In this article I want to think not about the materiality of race, but about the material dimensions of race theory. In particular, I want to consider as material the relationship between race theory and an anti-racist politics in contemporary Britain. Though what follows is focused on the problematization of anti-essentialism, my object is not to construct some reactionary ‘materialist’ critique of anti-essentialist theory, but rather to insist that we need to be critically attentive to the materiality of theory itself. It is, I will suggest, only the recognition of this inherent materiality that equips any form of theoretical practice with the necessary tools to serve as the agent of a meaningful politics of anti-racism.

While anti-essentialist critiques of race-thinking are quite right to insist that race can never be fully grounded in the material, it is, as I have argued elsewhere, equally mistaken to deny or refuse a necessary relationship between the two. I therefore do not consider it particularly productive to reintroduce materialism to race theory from the outside, on account of it having been there all along.

Having said this, it is easy to see where the desire to augment race theory with an external conception of materiality might come from. The theoretical commitment to anti-essentialism that is dominant in the field of contemporary race thinking does not appear particularly well-equipped to deal with the social facticity of race, or to engage critically with many current sites of racial practice. The present relationship, for example, between racialization and the cultural, political and territorial reconfigurations of global capitalism seems to demand just such a materialist supplement given the way that pluralist models of race and culture alone appear to operate quite comfortably within the ideologies of neo-liberalism and the logics of capital.

While I have some sympathy with this kind of position, there is a real danger in adopting a model of materialism without due recognition of the already-material nature of race theory. Indeed, to make such a move would be to risk perpetuating a false theory/practice distinction that would result in the containment of that materialism within a theoretical discourse perversely unaware of its own materiality. It is, in other words, imperative that we first recognize the material dimensions of race theory if we are not to end up replicating the conditions under which a turn to materialism is considered necessary in the first place.

If recognition of the material dimensions of race theory is the precondition of its effectivity, there is little to be gained from embarking on a classically materialist critique of anti-essentialism. To pick a fight with anti-essentialism as such would effectively be to restage those rather empty tussles where a fashionable poststructuralist lexicon is berated for its ironies, equivocations and ambiguities by an unreflexively empirical conception of race politics. Such an argument would, among other things, neglect the extent to which the critique of concepts like hybridity has taken place within contemporary race theory itself.

Though I want to think critically about the orthodox status of anti-essentialism in contemporary race theory, the conception of materialism I want to employ here is based on an alternative critical framing that is not confined within an unproductive binary of essentialism and anti-essentialism. Rather than construct yet another conceptually workable articulation of the particular and the universal, the strategic and the contingent, this perspective does not derive from any crude distinction between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’; nor is it formed by differentiating the discursive and non-discursive, a distinction often retained by those working in the Foucauldian tradition. By insisting on the material character of discursive structures, I hold onto a conception of discourse as both material and semiotic. As well as guarding against the potentially facile mobilization of materialism to ground or ‘save’ race theory from a purely ideational existence, this understanding of discourse underlines the institutional embeddedness of beliefs and practices, and forces us to recognize the broader social and political contexts that underpin and give meaning to what might otherwise be thought of (quite erroneously) as occurring solely within a theoretical realm.

It is this understanding of the material dimensions of theoretical discourse that I want to use to
problematize a recent shift in dominant discourses of race. In particular I want to consider how an impeccably anti-essentialist vocabulary has effectively become installed as hegemonic in a variety of contemporary social contexts - and in particular mainstream political discourse. I not only want to suggest that some of anti-racism’s key conceptual resources have been appropriated to dubious political ends, but also that such approaches reveal a real problem with the capacity of contemporary race theory to obtain a critical purchase that is sufficient to contest such appropriations.

The Institutionalization of Anti-Essentialism

As an illustration, consider the example provided by the recently inaugurated (October 2007) Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR). The CEHR is designed to incorporate into the British equalities framework new European legislation outlawing discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation, religion and age. It has done this by replacing a ‘strand’ approach - where specialized quangos had focused on separate equalities strands - with a single body tasked with tackling them all.

What I want to highlight here is the sense in which the operational philosophy of the CEHR incorporates, and is to a degree legitimated by, the pluralist model of anti-essentialist identity construction that is dominant in contemporary academic race thinking. As Patricia Hewitt, Cabinet Minister for Women, argued in this speech that launched the CEHR white paper:

In a world where individual identities are becoming increasingly important we need to see people as a whole - not put them in boxes marked race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability (p. 4).

