

Critical Race Theory Would Not Solve Racial Inequality: It Would Deepen It

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Critical race theorists falsely accuse the United States of being a fundamentally racist nation and condemns capitalism, individual rights, and the Constitution.

Critical race theory ignores evidence that shows that family structure, educational attainment, and workforce participation are the primary drivers of inequality.

Critical race theory seeks to undermine the foundations of American society and replace the constitutional system with a near-totalitarian “antiracist” bureaucracy.

Critical race theory has emerged as one of the most influential—and controversial—academic theories in contemporary political discourse. The discipline’s key terms, such as “systemic racism,” “white privilege,” “white fragility,” and “racial equity,” have become part of the common vocabulary and the basis for much of progressive policymaking. In 2020, the President of the United States addressed the debate over critical race theory’s role in policymaking with a speech denouncing it at the National Archives and an executive order banning critical race theory–inspired training programs from the federal government.¹

The rise of critical race theory in recent years has been astonishing. For decades, the theory, which posits that America’s institutions are “camouflages” for racial oppression,² had been relegated to the

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academic world, circulating in journals, law review articles, and conference presentations. Over the past decade, however, critical race theory has moved from obscurity to near ubiquity in America's academic, corporate, and governmental institutions. In recent years, a large number of schools, universities, and local governments have adopted "antiracism" or "diversity and inclusion" policies based on critical race theory. In addition, federal agencies have implemented human resources programs based on critical race theory,³ philanthropies have pledged billions toward "racial equity" initiatives,⁴ and hundreds of corporations have signaled their support for the new ideology of "antiracism."⁵

Unfortunately, despite the superficial appeal of slogans like "fighting racism," these policies will do little to alleviate poverty and inequality in the real world. As scholars such as Ron Haskins, Robert Rector, Isabel Sawhill, and others have demonstrated, the real drivers of American poverty—for all racial groups—are the so-called background variables of family structure, educational attainment, and workforce participation.

In spite of the empirical evidence demonstrating the importance of these variables, however, the critical race theorists have sought to undermine them at every turn. They have argued that the nuclear family is a vestige of white supremacy,⁶ work requirements and entry-level employment are an extension of capitalist oppression,⁷ and achievement-based education is a historical artifact of racism and eugenics.⁸ "Poverty," in the words of race theorist Kay Ann Taylor, "is a structural, embedded, institutionalized, and systemic requirement to maintain capitalism's efficacy; it is an ongoing outcome of hegemony, patriarchy, and a capitalistic economic structure."⁹

Contrary to the doctrine of critical race theory, the solution to poverty—for members of all racial groups—is to provide a pathway for stable two-parent households, achievement-based academic success, and full-time work for householders. If policymakers can close the gap for these critical background variables, the gap between various racial groups will follow in kind.

In order to address inequality, policymakers must begin with a rigorous understanding of what drives it and how the institutions of family, education, and work can help to reduce it. Although there is no quick or easy solution for this problem, the alternative proposed by critical race theory—in essence, the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, tradition, and constitutionalism—would be even worse.

Background of Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory is an academic discipline, derived from critical theory and critical legal theory,¹⁰ that holds that the United States is a nation founded on white supremacy, patriarchy, and oppression and that these forces are still at the root of our society. According to UCLA Law School professor Cheryl Harris, “historical forms of domination [such as slavery and segregation] have evolved to reproduce subordination in the present.”¹¹ For Harris and other theorists, racism is a constant: It simply becomes more subtle, sophisticated, and insidious. Consequently, Harris argues, “the existing state of inequitable distribution is the product of institutionalized white supremacy and economic exploitation.”¹²

In simple terms, critical race theory reformulates the old Marxist dichotomy of oppressor and oppressed, replacing the class categories of bourgeoisie and proletariat with the identity categories of white and black. However, the political foundations of critical race theory maintain a clear Marxist economic orientation. Ibram X. Kendi, a leading figure in the critical race theory movement, argues:

I classify racism and capitalism as these conjoined twins... [I]n order to truly be anti-racist, you also have to truly be anti-capitalist.... And in order to truly be anti-capitalist, you have to be antiracist, because they're interrelated.¹³

