

## SEP Summer School 2021 Lecture

# The ideological foundations of Critical Race Theory

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In recent months, factional warfare within the US political establishment around “critical race theory” has escalated to a fever pitch. This controversy is a contest between two fundamentally right-wing, anti-Marxist positions, neither of which can claim to be connected with anything left-wing or progressive.

On one side of the American political establishment, the Republican Party is mobilizing all the reactionary forces at its disposal—fascist militias, white supremacists and religious fundamentalists—for a full-scale assault on the teaching of any left-wing, socialist or Marxist ideas at American schools and universities, which the Republicans intend to carry out under the banner of a fight against “critical race theory.”

As of today, Republican-controlled legislatures in at least 10 American states have enacted laws banning the teaching of critical race theory, and 26 are in various stages of enacting such laws. Many of these laws, to greater or lesser degrees, utilize the pretext of a struggle against “critical race theory” to target the real threat as the Republicans see it: Marxism.

A new law in Tennessee, for example, bans along with critical race theory any materials that promote “division between, or resentment of, a ... social class, or class of people.” It is not hard to imagine how such laws, in the hands of Republican authorities, will be used to ban any articles from the *World Socialist Web Site* from being discussed in classrooms. These laws have been accompanied by provocative demands for cameras to be installed in classrooms to monitor the content of teachers’ lessons.

The Republicans, fresh from their violent attempt on January 6 to overthrow the results of the 2020 elections, are planning to make the purported struggle against “critical race theory” a centerpiece of their upcoming campaigns, electoral and otherwise. Steve Bannon, the fascist political operative who played a significant role in Trump’s 2016 election victory, told *Politico* magazine in January: “I look at this and say, ‘Hey, this is how we are going to win.’”

Bannon and his ilk are calculating that popular revulsion with the precepts and methods associated with critical race theory will play into their hands. Along these lines, as early as September 2020, the Trump administration’s Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued a directive prohibiting agency spending related to any training on critical race theory.

On the other side of this “debate” is critical race theory itself, a body of academic writing that emerged in the US in the late 1980s and early 1990s which combines postmodernism and subjective idealist philosophy with historical revisionism, racial sectarianism and an orientation to the Democratic Party and its satellites.

The ascendancy of critical race theory and other “social justice” theories

over the preceding decades coincided with the accelerating shift by the Democratic Party of its ideological center of gravity onto issues of race, gender and identity, which in turn coincided with the Democratic Party’s abandonment of the last vestiges of any reformist program with which it could make a genuine mass appeal.

Alongside this trajectory, critical race theory and similar postmodern identity theories emerged from obscure academic trends into a dominant ideology in universities, executive suites, Hollywood studios, media conglomerates, trade unions and within and around the Democratic Party itself.

These so-called “social justice” theories have an unmistakable and tendentious jargon that everyone by now has encountered—“cultural appropriation,” “white privilege,” “speaking your truth,” “white supremacy,” “safe spaces,” “discursive violence,” “microaggressions,” “toxic masculinity,” “patriarchy,” “rape culture,” “intersectionality,” “trigger warnings” and so forth.

The response of the Democratic Party to the Republican offensive against critical race theory has been to double down on it, mobilizing its supporters in the middle class pseudo-left and in the trade union bureaucracy for a fight to promote it. Charles Blow, writing in the *New York Times*, defended critical race theory in a prominent editorial as a “lens through which to examine structures of power.” And shortly after taking office, Biden himself rescinded the September 2020 OMB directive prohibiting federal spending related to critical race theory.

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, issued a statement defending critical race theory, and similar statements have issued from state-level and local union officials around the country.

The pseudo-left tendencies in the orbit of the Democratic Party, for their part, are arguing that, in one or another way, critical race theory and similar postmodern identity theories should be appreciated by socialists or even harmonized with Marxism. In article titled “Why Critical Race Theory Should be Taught in Schools,” which appeared in *Current Affairs* magazine, editor-in-chief and prominent DSA figure Nathan J. Robinson defended critical race theory on the grounds that it is “provocative and should spark important discussions.”

The Democrats celebrated a victory in June when none other than General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, appeared to align the Pentagon with those defending the teaching of critical race theory to officer cadets. Responding to denunciations from a Republican legislator during a House Armed Services Committee hearing, Milley defended the teaching of critical race theory at West Point by saying: “The United States Military Academy is a university, and it is important that we train and we understand.” He added, “I want to understand white rage. And I’m white.”

General Milley’s apparent defense of critical race theory prompted a

wave of disappointed and bitter denunciations from the Republican ranks and Trump himself, along with enthusiastic saluting from the Democratic side.

