



Counterweight

Demystifying Critical Race Theory so We Can Get to the Point

by Helen Pluckrose

What Critical Race Theory (or CRT) is and isn't, who understands it and who doesn't, and what people's motivations are for defending or criticising it seem to be the issues dominating the culture wars right now. It is a good thing that we're talking about contemporary critical theories of race. This particular approach to addressing racism is something we desperately need to have serious discussions about. The problem is that we are largely not having serious discussions about it. Instead, people are quibbling over terms, accusing each other of ignorance or malice and generally talking past each other without engaging the point in any kind of productive way.

The first hindrance to discussing Critical Race Theory is that the discussion generally fails to get past the accusation that the other person doesn't understand what Critical Race Theory actually is. Often these accusations are correct. Many of the people advocating for CRT seem to believe it is any historically literate understanding of racial history in the USA, how horrendously it oppressed black Americans, why this was bad and how its aftermath is still felt today. Some even seem to think that CRT just means 'talking about racism.' Of course, if you believe that this is what CRT is, you will believe that anybody who opposes it is, at best, trying to gloss over a shameful history and, at worst, indifferent to or even supportive of racism. Meanwhile, some opponents of CRT believe it is essentially racism against white people and centred around the belief that all white people are racist, bigoted, and personally responsible for the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade. If you understand CRT as the belief that white people are evil and

generally inferior, you are going to believe that anyone who advocates it is, at best, a profoundly misguided conspiracy theorist and, at worst, a racist.

Many of the people who are wrong about what CRT is are well-intentioned but missing the point, preventing a more reasonable conversation from making progress. We are essentially looking at a conflict between two positions that can be discussed and evaluated. 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 socialised 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. Meanwhile, the liberal approach to addressing racism holds that it is a prejudiced attitude often accompanied by discriminatory behaviours that individuals can adopt or reject, that they already do so to varying extents and that much progress has been made towards the 'reject' position. This approach maintains that progress needs to be furthered by consistently opposing the evaluation of people by their race.

However, often what we see is people who are genuinely knowledgeable about what CRT is nitpicking over terminology in pedantic ways and arguing over whether or not the most extreme approaches to 'anti-racism' are really CRT. The reality is that current critical theories of race are not identical to the Critical Race Theory that emerged in legal scholarship from the 1970s. Nevertheless, there are many people who are

criticising the current manifestation of critical theories of race accurately in relation to their genuine negative impact on the real lives of real people of all races. It is not at all helpful to quibble over terms in these situations when we could be addressing genuine, complex problems and having productive disagreements about substantive issues. Often people choose to claim that a critic does not understand Critical Race Theory rather than engaging with their claims and arguments in order to make it harder for people to put forward their criticisms. It is commonly claimed that the critic simply doesn't know what they are talking about because they have not studied the theories in higher education. However, neither have most of the people being hit by the impacts of them. Rather than quibbling over whether what critics are criticising is really the theories that emerged in legal studies from the 1970s, let's address the reality of what critical theories of race look like right now and how they are impacting real people of all races.

The Evolution of an Idea: Materialist and Postmodernist CRT

It is not surprising that the theories have evolved and developed because that's what ideas do. In this case, the two main branches of CRT – best understood as materialist and postmodern – have evolved into the two branches of what is known as Critical Social Justice (CSJ) approaches to anti-racism. These are still best understood as materialist and postmodern. In the transition and in both branches, they have become more concrete and dogmatic and also simplified considerably. This is unsurprising as CSJ anti-racism operates mostly within cultural studies and pedagogy – the study of approaches to teaching – while CRT operated mostly within legal studies. You will find more detailed information on this in my and James Lindsay's *Cynical Theories*, which has a chapter on CRT, which was part of the second generation that we called “applied postmodernism”, and a chapter on current Critical Social Justice approaches to anti-racism, which is part of the third generation that we called “reified postmodernism.”

Firstly, let me explain what I mean by both CRT

and CSJ anti-racism having a materialist and postmodern branch. In *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic describe these as the “materialist” or “realist” approach vs the “idealist” approach.

They argue:

This hypothetical question poses an issue that squarely divides critical race theory thinkers—indeed, civil rights activists in general. One camp, which we may call “idealists,” holds that racism and discrimination are matters of thinking, mental categorization, attitude, and discourse. Race is a social construction, not a biological reality, they reason. Hence we may unmake it and deprive it of much of its sting by changing the system of images, words, attitudes, unconscious feelings, scripts, and social teachings by which we convey to one another that certain people are less intelligent, reliable, hardworking, virtuous, and American than others.

