believed it was a work I could do justice to.

Dark Ghettos would be a particularly difficult work to teach considering how the incarceration center I worked at did have content restrictions that I needed to abide by. According to their rules, I was not allowed to teach any material that could “encourage bad behavior,” and while Shelby’s work most definitely did not explicitly do that, some of its findings could be used to justify behavior or mindsets the prison would not approve of.

I designed the worksheet for this class with a similar structure to the Marx worksheet. I decided the class would mainly cover Shelby’s idea of the medical model, which he describes as the model people typically use when examining and dissecting the issues within the inner-city ghettos. The worksheet covered how the medical model suffers from status quo bias, reduces the agency of those in the inner-city ghetto, and is blind to how unjust social structures advantage the elite.

When teaching this topic to my students, I noticed how easily they seemed to grasp the idea. It was almost intuitive to them which was contrary to how I saw the idea typically being received in most of the philosophy classes I have taken in college. However, that is because for those people Shelby describes a concept that is quite foreign to their lived experience, but for my students, Shelby’s description of the medical model described phenomena they had noticed for most of their lives, but now they just had different language to articulate it. During the discussion, they started to speak about their own experiences and how they felt like the medical model was relevant to the kinds of treatment they often received at the hands of so-called reformers.

What do we believe is the root of injustice in society? Why do people commit crimes? Why do people hurt other people? Why are some people left without food, water, and housing?

Is injustice due to personal failure or structural conditions that cause it?

When attempting to grapple with issues of injustice, politicians typically use an approach that author Tommie Shelby, coined as the medical model. Shelby says “Just as physicians take basic human anatomy as given when treating patients, policymakers working within the medical model treat the background structure of society as given and focus only on alleviating the burdens of the disadvantaged. When it comes to the ghetto poor, this generally means attempting to integrate them into an existing social system rather than viewing their unwillingness to fully cooperate as a sign that the system itself needs fundamental reform. In short, features of society that could and should be altered often get little scrutiny. This is the **problem of status quo bias**. In addition, the technocratic reasoning of the medical model marginalizes the political agency of those it aims to help. The ghetto poor are regarded as passive victims in need of assistance rather than as potential allies in what should be a collective effort to secure justice for all. The everyday, sometimes unusual, and often misunderstood choices of those in these disadvantaged communities are viewed, when seen through the lens of the medical model, as at best devoid of moral content or political intent and at worst pathological. Indeed, status quo bias invites us to see dysfunction where perhaps lies resistance to injustice. Call this the problem of downgraded agency. Furthermore, focusing on the problems of the disadvantaged can divert attention from or obscure the numerous ways in which the advantaged unfairly benefit from an unjust social structure. Keep in mind that the privileged tend to believe that they have earned all their advantages while the disadvantaged have brought their hardships on themselves. Narrowly focusing on “fighting poverty” might seem progressive. But it can also serve to quiet the grievances of those most distressed while preserving a stratified social order that would still be marred by serious injustices, illegitimate privileges, and ill-gotten gains. Call this the unjust-advantage blind spot problem.

Can you think about examples where people, in their well-intentioned efforts, have used the medical model and has status quo bias or the issue of down-graded agency?

An example of where the medical model inhibited reform efforts is in the fight to desegregate schools. The Court, in their unwillingness to acknowledge the agency of Black people and other people of color, forcefully integrated schools rather than desegregating schools and funding Black schools.

Knowing this information, how does it affect how we discuss injustice? How can we take efforts to reject the medical model in our own frameworks and push for radical changes to create a better world?

What do we believe is the root of injustice in society? Why do people commit crimes? Why do people hurt other people? Why are some people left without food, water, and housing?

I think injustice wasn't fair. People turn into other crimes because society is injustice.

Is injustice due to personal failure or structural conditions that cause it?

Both but more because of structural conditions

What do we believe is the root of injustice in society? Why do people commit crimes? Why do people hurt other people? Why are some people left without food, water, and housing?

I feel people commit crimes to get what they want and other people hurt other people because they don't know better.

Is injustice due to personal failure or structural conditions that cause it?

I think it has to do with a little bit of both some people don't have that motivation to achieve or go out of their way to get what they need and some people just don't have the same resources that will help them.

When attempting to grapple with issues of justice, politicians typically use an approach that

FUCK
COPS

What do we believe is the root of injustice in society? Why do people commit crimes? Why do people hurt other people? Why are some people left without food, water, and housing?

SOME PEOPLE DONT GET IT HOW THEY GREW UP..

What do we believe is the root of injustice in society? Why do people commit crimes? Why do people hurt other people? Why are some people left without food, water, and housing?

1 And 2 I believe happens from what people want

But cant obtain so they commit selfish actions

Is injustice due to personal failure or structural conditions that cause it?

I believe both others might have it easier

But those who have it harder I believe if really

pursue something will succeed alot better

with issues of justice, politicians typically use an approach that

Can you think about examples where people, in their well-intentioned efforts, have used the medical model and has status quo bias or the issue of down-graded agency?

Native Americans when they were forced to live with other white families in order to colonize them better

WEEK SIX: CRITICAL ACTION

For the last class, I decided to facilitate a discussion on how knowing philosophy can affect the way we choose to move forward and how we pursue our notions of the good life. I tried to connect the content from all of the previous classes together and brought up questions I asked on the original intake form as well as in the reflection class.