The Republican offensive against critical race theory grows out of and was made possible to a significant degree by the Democrats' embrace of the *New York Times'* 1619 Project. The Republicans responded to the 1619 Project with the so-called "1776 Report," issued in the final days of the Trump presidency, which demanded that America "restore patriotic education" and purge schools and universities of any teachings that are "contrary to America's principles." And the Republicans are now putting these threats into practice.

A central conceit of this whole official "debate" is that critical race theory represents something left-wing or even Marxist. This is often taken for granted both by its Republican-aligned detractors and by its Democrat-aligned advocates.

While genuine Marxists certainly oppose the drive by the Republicans to purge the schools of "unpatriotic" literature, it must be made clear that critical race theory, for its part, has absolutely nothing in common with Marxism.

### **The roots of critical race theory in postmodern subjective idealism**

Critical race theory is a broad current, with many tributaries flowing into it and many offshoots flowing out of it. One can go to a library and walk down aisle upon aisle of shelves of this material, which at a surface level comprises many diverse and even internally contradictory trends that have emerged and shifted over time.

In characterizing this whole current, it is therefore useful to begin at the most basic level with its fundamental philosophical conceptions, the heritage of which can be traced to postmodernism and the conceptions advanced by the Frankfurt School. This is the "critical theory" from which "critical race theory" emerges.

This protracted ideological trajectory has been analyzed extensively elsewhere, including in David North's *Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness* (2007) and *The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left: A Marxist Critique* (2015), but it will suffice for the purposes of this lecture to review a few of the characteristic conceptions.

In the book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, two leaders of the Frankfurt School, concluded that the Enlightenment was to blame for all the authoritarianism and barbarism that characterized the first half of the 20th century, on the grounds that it was all the inevitable result of a misguided attempt to exert control over nature through science and reason. Adorno would go on in *Negative Dialectics* (1966) to claim that all systemic thought is inherently authoritarian.

The postmodernists took as their starting point this rejection or denigration of science, reason and Enlightenment rationalism—this is the "modernity" that they claim to have moved beyond—and proceeded to declare their "incredulity to all meta-narratives," in the phrase of postmodernist philosopher Jean-François Lyotard.

According to the postmodernists, scientific understanding constitutes only one "web of reality" or "way of knowing" or "narrative" or "discourse" among many—and a discredited, authoritarian one at that—so it is impermissible to speak in terms of universal truth, or of an objective reality outside and independent of human minds, to which human thoughts can reliably correspond and which human collective activity can effectively change or improve.

To cite one characteristic example, there is an anthology of writings

titled *Webs of Reality: Social Perspectives on Science and Religion*, published by Rutgers University Press in 2002, which presents its subject matter as follows:

"We explore some of the similarities between religion and science that stand out when they are treated as social structures and as systems of meaning ... What we find is that the so-called scientific worldview is itself implicitly religious."

I am not singling out this book as especially significant. It just serves as only one of countless illustrations one could provide of the application of the postmodern framework. According to postmodernism, there is no scientific understanding of the world that corresponds with objective reality. Science and religion are merely different "communities," different "discourses," each with its own "web of reality," neither of which is in any fundamental sense more legitimate than the other.

Conceptions flowing from these basic postmodern philosophical ideas find expression throughout the writings of the proponents of critical race theory, who employ phrases such as "naming one's own reality" and "speaking your truth."

Because scientific reasoning is a discredited "narrative" associated with past oppression, according to critical race theory, particular emphasis is placed on what is called "personal storytelling," and in particular, on the dramatic recounting of intensely emotional experiences.

As Jeanette Haynes Writer, a proponent of critical race theory, put it: "The goal of CRT [critical race theory] is to construct an alternative reality by naming one's reality through storytelling and counterstorytelling; thus, the advantage of CRT is the voice that it provides people of color."

The concept of "personal storytelling" gives critical race theory as a body of writing one of its distinctive features. One opens a treatise on a historical or sociological topic and finds chapters devoted to the personal reminiscences of the author. "Speaking your truth" in this way is regarded as an entirely legitimate way to "prove" an idea—and indeed, even more legitimate than the discredited old method of employing objective facts, figures and logical arguments.

Whatever the intentions of the adherents of this theoretical framework, it must be said at the outset that these conceptions in themselves are not without patronizing and frankly racist implications. It is as if to say: "Facts and logical reasoning about objective reality are for white people, so people of color use personal storytelling instead."

Notwithstanding the occasional invocation of Marx, these conceptions constitute, in precise philosophical terms, various forms of subjective idealism, or conceptions flowing from a belief in the primacy of thought over matter and a skepticism towards the correlation between thought and an objective reality independent of individual consciousness.

Subjective idealism constitutes the polar opposite of the philosophy of Marxism, historical materialism, which is grounded on the conceptions that matter precedes thought and that human thought can grasp and understand objective reality—the same objective reality that people of all races inhabit—and through conscious and collective human activity, change and improve it.

