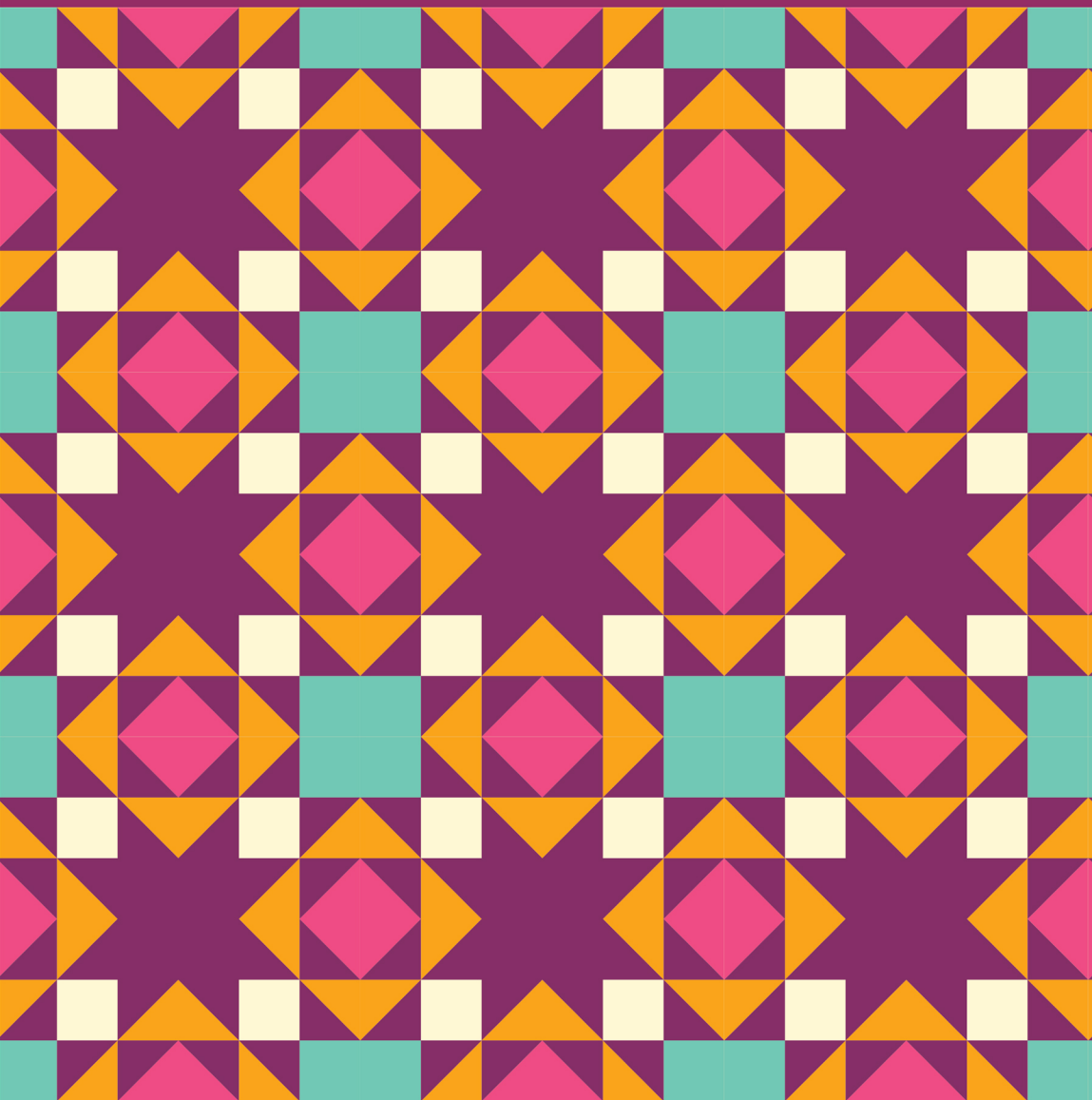
Ethnic Minority Agency in Mainstream Education

Edited by: Andrew Goodwyn, Nasreen Majid and Samson Maekele Tsegay



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Ethnic Minority Agency in Mainstream Education: A Regional Perspective on a National Challenge

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About the Editors

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His research focusses on first language education, especially English in Education, and on the concept of teacher expertise with special focus on the numerous models of expert teaching that have developed around the world.

