

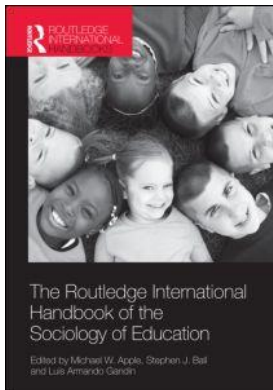
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Education and critical race theory

David Gillborn and Gloria Ladson-Billings

Introduction

CRT's usefulness will be limited not by the weakness of its constructs but by the degree that many whites will not accept its assumptions; I anticipate critique from both left and right.

(Taylor, 1998: 124)

One of us recently gave a keynote lecture that formed the centerpiece for a conference dedicated to new approaches to understanding race/racism¹ in education. The address focused on Critical Race Theory (CRT), a relatively new approach pioneered by scholars of color in US law schools in the 1970s and 1980s, which has grown quickly since its introduction into US educational studies in the mid 1990s (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995) and is now an increasingly popular approach that is building an international profile (see Hylton, 2008; Lynn and Parker, 2006; Taylor *et al.*, 2009). At the end of the lecture the chairperson invited questions, and a White professor, sitting on the front row, raised his hand. Once invited to speak, the man stood, turned his back on the chair and speaker, and addressed the audience for several minutes on the “danger” posed by CRT. It was, he explained, a retrograde step in the search for educational equity because it gave primacy to race and diverted attention from the “real” issue, which, he informed us, was social class inequality as diagnosed by his chosen version of Marxism. After a spirited exchange and several other questions, the session came to a close and, as the audience began to filter out, a Black woman practitioner approached the podium to ask the lecturer a question, explaining that she didn't like to ask it in front of the whole audience. Before she could pose the question, however, the White professor strode to the lectern and physically positioned himself between the questioner and the lecturer, keen to explain more about his view of the current state of social theory. The incident reminds us of similar episodes reported by Trina Grillo and Stephanie Wildman, who describe some of the “guerilla tactics” used by Whites to “steal back the center” (1991). By arguing that race/racism be placed at the forefront of social critique, CRT challenges the assumed right of White people to see *their* perspectives and *their* interests placed center stage, and, hence, CRT has not been universally welcomed as an addition to critical theory in education.

Despite its detractors, CRT has rapidly established itself as one of the most important strands in contemporary educational theory. It has done this partly by focusing on the vital link between social theory and social activism, as David Omotoso Stovall (2006: 257) notes:

Arguing across conference tables is useless. For those of us who are concerned with the social justice project in education, our work will be done on the frontline with communities committed to change . . . neither race nor class exists as static phenomena.

Stovall is one of the leading writers in the new wave of critical race scholars who are taking forward CRT as both an academic discipline and a practice of resistance—praxis. The approach continues one of the basic assumptions of the foundational work in CRT, that is, that theory provides a set of *tools* to be applied and *ideas* to be used and refined. In this sense, social theory is always work in progress. But this does not mean that CRT is any less serious about the importance of theory—quite the contrary. From its very first iteration, critical race scholars have staked a claim to the conceptual importance of their work. The foundational critical race theorist, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, for example, recalls how she and colleagues identified a form of words that could be used to describe (and provide a rallying point for) the new ideas they were developing as they began to organize what was to become the first ever CRT workshop (held at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in July 1989):

Turning this question over, I began to scribble down words associated with our objectives, identities, and perspectives, drawing arrows and boxes around them to capture various aspects of who “we” were and what we were doing . . . we settled on what seemed to be the most telling marker for this peculiar subject. We would signify the specific political and intellectual location of the project through “critical,” the substantive focus through “race,” and the desire to develop a coherent account of race and law through the term “theory.”
(Crenshaw, 2002: 1360–1361)

This practical and strategic orientation reflects a perspective that Derrick Bell terms “racial realism”: an approach that foregrounds an understanding of how the world really operates, rather than fetishizing some idealized notion that bears little resemblance to the lives and experiences of oppressed people (Bell, 1992). The real-world focus of CRT should not be seen as in any way lessening its claim to be taken seriously as a major innovation in social theory. As Crenshaw notes, from the very start CRT has encountered a patronizing attitude from academics who find its focus on race/racism distasteful and/or threatening. The foundational critical race scholars refused to be intimidated by such attacks:

. . . interference dovetailed with criticisms that were beginning to emerge from Stanford quarters in the form of a counter-critique to our earlier work, characterizing it as essentialist. Whether intended or not, in that critique some of us heard a crude characterization of our work as theoretically unsophisticated and politically backward.
(Crenshaw, 2002: 1357)

The roots of critical race theory

In many ways, CRT has its roots in the radical diasporic writings and resistances of previous centuries, including actions by enslaved African peoples (see Baszile, 2008; Bell 2004; Du Bois

1975, 1990; Mills, 1997, 2003). Contemporary CRT is a direct outgrowth from debates within US legal scholarship in the mid 1970s and 1980s. It began as a radical alternative to dominant perspectives, both the conservative “mainstream” and the ostensibly radical tradition of critical legal studies (CLS), which—in practice—treated race as a peripheral issue and foregrounded a concern with economic disadvantage (see Bell, 2005; Crenshaw, 2002; Crenshaw *et al.*, 1995; Delgado and Stefancic, 2001; West, 1995).

Key foundational CRT scholars include Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, Lani Guinier, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia Williams. Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate (1995) first introduced CRT into education in the mid 1990s, and since then a growing number of educators have begun working with these ideas (see Dixson and Rousseau, 2006; Lynn and Adams, 2002; Parker, 1998; Solórzano, 1997; Stovall, 2006; Yosso, 2006; Yosso *et al.*, 2004). CRT now spans numerous disciplines, and the work often crosses epistemological boundaries (see Tate, 1997) and is also building an international presence, including work in the UK (Gillborn, 2005, 2008a; Hylton, 2008) and Australia (McDonald, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2004).

The tenets of critical race theory

From its earliest formulations, CRT has generally been united by a dual concern to understand and oppose race inequality. In an influential statement of the approach, Crenshaw and colleagues state:

Although Critical Race scholarship differs in object, argument, accent, and emphasis, it is nevertheless unified by two common interests. The first is to understand how a regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained . . . The second is a desire not merely to understand the vexed bond between law and racial power but to change it.

(Crenshaw *et al.*, 1995: xiii)

Within CRT, the term “White supremacy” is used in a particular way that differs from its usual understanding in mainstream writing: whereas the term commonly refers to individuals and groups who engage in the crudest, most obvious acts of race hatred (such as extreme nationalists and Neo-Nazis), in CRT the more important, hidden, and pervasive form of White supremacy lies in the operation of forces that saturate the everyday mundane actions and policies that shape the world in the interests of White people:

[By] “white supremacy” I do not mean to allude only to the self-conscious racism of white supremacist hate groups. I refer instead to a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.

(Ansley, 1997: 592)

Many critical race scholars view White supremacy, understood in this way, as central to CRT in the same way that the notion of capitalism is to Marxist theory and patriarchy to feminism

(Stovall, 2006). This perspective on the nature and extent of contemporary racism is one of the key defining elements of CRT.

The centrality of racism

CRT begins with a number of basic insights. One is that racism is normal, not aberrant, in American society. Because racism is an ingrained feature of our landscape, it looks ordinary and natural to persons in the culture.

(Delgado and Stefancic, 2000: xvi)

CRT views racism as more than just the most obvious and crude acts of race hatred; it focuses on the subtle and hidden processes that have the effect of discriminating, regardless of their stated intent. In the political mainstream, “racism” tends to be associated with acts of conscious and deliberate race hatred; discrimination is assumed to be an abnormal and relatively unusual facet of the education system. In contrast, CRT suggests that racism operates much more widely, often through the routine, mundane activities and assumptions that are unquestioned by most practitioners and policymakers, e.g. through the design of the curriculum, the operation of certain forms of assessment, and the selection and training of teachers who overwhelmingly replicate dominant cultural norms and assumptions about race and racial inequality (Ladson-Billings, 2004).

Critical race theorists do not view racism as a simple or unchanging aspect of society. CRT challenges ahistoricism by stressing the need to understand racism within its social, economic and historical context (Matsuda *et al.*, 1993: 6). The notion of “differential racialization” refers to the constantly changing and malleable nature of racist stereotypes. For example, a group once seen as conservative and conformist might be redefined as competitive and threatening at another time, e.g. Japanese workers in the US and “Asian” groups in the UK during the twentieth century.