These basic philosophical conceptions are key to distinguishing critical race theory from Marxism—and why it is impossible to speak of commingling or combining any of the postmodern "social justice" theories like critical race theory with a Marxist critique of capitalism.

It is hoped that this lecture, if it accomplishes nothing else, makes this point perfectly clear: when we are talking about critical race theory versus Marxism, we are talking about two completely different, completely irreconcilable and completely incompatible theoretical frameworks, all the way down to their most basic philosophical roots.

In the period leading up to the Russian Revolution, Lenin was compelled in 1909 to produce an entire treatise on philosophy, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, in which he vigorously defended

Marxism from various forms of subjective idealism masquerading as “improvements” on the philosophical foundations of Marxism. And likewise, during the struggle with the petty-bourgeois opposition in the Socialist Workers Party, Trotsky was compelled in 1939 to write “The A-B-C of Materialist Dialectics,” in which he patiently reiterated fundamental conceptions that to Marxists are so basic that they are like learning the alphabet.

Cliff Slaughter, in *Lenin on Dialectics*, explained: “It is only on the basis of seeing the existence of objective reality independent of human consciousness as ‘the main thing’ that Lenin is able to make the great contribution ... which he does in the [Philosophical] Notebooks. Only a materialist understanding of the active role of human practice in the real world could form the basis for the richness of Lenin’s conceptions, for it is from that real world that the infinitely expanding and enriched truth of human understanding is derived.”

With the approach of a new cycle of revolutionary upheavals in our time in the 21st century, we can expect to find ourselves likewise compelled again and again to defend the most basic conceptions of Marxism from the corrupting influence of liberal university and establishment figures, who will more and more aggressively seek to displace them with various forms of subjective idealism.

The subjective idealist and postmodern roots of critical race theory are expressed in the concept of constructing an “alternative reality” according to one’s individual desires, of “truth” being individual to each person, and the fixation on policing everyday language—or what the postmodernists would call “problematizing dominant discourses.”

The subjective idealist and postmodern roots of critical race theory are also expressed in another trope common to identity politics that is embraced by critical race theory—that only certain minorities have “standing” to speak about racism, and that statements by non-minorities are presumptively illegitimate by virtue of the “standpoint” of the person speaking. This conception, which is central to critical race theory, is described as “standpoint epistemology.”

“Minority status,” write Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, leading proponents of critical race theory, “brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism.”

This central precept of critical race theory is like arguing that a doctor has no business diagnosing a patient because the doctor has not personally experienced the subjective personal discomfort resulting from the patient’s condition. According to this postmodernist framework, the patient would be the only person “presumed competent” to opine regarding his or her condition, because the patient has experienced the symptoms, while the doctor’s diagnoses would be regarded as presumptively illegitimate on account of the doctor’s “standpoint.”

These anti-scientific conceptions are wrong at the most fundamental level about how human knowledge and understanding work. The doctor in this example has not personally experienced the patient’s subjective feeling of discomfort, but the doctor may discover and understand objectively the bacteria that is causing it, and he or she may be able through scientific methods to make a diagnosis and prescribe treatment that saves the patient’s life. Meanwhile, the patient’s subjective feeling of discomfort does not automatically give the patient any special insight into the objective cause of the disease. Human beings suffered from bacterial diseases for millennia without understanding what caused them and without being able to cure them. The patient goes to the doctor because the subjective experience of the symptoms of the disease is not sufficient by itself to understand what the disease is or how to cure it.

This brings us to the concept of race itself, as it used by the critical race theorists. Race, it should be said at the outset, from the standpoint of Marxism as well as modern science, is not a coherent biological or even sociological category.

With the discovery and analysis of DNA, it can be stated categorically

that from the standpoint of biology, there is no such thing as race. Moreover, any attempt in the present day to categorize individual Americans into members of a “white race” and a “black race” would itself be arbitrary and reactionary. How would that determination be made? Based on what criteria? It would necessarily require reviving and reinstating racist tropes such the “one-drop rule” associated with the era of Jim Crow apartheid, which categorized as black any individual with a single black ancestor.

Critical race theory acknowledges that race is socially constructed, in the sense of not being biological, but that only makes it possible to deploy the subjective idealist conceptions borrowed from postmodernism to breathe new life into these racial categories.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, a founder of critical race theory, says this more or less directly: “While the descriptive project of postmodernism of questioning the way in which meaning is socially constructed is generally sound ... to say that a category such as race or gender is socially constructed is not to say that the category has no significance in our world. On the contrary, a large and continuing project for subordinated people—and indeed, one of the projects for which postmodern theories have been very helpful—is thinking about the way power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others.”

Crenshaw takes up the distinction between the statement “I am Black” on the one hand and the claim that “I am a person who happens to be Black” on the other hand, and she embraces the former on the grounds that it “takes the socially imposed identity and empowers it as an anchor of subjectivity.”

