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Critical Race Theory: What It Is and How to Fight It

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The following is adapted from a lecture delivered at Hillsdale College on March 30, 2021.

Critical race theory is fast becoming America's new institutional orthodoxy. Yet most Americans have never heard of it—and of those who have, many don't understand it. It's time for this to change. We need to know what it is so we can know how to fight it.

In explaining critical race theory, it helps to begin with a brief history of Marxism. Originally, the Marxist Left built its political program on the theory of class conflict. Marx believed that the primary characteristic of industrial societies was the imbalance of power between capitalists and workers. The solution to that imbalance, according to Marx, was revolution: the workers would eventually gain consciousness of their plight, seize the means of production, overthrow the capitalist class, and usher in a new socialist society.

During the 20th century, a number of regimes underwent Marxist-style revolutions, and each ended in disaster. Socialist governments in the Soviet Union, China,

Cambodia, Cuba, and elsewhere racked up a body count of nearly 100 million of their own people. They are remembered for their gulags, show trials, executions, and mass starvations. In practice, Marx’s ideas unleashed man’s darkest brutalities.

By the mid-1960s, Marxist intellectuals in the West had begun to acknowledge these failures. They recoiled at revelations of Soviet atrocities and came to realize that workers’ revolutions would never occur in Western Europe or the United States, where there were large middle classes and rapidly improving standards of living. Americans in particular had never developed a sense of class consciousness or class division. Most Americans believed in the American dream—the idea that they could transcend their origins through education, hard work, and good citizenship.

But rather than abandon their Leftist political project, Marxist scholars in the West simply adapted their revolutionary theory to the social and racial unrest of the 1960s. Abandoning Marx’s economic dialectic of capitalists and workers, they substituted race for class and sought to create a revolutionary coalition of the dispossessed based on racial and ethnic categories.

Fortunately, the early proponents of this revolutionary coalition in the U.S. lost out in the 1960s to the civil rights movement, which sought instead the fulfillment of the American promise of freedom and equality under the law. Americans preferred the idea of improving their country to that of overthrowing it. The vision of Martin Luther King, Jr., President Johnson’s pursuit of the Great Society, and the restoration of law and order promised by President Nixon in his 1968 campaign defined the post-1960s American political consensus.

But the radical Left has proved resilient and enduring—which is where critical race theory comes in.

WHAT IT IS

Critical race theory is an academic discipline, formulated in the 1990s, built on the intellectual framework of identity-based Marxism. Relegated for many years to universities and obscure academic journals, over the past decade it has increasingly become the default ideology in our public institutions. It has been injected into government agencies, public school systems, teacher training programs, and corporate human resources departments in the form of diversity training programs, human resources modules, public policy frameworks, and school curricula.

There are a series of euphemisms deployed by its supporters to describe critical race theory, including “equity,” “social justice,” “diversity and inclusion,” and “culturally responsive teaching.” Critical race theorists, masters of language construction, realize that “neo-Marxism” would be a hard sell. *Equity*, on the other hand, sounds non-threatening and is easily confused with the American principle of *equality*. But the distinction is vast and important. Indeed, equality—the principle proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence, defended in the Civil War, and codified into law with the 14th and 15th Amendments, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965—is explicitly rejected by critical race theorists. To them, equality represents “mere nondiscrimination” and provides “camouflage” for white supremacy, patriarchy, and oppression.

In contrast to equality, equity as defined and promoted by critical race theorists is little more than reformulated Marxism. In the name of equity, UCLA

Imprimis (im-pri-mis), [Latin]: in the first place

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Law Professor and critical race theorist Cheryl Harris has proposed suspending private property rights, seizing land and wealth and redistributing them along racial lines. Critical race guru Ibram X. Kendi, who directs the Center for Antiracist Research at Boston University, has proposed the creation of a federal Department of Antiracism. This department would be independent of (i.e., unaccountable to) the elected branches of government, and would have the power to nullify, veto, or abolish any law at any level of government and curtail the speech of political leaders and others who are deemed insufficiently “antiracist.”

One practical result of the creation of such a department would be the overthrow of capitalism, since according to Kendi, “In order to truly be antiracist, you also have to truly be anti-capitalist.” In other words, identity is the means and Marxism is the end.