Nasreen Majid is an Educator with over 25 years' of experience. She is an Academic and Associate Fellow for the Centre for Climate Change and Sustainability Education at UCL's Faculty of Education and Society. Her career started as a primary school teacher in England with two years' of international teaching experience at the British School in Jakarta, Indonesia. She was an Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) for Mathematics and Science. Her Doctorate explored the professional identities of primary teachers becoming specialist teachers of mathematics.

She has led and developed aspects of decolonising the curriculum both at faculty and university level. Her work at the University of Reading led to the development of a resource supporting colleagues to build effective practices to decolonise the curriculum. Her research interest overlaps climate change and sustainability education, mathematics, and critical pedagogies, enabling her to deeply examine aspects of justice within the field of education.

Samson Maekele Tsegay is a Research Fellow at the School of Education, Anglia Ruskin University, UK. He obtained an MA and PhD in Educational Leadership and Policy at Beijing Normal University, China. In 2020, he also completed another PhD in Education and Social Justice at the University of Roehampton, UK. Before joining Beijing Normal University, he worked for about 10 years at the University of Asmara and the National Board for Higher Education, Eritrea. He conducted various research projects and published many books, book

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About the Contributors

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Steve Connolly is Associate Professor of Curriculum and Cultural Education at Anglia Ruskin University. He worked in schools and colleges for more than 20 years teaching Media, English and Film and his PhD research focussed on how students learn to make video projects. Learning processes in all their forms (social, cognitive, cultural, etc.) continue to be an area of research interest for him. He has just written a book about the nature of knowledge in school-based Media and Film Studies entitled 'Knowing and Knowledge in Media and Film Studies' which is published by UCL press.

He is a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Excellence in Media Practice at the University of Bournemouth and a Member of the DARE Collaborative, based at the London Knowledge Lab. His current teaching commitments include working on the Professional Doctorate in Education at ARU. He is also a Peer Reviewer for the *Film Education Journal* and an Editorial Board Member for the *Media Education Research Journal*.

Nicola Darwood is the Director of the Research Institute for Media, Arts, and Performance and a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Bedfordshire, UK. She currently leads the undergraduate English provision and has taught modules ranging from the literature of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries through to Gothic literature, and Joyce's *Ulysses*. Her research interests focus on 20th century women writers; she has published work on Elizabeth Bowen, Stella Benson, and Nancy Spain (her monograph *The Loss of Innocence: the fiction of Elizabeth Bowen* was published in 2012). She is the Co-editor (with Nick Turner) of '*Have Women a Sense of Humour?': Interwar Women's Comic Fiction*, Co-editor (with W. R. Owens and Alexis Weedon) of *Fiction and 'The Woman Question' from 1850 to 1930*, and Co-editor (with Alexis Weedon) of *Retelling Cinderella: Cultural and Creative Transformations*. She is a Co-founder and Co-chair of the Elizabeth Bowen Society and Co-editor of *The Elizabeth Bowen Review*.

Eric Edwin was Bedfordshire's first Black male police officer when he was sworn into the force in 1979. A former amateur bodybuilder, he worked for the police, as both an officer and civilian, for more than 30 years. In late 2016/early 2017, he was diagnosed with multiple myeloma – manageable, he was told, but incurable. His collaboratively written, *Getting My House in Order*, is being published as a series of chapbooks, and he is donating proceeds to local and regional cancer and respite-care charities. Details of *Getting My House in Order* are available from the REHG website: https://radedhums.wordpress.com/rehg-am/eric-edwin-getting-my-house-in-order/.

Esther Idowu is a Primary School Teacher working in Southeast London. She is a recent graduate of the MA Education with Leadership and Management course at Anglia Ruskin University. Her research interests include the leadership development of black and global majority teachers in primary schools.