In the book *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, to cite another example of the way these concepts are employed, E. Patrick Johnson describes “blackness” as “the ways in which the ‘living of blackness’ becomes a material way of knowing.”

The implication flowing from these postmodern concepts is that race comes to be understood not as a form of a subjective prejudice in the mind of the bigot, but as a fundamental defining feature of each person’s separate existence and “way of knowing,” an “anchor of subjectivity” in Crenshaw’s words, a condition upon which all of a person’s knowledge and beliefs about the world are contingent. The logical endpoint of the operation of these postmodern and subjective idealist conceptions is that a person’s race not only determines the “reality” that person lives in, but also that people of different races inhabit, quite literally, different “realities.”

### Critical race theory and racial sectarianism

While its philosophical roots are in postmodernism and subjective idealism, what gives critical race theory its essential character is the addition of another ingredient: racial chauvinism and separatism, which itself has its roots in the right wing of American petty-bourgeois black nationalism.

Critical race theory takes the rejection of the Enlightenment from the Frankfurt School and postmodernism and adds a racial spin. According to Delgado and Stefancic, critical race theory challenges “Enlightenment rationalism” by questioning whether “Western philosophy is inherently white by its orientation, values, and method of reasoning.”

Delgado himself published an annotated bibliography in 2012 observing candidly, “An emerging strain within CRT holds that people of color can best promote their interests through separation from the American mainstream. Some believe that preserving diversity and separateness will benefit all, not just groups of color.”

This amounts to nothing more than a perverse revival of the old

segregationist slogan of “separate but equal,” which was associated with the Ku Klux Klan and the 100-year regime of Jim Crow apartheid in the American South. According to this theory, it is in the best interest of all races to live separately and not to integrate.

This right-wing perspective is reactionary in the most direct and literal sense. It would represent undoing the progressive work of generations of people who worked and fought and sacrificed together to overcome racial division and prejudice, to break down barriers, to unite and to integrate.

This reactionary racial sectarianism—which is reflected in demands within and around the Democratic Party for racial reparations, racial quotas and racial preferences, together with racially segregated classrooms, which they call “safe spaces,” or “African-American cultural immersion programs”—is entirely consistent with the essential theoretical framework, conceptions and methods of critical race theory.

According to critical race theory, inequality and injustice are explained as the result of “white privilege” or “white skin privilege,” which is a system of racial benefits that American society is allegedly organized around bestowing to white people at the expense of black people.

In the language of critical race theory, “whiteness” is a form of “property” that is allegedly possessed by all white people, no matter what position they occupy in society, and whether those people are conscious or unconscious of their participation in “White Supremacy.” This conception, a key centerpiece of critical race theory, was advanced in a 1993 law review article by Cheryl Harris which sought to interpret a long list of legal decisions in the American judicial system as implicitly employing this concept.

What this means is that a homeless man sleeping on the streets of Los Angeles who happens to be white has a “property” interest in his “whiteness” that makes him in some meaningful way richer than Oprah Winfrey (net wealth \$2.7 billion), at least from the standpoint of this key form of “property,” and therefore makes him complicit in the regime of “white privilege” and “white supremacy.”

When critical race theorists employ terms such as “white supremacy” and “structural racism,” they are not merely arguing that *de facto* discrimination is widespread in the United States, which is undoubtedly true as a statistical fact. Instead, these terms refer to the conception that the entire society is positively organized around the principle of advantaging “white people” at the expense of disadvantaging “black people.” Accordingly, for the adherents of critical race theory, it is not a question of *whether* racism is expressed in any given social phenomenon, but a question of *how* racism is expressing itself in that phenomenon, given that generalized racism on the part of all white people is supposedly the organizing principle of the whole society.

How does critical race theory explain the epidemic of police brutality? The answer is that it is a product of generalized racism on the part of all white people. Mass incarceration? Same answer. Government policy favoring the rich? Same answer. Low wages? Unsafe working conditions? High rent? Conditions in the schools? Same answer. Imperialist war? Flint water poisoning? Trump’s victory in 2016? Same answer. The coup attempt on January 6? Generalized racism on the part of all white people. It is the explanation for everything.

This approach cheapens and detracts from the real struggle to confront and eliminate prejudice, while helping to cover up the deeper social causes of inequality and injustice. The majority of victims of police killings in the US, for example, are white. While racism may explain the subjective motivations of individual police officers who disproportionately target black youth or carry out particular beatings, asphyxiations and shootings, it is not sufficient to explain the phenomenon as a whole—much less why the political establishment and both official political parties in the US defend the regime of arbitrary police terror.