Those involved in the setting up and running of the CEHR go out of their way to emphasize a multiple and cross-cutting characterization of social discrimination; they stress the irreducibility of the individual to a sexual, racial or gendered identity, the degree to which the particular exceeds or escapes the general, placing emphasis on the hybrid, the contingent, and so on.

While such conceptualizations might be applauded for their attempt to recognize the irreducible multiplicities of social life and the subtle and complex mechanics of identity construction, this does not automatically mean that they provide a particularly convincing or workable framework for dealing with issues of social discrimination. My suggestion is not only that the mobilization of an anti-essentialist discourse of race within the CEHR is inappropriate to the task at hand, but moreover that it has encouraged an unhelpful focus on individual capabilities and foregone what would have been a more productive emphasis on collective and group rights.

Although it is, as feminists have for a long time argued, important to recognize the intersectional nature of social discrimination, the apparent move in social policy circles to construct a viable model of practice from the contingent triangulation of multiple identities fails to address the stubborn realities of social discrimination. While the unsubtle generalizations of ‘identity politics’ may be out of favour in contemporary race theory, it remains the case that many acts of prejudice and discrimination continue to be premised on just such grounds: to mobilize anti-essentialism as a means of combating racism might in some cases be about as effective as pretending that it doesn’t exist.

I am not trying to suggest that the weaknesses of the CEHR are in any simple and straightforward sense the result of the appropriation of anti-essentialist race theory within a governmental policy arena. Rather, I am trying to highlight a certain tacit complicity at the level of theory that prevents those working in this field being critical of such state projects. This failure to criticize, I want to suggest, is practically the same as approval, and effectively functions as a mechanism for the legitimation of those projects.

The Decontextualization of Theoretical Practice

To understand how this process of unsolicited or passive legitimation has come into being, it is necessary to consider the historical dimensions of theoretical practice that first made the kind of anti-essentialism I have been describing an important component of anti-racism (as well as the other political projects we associate with the New Left). This kind of critique was pioneered in the race theory of twenty to thirty years ago - particularly that deriving from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies - and was at that moment immensely important in curbing unhelpfully essentializing tendencies in social movement politics that prevented recognition of their own contingencies, and thus, amongst other things, the potential for their mutual articulation.
In particular, a theoretical anti-essentialism provided an important counterpoint to forms of anti-racist politics that mobilized a social constituency in accordance with potentially reductive and indeed reactionary forms of identity and belonging. In addition, and just as importantly, it arguably served as a foil to the institutional forms of representation that had been developed in governmental and quasi-governmental bodies on both local and national levels. In other words, the critical anti-essentialism of the British race theory of the 1970s and 80s was always in implicit dialogue with the very different models and forms of political identification and representation that it existed alongside.

This is an obvious historiographic point, but I think quite an important one. What has happened in the more recent history of race theory is not just a falling away of an awareness of the specific context of its earlier elaboration, but - more significantly - a falling away of that context itself. The anti-essentialism of contemporary race theory is no longer an important supplement to the essentializing tendencies of organized black politics: a black politics (in this classic sense) does not in fact any longer exist. Race theory’s anti-essentialism is no longer pitched against the reductive tendencies of official representative and advocacy bodies: as I have shown, a form of anti-essentialism (however nominal) has recently been taken on as the defining feature of state-sponsored equalities practice.

Though I would argue that the anti-essentialism of race theory no longer operates as a critical resource within the broader political contexts it once did, many of its academic exponents - almost as a basic operating premiss - tend to assume that it has somehow retained this same political function. This example points, I think, to a wider problem with the status of theory within the humanities and social sciences: the operational logic of theoretical practice habitually transforms what began as strategic interventions into particular social and political conjunctures into universal theoretical truths. The universalization of anti-essentialism in contemporary race theory has worked to conceal from view the wider contextual underpinnings of meaningful political practice.

While, as I am trying to suggest, it was the particular historical conditions of its development that were the guarantee of anti-essentialism’s initial political efficacy in the 1970s and 80s, knowledge of this necessary context is rather limited amongst those studying race and racism today. This is arguably because such an understanding operates outside of the realm of theory. Theorists of anti-essentialism may never have fully acknowledged this, but successful work done in its name has nonetheless always depended on an implicit relationship to a concept of the political exterior to itself. Though this was no more or no less than a kind of background function of the theory’s specific historical context, it was nevertheless a relationship that underwrote its relevance as an effective political intervention.

There is a real problem here because, for a number of reasons, contemporary race theory has retained a serious commitment to anti-essentialism regardless of the changed social and political contexts in which it is now operative. Indeed, it could be argued that anti-essentialism has become the privileged content of the majority of the work that is now done on race and racism in the academy today, and is certainly a strong feature of the taught curriculum. While in fact there is nothing intrinsic to an anti-essentialist stance per se that makes it the agent of a progressive anti-racist politics, there still seems to be a widespread assumption that anti-essentialism will always remain a tool of the left.