Chapter One

Introduction: The Possibilities of a Racially just Society, Towards Concrete Utopias

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This book aims to add to the body of evidence about the nature of racism persistently present in the education system of England but with a very particular emphasis on the additional focus of the regions as opposed to the city/urban experience. The educational researchers who undertook the project that underpins the book all work in a specific region of England, formally categorised as the Eastern region but actually spreading across schools and universities across the East and the South Midlands. The project developed from some pilot work for a more national project that suggested the regional experiences of BAME educators, whilst inevitably similar to colleagues in the cities, had an additional dimension that deserved more investigation and documentation, this dimension is fully revealed in the first, scene setting chapter and then documented in detail throughout the rest of the chapters.

The idea that there was an important regional dimension came from the pilot study but also from the feelings of the researchers which grew from everyday work in schools and universities, from conversation with student teachers, local teachers and colleagues in Higher Education. There emerged a strong conviction that the voices of BAME educators in the region had not been properly heard and deserved more genuine attention, hence the book has many quotations from those educators and seeks to provide a real sense of authenticity to the text. There was also a shared sense that the term 'BAME, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic' was itself, deeply problematic, this is considered below.

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A recent and comprehensive report, *Ethnic diversity in the teaching workforce: evidence review* by Caroline Sharp and Katherine Aston (2024), is very forthright about the problems the book is addressing:

> Key Findings
>
> People of colour are less likely to receive and accept an offer for Initial Teacher Training (ITT) compared with their white peers, but the reasons behind this disparity are not clear. Negative experiences during ITT help to explain why fewer trainee teachers of colour achieve qualified teacher status (QTS). This is an important stage for intervention.
>
> Teacher retention is lower for teachers of colour than for their white counterparts. Beyond high workload, key reasons for leaving include (1) overt and covert racial discrimination; (2) disillusionment with their ability to make a difference for pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds; and (3) lack of progression opportunities.
>
> Barriers to recruitment, retention and progression coalesce around the unequal treatment of teachers of colour in a system that was not designed to support either ethnic or intersectional diversity. An anti-racist school culture is a key enabler of progression. Therefore, action should focus on ensuring a positive working environment for teachers and leaders from diverse ethnic backgrounds.
>
> In England, there are currently no government targets, programmes or funding to improve ethnic diversity in the teaching workforce, in contrast to Scotland and Wales.
>
> While there are promising approaches for improving ethnic diversity, there is a lack of rigorous evidence on their effectiveness (p. 1).

The BAME Regional Project

The project might be considered something of a snowball model, as it rolled along it picked up important mass. It started as a small study of BAME teacher education students at one university in the year before Covid and then picked up ambition and scale over several years, spanning the Covid years and continuing after that interruption. On paper it looks like a long, slow project spanning 2020–25; however, it is not about Covid or its effects; however, significant Covid's effects are generally, it just took considerable time and parts of it were often undertaken in intensive periods. As is often the story of research, considerable time was taken up writing bids for significant funding which were ultimately unsuccessful although highly commended. The result of having no specific funding was that colleagues time for the project came from their annual institutional allowances

and this inevitably meant slow progress for a mainly qualitative project with the time expensive demands of interviewing and transcribing.

The project's goal became clear after some initial work and that was to investigate the experiences of current and future BAME educators in a particular region of England. The evidence generated would reveal how similar these experiences were to the findings of previous research in a general, national sense and also what might be learnt of the particular inflections of regionality. The researchers undertook different facets of the project's empirical and theoretical work and these facets are fully explained and described in the different chapters below. At one university, there happened to be another project underway to document the life of the first black police officer in a particular regional force. After consideration, all colleagues felt this was a truly complementary perspective on this regionally focussed endeavour.

After a successful symposium at the British Educational Research Association annual conference in 2023 where the audience endorsed the value of including this important life story, the researchers felt its inclusion was a real strength in extending the scope of the book and in providing a story that might be of real use to BAME educators who were undertaking anti-racist teaching. The research team determined to include student teachers, teachers and teacher leaders, teaching assistants and BAME colleagues working in Higher Education whose work was itself focussed on the discipline of Education in some way, this included teacher educators but not exclusively. The methods and approaches used in the research are outlined in each chapter as there are necessary and useful variations. The aim of the work was, and is, to influence policy and practice and we feel there is abundant evidence provided of the need for fundamental change, recommendations appear in the Conclusions.