By explaining the epidemic of police brutality as the result of generalized and pervasive racism on the part of all white people, critical

race theory shifts the blame from the ruling class and the existing social order onto the mass of working people who are white, who are in no way responsible for police brutality and who themselves frequently fall victim to it.

For critical race theory, concepts such as “white privilege,” “white fragility” and “white supremacy” operate parallel to bourgeois feminist concepts such as “rape culture,” “patriarchy” and “toxic masculinity,” with “sexism” substituted for “racism” as the alleged generalized and “structural” prejudice at the root of all of society’s problems.

In the final analysis, these are all frameworks for transmuting social phenomena that are fundamentally the products of capitalism and class society into forms digestible to middle class identity politics.

The concept of “intersectionality,” which is central to critical race theory, is an attempt to reconcile these various competing postmodern identity frameworks with one another, with each of the various prejudices operating along the axis of a separate identity category, such as race, gender, body weight or sexual orientation.

The principal function of the “intersectionality” framework in its current form is to displace the decisive role of class in history and society, relegating capitalism as a world economic system into “classism,” one of a long list of other “-isms” or forms of subjective prejudice—if not eliminating class from the discussion entirely.

In the book *Is Everyone Really Equal?*, which is a “social justice education” textbook aimed at students “from high school through graduate school,” Robin DiAngelo and Özlem Sensoy use the framework of “intersectionality” to attack anyone attempting to introduce class into a discussion about injustice and inequality. The authors imagine someone saying, “The true oppression is class. If you eliminate classism then all other oppressions disappear.” They identify this statement as a form of “channel switching,” one of several forms of psychological “denial and resistance” and “willful ignorance” displayed by “dominant group members.”

They return to this theme repeatedly, later classifying under the subheading “misconceptions about class” the following statement: “Class is the true oppression. If we eliminate classism we will eliminate racism.”

In another publication entitled “Whites Receiving Feedback on Racism and Responding from the Mainstream Framework: Above & Below,” DiAngelo suggests that a white person saying “the real oppression is class” functions to “maintain white solidarity,” “protects white privilege” and “protects racism.”

This basic sentiment, by the way, was echoed by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who recently attacked those who advocate a “class essentialist” position as essentially racist.

Let me answer this for just a moment. For Marxists, yes, we plead guilty to being “class essentialists.” Class for us is not just another form of subjective prejudice. Marx’s contribution to human knowledge and understanding was not simply the observation that some people have more wealth and power than others. That much has been common knowledge for millennia.

What Marx discovered was nothing less than the law-governed dynamic driving the development of human civilization, based on a scientific examination of the development of productive forces, tracing the way that social classes correspond to specific social relations of production which arise from and then come into contradiction with those forces. Looking back over the entire preceding history of mankind, Marx was able to confirm everywhere the operation of these laws of socioeconomic development, providing new insight into the past.

And looking forward, Marx’s discovery made possible, for the first time in human history, fully-conscious politics, making it possible to deliberately align the program and strategy of a revolutionary movement—or a revolutionary government—with the objective interests of objectively existing social forces. It is possible, therefore, for Marxists

active in the class struggle to study and analyze how the objective interests of social classes are expressing themselves in one or another way in that historical process—for example, in the choice of profits over human life in the refusal to contain the pandemic.

One can talk objectively about a historically revolutionary class, but it is not possible to talk about a “historically revolutionary race,” or for that matter a “historically reactionary race.” Any attempt to base politics on supposed “racial interests” in our world would be totally false and reactionary. Millions of people of all races have died from a preventable pandemic, not because of racial interests, but because of class interests. That is the answer to “intersectionality.” Comparing race and class is apples and oranges—two completely different categories and two completely different things. Racism, on the one hand, is a form of subjective and unscientific prejudice; class, on the other hand, is the key to understanding all human history, society and politics.

What perspective do these practitioners of racial politics offer for a person who wants to fight against racism and other forms of injustice, but who happens to be white? Given the racism allegedly embedded in the existential core of every white person, the prognosis is bleak. White people, as explained above, have no “standing” to discuss or even understand racism, according to critical race theory, so they can only be instructed to be silent and prescribed a bizarre form of therapy.

The book *Me and White Supremacy*, by Layla F. Saad, offers one such four-week course of study for the repentant white reader: “Day 1: You and White Privilege. Day 2: You and White Fragility. Day 3: You and Tone Policing. Day 4: You and White Silence. Day 5: You and White Superiority. Day 6: You and White Exceptionalism. Day 7: Week 1 Review.”

This 200-plus page tract, which future historians will catalog as a specimen of a disoriented intelligentsia going utterly out of its mind, is characteristic of a whole cottage industry of self-flagellating “self-help” books now being issued for the alleged benefit of white people, along with corporate leadership seminars and diversity workshops, which are designed to force white people to “confront” their own alleged unconscious racism.

