

# A JILV Backgrounder

## Critical Race Theory and the Jewish Community



### What is Critical Race Theory (CRT) Anyway?

A hot battle in the current culture wars is over what children are being taught about race and racism in K-12 schools. The controversy is part of a larger debate over American society's reckoning with racism in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in the spring of 2020. The debate over Critical Race Theory (CRT) in the classroom often becomes bogged down in semantics over what CRT is and isn't. [According to Helen Pluckrose](#), a prominent critic of progressive ideologies and theories, both the opponents of CRT in the classroom and those who deny it often misrepresent CRT. She defines Critical Race Theory thusly:

The critical theories of race approach argues that racism is ordinary (possibly even permanent) and a system embedded in attitudes and language that everyone is socialized into. It argues that we, therefore, need critical theorists and trainers to make everyone see and affirm their racism in order to dismantle it using certain critical methods.

Pluckrose argues that applied CRT has given rise to much of today's "anti-racism" and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion efforts, whether we choose to label these endeavors CRT or not.

As an intellectual and social movement, CRT started in the mid-1970s in response to what was seen as endemic racial inequalities persisting despite Civil Rights legislation. It gained steam in the 1980s and 1990s particularly with the writings of a handful of legal scholars, including notably Derrick Bell (his 1973 book *Race, Racism, and American Law*, now in its 6th printing, is considered a seminal book in the field), followed by Richard Delgado, a law professor at the University of Alabama School of Law; Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, a law professor at the UCLA School of Law and Columbia Law School; Mari Matsuda, a law professor at the University of Hawaii; and Cheryl I. Harris, a professor of [civil rights](#) and

[civil liberties](#) at the [UCLA School of Law](#), among others.

According to Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic in their book *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, "Critical Race Theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law." Derrick Bell, the pioneer in the field, stated "whites continue, consciously or unconsciously, to do all in their power to ensure their dominion and maintain their control."

In its basic form, CRT can be thought of as a theoretical framework that seeks to explain ongoing disparities and racism, which it sees as embedded in the cultural norms, language, and systems of society. Thus the widely used term "systemic racism" can be understood as an outgrowth of CRT. Moderate critics of CRT point out that in its applied form or "praxis" the theory becomes a problem. Indeed, CRT is often taught and applied not as a theoretical framework subject to scrutiny, but rather as an ideology that purports to explain all disparities in society.

In this applied form, CRT is frequently combined with a related theoretical framework called Standpoint Theory or Standpoint Epistemology, which holds that only those who have been adversely impacted by systems of oppression—that is, those with the requisite "lived experience"—have the standing and insight to define their oppression for the rest of society. Anyone questioning another's opinions ostensibly based on their life experience is thus coming from a place of "privilege," negating the other person's lived experience.



Indeed, critics of CRT argue that such Standpoint claims are often used to shut down the arguments of others, which generates an overall censorious culture and stifles discourse. The preeminent social psychologist Jonathan Haidt calls CRT "cuckoo" not because it is crazy but because it is like the cuckoo bird that takes over another bird's nest and pushes out its eggs.

In other words, applied CRT seeks to crowd out all alternative explanations and theoretical frameworks and thereby establish itself as the one and only explanatory framework for social disparity.



### Is CRT being Taught in K-12 Schools?

Opponents of teaching CRT in K-12 schools argue that it teaches young students a highly ideological and essentialist view of race. Some want the state to ban all teaching of CRT and others want CRT to be balanced with other viewpoints and theories in the classroom. The latter group of opponents may see CRT as a legitimate theoretical lens but oppose its being taught as a dogmatic, one-size-fits-all explanation. Both camps assert that such a pedagogy is detrimental to kids of all races and is highly divisive. As to the question of whether or not CRT is actually taught in public schools, critics point to the many schools that explicitly state they are teaching it and to the National Education Association (NEA), the nation's largest teacher's union, which received approval and funding for a plan promoting CRT in all 50 states in K-12 curricula.

The supporters of the new pedagogy deny that CRT, which they define narrowly as a legal framework taught primarily in law schools, is being taught at all in K-12 schools. They argue that the claim that CRT is being taught is a manipulation by conservative activists who use it as a wedge issue in electoral campaigns. Some of the same supporters, while denying that CRT is being taught, nevertheless assert that raising awareness of "systemic racism" is essential to understanding the current disparities and power dynamics in America and should be taught in schools. They see assertions of systemic racism as beyond reproach. These supporters of the new racial pedagogy further claim that critics of the pedagogy are actually motivated to deny America's racist past and eliminate the teaching of chattel slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and other racist episodes in American history.

Most critics of CRT-based education, however, deny the charge that they want schools to stop teaching about slavery and past racism. They want, instead, for there to be reasonable discussion and debate over *contemporary* claims of racism. What most proponents and opponents of the new pedagogy might agree on, if they could ever get past the semantic debate over the term "CRT," is that there is a heated debate over whether the assertion that systemic racism is ubiquitous and explains most social disparities should be taught as a given or as a debatable proposition in schools.