Over the duration of the project, we have used the term BAME in our analysis of evidence and especially statistics as the term remains the current official category used by, for example, The Department for Education. It was an unsatisfactory term at the beginning of the project and is even more so in 2025 and there is constant discussion about the search for a better and more useful categorisation. The term itself and alternatives appear throughout the book as a subject for debate. However, for reasons of practical adequacy, we adopted and used the term. For example, in communications to potential research participants, the term was used but also problematised to demonstrate the use was pragmatic and not ideological. We have decided not to dedicate a large amount of text to discussing the term and its alternatives, but we absolutely wish to acknowledge its problematic nature; indeed, we illustrate its difficulties in the reporting of several interviews. There is a very useful summary of the issue on the website of British Black Academics which states:

> Language and terminology can perpetuate racial inequality by reinforcing White privilege.
>
> The terms 'BME' and 'BAME' used in the UK, should be problematized since they homogenise people from a variety of different

> ethnic and cultural backgrounds and reproduce unequal power relations where 'White' is not a visible marker of identity and is therefore a privileged identity. Avoid using the terms 'BME' and 'BAME' unless referring to statistics where the terms are used at the point of data collection. Even then, these categories should be acknowledged as contested.
>
> The terms 'BME' and 'BAME' are also problematic because they mask inequalities as they are experienced by different racialised ethnic groups, for example, rendering anti-Black racism invisible. The use of these terms reinforces racial inequality by maintaining White ethnic identity as privileged. Since 'White' is never named as an identity, it continues to be normative so that people of colour only exist in a marginalised position that is de-centred by whiteness (Gabriel, 2025).

We fully agree with this summary and found it helpful that the point was made about the nature of data collection, the contextual chapter is necessarily replete with statistical reporting and analysis. The statement points out that there are several other terms in use around the world:

> The term 'people of colour' as used in the USA is preferred, because while it is acknowledged as homogeneous, it does not include 'minority', a term that places non-White people in a subordinate position to those racialised as White.
>
> An alternative term is 'racialised minorities', which draws attention to the racialisation of people of colour and serves to highlight the discursive power of whiteness. As such the term is a critique of whiteness and therefore a form of resistance.
>
> The term 'Black' can also be used politically to refer to non-White groups as a unifying term and one that historically symbolises collective empowerment; or to draw distinction between different ethnicities 'Brown' can also be used to refer to non-Black peoples (Ibid, 2025).

It was notable that many of our participants consider themselves to be 'people of colour' but also striking that several participants did not. There are appropriately places where participants discuss their skin tone in detail and its relationship to their identities and those of their families, especially their children; in a racist society, this is an important nexus of prejudice to be recognised. There are points in the interviews where there was considerable discussion of the histories of migrations over several generations; at times the nature of family names were considered, often when a white name had 'been taken'. All these factors serve to illustrate the immense complexity of these histories and the many strands in

individual identities and the very blunt and crude nature of BAME. A term that is growing in significance, and perhaps preference, is 'people of the global majority' (see Bryan, 2025).

Theoretical Perspectives

The discussion about the use of the categorisation 'BAME' leads necessarily to a review of the theoretical principles that drove the research. In another discussion on BBC News, English teacher and writer Lola Okolosie (2020) points out:

> Can Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities be labelled people of colour? If not, does their experience of being an ethnic minority not count? With life expectancy 12 years lower than the general population and infant mortality three times higher, is their whiteness all that matters?
>
> Though I may use BME/BAME, I don't particularly like these terms. They are unwieldy and lack nuance. No one can deny that. My blackness is informed by whether or not I am Nigerian or Jamaican or half-white, poor or middle class. Blackness is no one thing, and it isn't experienced as such.