There is good money to be made for those who have hitched their wagons to this tendentious nonsense. DiAngelo herself recently charged \$12,000 for just one seminar at the University of Kentucky and \$20,000 for one three-and-a-half-hour workshop at the University of Connecticut. She typically charges between \$10,000 and \$15,000 per event. Tim Wise, author of the book *White Like Me*, likewise charges a speaking fee in the \$10,000 to \$20,000 range.

An eight-hour day on the federal minimum wage, by contrast, amounts to \$58, and comes out to about \$15,000 for a year of full-time work.

These pricey “workshops” for white people resemble nothing so much as the “gay conversion therapy” practiced by Christian fundamentalists—in that the whiteness, like the homosexuality, can never be completely purged, but can only be meditated upon as a perpetual source of shame and guilt for the person so unlucky as to have been born in such a sinful condition.

One of the most toxic manifestations of this intensely subjective current is the insistence that all personal relationships (marriages, friendships, family ties) must be transformed into the preferred battlegrounds for waging “political” struggle for “transformational change.” Inductees of this ideology are urged to “educate” friends, spouses, lovers, co-workers and parents by forcing them to “struggle with” their alleged “unconscious racism.”

One feels that anyone who honestly attempts to put these precepts into practice with their friends will quickly find themselves without any, and that the lesson for anyone contemplating a romantic relationship across racial lines is that any effort to bridge the gap between these utterly separate “realities” will be so demanding and perilous that one should

give up before even trying. In practice, while these theories posture as “anti-racist,” their effect is the opposite: to poison the atmosphere with obsessive fixation on race in every social interaction.

This is all foul garbage—and, frankly, often an expression of racial prejudice in its own right. One anthology of writings titled *Critical Whiteness Studies*, edited by Delgado, presents uncritically an interview with Noel Ignatiev, co-editor of a magazine titled *Race Traitor*, a one-time Stalinist and former participant in the Students for a Democratic Society, who states: “We believe that so long as the white race exists, all movements against what is called ‘racism’ will fail. Therefore, our aim is to abolish the white race.”

These practitioners of racial politics are expressly hostile to any aspiration of uniting human beings throughout the world in a progressive and egalitarian global culture. In a chapter of *Me and White Supremacy* devoted to “cultural appropriation,” a concept that constitutes a major ideological tenet of critical race theory, Saad directly argues that the idea of “cultural sharing” as a “way to solve racism” is “flawed.”

According to the retrograde, repressive, anti-artistic concept of “cultural appropriation,” which involves judging art on the basis of race, different artistic objects, motifs, genres and styles are “owned” by different races, which can only be performed or appreciated (or profited from) by members of that particular race. Therefore, anyone attempting to make art that does not “belong” to the artist’s race is guilty of illegal “appropriation.”

Within this reactionary framework, artists are admonished to “stay in their lane,” restricted to performing and consuming the cultural products of “their” race. This is a framework that plays directly into the hands of the far right, and with which white-supremacist Proud Boys and neo-Nazis would enthusiastically agree.

At a time when humanity is increasingly integrated on a global scale via the Internet, a development that is full of progressive potential for art and culture worldwide—with young people improvising, adapting and exploring dances and music from all around the world via TikTok and other social media platforms—the racial sectarian adherents of critical race theory throw up their hands and object to “cultural sharing.”

In the same chapter of *Me and White Supremacy*, Saad goes on to reject any aspiration towards “color-blindness.” In a highly revealing passage, she rejects the idea that “we should act like one giant human culture who share everything equally would work if not for racism and the existence of privilege.”

This amounts to a repudiation of everything that was in fact progressive in the civil rights struggles in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, which united masses of people of all races around the demand for legal equality.

There is a left-wing critique of the civil rights struggles, to the extent those mass struggles were limited by a national-reformist framework, and to the extent that they achieved formal legal equality but not genuine social equality. And inequality and injustice persisted in the decades after these struggles receded and persist to this day. But critical race theory draws from these experiences an essentially pessimistic and reactionary conclusion, rejecting as misguided the aspiration towards a united struggle for equality itself.

## **The embrace of critical race theory by the Democratic Party**

Critical race theory emerged as a distinct trend in the late 1980s and 1990s in obscure corners of American academia, a time frame that coincided with the liquidation of the USSR, the receding of the tide of struggles for social equality that had characterized the previous decades

and the jettisoning by the Democratic Party of the last vestiges of any commitment to social reform.

While some of the concepts and themes can be traced into the preceding decades, including writings of the Harvard law professor Derrick Bell, the first academic event centered on critical race theory in its current form is generally held to be a 1989 workshop retreat near Madison, Wisconsin, called “New Developments in Critical Race Theory.” As organizer Kimberlé Crenshaw would go on to candidly acknowledge, there were no “new developments” because it was the first ever event dedicated to discussing the theory: “Sometimes you gotta fake it until you make it,” she later said.