An equity-based form of government would mean the end not only of private property, but also of individual rights, equality under the law, federalism, and freedom of speech. These would be replaced by race-based redistribution of wealth, group-based rights, active discrimination, and omnipotent bureaucratic authority. Historically, the accusation of “anti-Americanism” has been overused. But in this case, it’s not a matter of interpretation—critical race theory prescribes a revolutionary program that would overturn the principles of the Declaration and destroy the remaining structure of the Constitution.

HOW IT WORKS

What does critical race theory look like in practice? Last year, I authored a series of reports focused on critical race theory in the federal government. The FBI was holding workshops on intersectionality theory. The Department of Homeland Security was telling white employees they were committing “microinequities” and had been “socialized into oppressor roles.” The Treasury Department held a training session telling staff members

that “virtually all white people contribute to racism” and that they must convert “everyone in the federal government” to the ideology of “antiracism.” And the Sandia National Laboratories, which designs America’s nuclear arsenal, sent white male executives to a three-day reeducation camp, where they were told that “white male culture” was analogous to the “KKK,” “white supremacists,” and “mass killings.” The executives were then forced to renounce their “white male privilege” and write letters of apology to fictitious women and people of color.

This year, I produced another series of reports focused on critical race theory in education. In Cupertino, California, an elementary school forced first-graders to deconstruct their racial and sexual identities, and rank themselves according to their “power and privilege.” In Springfield, Missouri, a middle school forced teachers to locate themselves on an “oppression matrix,” based on the idea that straight, white, English-speaking, Christian males are members of the oppressor class and must atone for their privilege and “covert white supremacy.” In Philadelphia, an elementary school forced fifth-graders to celebrate “Black communism” and simulate a Black Power rally to free 1960s radical Angela Davis from prison, where she had once been held on charges of murder. And in Seattle, the school district told white teachers that they are guilty of “spirit murder” against black children and must “bankrupt [their] privilege in acknowledgement of [their] thieved inheritance.”

I’m just one investigative journalist, but I’ve developed a database of more than 1,000 of these stories. When I say that critical race theory is becoming the operating ideology of our public institutions, it is not an exaggeration—from the universities to bureaucracies to k-12 school systems, critical race theory has permeated the collective intelligence and decision-making process of American government, with no sign of slowing down.

This is a revolutionary change. When originally established, these government

institutions were presented as neutral, technocratic, and oriented towards broadly-held perceptions of the public good. Today, under the increasing sway of critical race theory and related ideologies, they are being turned against the American people. This isn't limited to the permanent bureaucracy in Washington, D.C., but is true as well of institutions in the states, even in red states, and it is spreading to county public health departments, small Midwestern school districts, and more. This ideology will not stop until it has devoured all of our institutions.

FUTILE RESISTANCE

Thus far, attempts to halt the encroachment of critical race theory have been ineffective. There are a number of reasons for this.

First, too many Americans have developed an acute fear of speaking up about social and political issues, especially those involving race. According to a recent Gallup poll, 77 percent of conservatives are afraid to share their political beliefs publicly. Worried about getting mobbed on social media, fired from their jobs, or worse, they remain quiet, largely ceding the public debate to those pushing these anti-American ideologies. Consequently, the institutions themselves become monocultures: dogmatic, suspicious, and hostile to a diversity of opinion. Conservatives in both the federal government and public school systems have told me that their “equity and inclusion” departments serve as political offices, searching for and stamping out any dissent from the official orthodoxy.

Second, critical race theorists have constructed their argument like a mousetrap. Disagreement with their program becomes irrefutable evidence of a dissenter’s “white fragility,” “unconscious bias,” or “internalized white supremacy.” I’ve seen this projection of false consciousness on their opponents play out dozens of times in my reporting. Diversity trainers will make an outrageous claim—such as “all whites are intrinsically oppressors” or

“white teachers are guilty of spirit murdering black children”—and then when confronted with disagreement, they adopt a patronizing tone and explain that participants who feel “defensiveness” or “anger” are reacting out of guilt and shame. Dissenters are instructed to remain silent, “lean into the discomfort,” and accept their “complicity in white supremacy.”