For critical race theory scholars, the entire foundation of American society is fundamentally illegitimate; consequently, they reject the traditions of constitutionalism and individual rights. As Jeffrey Pyle observed more than two decades ago, “[c]ritical race theorists attack the very foundations of the liberal legal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism and neutral principles of constitutional law.”¹⁴ This is a deeply pessimistic worldview. In the language of Richard Delgado, a founder of the movement, critical race theory is “marked by a deep discontent with liberalism, a system of civil rights litigation and activism characterized by incrementalism, faith in the legal system, and hope for progress.”¹⁵

With regard to public policy, critical race theory’s key analytical and rhetorical framework is to portray every instance of racial disparity as evidence of racial discrimination. In the metaphor of one recent paper, “white supremacy” is the “spider in our web of causation” that leads to “immense disparity in wealth, access to resources, segregation, and thus, family well-being.”¹⁶ To adopt the vocabulary of the race theorists, the forces of

“hegemonic whiteness” have created society’s current inequalities, which we can overcome only by “dismantling,” “decolonizing,” and “deconstructing” that whiteness.¹⁷ In their theoretical formulations, the critical race theorists reduce the social order to an equation of power, which they propose to overturn through a countervailing application of force.

Practically, by defining every disparity between racial groups as an expression of “systemic racism,” the critical race theorists lay the foundation for a political program of revolution. If, in the widely traveled phrase of author bell hooks, American society is an “*imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy*,”¹⁸ radical changes are needed. Although critical race theory has sought in some cases to distinguish itself from Marxism, the leading policy proposals from critical race theorists are focused on the race-based redistribution of wealth and power—a kind of identity-based rather than class-based Marxism.

In one of the founding texts of critical race theory, Cheryl Harris argues that property rights, enshrined in the Constitution, are in actuality a form of white racial domination. She claims that “whiteness, initially constructed as a form of racial identity, evolved into a form of property, historically and presently acknowledged and protected in American law,” and that “the existing state of inequitable distribution is the product of institutionalized white supremacy and economic exploitation, [which] is seen by whites as part of the natural order of things that cannot legitimately be disturbed.”¹⁹

Harris, on the other hand, believes that this system must be disturbed, even subverted. She argues that the basic conceptual vocabulary of the constructional system—“‘rights,’ ‘equality,’ ‘property,’ ‘neutrality,’ and ‘power’”—are mere illusions used to maintain a white-dominated racial hierarchy. In reality, Harris believes, “rights mean shields from interference; equality means formal equality; property means the settled expectations that are to be protected; neutrality means the existing distribution, which is natural; and, power is the mechanism for guarding all of this.”²⁰

The solution for Harris is to replace the system of property rights and equal protection—which she calls “mere nondiscrimination”—with a system of positive discrimination tasked with “redistributing power and resources in order to rectify inequities and to achieve real equality.”²¹ To achieve this goal, she advocates a large-scale wealth and property redistribution based on the African decolonial model.²² Harris envisions a suspension of existing property rights followed by a governmental campaign to “address directly the distribution of property and power” through wealth confiscation and race-based redistribution. “Property rights will then be respected, but they

will not be absolute and will be considered against a societal requirement of affirmative action.”²³ In Harris’s formulation, if rights are a mechanism of white supremacy, they must be curtailed; the imperative of addressing race-based disparities must be given priority over the constitutional guarantees of equality, property, and neutrality.

In more recent years, the critical race theorists have added additional policy proposals. Ibram Kendi, who directs Boston University’s Center for Antiracist Research and has received the National Book Award, has promoted the concept that individuals and societies cannot be neutral in America’s eternal racial conflict; they must be “antiracist.” That is, they must either adopt the political program of the critical race theorists or be considered “racist.”²⁴ Building on this framework, Kendi advocates an “anti-racist amendment” to the Constitution:

The amendment...would establish and permanently fund the Department of Anti-racism (DOA) comprised of formally trained experts on racism and no political appointees. The DOA would be responsible for preclearing all local, state and federal public policies to ensure they won’t yield racial inequity, monitor those policies, investigate private racist policies when racial inequity surfaces, and monitor public officials for expressions of racist ideas. The DOA would be empowered with disciplinary tools to wield over and against policymakers and public officials who do not voluntarily change their racist policy and ideas.²⁵

The scope and power of this new “Department of Anti-racism” would be nearly unlimited. In effect, it would become a fourth branch of government, unaccountable to voters, that would have the authority to veto, nullify, or suspend any law in any jurisdiction in the United States. It would mean an end both to federalism and to the lawmaking authority of Congress. Furthermore, under the power to “investigate private racist policies” and wield authority over “racist ideas,” the new agency would have unprecedented control over the work of lawmakers as well as the auxiliary policymaking institutions of think tanks, research centers, universities, and political parties.