It is this mistaken belief in the innately progressive character of anti-essentialist discourse that has in my view facilitated its appropriation to politically regressive ends. What remains in race theory is commonly an abstract, doctrinal anti-essentialism that no longer works within a broader political context. As a result of this lack of contextualization, it has become easier for a discourse of anti-essentialism to be put to work in the service of a range of different political agendas. This has simply been a classic case of hegemonic rearticulation. What had once made anti-essentialism work as a key part of the anti-racist project was its articulation within an expansive political framework. In the absence of these articulations, the political meaning of anti-essentialism has been largely up for grabs. Because it is still thought by many working on race and racism in the academy that anti-essentialism remains innately progressive in character, there is a mistaken belief that practices that take place in its name must similarly be part of a progressive political agenda. As such, it becomes very difficult to mobilize a critical vocabulary that is able to take its politically wayward appropriations to task.

A Materialist Imperative
It should now be quite clear what it is I mean by the need to recognize the material dimensions of race theory. A turn to materialism in the theorization of race is, without this recognition, effectively an idealist manoeuvre. The primary materialist imperative, in my view, is simply an injunction not to consider
theoretical work in abstraction from the wider social and political contexts that underlie and underwrite it. A theory of materialism, as I have already suggested, is entirely useless unless it is first premised on the cognizance of the materialism of theory. To understand materialism as, in this sense, a relation rather than as having any specific theoretical content does not in itself guarantee the politically progressive character of any particular discourse of race, but it does shift us away from an impossible and thus counterproductive search for answers within theory alone. To recognize that the material is implicit to theory rather than being a theoretical supplement or alternative to an immaterial theory helps to open up a field of practice otherwise unhelpfully sutured by overly reductive understandings of what materialism is. Indeed, this conceptualization of materialism is receptive to a wide range of critical resources, ranging from a deconstructive anti-essentialism to a methodologically orthodox Marxism.¹²

I do not pretend here to be making anything resembling an original point. Any coherent political methodology would consider it axiomatic to recognize the broader functions and effects of theoretical practice. Yet it nevertheless remains the case that this procedural banality appears to have been erased from the field of much contemporary race theory. I have so far described this refusal to recognize the materiality of theory as an example of collective negligence, but of course it could be (and most likely is) sometimes the case that this refusal is made in full consciousness of its depoliticizing tendencies. The motives for such intentional refusals are not hard to understand: theory can be neater and in a way more ambitious when it remains contained within its own hermeneutic, for the political is a messy realm of bastardization and compromise, and will sometimes only be able to serve theory by proving its impotence. It is no wonder then that some contemporary race theorists will avoid acknowledgement of the materiality of theory (and if pushed might shyly confess that their interests are not really political at all).

Yet the political still retains it status as the key legitimating discourse of race theory, just as it remains the master signifier that bears meaning right across the humanities and social sciences. In the shape of contemporary race theory’s doctrinal anti-essentialism we therefore have a conceptual object perfectly tailored for the theoretical practices of those who have no real interest in an anti-racist politics. As I argued earlier, this anti-essentialism references a politics, but no longer has a real political project of its own. To retain an appearance of being politically engagé, those working on race and racism in the academy thus maintain an association with an idea of the political founded on the (now passed) historical conditions of effective anti-essentialist practice: even the intentional refusal of the political relies on the trope of politics. Anti-essentialism - as a signer of a ‘politically committed’ race theory - has taken on an iconic status as shorthand for the symbolic contribution of race theorists to anti-racist practice made necessary by the normative requirements of the academic field.

There are formal similarities here between the way anti-essentialism works in ‘apolitical’ race theory as a signer of a progressive politics, and the example of anti-essentialism’s hegemonic rearticulation to dubious political ends. In both cases, what needs to be understood is the strength of the lingering association between the concept of anti-essentialism and a politics of anti-racism. As I have already argued, the problem here is not one of recognizing that anti-essentialism does not ‘belong’ to anti-racism, but conversely of being able to account for the ways in which it maintains a semblance of belonging - often a primary association - even when that relationship no longer exists in any meaningful sense. It is all very well to acknowledge that a concept like anti-essentialism can have liberal, conservative, reactionary, etc., variants, but such acknowledgements do not capture the peculiar obduracy of anti-essentialism to retain an association - however nominal - with a progressive politics. An understanding of this phenomenon is absolutely crucial if we are to try to contest the (mis)appropriation of anti-racism, and defend a critical discourse that is able to retain a critical purchase on racist practice.¹³