The focus on racism in CRT does not operate to the exclusion of other forms of social inequality. Indeed, a key aspect of CRT is a concern with “intersectionality,” that is, an attempt to analyze how racism operates within and across other axes of differentiation such as social class and gender (Crenshaw, 1995; Gillborn and Youdell, 2009; Tate, 1997).

A critique of liberalism

CRT portrays dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, color-blindness, and meritocracy as camouflages for the self-interest of powerful entities of society.

(Tate, 1997: 235)

Another distinctive theme is CRT’s critique of liberalism. In the education system, for example, racism is figured in the distribution of material and educational resources and even in teachers’ notions of “ability” and motivation (Gillborn, 2008a). In this situation, the adoption of color-blind approaches (which refuse to acknowledge racial reality) and an emphasis on supposed “merit” (as measured by dominant assessments) may appear open and equitable, but the playing field is not level. Minoritized students are more likely to attend poorly funded schools with less highly qualified teachers and, because of socio-economic inequalities, they are less likely to enjoy additional educational resources at home (Ladson-Billings, 2006a). Under such unequal conditions, a color-blind insistence on a single “merit” standard will not only ensure that race inequalities continue but also present them as fair and just.

The call to context (experiential knowledge and storytelling)

CRT places a special importance on the experiential knowledge of people of color. There is *not* an assumption that minoritized groups have a singular or “true” reading of reality, rather there is recognition that, by experiencing racial domination, such groups perceive the system differently and are often uniquely placed to understand its workings.² Richard Delgado (1989) is one of the leading advocates of the need to “name one’s own reality.” Inspired by the scholarship of Derrick Bell and the centuries old traditions of storytelling in minoritized communities, Delgado argues forcefully for the use of narrative and counter-storytelling as a means of presenting a different reading of the world, one that questions taken-for-granted assumptions and destabilizes the framework that currently sustains, and masks, racial injustice. This approach makes CRT an easy target for those who are willing to oversimplify and seize the opportunity to accuse the approach of merely inventing its data, but such criticisms misunderstand the nature of counter-storytelling and ignore the fact that most CRT “chronicles” are tightly footnoted, so that detailed evidence is marshalled to back up each substantive part of the argument:

CRT scholars are not making up stories—they are constructing narratives out of the historical, socio-cultural and political realities of their lives and those of people of color.
(Ladson-Billings, 2006b: xi)

A revisionist critique of civil rights progress (the interest convergence principle)

Detractors have sought to present CRT as disrespectful of civil rights campaigns and their victories, but this misreads the approach. CRT is not critical of the campaigns or the people who sacrificed so much to advance race equality (Crenshaw *et al.*, 1995). Rather, CRT examines the limits to reform via law and policy making, and shows how even apparently radical changes are reclaimed and often turned back over time. A key element here is the concept of *interest convergence*. Put simply, this view argues that advances in race equality come about only when White elites see the changes as in their own interests. Derrick Bell (2004: 59), who coined the interest convergence principle, summarizes the idea like this:

Justice for blacks vs. racism = racism.
Racism vs. obvious perceptions of white self-interest = justice for blacks.

It is important to note that interest convergence does not envisage a rational negotiation between minoritized groups and White power holders, where change is achieved through the mere force of reason and logic. Rather, history suggests that advances in racial justice must be won, through protest and mobilization, so that taking action against racism becomes the lesser of two evils for White interests. For example, the moves to outlaw segregation in the 1960s are usually thought of as a sign of enlightenment and a landmark civil rights victory. But they must be understood within the context of the “cold war” and the US’s need to recruit friendly African states (Dudziak, 1988):

“No such decision would have been possible without the world pressure of communism” which made it “simply impossible for the United States to continue to lead a ‘Free World’ with race segregation kept legal over a third of its territory.”
(W.E.B. Du Bois, 1968, quoted in Bell, 2004: 67)

The moves to bring about desegregation would not have happened without the civil rights protests *and* a wider geo-political context that made continued violent suppression impractical. Furthermore, the gains themselves have rarely lived up to the politicians' rhetoric. The obvious signs of segregation—such as separate toilets and lunch counters—may have gone, but the reality of ingrained racism continues in economic, residential, and educational terms. It has been argued that more African Americans now attend segregated schools than they did in 1954 at the time of the Supreme Court decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001: 33). Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2001: 24) describe the process like this:

after the celebration dies down, the great victory is quietly cut back by narrow interpretation, administrative obstruction, or delay. In the end, the minority group is left little better than it was before, if not worse. Its friends, the liberals, believing the problem has been solved, go on to something else . . . while its adversaries, the conservatives, furious that the Supreme Court has given way once again to undeserving minorities, step up their resistance.