Third, Americans across the political spectrum have failed to separate the premise of critical race theory from its conclusion. Its premise—that American history includes slavery and other injustices, and that we should examine and learn from that history—is undeniable. But its revolutionary conclusion—that America was founded on and defined by racism and that our founding principles, our Constitution, and our way of life should be overthrown—does not rightly, much less necessarily, follow.

Fourth and finally, the writers and activists who have had the courage to speak out against critical race theory have tended to address it on the theoretical level, pointing out the theory’s logical contradictions and dishonest account of history. These criticisms are worthy and good, but they move the debate into the academic realm, which is friendly terrain for proponents of critical race theory. They fail to force defenders of this revolutionary ideology to defend the practical consequences of their ideas in the realm of politics.

POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

No longer simply an academic matter, critical race theory has become a tool of political power. To borrow a phrase from the Marxist theoretician Antonio Gramsci, it is fast achieving “cultural hegemony” in America’s public institutions. More and more, it is driving the vast machinery of the state and society. If we want to succeed in opposing it, we must address it politically at every level.

Critical race theorists must be confronted with and forced to speak to the facts. Do they support public schools separating first-graders into groups of

“oppressors” and “oppressed”? Do they support mandatory curricula teaching that “all white people play a part in perpetuating systemic racism”? Do they support public schools instructing white parents to become “white traitors” and advocate for “white abolition”? Do they want those who work in government to be required to undergo this kind of reeducation? How about managers and workers in corporate America? How about the men and women in our military? How about every one of us?

There are three parts to a successful strategy to defeat the forces of critical race theory: governmental action, grassroots mobilization, and an appeal to principle.

We already see examples of governmental action. Last year, one of my reports led President Trump to issue an executive order banning critical race theory-based training programs in the federal government. President Biden rescinded this order on his first day in office, but it provides a model for governors and municipal leaders to follow. This year, several state legislatures have introduced bills to achieve the same goal: preventing public institutions from conducting programs that stereotype, scapegoat, or demean people on the basis of race. And I have organized a coalition of attorneys to file lawsuits against schools and government agencies that impose critical race theory-based programs on grounds of the First Amendment (which protects citizens from compelled speech), the Fourteenth Amendment (which provides equal protection under the law), and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (which prohibits public institutions from discriminating on the basis of race).

On the grassroots level, a multiracial and bipartisan coalition is emerging to do battle against critical race theory. Parents are mobilizing against racially divisive curricula in public schools and employees are increasingly speaking out against Orwellian reeducation in the workplace. When they see what is happening, Americans are naturally

outraged that critical race theory promotes three ideas—race essentialism, collective guilt, and neo-segregation—which violate the basic principles of equality and justice. Anecdotally, many Chinese-Americans have told me that having survived the Cultural Revolution in their former country, they refuse to let the same thing happen here.

In terms of principles, we need to employ our own moral language rather than allow ourselves to be confined by the categories of critical race theory. For example, we often find ourselves debating “diversity.” Diversity as most of us understand it is generally good, all things being equal, but it is of secondary value. We should be talking about and aiming at *excellence*, a common standard that challenges people of all backgrounds to achieve their potential. On the scale of desirable ends, excellence beats diversity every time.

Similarly, in addition to pointing out the dishonesty of the historical narrative on which critical race theory is predicated, we must promote the true story of America—a story that is honest about injustices in American history, but that places them in the context of our nation’s high ideals and the progress we have made towards realizing them. Genuine American history is rich with stories of achievements and sacrifices that will move the hearts of Americans—in stark contrast to the grim and pessimistic narrative pressed by critical race theorists.

Above all, we must have courage—the fundamental virtue required in our time. Courage to stand and speak the truth. Courage to withstand epithets. Courage to face the mob. Courage to shrug off the scorn of the elites. When enough of us overcome the fear that currently prevents so many from speaking out, the hold of critical race theory will begin to slip. And courage begets courage. It’s easy to stop a lone dissenter; it’s much harder to stop 10, 20, 100, 1,000, 1,000,000, or more who stand up together for the principles of America.

Truth and justice are on our side. If we can muster the courage, we will win. ■