Hegemonizing the Left
I therefore want to end this article by thinking a little about how this phenomenon of appropriation - crudely speaking, from left to right - takes place. I want to move on from thinking just about race theory, and broaden this problematic to take in a wider range of political projects. How and why is it, I want to ask, that putatively ‘progressive’ discourses are being installed as dominant in a wide range of contemporary social contexts? Though it might appear perverse in our current political climate, I want to suggest that one way of understanding these successes is to recognize that the left is winning a lot of the arguments. It is far more fashionable - at least in the public realm - to be anti-racist than to be racist; to support notions of gender equality than be sexist, and so on. These are examples of moral arguments pioneered by the New Left that have, I would suggest, been pretty decisively won.

Of course, these ‘successes’ are deeply problematic, in that they are all to some extent examples of putatively critical discourses (just like anti-essentialism) that have been incorporated into some of the very
practices they had ‘originally’ set themselves against. Their success extends beyond the politics they supposedly name, to the extent that they have in many cases served as a mechanism for the betrayal of that politics, a politics that has been stripped by hegemonic methods of its own critical vocabulary.

This is where I think it is useful to think about ethics. You can win a moral argument and still lose the war when the moral argument is co-opted by your political enemies. My thinking here is very different to a lot of the recent debates about ethics, in that I’m not interested in thinking about or defining the content of the ethical, but rather how it functions as a container for our idea of the good, with a focus on the social status of ethics as morally authoritative. Another way of putting this is that ethics signifies a linguistic marker that references - but does not necessarily coincide with - a set of politically progressive practices. Ethics therefore gestures towards an ‘original’ meaning (this is importantly from where is derives its moral power), but does not necessarily work in its service.  

The transformation of politics into ethics here is the transformation of a discourse your enemy finds unpalatable to one your enemy agrees with and signs up to. Ethics are the function of the moral incontrovertibility (the discursive hegemony) of a progressive politics. The non-negotiability of certain ethical positions has meant that their antagonists no longer argue against them, but incorporate them as their own.

How, for example, does a contemporary state construct legitimacy for the indiscriminate bombing of a sovereign nation like Afghanistan (or Yugoslavia, or Iraq)? If does so in the name of feminism. How does a contemporary political party attempt to garner the popular vote for socially and ecologically destructive policies? It does so in the name of environmentalism. These examples demonstrate incredibly clearly how what we might loosely term - and still defend as - a left politics is co-opted in the service of reactionary political agendas.

The difficulty here - just as with the hegemony of anti-essentialism - is to find a means of contesting these appropriations. What happens when those to whom you are opposed appear to speak precisely the same language as you do? While there remains a lot of thinking to be done here, it seems clear to me that the answer lies - at least in part - in being able to connect up our theoretical positions with the wider contexts within which they are operative. Although this does not involve an anachronistic reconfiguration of ‘theory’ and ‘practice’, it does nevertheless have much in common with the kinds of academic thinking that used to consider reflection on such issues to be the precondition of an effective politics. In particular, the version of materialism I have been promoting in this article could allow us to see more clearly the kinds of historical and socio-cultural contexts that have rendered particular theoretical positions politically productive, and those that have not. By recognizing the deeply material character of discourse - that even the most abstruse linguistic abstraction is linked into the social - and by working on the establishment of mechanisms to expose this materiality of theoretical discourse, it might become possible for us to retain a hold on progressive discourses that are otherwise at risk of becoming absorbed into the object of their critique.

Notes

1. Though my general argument is not confined to Britain, this relationship is set out in relation to a specific political conjuncture that has taken on different forms within, beyond and across other national contexts. 


3. Where race was dealt with by the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), sex discrimination by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) and disability by the Disability Rights Commission (DRC)

4. I am using the concept of legitimation here in the broadest of senses - that academic race theory helps to institute a hegemonic discourse that is held by cultural elites, and which therefore helps to shape a dominant intellectual consensus. I am also employing this concept to highlight the role that should be played (but which is not necessarily played in practice) by an explicitly political theorization of race, a key marker of which is precisely the capacity to contest politically regressive dimensions of state practice.

5. Plans for the CEHR were received with unremitting hostility by the vast majority of black and anti-racist groups and organizations involved in its consultation. Their concerns were, inter alia, about the marginalization of race within an enlarged equalities agenda and the general depoliticization of race issues, the adoption of an individualizing methodology, the CEHR’s clear contempt for existing campaign groups, a reduction in resources provided for corporate legal actions, and the
unrepresentative nature of key CEHR staff. For an overview of critical opposition to the CEHR consultations, see the chronology set out by the 1990 Trust, which can be accessed here.

