

Opinion | How Adherents See ‘Critical Race Theory’

William A. Galston – *The Wall Street Journal*, July 13, 2021

At its recent annual meeting, the National Education Association adopted an agenda item stating, “It is reasonable and appropriate for curriculum to be informed by academic frameworks for understanding and interpreting the impact of the past on current society, including critical race theory.”

Becky Pringle, the teachers union’s president, declared that “if this grand experiment in democracy is to succeed,” then “we must continuously do the work to challenge ourselves and others to dismantle the racist interconnected systems and the economic injustices that have perpetuated systemic inequities.”

Asked about the NEA’s decision, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said that President Biden believes “children should learn about our history,” including the view that “there is systemic racism that is still impacting society today.”

With this statement, Mr. Biden has plunged headlong into a roiling national debate about critical race theory, and it isn’t clear he can win it. The issue has become central to the cultural agenda that Republicans hope to ride to victory in the midterm elections. The share of Americans who believe its impact on our society will be negative is twice as large as those with a positive assessment. Only 16% strongly support teaching critical race theory in public schools, compared [with 29% who strongly oppose it](#).

Between Feb. 1 and June 13, Fox News mentioned critical race theory more than 1,300 times. Christopher Rufo, a young conservative activist who was instrumental in persuading President Trump to issue an executive order restricting diversity training throughout the executive branch, has a remarkably effective strategy. It’s no secret: In a well-known tweet, he described his plan for turning critical race theory “toxic” by putting “all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category.”

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The evidence suggests that so far Mr. Rufo is succeeding. Critical race theorists, who have written extensively about the power of narratives, are losing ground to a counternarrative focused on stories drawn from workplaces, universities and public schools, and states across the country are busy enacting bills banning it in K-12 education.

Still, relatively few Americans—including those who regularly denounce it—know much about what critical race theory is. It originated in law schools in the 1970s and has since become a sprawling movement. To find out more about it, I turned to “Critical Race Theory: An Introduction,” co-written by one of the movement’s founders, Richard Delgado. He writes that critical race theory “questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law.” It builds on critical legal studies and radical feminism, the work of European theorists such as Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault and Jacques

Derrida, and the American radical tradition, including the Black Power and Chicano movements of the 1960s and early '70s.

Mr. Delgado and Jean Stefancic proceed to describe the key tenets of critical race theory. These propositions include the belief that racism is ordinary, “the usual way that society does business,” not aberrational; and that “triumphalist history”—the confidence that the legislation and court decisions of the 1950s and 1960s set the U.S. on the course of irresistible racial progress—neglects social backlash and legal retreat. Liberal approaches to racism, such as colorblindness and neutral principles of law, can fix only the worst abuses. But if racism is deeply embedded in thought processes and social structures, they say, then only “aggressive, color-conscious efforts” to change the status quo can make a difference.

“White privilege”—the unspoken, unseen advantages that whites enjoy—is a key aspect of these social structures. Changing laws without undoing the “racial subordination” inherent in white privilege will not get us very far. Incrementalism is a bankrupt strategy; “everything must change at once.” The logical conclusion is that to overcome racism, we need a cultural revolution.

The case against affirmative action, we are told, rests on “an implicit assumption of innocence on the part of the white person” this policy displaces. The guilty parties are the beneficiaries of affirmative action who take what does not rightfully belong to them. But if racism is “pervasive, systemic, and deeply ingrained,” as critical race theorists insist, then “no white member of society seems quite so innocent.” Because all whites benefit from a system of unearned advantage, race-conscious remedies simply rectify that injustice.

I have barely scratched the surface of this complex movement in these paragraphs. But one thing is clear: Because the Declaration of Independence—the founding document of the American liberal order—is a product of Enlightenment rationalism, a doctrine that rejects the Enlightenment tacitly requires deconstructing the American order and rebuilding it on an entirely different foundation.



WSJ Opinion: Teachers Unions Push Toward Critical Race Theory

Journal Editorial Report: Convention votes signal their goal is to put CRT in curriculums. Image: Evelyn Hockstein/Reuters

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Appeared in the July 14, 2021, print edition.