A contrasting school—the “realists” or economic determinists—holds that though attitudes and words are important, racism is much more than a collection of unfavorable impressions of members of other groups. For realists, racism is a means by which society allocates privilege and status. Racial hierarchies determine who gets tangible benefits, including the best jobs, the best schools, and invitations to parties in people's homes. Members of this school of thought point out that antiblack prejudice sprang up with slavery and capitalists' need for labor...

Materialists point out that conquering nations universally demonize their subjects to feel better about exploiting them, so that, for example, planters and ranchers in Texas and the Southwest circulated notions of Mexican inferiority at roughly the same period that they found it necessary to take over Mexican lands or, later, to import Mexican people for backbreaking labor. For materialists, understanding the ebb and flow of racial progress and retrenchment requires a careful

look at conditions prevailing at different times in history.

So, the idealists are those who look to attitudes, biases, categorisation, social constructivism and discourses as the sources of racism. I think it is more accurate to refer to these as the 'postmodernists' because there are many kinds of idealists, but those who think in this way draw heavily on the work of the poststructuralists, particularly Michel Foucault, and the overall theme is that of postmodernism – a skepticism of the ethos of modernity, especially science, reason, liberalism and progress. This is supported by the citations used by the advocates of this method. Within CRT, the postmodernist branch emerged largely from black feminist thought and is exemplified by Kimberlé Crenshaw who described her concept of intersectionality as “contemporary politics linked to postmodern theory.” Within CSJ approaches to anti-racism, the postmodernists are largely found in critical pedagogy and are exemplified by the approaches of theorists like Robin DiAngelo and Barbara Applebaum, who look almost entirely at the biases, attitudes and language believed to dominate the thought of white people. They frequently cite Michel Foucault to do so.

Meanwhile the materialists are those who look at economic, legal, political and governmental systems to see where the power imbalance lies. They do so empirically but they tend to cherry-pick statistics in order to read all disparities as evidence of racist discrimination. This gets in the way of addressing those that actually are while also neglecting to address those that are caused by something else – e.g., class, culture, geography – and so are of limited value for fixing genuine injustices. They tend towards cynicism and pessimism. Within Critical Race Theory, the key figure is Derrick Bell, who developed Interest Convergence Theory. This holds that white people only allow rights to black people when it benefits themselves. Bell also argued that racism has not improved at all and is, in fact, permanent.

Michelle Alexander also takes a materialist approach and has supported the 'racism is permanent' thesis but is a more rigorous

empirical scholar generally, although her scope can also be counterproductively narrow. Within CSJ approaches to anti-racism, the key materialist figure is Ibram X. Kendi. His work also focuses on structures more than biases and, although he holds that racist ideas lead to racist policies, he believes that people of all races can choose not to hold racist ideas, unlike DiAngelo et al. He is thus bound neither to postmodern discourse theory nor the 'racism is permanent' position. However, he does take the materialist stance of systematically closing down any other option than racism as a cause of and explanation for disparities.

So, What is Critical Race Theory?

Critical Race Theory: An Introduction describes it as a departure from liberal Civil Rights approaches:

Unlike traditional civil rights discourse, which stresses incrementalism and step-by-step progress, critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law.

and sets out four key tenets:

First, racism is ordinary, not aberrational—“normal science,” the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country.

This is a claim that racism is everywhere. All the time. It's just the water we swim in. It's also claimed that most people of colour agree with this. In reality, people of colour differ on this although a greater percentage of black people believe it to be true than white people.

Second, most would agree that our system of white-over-color ascendancy serves important purposes, both psychic and material, for the dominant group.

This means that this system, which has just been asserted to exist everywhere, is valued by white people both psychologically and in practical

terms. Many white people would disagree that they regard racism positively.

A third theme of critical race theory, the “social construction” thesis, holds that race and races are products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient.

This argues that races are social constructs rather than biological realities which is true – “populations” are the biological categories and don’t map neatly onto how we understand race – and that society has categorised and recategorised races according to custom, which is also true.

A final element concerns the notion of a unique voice of color. Coexisting in somewhat uneasy tension with antiessentialism, the voice-of-color thesis holds that because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, black, American Indian, Asian, and Latino writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their white counterparts matters that the whites are unlikely to know. Minority status, in other words, brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism.

There is much evidence that there is no unique voice of colour, and although there is good reason to think that people who have experienced racism may well have more perspective on it, they tend to have different perspectives. CRTs are more likely to regard those who agree with them as authoritative than those who disagree – i.e. “Yes” to Derrick Bell and Kimberlé Crenshaw but “No” to Thomas Sowell or Shelby Steele.

