

Racial Justice Ministry

Race in Focus – January 2022

This month's "Race in Focus" is about **Critical Race Theory** (CRT for short). CRT has become a prominent part of the "culture wars" at the center of many political discussions. One result is that the meaning of CRT has become blurred. The goal of this program is to clarify:

1. What is CRT and where did it come from?
2. How did CRT become so controversial and enmeshed in conversations about public education?

We're asking that you watch 3 short videos (~44 minutes total). We're also suggesting that you read one of the "additional resources" (your choice) – see question #2.

As you watch/read these sources, consider these questions

1. What do you see as most important about CRT? Why?
2. Read or watch one of the "additional resources." Which did you choose, why, and what in that resource did you find most useful to your understanding of CRT and the controversy surrounding it?
3. In what ways have these materials added to your understanding of CRT, or your understanding of the controversy surrounding it?
4. Consider the discussions you've seen, heard, or been part of (including any at the local level). Were they primarily about CRT, as a theoretical perspective, or the way history is taught? What leads you to this conclusion?

Video links:

Video #1

A simple introduction to Critical Race Theory (2021),
4:27. <https://video.search.yahoo.com/search/video?fr=mcafee&ei=UTF-8&p=what+is+critical+race+theory+in+simple+terms&type=E211US0G0#id=1&vid=dcf63fbc960925e1238126eac654dc&action=view>

NOTE: This video provides a concise summary of CRT. Important points include:

- CRT began as an attempt to understand the persistence of racial inequality in America in spite of improvements of legal equality.
- CRT understands racism as both pervasive and persistent, even when the way institutions operate is fair and legal.
- CRT is often critical of liberalism.
- Both opponents and proponents of CRT misrepresent it in order to serve their own purposes.

Video #2

Answering your questions on critical race theory – Amna Nawaz interviews Prudence Carter, Professor of Education, University of California, Berkeley. PBS News Hour (2021), 31:15. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/watch-live-answering-your-questions-on-critical-race-theory>

NOTE: Early in the interview, Prof. Carter makes a distinction between CRT and teaching US history critically. The problem, she argues, is that critics are conflating the two; that many arguments related to schools are not about CRT but about the way US history is taught. She then argues that history should be taught “critically.” This comes up during the PBS News Hour report (Video #3) in an interview with Ian Holm in which he says that CRT shows up in teacher training and, therefore, influences the way they teach.

Video #3

Why Americans are so divided over teaching critical race theory. PBS News Hour – a report by Amna Nawaz (2021), 9:04. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/why-americans-are-so-divided-over-teaching-critical-race-theory>

NOTE: Note the argument made by Ian Prior (about 8m into the video) that CRT is not being taught as a subject “like its physics or chemistry” but that it’s being implemented through teacher training which then influences the way teachers teach their respective subjects. This comes up during the PBS News Hour interview with Prof. Prudence Carter (Video #2) in which she makes a distinction between CRT as a subject and the way history is taught.

Additional resources

Idaho law

- Idaho Code 33-138. Dignity and Nondiscrimination in Public Education. Available online from LawServer. [Idaho Code 33-138 – Dignity and Nondiscrimination in Public Education » LawServer](#)

NOTE: This is the law passed during the 2021 first regular session and subsequently signed by Governor Little.

Video

- Creator of term ‘critical race theory’ Kimberlé Crenshaw explains what it really is (2021), 8:35. MSNBC – Joy Reid, The Reidout. <https://www.msnbc.com/the-reidout/watch/critical-race-theory-explained-as-not-marxist-or-racist-by-its-leading-scholar-kimberle-crenshaw-115226693996>

NOTE: The first 2 minutes of this video is about the interviewer’s personal views on this topic. The interview with Prof. Crenshaw begins after that. Note Prof. Crenshaw’s statement that CRT is “not a thing but a way at looking at a thing,” developed in an effort to understand why, a couple of centuries after emancipation, we have enduring patterns of

inequality and how the law has not been simply a “neutral referee.” This is the central issue at the onset of CRT and its use as a “way of looking at” race and racism in the US.

