

A Deeper Look at Critical Race Theory

The neo-Marxist movement rejects equal opportunity, merit and objectivity.

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In last week's [column](#) about critical race theory, I said that I had barely scratched the surface of this complex movement. To dig deeper, I turned to a collection of essays by the movement's founders and early adherents—"Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement"—published in 1996. Here is what I found in the volume and in an article by Kimberlé Crenshaw, one of the book's editors and one of the movement's most insightful thinkers.

- *Critical race theory denies the possibility of objectivity.* As the volume's editors state in their illuminating introduction, "Scholarship about race in America can never be written from a distance of detachment or with an attitude of objectivity. . . . Scholarship—the formal production, identification, and organization of what will be called 'knowledge'—is inevitably political." And politics is about power—specifically, about the struggle between those who seek to maintain oppressive hierarchies and those who seek to overturn them. Scholarship can be a powerful weapon in that struggle.
- *The theory moves race to the center of our focus.* As the editors put it, it aims to "recover and revitalize the radical tradition of race-consciousness," a tradition "that was discarded when integration, assimilation and the ideal of colorblindness became the official norms of racial enlightenment."
- *The founders of Critical Race Theory identified with Black Power movements much more than with those who were working for integration.* This form of race-consciousness can't be reduced to class-consciousness. Sen. Bernie Sanders, who understood the fight for equality as a class struggle, learned this lesson the hard way during his quest for the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination.
- *Critical race theory is an explicitly left-wing movement inspired by the thinking of an Italian neo-Marxist, Antonio Gramsci.* Against classic Marxism, for which material conditions are primary, Gramsci (1891-1937) focused on "hegemony"—the system of beliefs that "reinforces existing social arrangements and convinces the dominated classes that the existing order is inevitable," as Ms. Crenshaw puts it.

- *The theory offers a fundamental critique of the civil-rights movement and the liberal ideology it reflects.* Such theorists argue that the civil-rights movement scored some “symbolic” gains for black Americans but left their material conditions mostly unchanged, in part because civil-rights law is inherently limited. Such laws treat “discrimination” as isolated acts by specific individuals or businesses, as exceptions to prevailing norms and practices, not as pervasive and “systemic.” Civil-rights law can mitigate the consequences of illegal and unjust acts, but it can do nothing to redress the continuing impact of past oppression.

- *Critical race theory rejects the principle of equality of opportunity.* Its adherents insist that equality of opportunity is a myth, not a reality, in today’s America, and that those who pursue it are misguided. The real goal is equality of results, measured by black share of income, wealth and social standing. Critical race theorists reject the idea that sought-after goods should be distributed through systems that evaluate and reward “merit.”

This metric is unacceptable, the editors say, because certain “conceptions of merit function not as a neutral basis for distributing resources and opportunity, but rather as a repository of hidden, race-specific preferences for those who have the power to determine the meaning and consequences of ‘merit.’ ” These critics don’t specify which conceptions of merit, if any, they would find acceptable.

For those who reject meritocracy and demand equal results, even race-conscious policies such as affirmative action are diversionary. “The aim of affirmative action,” the book’s editors insist, is to “create enough exceptions to white privilege to make the mythology of equal opportunity seem at least plausible.” Such policies are an inadequate response to the persistence of “white supremacy.”

Following Gramsci’s lead, critical race theory has used mainstream concepts such as equality and inclusion to wage a highly effective war of position against liberal ideology. Some liberals have been co-opted, and others silenced. But now the debate has moved to states and school districts around the country, and many parents don’t like what they are seeing. Presenting an honest view of American history in public schools is one thing, parents say, but focusing the curriculum on the “1619 Project” is quite another. Hiring practices and workplaces should be fair and welcoming to all, employees say, but mandatory diversity training premised on the ubiquity of “unconscious racism” and “white fragility” is coercive and insulting.

Critical race theory’s popularizers have done the movement no favors. In his bestselling book, “How to Be an Anti-Racist,” Ibram X. Kendi bluntly asserts that “the only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination. The only remedy to present discrimination is future discrimination.” If prescriptions such as Mr. Kendi’s come to be seen as the inevitable consequence of critical race theory, the movement will end in failure.