However, she argues that endless focus on the 'labels' is 'a distraction', but –

> That said, these labels are a necessity. They exist because society recognises that discrimination is a fact which the law must acknowledge and seek to redress. Without these labels, Bame people become separated from our racial/cultural difference and the material disadvantages it makes real are rendered invisible. This is dangerous. For example, it is through keeping a count based on such categories that we know that certain people are far more likely to be stopped and searched on our streets or in our airports.

As she points out, we have so much evidence of racism that we have recognised its structural impact and we (society) seek to address it. What explains the continuing existence of endemic racism when we seem to have reached a point in history when we deem it unacceptable? We draw on two broad theoretical perspectives to underpin our work. These are considered briefly as the main focus of the book is to present the lived experience of our participants in a regional context.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged from legal studies in the United States in the 1970s (Delgado et al., 2012). It seeks to examine the relationships between race, racism and power, and highlight the disadvantages that people of colour have faced historically and continue to face today (Delgado et al., 2012). Since its

development, CRT has gained prominence in many disciplines and educators have found it to be a useful framework to understand the many dimensions of racism that intersect and are embedded within the fabric of our education system. Scholars using CRT are interested to see the relationships between race, racism and power. These dimensions, intersected with the geopolitics and historical context support a deep insight into the inequalities faced by people of colour and what can be done to dismantle these inequalities.

CRT argues that racism is not the result of individual acts that disadvantage individuals but a result of deeply embedded systems and processes that have historically and continue to create disadvantage for marginalised groups. The key components of CRT are disputed, but the following five principles provide a comprehensive overview. These principles are *intersectionality*, *structural racism*, *White privilege*, *microaggressions* and *counter-storytelling*. Underpinning these principles is the common agreement that race is a socially constructed phenomenon. These components shed light into how BAME teachers and teacher educators navigate the workplace and our shared understanding of their lived experiences. Each of the five components will now be discussed using the context of BAME teachers and teacher educators.

Firstly, CRT provides a deep insight into how race intersects and creates further barriers for people of colour as it intersects with aspects such as gender, class, disability. A study by Gillborn (2020) illustrates this well through the lens of middle-class black parents who faced discrimination whilst trying to get their child diagnosed with specific learning needs. BAME teachers and teacher educators in this book illustrate how various aspects of their personal identities and characterises intersect with their race to exacerbate the levels of discrimination they have faced in the workplace.

The second element of CRT, structural racism discusses how practices of racism are embedded within all social structures and hence create deeply embedded barriers for people of colour, for example curriculum content can be seen as a structural, embedded, racialised commodity, deeply rooted in the histories of nations colonial pasts. A curriculum that negates groups of marginalised individuals by lack of representation has lasting impact on individual identities and sense of belonging. The BAME teachers shared their views on how many layers of structural inequalities, through their working lives created crippling disadvantage for their career progressions.

The third aspect of CRT, white privilege. Simply put, 'white privilege' is a set of invisible tokens that a white person can 'cash in' on anything they want to or need to gain an advantage. In many cases, this is done in such an introspective way that individuals do not even realise the privilege they hold. The consequences of this are the disadvantages these privileges create in a society that continues to normalise racial bias and stereotypes. Understanding of white privilege was enhanced through the work of Peggy McIntosh wrote in a 1989 essay that 'I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group' (p. 1).

Microaggressions can be defined as subtle aggressions experienced on a day-to-day basis that are a constant feature of the lived experiences of people of colour.

In many cases, these are not tackled and can create long-term psychological harm. Further research from neuroscientists and social psychologists show that people of colour who receive regular microaggressions show the same brain patterns as military personnel who have served in conflict zones, experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder. Participants in the study, BAME teachers and teacher educators indicated regular microaggressions in their work places, creating disadvantage for their long-term progress and career progression.

Finally, the fifth CRT characteristic is counter storytelling, and this can be argued to be the most powerful tool in the framework. Counter storytelling empowers people of colour to share their lived experiences through narratives to shape shared understanding and ways to move forward. Aspects of this approach are used in a well-known concept of a 'Human Library', where people come together as 'books' to tell their stories to questions the stereotypes that exist about different groups in society (Unjudge someone – The Human Library Organization).