The 1990s were a period of reaction worldwide and in the United States in particular, featuring a succession of wars of imperialist aggression under both Democratic and Republican administrations, with the Democrats themselves championing “law and order” campaigns at home while the Republicans embraced “family values.”

Critical race theory, in this context, did not emerge out of any mass social struggles or campaigns for equality or democratic reforms, but spawned and festered in the corners of middle class academia during a period of reaction. Nurtured in an atmosphere of bitter disappointment and subjective demoralization, it collected in anthologies of literary criticism, legal commentary and other nodes in the humanities departments.

For all its pretensions of being “radical” and even “revolutionary,” its content was always essentially anti-working class, anti-Marxist and anti-socialist: middle class academics venting their anger against the working class for the failure of previous struggles, concluding that these struggles failed because the vast majority of “white people” are hopelessly racist and sexist and unworthy of any role in history.

Critical race theory also represented, to be perfectly blunt, a means for ex-radical middle class academics to carve out a comfortable space to make money for themselves. The dirty secret of this whole vast exercise in hypocrisy is that for all the denunciations of “privilege,” it is figures like DiAngelo, whose net worth is likely in the six or seven figures, and Nikole Hannah-Jones, with a net worth estimated around \$3 million, who are the real beneficiaries of privilege.

In a succession of presidential campaigns, including the Obama election campaigns in 2008 and 2012, together with the Hillary Clinton campaign in 2016, followed by the promotion of the #MeToo campaign beginning in 2017 and the 1619 Project in 2019, the Democratic Party turned more and more sharply to issues of race, gender and other forms of identity to mobilize sections of middle class professionals, students and young people behind its right-wing, imperialist policies. As part of this process, critical race theory rapidly gathered momentum—and as of today, it can be said that for all intents and purposes it has been embraced as the crown philosophy of America’s oldest imperialist party.

As a theoretical tendency, critical race theory is quite compatible with nationalism, capitalism and the ideological requirements of US imperialism. Crenshaw herself recently gave a widely featured interview on CNN, in which she claimed that “critical race theory is not anti-patriotic. In fact, it is more patriotic than those who are opposed to it...”

The practitioners of racial politics make an approach to young people angered by police brutality and by the persistence of racism. Young people in the US, like their counterparts around the world, instinctively hate all forms of bigotry and prejudice. They mistrust the flag-waving patriotic version of their country’s history and intuitively sense that there is something deeply wrong with the whole society. But the purpose of racial politics is to capture and derail those natural and healthy sentiments, channeling them away from class solidarity and revolutionary Marxism and into the framework of middle class opportunist politics within and around the Democratic Party.

Critical race theory has no unified international perspective. Its adherents focus their attention almost exclusively within the geographic

boundaries of the United States, seldom stopping to ask themselves what the implications of their theory would be if applied beyond America’s borders.

For example, if racial division explains all the conflicts and ills of American society, then it would follow that countries that are more ethnically homogeneous, like Iceland and Japan, would be paradises free of any form of social inequality and injustice. Alas for critical race theory, that is obviously not the case.

When the practitioners of racial politics do turn their attention outside the borders of the US, the results can be cringeworthy and downright horrific, as on the occasion in 2019 when 1619 Project author Nikole Hannah-Jones took up the question of the Holocaust.

Socialism, meanwhile, has always stood for equality, and the struggle of scientific socialists for equality around the world stretches back a century and a half before the phrase “critical race theory” was ever uttered. Since coming onto the scene mere decades ago, the proponents of critical race theory have done nothing to contribute to that struggle and have instead only befouled the air with their pompous postmodern jargon and vicious race-baiting.

Marxists have a long and proud history of opposing all forms of prejudice and division within the working class, and of rejecting the category of race as having any explanatory value in the historical process. Even the long tradition of using the word “comrade” within the Marxist movement has itself underscored that every fighter who joins the struggle for socialism is on equal footing.

There is no value whatsoever to a method that proceeds from an assumption that racial divisions, socially constructed or otherwise, constitute a primary or decisive factor in history and social conflict. Such conceptions should be rejected absolutely and categorically.

Seeking to explain Trump’s January 6 coup attempt, for example, as the product of “white rage” is no more helpful than an astrologer’s quest to discover in that same phenomenon an expression of the movements of the planet Jupiter. From any objective scientific standpoint, the one simply does not help explain the other.

The embrace of critical race theory by the Democratic Party reached its high-water mark, at least to date, with the promotion of the *New York Times*’s 1619 Project. But the Democratic Party has shown no signs of changing course.

It is important to recall that in an earlier period, the American ruling class rejected the race-obsessed historical revisionism that came to be associated with critical race theory. The *New York Times* itself once vigorously defended Lincoln against accusations that he could be understood only as a racist. The maintenance of a “national idea” independent of race was previously seen as key to the long-term stability of American society and politics.