6. The historical relationship between equalities campaigning and state recognition is a complex one. The European equalities legislation that the CEHR is supposed to promote would certainly not have come about without the pressure of social movements organizing in relatively autonomous ‘strands’. Though it is encouraging to see serious work being done that recognizes the difficulties of constructing a meaningful politics between and across strands, it is by no means certain that the institutionalized intersectionality currently being championed by feminist activists at the European level is going to be the best way of guaranteeing an effective plural equalities agenda. For a recent example of these debates, see European Journal of Women’s Studies (2006) 13(3).

7. I am not trying to suggest here that the co-optation of progressive race discourse is in itself a new phenomenon: there is a long and complex relationship between anti-racism and the state where the latter is typically quick to recognize the political capital that can be accrued by speaking the language of its critics. My object here is really just to highlight the fact that these borrowings will always require a careful rethinking of anti-racist practice, and that this is a rethinking - in relation to the latest round of appropriation - that is in my opinion rather long overdue. I fear the relative absence of progressive academic voices in Britain engaging at a theoretical level in the critique of the CEHR rather proves my point.

8. Of course, essentialism is live and well in a lot of contemporary race politics. The point I am trying to make here is not that race theory’s anti-essentialism is somehow unnecessary, but rather that its contemporary articulation does not work in the way in once did, and in fact risks being wielded to politically regressive ends (consider, for example, the way that the anti-essentialist critique of religious identities has neatly played into the hands of the right in the context of the War on Terror).

9. The irony here is that the adoption of an anti-essentialist stance 30 odd years ago was made in full knowledge of its strategic and contingent nature.

10. I explore some of the reasons for this ongoing commitment below.

11. It has been suggested that my refusal to name names in this critique of the ‘abstract, doctrinal anti-essentialism’ of contemporary race theory is testimony either to a failure of nerve, or to the sense in which I have indulged in caricature and set up a straw target to serve my own argument. I contest that my intention here is to point to a general tendency in academic race theory, and though it would indeed be possible for me to select examples, this would in my opinion occult the broader point I am trying to make. The tendency to privilege anti-essentialism (as a theoretical commitment) over the specific context of its elaboration is absolutely a function of academic work in the current historical conjuncture. To single out particular individuals rather misses the point, as such practices are very much the rule rather than the exception. Indeed, while I go on to argue immediately below for alternative materialist orientations, a similar critique of academic idealism can absolutely be made of the text you are currently reading. It is perhaps a little disconcerting to think that most academic work on race today effectively takes place in a political vacuum, but it is my belief that the argument I make here might bring us a little closer to tackling this problem, and is as a result not an entirely pointless exercise.

12. To clarify my position here: this is not an argument against anti-essentialism as part of a progressive politics, and it is certainly not an argument advocating some kind of neo-essentialism. As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, the idea is to step outside of the rather unproductive binary of essentialism and anti-essentialism. While I’m therefore intentionally agnostic about the relative merits of either as the necessary conduit of a progressive politics, I would still be the first to acknowledge the historical importance of anti-essentialism as a key weapon in the theoretical armoury of anti-racism; indeed, it is precisely the significance of anti-essentialism to progressive political projects that motivates my concern with its ‘failures’. The point is that anti-essentialism alone is not a sufficient guarantee of political effectivity, and that the fixation on anti-essentialism as the sine qua non of race politics obfuscates this insufficiency.

13. Of course, there is far more to be said about the ways that we might go about tackling what Sara Ahmed has called ‘the non-performativity of anti-racist speech acts’. In particular, it might be useful to do some historical work on the development of progressive political struggles that is particularly attentive to the forms of discursive appropriation. This perspective might allow for a reassessment of currently unfashionable concepts like black self-organization, not as part of a politics of essence or even embodiment, but as a mode of rhetorically fixing an anti-racist politics that successfully links theoretical work to its wider realm of application along the lines of the methodological materialism I have been recommending here.

14. Essential to this understanding of ethics is what I can only describe as its psycho-affective dimension - the sense in which an ethical position convinces even if it has become entirely detached from the politics it ostensibly names. As such, it might be thought of as a secular equivalent to the category of religious belief.
15. While the truism about history being written by its victors still stands, we should note that the content of this history is often provided by history's losers. The ethics of historical struggles (for democracy, enfranchisement, emancipation, etc.) are not denied, but reappropriated (rearticulated). This is why moral victories are usually hollow victories. [↩]