Overall, CRT provides a helpful framework to understand the experiences of BAME teachers and teacher educators and to the extent of the disadvantages they experience and what can be done to reduce such inequalities to support the development and retention of these BAME teachers and teacher educators within the British education workforce. CRT is especially important to apply in regional contexts where all five factors play out but within a different configuration of power and structure. For example, because there are less BAME members of the population, there might be less acts of racism? However, the research shows that the victims of such racism experience proportionally more, and more often, than their urban counterparts. This factor is another reason why a qualitative study is so important, recognising the individual experiences that add up to a collective phenomenon.

It is reasonable to say that CRT is not a common concept in UK schools for teachers or students, but in the last 5 years in the UK, it has been in the political spotlight and has been associated with racism against whites – in other words it is experiencing a major backlash especially in relation to education. This can be described as a 'movement' and unquestionably has been hugely important in the USA, where CRT was more of a normative concept. According to the parliamentary record, Hansard, the term 'critical race theory' had never once been uttered in the House of Commons chamber. By the end of the day on 20 October 2020, it was of such importance that the government declared itself 'unequivocally against' the concept. 'We do not want teachers to teach their white pupils about white privilege and inherited racial guilt', warned the then equalities minister, Kemi Badenoch, at the end of a six-hour debate to mark Black History Month. 'Any school which teaches these elements of critical race theory, or which promotes partisan political views such as defunding the police without offering a balanced treatment of opposing views, is breaking the law'. At the time of writing, Kemi Badenoch is the leader of the Conservative party and continuing to express these views. Proponents of CRT would certainly argue that the simple fact she is a woman of colour and grew up in Nigeria, but was born in London because her mother travelled when pregnant, so that she could be born in London, has all the hallmarks of how racism works in profoundly structuring ways.

Critical Realism and Concrete Utopias

If Critical race theory is the microscope with which we examine the individual experiences of our participants, then Critical Realism (CR) is more of a telescope through which we view the nature of human behaviour and societies to examine the conceptual contours of historical developments and contemporary existence. CR is an increasingly important theory, originating in Philosophy with the work of Roy Bhaskar (1986, 1989) but spreading through many disciplines and now into the Social Sciences. In rather simplistic and summary terms, its major premise is that humans inhabit a permanent and objectively describable reality that we all share whilst each individual lives in a subjectively perceived universe which limits our knowledge but emphasises that we have degrees of agency with which to interact with our environment and our fellow human beings.

For CR, society is part of that reality but it is not reducible to predictable laws like natural sciences because it is constantly changing and so much harder to predict. Nevertheless, we know a great deal about societies and how they work, sufficient to mean that the 'Critical' in 'Critical Realism' is about the potential for humans to bring about change. Societies do have structures of all kinds, examples include patriarchy, colonialism and racism, endemic elements in many societies with enduring power. We know humans are imperfect, but we know that they have agency and we believe they can enact emancipatory reforms. We have developed an imperfect system of collective agency called Politics, in some societies expressed as democracy, in order to manage but also potentially improve society, for example, to challenge racism. To sum up, CR acknowledges the inescapable subjectivity of the individual but balances this limitation with the recognition that we inhabit a shared reality and that the intention of objectivity is a useful element in social research (Sayer, 1997). CR is predicated on the principle of emancipation and on the belief in human agency which can act on social realities and structural inequalities.

CR is essentially realistic, that is it accepts that we live in profoundly racist societies but we do have evidence of change and potential long term emancipation. The phrase 'concrete utopias' is important in this respect, as Bhaskar explains:

> Concrete utopianism involves a differentiation within the domain of possibilities of those that are real from those that are not. 'Real' here means 'realisable', and designates which possibilities may be actualized given a particular constraint (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 125).

Concrete utopianism, Bhaskar argues,

> involves thinking how a situation or the world could be otherwise, with a change in the use of a given set of resources or with a different way of acting subject to certain constraints. This mode of thinking forms the basis of an ethics oriented to change, in which we think alternatives to what is actualized on the basis of given