Online articles

NOTE: In addition, to summarizing CRT, each of these articles offers a slightly different perspective on the growing controversy surrounding CRT, particularly its connection to education in public schools. Taken together, the articles show the complexity of CRT.

1. Fortin, Jacey (NOV2021). Critical race theory: A brief history. *The New York Times*.
https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-critical-race-theory.html?mc=aud_dev&campaign_id=23848634527590063&ad_keywords=auddevgate&subid1=TAFI&adset_id=23848680117090063&ad_id=23848680117360063&ad_name=INTER_20_XXXX_XXX_1P_CD_XX_XX_SITEVISITXREM_X_XXXX_COUSA_P_X_X_EN_FBIG_OA_XXXX_00_EN_JP_NFLINKS&adset_name=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nytimes.com%2Farticle%2Fwhat-is-critical-race-theory.html&fbclid=IwAR1fh7ubrbc1feSmZChPT0OAP7js8Jh6EPwTtM61O9HdLJblyLoak5NyAds

NOTE: The author poses the question “Why is this coming up now?” and suggests an answer that begins, like much in recent history, with renewed considerations of structural racism in the US following the killing of George Floyd in 2020 the response of conservative scholars, politicians, and journalists focused on “cultural indoctrination.”

2. Harris, Adam (2021). The GOP’s ‘critical race theory’ obsession: How conservative politicians and pundits became fixated on an academic approach. *The Atlantic*.
https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/05/gops-critical-race-theory-fixation-explained/618828/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=atlantic-daily-newsletter&utm_content=20210628&silverid=%25%25RECIPIENT_ID%25%25&utm_term=The%20Atlantic%20Daily

NOTE: The author suggests that CRT has become increasingly controversial since 2020 largely because of Christopher Rufo, a fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a libertarian think tank. Since then, politicians have used these criticisms to draft and pass legislation throughout the US. The article also notes that an *Atlantic*/Leger poll found that 52% of Republicans and 30% of independents said that states should pass laws that banned schools from teaching CRT and that 78% of Americans hadn’t heard of CRT or were unsure whether they had, suggesting why debates about CRT are dominated by CRT opponents.

3. Martinez, Aja Y. (2014). Critical race theory: Its origins, history, and importance to the discourses of rhetorics and race. *Frame*, No. 27:2, November 2014, 9-27.
<http://blog.richmond.edu/criticalracetheory/files/2019/01/CRT-Origins-History-Importance.pdf>

NOTE: This is an academic article, written by an Assistant Professor from the University of North Texas. That puts CRT in the context of both legal scholarship going back to the 1920s

and the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. As background, the article begins with a discussion of “race” including the “color blind racism” that developed after the Civil Rights era. In the description of CRT, note the four premises described as “resounding themes” and the “critical race counterstory” described as a “necessary and legitimate method of critical inquiry for marginalized scholars, particularly those from cultures where the oral tradition is valued.”

4. Simba, Malik (AUG2021). Critical race theory: A brief history. *Black Past*.
<https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/critical-race-theory-a-brief-history/>

NOTE: The author suggests that the controversy surrounding CRT began with the 1993 appointment of Lani Guinier as US Assistant Attorney General. Ms. Guinier’s interest in using the law to expand voting rights and diversity on college campuses resulted in Republican accusations that she was using Critical Race Theory, which became the starting point for a variety of culture war battles.

5. Waxman, Olivia B. (2021). Past tense: Critical race theory is the new front in a long-running fight over how to teach America’s story to the next generation. *Time*.
<https://time.com/6075193/critical-race-theory-debate/>

NOTE: This article highlights the city of Rockwood, MO, a St. Louis suburb, to describe the heat the CRT controversy has generated, particularly related to teaching history in schools. It also connects the controversy to earlier controversies related to prayer in public schools, integration and, more recently, bathroom bills and Covid-19 school closures.