It should also be noted that this new pedagogy on race and racism is increasingly being taught in non-Orthodox Jewish day schools around the US. Private schools and school systems are often under pressure from their accrediting bodies to institute coercive Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) programs that train teachers in and teach a single view of race and racism. Numerous Jewish groups support the teaching of DEI and many Jewish educators regard it as *de rigueur* and beyond any reasonable dispute.

### Is CRT Good or Bad for the Jews?

The debate over CRT is particularly significant for the Jewish community as some critics assert that CRT and related ideological approaches are fanning the flames of antisemitism. They argue that CRT's binary, "oppressed vs. oppressor" paradigm often erases the distinct experience of Jews, who do not fit neatly into either category. They further argue that linking one's identity to privilege will inevitably suggest that there is a connection between Jewish identity and so-called "Jewish privilege" and power, producing the image of the "hyperwhite" Jew, the antisemitic stereotype who avails himself of power and uses it to marginalize others. In this worldview, economic success is synonymous with privilege. It will also, they argue, generate a simplistic, one-sided view of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as Israel will invariably be deemed the oppressor.

The critics express grave concern that the related concept of "equity" as popularized by Professor Ibram X. Kendi —

that all groups are standing in roughly equal footing or representation — will exacerbate antisemitism. The problem with this view of equity is that it treats differences among groups as expressions of racism and white supremacy. Such a view, they worry, will be weaponized to scapegoat Jews and Asians, among others, whose average income and educational achievement significantly exceed the mean. In other words, if some groups are held down by oppression, others must be propped up. Lastly, those concerned about CRT's role in inflaming antisemitism worry that in claiming a monopoly on discourse, critical race ideologies undermine society's enlightenment values of liberal discourse and free expression, which have always inured to the benefit of minority communities. A more illiberal society, they argue, will be bad for Jews.

*New York Times* Columnist Bret Stephens contends in an issue of the journal *Sapir*, of which he is Editor-in-



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Chief, that the ideology spawned by CRT is particularly dangerous to American Jews:

The intellectual battle against critical social justice theory (often called “woke” ideology) is one no true Jewish leader can shirk. That isn’t merely because a spirit of liberal-mindedness matters to Jewish well-being. It’s because woke ideology invariably combines three features that ought to terrify Jews: a belief that racial characteristics define individual moral worth, a habit of descending into antisemitism, and a quasi-totalitarian mindset that insists not only on regulating behavior but also on monitoring people’s thoughts and punishing those who think the wrong ones.

Those who disagree that CRT fuels antisemitism argue that critical approaches to racism will dismantle systems of oppression against all groups and pave the way for a more equitable society benefiting all people, including Jews. Jewish supporters of the new racial pedagogy claim that such explanations for disparity are established fact and not subject to reasonable debate. Some regard these social justice concepts as sacred and consider any attempt to critique them as blasphemous and often racist. They argue that teaching history is, in itself, not a mere recitation of facts but an interpretation of those facts and that educators should extend such “critical analysis” to contemporary American social issues.

They also contend that the push to teach multiple perspectives on race and racism will only open the door to Holocaust denial and other absurd claims. They point

to the comments of a Texas educator who stated that a Texas law requires that the school system teach “multiple views” on controversial topics, even on the historicity of the Holocaust. The school superintendent later apologized for the school official’s remarks. Since that time, no other cases of supposed anti-CRT legislation-induced Holocaust denial have been reported. Finally, Jewish CRT proponents often argue that CRT-based tools can be properly used in analyzing systemic antisemitism as well as systemic racism and should not be opposed for that reason alone. It should be pointed out that liberal critics of CRT do not believe that teaching multiple views on contentious subjects means teaching outlandish and bigoted perspectives well outside the Overton Window.

### What It All Comes Down To

The debate over CRT in the classroom and the boardroom, inside and outside Jewish organizational life, might be boiled down as follows: Should institutions tell children and adults precisely what to think about race and racism? Is the contention that America is rife with racism, embedded in every nook and cranny of society, an *opinion*, subject to debate, or should it be properly regarded as a *fact*? Is the idea that there is rampant systemic racism in America today as well-established and noncontroversial as the existence of racism during slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow? Should it be regarded as socially permissible to offer other explanations for disparities among groups, such as socioeconomic status, culture, and family structure? And the question most pertinent for the Jewish community: Should Jews be concerned that such an officially-sanctioned social diagnosis will be weaponized to harm Jews, or should they be inclined to believe that the new orthodoxy will create the kind of society in which Jews and other minorities can thrive?

### Discussion Questions

- How do you characterize the current public debate over CRT in schools?
- Should CRT be thought of as a theory explaining why there is societal disparity, or as an accepted set of observations about race and racism? Likewise, should the concept that systemic racism is the only acceptable explanation of disparity be taught in K-12 schools?
- How do you think CRT and the new racial pedagogy impact the Jewish community? What should Jews and Jewish organizations do about it?



Backgrounder by  
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