The British Educational Research Association has formed its own overlapping list of tenets of Critical Race Theory:

1) Centrality of Racism

For this they cite Delgado and Stefancic above.

2) White Supremacy

The BERA paper clarifies that “White supremacy’ does not relate to the obvious crude race hatred of extremist groups but to forces that saturate society as a whole.” These are quite vague but include material benefits and ideas that can be held consciously or unconsciously.

3) Voices of People of Color/Storytelling

This again focuses on those who feel ‘minoritised’ and the “depleting effects of racism” and focuses on experiences and fictionalised stories that convey those experiences. This was used often by Derrick Bell who included stories about a fictional island that only black people could breathe on, and a scenario in which aliens demanded all the black Americans in exchange for great benefits, to the agreement of white Americans. It is unclear that all voices and stories told by people of colour are equally valued with those who agree with CRT approaches.

4) Interest Convergence

This is the idea mentioned above that white people only offer equality to black people when it benefits white people. It neglects the possibility that very many white people might genuinely have moral commitments to racial equality due to empathy and principles.

5) Intersectionality

The framework set out by Kimberlé Crenshaw in which multiple variables of subordinated identity need to be considered at the same time as race – i.e. gender and sexuality. This can be done in a rigorous and reasonable way but is also hampered by Crenshaw’s commitment to postmodernism and rejection of universal liberalism. This tends to lead, in practice, to being suspicious of empirical studies into racism and other bigotries and to being divisive, creating a hierarchy of competing oppressions. I discussed that here.

Meanwhile, Payne Hiraldo, of the University of Vermont, set out five tenets of Critical Race Theory for use in higher education. These are:

1) Counter-Storytelling— “A framework that legitimizes the racial and subordinate

experiences of marginalized groups.”

Because society is believed to be constructed by stories told by dominant groups, counter-stories are believed to counteract that. See above.

2) The Permanence of Racism

This is a variation on the ordinariness of racism but stronger in its belief that racism is everywhere and in everything and doesn't go away or reduce, but just changes in manifestations and so needs critical methodologies to detect it.

3) Whiteness as Property

This incorporates ideas of white privilege and white supremacy in the idea that being white itself bestows material benefits on people. Although it originates with a somewhat dense and sophisticated argument by the legal scholar Cheryl Harris it tends to be rather simplistic and reductionist when broken down. See 'White supremacy' above.

4) Interest Convergence

See above.

5) The Critique of Liberalism

Liberalism is consistently criticised in CRT for individualistic and universalist approaches to overcoming racism, such as “colorblindness” – the commitment to not evaluating people by their race – equal opportunities, equal rights under the law, and meritocracy. Liberalism is often represented as having a tendency to overlook systemic racism by assuming an already “level playing field” when, in reality, genuine liberalism seeks to achieve one by removing barriers.

Finally, *The Encyclopedia of Diversity* in Education presents yet another variation on these same themes:

1) Centrality of Racism

A variation on the 'ordinariness' or 'permanence' of racism.

2) Challenges to Claims of Neutrality, Color Blindness, and Meritocracy

The rejection of liberalism.

3) Whites as Beneficiaries of Racial Remedies

Interest convergence theory.

4) Centrality of Experiential Knowledge

The unique voice of colour and storytelling.

5) Commitment to Working towards Social Justice

This commitment involves using the methods of Critical Race Theory rather than liberalism, obviously.

It should be clear by now that CRT is not just talking about historical and contemporary racism with a view to overcoming it – something that all approaches to addressing racism do – but a set of core beliefs that racism is ordinary and/or permanent; that white supremacy is everywhere; that white people don't oppose racism unless it suits them; that there is a unique voice of colour that just so happens to be the one that agrees with CRT; that lived experience and storytelling are primary ways of revealing racism; that liberalism and the Civil Rights Movement approach are bad; and that working for social justice means using the critical theories of race set out above.

These can all be disagreed with – and often are – by people of all races who still genuinely oppose racism.

So, what is Critical Social Justice Anti-racism?

Let's look first at Kendi's approach. Here are some key thoughts of his from *How To Be an Anti-Racist*:

What is racism?

Racism is a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities.

Okay, so what are racist policies and ideas? We have to define them separately to understand why they are married and why they interact so well together. In fact, let's take one step back and consider the definition of another important phrase: racial inequity. Racial inequity is when two or more racial

groups are not standing on approximately equal footing. Here's an example of racial inequity: 71 percent of White families lived in owner-occupied homes in 2014, compared to 45 percent of Latinx families and 41 percent of Black families. Racial equity is when two or more racial groups are standing on a relatively equal footing. An example of racial equity would be if there were relatively equitable percentages of all three racial groups living in owner-occupied homes in the forties, seventies, or, better, nineties. A racist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups. An antiracist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial equity between racial groups. By policy, I mean written and unwritten laws, rules, procedures, processes, regulations, and guidelines that govern people. There is no such thing as a nonracist or race-neutral policy. Every policy in every institution in every community in every nation is producing or sustaining either racial inequity or equity between racial groups...