The more recent *volte face* to embrace racial sectarianism has a short-sighted and desperate character. Unable to make a popular appeal on the basis of a genuine improvement in living and working conditions for masses of people, the Democrats have to resort to emotional appeals to various forms of prejudice, envy and mistrust. But the incessant talk of “white privilege” and “white fragility,” as Bannon gleefully anticipates, will have the effect of driving workers into the arms of the far right and, in fact, undermining the real struggle to expose and eliminate prejudice.

Thirty years have passed since the outbreak of the Yugoslav Wars, which were triggered by the reintroduction of capitalism in the former Yugoslavia.

The nationalist movements that were quickly thrown together by the newly enriched Stalinist ex-bureaucrats, who were unable to give any progressive coloration to their shameless looting operations, based themselves openly on dredging up and exploiting ethnic hatreds.

In the course of a decade of bloody conflict, the term “ethnic cleansing” entered the global lexicon. These wars led to more than a hundred

thousand deaths, and more than four million people were displaced. Similar wars and conflicts were triggered by the capitalist restoration elsewhere in the former USSR, such as the ongoing fratricidal conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh.

A warning must be made that one or another form of “Balkanization” is the logical end point of all the obsessive harping on race inside the United States, as capitalism brings out of the sewers the old hatreds and prejudices to set workers at each others’ throats and preserve class rule.

While critical race theory postures and presents itself as a continuation of the mass civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, nothing could be further from the truth. With its insistence that white people and black people essentially comprise incompatible species who have been at war with each other throughout history, critical race theory has less in common with Martin Luther King than it does with Adolf Hitler. Among the ideological precursors of critical race theory, in that respect, is the racist pseudoscience that emerged in the late nineteenth century, “social Darwinism,” which purported to replace the class struggle in history with concepts borrowed from Darwin’s discoveries related to biological evolution, reimagining history not as a struggle between social classes, but as a process of competition and “natural selection” among biologically distinct races.

At the time of the Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks likewise had to confront efforts to stir up racial, religious and national hatreds aimed at destabilizing and dividing the workers movement.

“When the accursed tsarist monarchy was living its last days, it tried to incite ignorant workers and peasants against the Jews,” Lenin explained in a 1919 radio address. “The landowners and capitalists tried to divert the hatred of the workers and peasants who were tortured by want against the Jews.”

“It is not the Jews who are the enemies of the working people,” Lenin said. “The enemies of the workers are the capitalists of all countries. Among the Jews there are working people, and they form the majority. They are our brothers, who, like us, are oppressed by capital; they are our comrades in the struggle for socialism. Among the Jews, there are kulaks, exploiters and capitalists, just as there are among the Russians, and among people of all nations.”

“The capitalists strive to sow and foment hatred between workers of different faiths, different nations and different races,” Lenin continued, concluding his address with the words: “Long live the fraternal trust and fighting alliance of the workers of all nations in the struggle to overthrow capital.”

A hundred years later, the basic conceptions articulated by Lenin remain a centerpiece of the Marxist tradition. Within every so-called “race,” there are the working people who form the majority, who are oppressed by capital and who are the brothers and sisters and natural comrades of all other workers on the planet. And within every “race,” there is a minority consisting of the capitalist class and its privileged agents.

Socialists around the world are engaged in the complex and challenging struggle to unite the working class—including people of different nationalities, genders, languages, religions, ages and customs—for a common struggle for peace, progress and equality.

This certainly involves fighting and exposing prejudice and injustice wherever we encounter it, as it always has—if we see it, we won’t stand for it—but we understand that prejudice survives not because it is fixed eternally in human psychology but because capitalism survives to nourish it. We explain to workers and young people how prejudice is cultivated and exploited to undermine class solidarity, and how overcoming those prejudices is not simply morally right but historically necessary.

The coming revolutionary upheavals around the world will bring hundreds of millions of people into struggle. The forces exerted on the revolutionary movement will be tremendous. A movement that is cracked and fractured along racial or national or gender lines will not be able to

withstand those forces and will quickly break apart the moment real pressure is brought to bear. A world movement that can weather the revolutionary maelstrom must be prepared to advance a unified world perspective, applicable to all workers, from a shared understanding of its own history to its basic philosophical foundations and method, class orientation, conception of the epoch and strategy for victory. This is the real strength of a political movement—the glue that will hold it together through any crisis.

For these reasons, the answer to the bigotry of the Republicans and Trump is not to give an inch to the racial sectarianism of the Democrats and critical race theory. Rather, we must build international workers’ solidarity, which is an essential condition for the advance of human civilization and culture and for the final defeat of all forms of prejudice.



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