Landmark victories may actually come to operate in ways that protect the racist status quo: these are sometimes known as “contradiction-closing cases,” which operate like a safety valve to provide a solution when the gap grows too large between, on one hand, the liberal rhetoric of equal opportunities and, on the other hand, the reality of racism.

[contradiction-closing cases] are a little like the thermostat in your home or office. They assure that there is just the right amount of racism. Too much would be destabilizing—the victims would rebel. Too little would forfeit important pecuniary and psychic advantages for those in power.

(Delgado, 1995: 80)

Landmark cases such as the *Brown* desegregation case in the US and the *Stephen Lawrence Inquiry* in the UK (Macpherson, 1999) appear to have addressed blatant race inequalities, but in reality little or nothing changes.³ Indeed, such cases are sometimes used as yet another weapon against further reform because they:

allow business as usual to go on even more smoothly than before, because now we can point to the exceptional case and say, “See, our system is really fair and just. See what we just did for minorities or the poor.”

(Delgado, 1999: 445)

Myths and misunderstandings: beyond the stereotypes of CRT

Like any new perspective, CRT has been subject to a range of responses and critiques. Some of the engagement has been positive and constructive, pushing critical race scholars to clarify their arguments and develop further analyses. Other of the responses, however, have sought to reassert traditional assumptions (in the guise of “scientific rigor”) or dismiss CRT as misguided or simplistic. As we have noted above, CRT offers a view of the world that is fundamentally at odds with mainstream assumptions, and so it is no surprise that the approach is often misunderstood. In this section we address three of the most common myths.

Myth 1: CRT assumes that race is the only thing that matters

Despite its central focus on racism, CRT does not insist that race is always the single most important factor in every situation. CRT argues that race/racism is always relevant to an understanding of wider social inequalities, but it is not the only element. Indeed, race inequity often cannot be fully understood in isolation from other axes of differentiation, such as class and gender. As Stovall (2006: 252) notes:

Vital to this misinterpretation is the semantics of referencing CRT as a critique solely of “race.” In no CRT literature is there a claim to the unanimity of race. The critique has and continues to be one of the functions of White supremacy and the complexities of race.

Myth 2: CRT sees all White people as a homogeneous mass of privileged racists

Detractors sometimes argue that, by identifying the underlying forces that legitimate and support White supremacy, CRT imagines all White people to be the same: in fact the criticism betrays a one-dimensional reading of CRT. Critical race scholars do not think that White people are uniformly privileged and racist, nor that all Whites benefit equally from White supremacy. Such a position is patently ludicrous, especially in view of the fact that foundational CRT writers have repeatedly noted how interest convergence usually operates to defend White elites at the expense of lower-class Whites (Bell, 2004). However, CRT *does* show how even working-class and poor Whites draw advantage from their Whiteness (Harris, 1993). Whites do not benefit *equally*, but they do all benefit from Whiteness to some degree (McIntosh, 1992). For example, when the attainment of the most economically disadvantaged White students in the UK dipped marginally below that of their Black peers, the media responded with stories blaming “the race relations industry” and claiming that neo-Nazi groups would gain an electoral advantage. The stories failed to mention that White students continued to out-perform virtually every minoritized group among the 86 per cent of the school population not counted as living in poverty (Gillborn, 2008b). Hence, even for the White students living in greatest poverty, their race means that the media perceive a national scandal if their achievement is not greater than similarly disadvantaged, minoritized peers.

Myth 3: CRT promotes hopelessness and despair by saying that things can never change

Derrick Bell (1992: ix) recalls an incident when he was challenged at a public reading of his work:

“Professor Bell, you have achieved much despite racial discrimination. How dare you now deny our children the hope that they may enjoy a success like yours?”