Since the 1960s, racist power has commandeered the term "racial discrimination," transforming the act of discriminating on the basis of race into an inherently racist act. But if racial discrimination is defined as treating, considering, or making a distinction in favor of or against an individual based on that person's race, then racial discrimination is not inherently racist. The defining question is whether the discrimination is creating equity or inequity. If discrimination is creating equity, then it is antiracist. If discrimination is creating inequity, then it is racist. Someone reproducing inequity through permanently assisting an overrepresented racial group into wealth and power is entirely different than someone challenging that inequity by temporarily assisting an underrepresented racial group into relative wealth and power until equity is reached. The only remedy to racist discrimination is antiracist discrimination. So, what is a racist idea?

A racist idea is any idea that suggests one

racial group is inferior or superior to another racial group in any way. Racist ideas argue that the inferiorities and superiorities of racial groups explain racial inequities in society. An antiracist idea is any idea that suggests the racial groups are equals in all their apparent differences—that there is nothing right or wrong with any racial group. Antiracist ideas argue that racist policies are the cause of racial inequities.

Is this Critical Race Theory? Not really. It shares some common elements in that it uses the materialist approach of reading all disparities as evidence of racism and in its rejection of liberalism, but the legal scholars of the original CRT would find this naive because of all the missing elements and because they believed law and policy changes made very little difference. Kendi does not claim there is a unique voice of color or that white people only support racial equality when it suits them. He does not really have a developed critical theory of race. He has a simplistic solution which involves equalising outcomes and a claim that anybody who opposes this is advocating racist policies because they have racist ideas. While liberals are likely to share his concerns about simplistic and racist arguments that attempt to explain disparities as being due to biological deficiencies of black people or self-imposed subcultural mores among black communities, his equally simplistic explanation of all disparities being caused by racism does not help. It just makes it even more difficult to look at disparities in a more rigorous and multi-faceted way.

Kendi's ideas are most strongly countered by two black intellectuals who study race and racism – Thomas Sowell and Shelby Steele. Sowell is an economist with a strong libertarian bent. He looks at data that offers disconfirming evidence for Kendi's approach and suggests other reasons for disparities. Steele is more of a conservative who argues that white guilt has led to affirmative action which disempowers black people. Their work is valuable, but liberals are likely to find both of them incomplete as well as they place primary responsibility on the black individual to sort out their own upward mobility. This is difficult enough

for anyone, but particularly for African Americans, who have only been allowed to be upwardly mobile for two generations. The solution to racial disparities is unlikely to be found either in placing all responsibility on white society or on black individuals.

If Kendi has a critical theory of race, it comes down to this: There is no such thing as 'not-racist.' There is only 'racist' or 'anti-racist.'

In his rejection of liberal colour-blindness and his dichotomous thinking, Kendi shares one tenet of CRT and the dogmatic spirit of the materialists. With his moralistic assertion that one must agree with him or be racist and the great influence his work has on society, he mostly stands in the way of more rigorous study of disparities by making people fearful to undertake them.

More influential in current Critical Social Justice approaches to anti-racism, however, is the work of Robin DiAngelo. It is her postmodern cultural constructivist ideas that most people currently criticising CRT are raising concerns about.

In her book with Ozlem Sensoy *Is Everyone Really Equal?: An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education* (2017), the authors write:

While some scholars and activists prefer to use the term social justice in order to reclaim its true commitments, in this book we prefer the term critical social justice. We do so in order to distinguish our standpoint on social justice from mainstream standpoints.

They define the mainstream standpoint on social justice in this way:

Most people have a working definition of social justice; it is commonly understood as the principles of "fairness" and "equality" for all people and respect for their basic human rights. Most people would say that they value these principles.

A critical approach to social justice refers to specific theoretical perspectives that

recognize that society is stratified (i.e., divided and unequal) in significant and far-reaching ways along social group lines that include race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. Critical social justice recognizes inequality as deeply embedded in the fabric of society (i.e., as structural), and actively seeks to change this.

The definition we apply is rooted in a critical theoretical approach. While this approach refers to a broad range of fields, there are some important shared principles:

All people are individuals, but they are also members of social groups.

These social groups are valued unequally in society.

Social groups that are valued more highly have greater access to the resources of a society.