I reminded my students how we learned that a lot of the things we have been taught to believe or accidentally internalized are not messages we accept once we question them. We are constantly being fed narratives about how we ought to live our lives and define ourselves and while those messages may have valid insight that can help guide us, we must make sure to be vigilant in our process of inquiry to ensure that what we choose to do in life is what we actually want.

At the beginning of the course, my students told me that after their incarceration they hoped to invest their money and grow very wealthy. While their ambitions did not radically change over the course of five weeks, they seemed to have a more critical mindset towards the circumstances that necessitated them to be hyper-focused on wealth and money. They acknowledged that structural circumstances as well as the reality of their incarceration caused them to value financial stability because of the security it provided (which was what made money valuable). However, they also acknowledged other factors that mattered to them in the good life like freedom and community, which can be hindered by the sole pursuit of money.

At the end of the class, I had my students fill out the same intake sheet that they filled out during the first class. The differences in their answers were vast. They had very thoughtful reflections regarding the value of philosophy and why it ought to be taught in schools. The evolution of their thought processes was very apparent, and it was a very fulfilling end to the six weeks.

1. What matters in life?
2. Do you believe life has a purpose? Are we set on this earth to accomplish something?
Does humanity have a purpose?
3. How do we find the good life? What is the good day?
4. What do you want happiness to look like for you?
5. Do you think we can find authentic happiness outside of society's expectations for us?
6. If you wake up tomorrow having gained one quality, what would it be?

1. What is Philosophy to you?

The discussion of thoughts and Ideas going into further detail

2. What do you think philosophy for you personally? How will it develop you as an individual? As a citizen?

It will broaden my point of view of everyone's aspects of things

3. What do you think is critical race theory?

I believe that critical race theory is a system that now we're all part of which consist of people being in different race, culture, or other things.

4. Do you think critical race theory is something that should be studied in schools?

Yes, everyone should be able to learn about it & try to come up with solutions for it

5. What is a right to learn? Do we have a right to learn?

The right to learn is being able to learn what is taught in schools & other places regardless of your race, when where you stand in society. Yes we all have the right to learn.

6. Did you enjoy this class? Why or why not?

yes, very interesting class. I like to think hard so this class was perfect!

5. What is a right to learn? Do we have a right to learn?

A right to learn is being able to soak in knowledge and get smarter we have a right to learn anything and everything beneficial

6. Did you enjoy this class? Why or why not?

yes because I learned about many things myths, navy, marx and more things I didn't know before

3. What do you think is critical race theory?

The unfairness and ~~unfairness~~ in which minority groups were targeted

4. Do you think critical race theory is something that should be studied in schools?

Yes, so others could understand that not all normalized things should be as is

6. Did you enjoy this class? Why or why not?

yes I enjoyed this

class because it gave me different outlooks on all sorts of subjects

FINAL TAKEAWAYS

I went into this summer with the expectation that I would teach 6 weeks of critical race theory. I ultimately only taught two weeks of critical race theory, with most of the classes being dedicated to simply discussing what philosophy is and how we as individuals should attempt to extract insights from it.

I think it was quite a shock for me to realize that many of the thinkers and ideas that I hoped to teach were quite inaccessible. To me, this was incredibly antithetical, that thinkers whose ideas were meant to have a transformative impact upon marginalized populations were not accessible to most of those very populations. Ultimately a lot of scholarship is then kept in the ivory tower of academics, never properly distributed to those it was intended for. Even if the knowledge is available to marginalized populations, if it is not accessible, it will not have its desired impact.

This summer I did see how ideas can transform from abstract principles to knowledge that inspires critical action. The process was simultaneously more complicated and less complicated than I envisioned. I did not expect that I would need to facilitate a process of introspection and reflection within my students. It was disconcerting to realize how difficult it was for my students to dream about a future where they could pursue whatever passion they pleased and live an authentic life. However, the ease at which my students were able to grasp the complex concepts behind the ideas I taught once I took care to pare down the vocabulary was astounding. I saw concepts that my peers struggled to grasp in undergrad be easily internalized by my students because to them the ideas at hand were not foreign to their lived experience. It was simply a new way of articulating a phenomenon that they had always known.

Teaching this summer was one of the most formative experiences of my undergraduate career. I knew that I wanted to pursue academia and research post-grad, but this summer cemented my passion for teaching and ensuring the accessibility of all knowledge. It is difficult to say whether I definitively achieved many of the lofty goals I set out in the summer. I cannot say I got to discuss all of the topics I wanted to, but I am proud of how I saw my students respond to and resonate with the content I taught and how many of them told me they would take another philosophy class after my course.

I went into this summer hoping to explore how the right to learn can be realized in prisons. I think I saw a possibility for that project with my class through the way in which my students voraciously consumed material and were excited to discuss it. However, I also saw the difficulty in distributing knowledge and the way in which regulations in prisons as well as the structure of life while incarcerated makes it difficult for students to learn the kind of content they want in a safe and open classroom environment. For example, on Week 5, a guard was posted inside of my classroom for the first time ever. When I inquired why he was suddenly there, he explained that the prison administration was not happy with my decision to bring food from the outside to my students on Week 4, because they believe it set bad incentives and encouraged rowdy behavior. As a result, he was there to ensure they behaved. Instances like this demonstrate how even though a right to learn can be realized in prisons, institutional policies of incarceration centers lend themselves to hurting this project as opposed to helping it.