

## What is ... CRITICAL RACE THEORY?

"It appears that my worst fears have been realised: we have made progress in everything yet nothing has changed."

Derrick Bell

### What is Critical Race Theory?

In *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, published in 2017, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic describe Critical Race Theory (sometimes referred to by the acronym CRT) as a “progressive legal movement that seeks to transform the relationship among race, racism, and power” (p. 171).

CRT works to place civil rights in a broad perspective that includes economics, history, and setting along with group and individual self-interests. The goal is to better understand the experience of race and racism across society in order to understand how victims of discrimination and oppression are affected by cultural perceptions of race. To do this, critical race theorists build on the work of Martin Luther King, Jr., Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Dubois, Ida B. Wells, Sojourner Truth, César Chávez, and others.

CRT is a form of “critical theory,” which has also been applied to literature, art, education and other disciplines. According to the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#), the purpose of critical theory is to provide a framework for social inquiry that is “aimed at decreasing domination and increasing freedom in all their forms.”

### How did CRT get started?

CRT began in the 1970s with a question: Why, after the civil rights era and the end of legal segregation, were there continuing racial disparities in a variety of societal outcomes such as life expectancy, infant mortality, accumulated wealth, education, and incarceration?

Legal scholars, including Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, began to examine the part played by laws and social structures in maintaining discrimination. For these legal scholars, CRT was a theoretical framework that provided a different perspective on the liberal idea of “color-blindness” (briefly, this refers to the idea that the best way to eliminate discrimination is to overlook racial differences; in other words, to not see the other person’s color). Bell, Delgado, Crenshaw, and others argued that ignoring color served to perpetuate, rather than eliminate, racial injustices.

### Why is CRT such a hot topic now?

CRT remained a relatively obscure academic subject until the 2020s. One possible cause for the controversy surrounding it is the work of Christopher Rufo, a conservative researcher. In a [Fox News interview](#), Mr. Rufo says that CRT has “pervaded every institution in the federal government” and has been “weaponized against the American people.”

This view of CRT has become particularly prominent in education as state governments across the US sought to eliminate any mention of CRT in public school curricula. One example is an amendment to Idaho education law, [Section 33-138](#), enacted at the end of the Idaho 2021 regular legislative session. As amended, the law states that principles “often found in critical race theory” serve to “exacerbate and inflame divisions on the basis of sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, national origin, or other criteria in ways contrary to the unity of the nation and the well-being of the state of Idaho and its citizens.” The law goes on to prohibit including these principles in any instruction that is provided by “any institution of higher education, any school district, or any public school, including a public charter school.” Refer to [This Map](#) from *The World Population Review* to see which states have either enacted or are considering similar bans.

## What do critical race theorists believe?

Delgado and Stefancic describe the following 6 principles:

**Ordinariness.** This refers to the view that discrimination is a common (ordinary), everyday experience for most people of color. CRT argues that “color-blind” ideas about justice and equity are more harmful than helpful because they serve to obscure the many forms of racism, making them difficult to address because they limit discussion to only the more blatant, overt forms.

**Interest convergence.** This refers to the view that advances by people of color are most likely to occur when they are supported by powerful white people acting on their own, often economic, self-interests.

**Social construction.** This refers to the view that “race” does not identify a category that is “fixed,” based on biology. Instead, it describes a category that is invented by a society and redefined over time.

**Differential racialization.** This refers to the view that a dominant group “racializes” different groups at different times. For example, at different times in U.S. history, Irish, Jewish, Italian, Mexican, and Japanese people have been considered inferior “races.”

**Intersectionality and antiessentialism.** This refers to the view that none of us is defined by a single “essential” characteristic or identity. Instead each of us is made up of several identities that “intersect” and interact with one another. These might include race, gender, age, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, education, and so on. These intersections can result in compound forms of discrimination.

**A unique voice of color.** This refers to the idea that members of marginalized groups have different experiences than members of a dominant group. This gives them a particular competence to speak about race and racism. As a result, CRT makes frequent use of storytelling and counter-storytelling, often presented in the first person, to highlight the experiences of members of a racial group, individually and collectively.

## What are common criticisms of CRT?

It can be difficult to separate CRT from politics because most proponents of CRT are politically progressive and most opponents are politically conservative. That said, [Eight Big Reasons Critical Race Theory is Terrible for Dealing with Racism](#), a 2020 article published in *New Discourses*, outlines common criticisms of CRT. In the article, James Lindsay says that the problem is that CRT:

- assumes that racism is present in every aspect of life, every relationship, and every interaction;
- relies on “interest convergences” (white people only give black people opportunities and freedoms when it is also in their own interests) and therefore doesn’t trust any attempt to make racism better;
- is against free societies and wants to dismantle them and replace them with something its advocates control;
- only treats race issues as “socially constructed groups,” so there are no individuals;
- believes science, reason, and evidence are a “white” way of knowing and that storytelling and lived experience are a “black” alternative, which hurts everyone, especially black people;
- rejects all potential alternatives, like colorblindness, as forms of racism, making itself the only allowable game in town (which is totalitarian);
- acts like anyone who disagrees with it must do so for racist and white supremacist reasons, even if those people are black (which is also totalitarian);
- cannot be satisfied, so it becomes a kind of activist black hole that threatens to destroy everything it is introduced into.

For more information refer to:

- [Critical Race Theory](#) (2021). The Heritage Foundation. [This website provides a rich collection of resources arguing against CRT, including a *Critical Race Theory Legislation Tracker* that provides information about CRT-related legislation in every state.]

## Where can I learn more?

- Audie Cornish (2021). [Academic Who Brought Critical Race Theory To Education Says Bills Are Misguided](#). NPR (Boise State Radio): All Things Considered.
- Faith Karimi (2021). [What CRT is and isn't](#). *CNN Online*.
- Matthew Nielsen (2021). [When critical theory took on race](#). *New Discourses*.
- Nicquel Terry Ellis (2021). [Critical race theory has become a social and political rod. This is how we got here](#). *CNN Online*.