Social injustice is real, exists today, and results in unequal access to resources between groups of people.

Those who claim to be for social justice must be engaged in self-reflection about their own socialization into these groups (their "positionality") and must strategically act from that awareness in ways that challenge social injustice. [All emphases mine.]

The authors go on to say that, based on these principles, a person engaged in critical social justice practice must be able to:

Recognize that relations of unequal social power are constantly being enacted at both the micro (individual) and macro (structural) levels.

Understand our own positions within these relations of unequal power.

Think critically about knowledge; what we know and how we know it.

Act on all of the above in service of a more socially just society.

Is this not very clearly a critical theory of race and an evolution of Critical Race Theory?

At the 2014 National Race and Pedagogy Conference at Puget Sound University that included DiAngelo, the following tenets were posited:

Racism exists today in both traditional and modern forms.

Racism is an institutionalized, multilayered, multilevel system that distributes unequal power and resources between white people and people of color, as socially identified, and disproportionately benefits whites.

All members of society are socialized to participate in the system of racism, albeit in varied social locations.

All white people benefit from racism regardless of intentions.

No-one chose to be socialized into racism so no-one is bad, but no-one is neutral.

To not act against racism is to support racism.

Racism must be continually identified, analyzed and challenged. No-one is ever done.

The question is not Did racism take place? but rather How did racism manifest in that situation?

The racial status quo is comfortable for most whites. Therefore, anything that maintains white comfort is suspect.

The racially oppressed have a more intimate insight via experiential knowledge into the system of race than their racial oppressors. However, white professors will be seen as having more legitimacy, thus positionality must be intentionally engaged.

Resistance is a predictable reaction to anti-racist education and must be explicitly and strategically addressed.

In all of this, it is explicit that DiAngelo and her collaborators do maintain the key tenets of the older CRTs. They clearly believe that racism is ordinary; that white supremacy is everywhere; that white people don't oppose racism because it suits them; that there is a unique voice of colour and it's the one that agrees with them; that lived experience is a primary way of revealing racism; that liberal individualism is bad; and that working for social justice means using the critical theories of race set out by people like them.

The theories of DiAngelo and the other Critical Social Justice anti-racists are clearly not identical to the earlier legal theories, however. They contain less materialism, focus much less on law and much more on culture, draw more explicitly on Foucauldian notions of discourse, make little to no mention of storytelling and are much more simplistic and accessible. But their work quite clearly consists of critical theories of race that have been significantly influenced by Critical Race Theory. In *Nice Racism*, DiAngelo cites Derrick Bell and Kimberlé Crenshaw among her influences alongside other Critical Race Theory scholars and more contemporary Critical Social Justice theorists of anti-racism and decolonial studies.

If it helps to call the current anti-racist theories "contemporary critical theories of race" rather than "Critical Race Theory", do so, but for goodness' sake, let's stop the endless quibbling about terminology and talk about the ideas that have deeply infiltrated universities, employment, education, mainstream media, social media and general culture.

This is vitally important for two reasons. Firstly, we need to be able address racism in society ethically and effectively. Secondly and relatedly, individuals need to be allowed to have their own views about how racism works and their own ethical frameworks for opposing it. They need to be able to discuss and compare them. This will

help with achieving the first goal.

When it comes to discussing contemporary critical theories of race, we need to be able to talk about what the current theories actually say and advocate for and whether they are ethical and effective. Many people from a wide range of political, cultural, racial, religious and philosophical backgrounds would say “No” they are not, and they should be able to make their case for alternative approaches.

It is also vitally important that we are able to talk about how much influence these theories already have and how much they should have on society in general and on government, employment, mainstream media, social media and education in particular, and whether this influence is largely positive or negative. From my time listening to clients of Counterweight, I would respond, “Way too much” and “Largely negative” to these questions.

We need to be able to consider whether the advocates of Critical Social Justice antiracism,

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particularly those in positions of power, are inclusive of alternative approaches to addressing racism that are held by people with different political, cultural, philosophical and religious worldviews. Clients of Counterweight, many of whom are not white or western, who are ideologically diverse, and who often find this whole western CSJ phenomenon bewildering, tell us they are not.

Most importantly, we need to be able to measure and discuss what effects these theories have on reducing racism, increasing social cohesion and furthering the goals of social justice. Are they achieving that or are they increasing racial tensions, decreasing social cohesion and being the driving force for many injustices in society while creating a culture of fear, pigeonholing people of racial minority into political stereotypes, and silencing the voices of those who dissent? I strongly believe, based on the reports coming into Counterweight, that it is the latter. However, I am willing to be persuaded to think differently, so let's talk.