The author responded that “it was the society and not me” that closes down opportunities for African Americans; he did not create the situation, he “simply chronicled what society had done and was likely to do” (Bell, 1992: ix). In fact, far from promoting a sense of hopelessness, CRT insists on the vital importance of active resistance against racism. Bell argues that a total

victory over racism may prove elusive but sees a duty to combat injustice (against *all* oppressed groups) as a central component of what he calls “a life fulfilled” (Bell, 1992: xi). The history of racism and education in the UK, for example, clearly demonstrates that all meaningful advances in race equality have come about as a result of community action (Tomlinson, 2008). Antiracist activism may never entirely remove racism, but, in the absence of resistance, it is certain that racist inequity would worsen. As Frederick Douglass observed more than 150 years ago: “If there is no struggle, there is no progress . . . Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did, and it never will” (quoted in Crenshaw, 2002: 1372).

Delgado and Stefancic respond to the accusation that CRT is a theory of despair by asking, “Is medicine pessimistic because it focuses on diseases and traumas?” (2001: 13). Indeed, Delgado turns the accusation on its head and identifies the lie at the heart of liberal perspectives that appear optimistic but disguise the true scale and nature of contemporary racism:

Suppose I am sent to an inner city school to talk to the kids and serve as role model of the month. I am *expected* to tell the kids that if they study hard and stay out of trouble, they can become a law professor like me. That, however, is a very big lie: a whopper. When I started teaching law sixteen years ago, there were about thirty-five Hispanic law professors, approximately twenty-five of which were Chicano. Today, the numbers are only slightly improved . . . Despite this, I am expected to tell forty kids in a crowded, inner city classroom that if they work hard, they can each be among the chosen twenty-five.

(Delgado, 1991: 1228, original emphasis)

Continuing debates and unresolved issues

CRT is gaining increasing attention but it is by no means a finished and settled set of approaches. CRT is a living and changing perspective, not a monolithic structure. There are, for example, many spin-off movements from traditional CRT, including critical race feminism and “LatCrit”—a version of CRT that focuses on the particular experiences and struggles of Latina/o communities (see Delgado and Stefancic, 1998; Dixson and Rousseau, 2006; Solórzano and Yosso, 2001; Wing, 1997). Although CRT in the US began with work that often focused on the position of African American communities, it is not the case that CRT adopts (or has ever supported) a simple racial binary perspective that views the world as divided between Whites and a unitary racial Other.

There are many important debates within CRT about the best way of conceiving its work and, in particular, the most effective means of moving things forward through a critical praxis, i.e. a combination of theoretical analysis and applied practical strategies of resistance (Lynn and Parker, 2006). Many of these debates raise issues that are relevant to a number of different perspectives and are by no means unique to CRT. For example, there is discussion about the level of group-identification/abstraction that is appropriate for different analytic and political purposes: sometimes it may be best to organize around a collective signifier that includes numerous minoritized groups, while at other times a more specific identity may be preferred (national, linguistic, or religious).

There is a continuing concern within CRT to understand the numerous, complex, and changing ways in which race/racism intersects with other axes of oppression, such as class, gender, disability, and sexuality. This concern with *intersectionality* is especially strong in critical

race feminism (Wing, 1997; Youdell, 2006). Indeed, building on Crenshaw's work, UK scholars Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix (2004) argue that intersectionality itself can provide a useful focus that offers numerous advances on current single-issue thinking. As Crenshaw (1995) argues, rather than viewing intersectionality as a kind of problem to be solved, the best way ahead may be to use intersectionality as a key means of understanding how White supremacy operates and how to mount effective resistance.

Notes

- 1 There is no consistent and meaningful biological basis for the group categories that human societies name "race." Although it masquerades as natural and fixed, "race" is a socially constructed category that changes from one society to another and even varies over time within the same society (see Mason, 2000; Mills, 1997; Omi and Winant, 1993). The social construction of "race" differences is *always* associated with raced inequities in some form (Leonardo, 2002); consequently, the notion of "race" inevitably carries racist consequences, and race/racism become categories that are mutually dependent and reinforcing.
- 2 This echoes Howard Becker's observation about the importance of "outsider" perspectives to critical sociological analyses (Becker, 1967).
- 3 For a detailed account of the Stephen Lawrence case, showing how apparently huge advances in equity law have been marginalized and ignored, see Gillborn (2008a: chapter 6).

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