Inez Stepman of the Independent Women’s Forum has called Kendi’s political program “woke Stalinism,” and journalist Robby Soave has argued that “there’s no way such a department could avoid becoming an Orwellian nightmare—indeed, the very program would necessitate the formation of a kind of speech police.”²⁶ In fact, it would entail an astonishing level of censorship. Under Kendi’s political system, the paper you are reading right now might be banned, and The Heritage Foundation, which published it, might be outlawed.

Together, the proposals from Harris, Kendi, and other race theorists would lead to a change of regime. In the name of racial justice, they would limit, curtail, or abolish the rights to property, equal protection, due process, federalism, speech, and the separation of powers. They would also replace the system of checks and balances with an “antiracist” bureaucracy with nearly unlimited state power. Although Kendi’s proposal is framed as an amendment to the American constitutional order, it is better described as an end to the constitutional order.

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An Alternative Theory of Racial Inequality

Critical race theory purports to reveal a deeper understanding of racism in the United States and point the way toward decreased racial inequality. However, by reducing the complex phenomenon of inequality to a single causal variable—racism—critical race theory is dangerously incomplete and threatens to obscure important empirical realities.

As scholars such as June O’Neill, Robert Rector, and Thomas Sowell have demonstrated, the story about racial disparities is more complicated than the simple narrative of the critical race theorists. For example, if one were to believe a viral *New York Times* story, black men earn 51 cents for every dollar earned by white men: In other words, the black–white wage gap is enormous and has remained largely unchanged since 1950.²⁷

However, as former Congressional Budget Office Director June O’Neill and Dave M. O’Neill have shown, this supposed “pay gap” disappears when one factors in the background variables of age, education, math and verbal skills, and work history.²⁸ In fact, when controlling for these variables, black men earn 99.9 percent of the wages of white men, and when the same calculation is applied to women, black women actually earn 7 percent more per hour than white women with the same education and math and verbal skills.²⁹ In short order, the pay gap disappears.

By the same logic, although there is a significant poverty gap between white and black children in the United States, this disparity vanishes when

one controls for the key background variables of family structure, educational attainment, and workforce participation.³⁰ As Heritage Foundation scholar Robert Rector has demonstrated, when these background factors are held constant, “race alone does not directly increase or decrease the probability that a child will be poor.”³¹ Contrary to the logic of the critical race theorists, the key determinant of child poverty is not race, but a cluster of human and social variables that affect Americans of all racial demographics with remarkably equal force.

Unfortunately, critical race theory does not offer a policy platform for strengthening these key background variables; in fact, it is in many cases directly hostile to them. With respect to family, a wide range of scholars have established that family structure is the single greatest predictor of poverty,³² both at the individual and community levels.³³ According to Robert Rector’s analysis, living in a two-parent household reduces the probability that a child will live in poverty by 82 percent—and 75 percent when controlling for level of education.³⁴

Yet despite this clear evidence, critical race theorists have lambasted the nuclear family as a vestige of patriarchy and white supremacy: They consider the family a structure that oppresses rather than secures and uplifts.³⁵ In a recent symposium, instead of attempting to understand how single motherhood often traps women in poverty, critical race theorists sought to normalize, reinforce, and “reclaim the welfare queen.”³⁶ These scholars believe that the non-working single mother is a manifestation of a new feminism “that centers the right to procreation as a central issue”³⁷ and that the state, rather than discouraging single motherhood, should recognize that “having a child [is] an important part of self-realization that the state must respect and support.”³⁸

The critical race theorists’ perception of work follows a similar logic. It is a truism that work—earned income—is the only viable mechanism for individuals to escape poverty in a self-sustaining manner. Nearly three-quarters of all poor families with children do not include an adult working full-time throughout the year.³⁹ There undoubtedly are many obstacles to employment for these families—most significantly, the preponderance of single-mother households—but this simply strengthens the conclusion that if all currently poor families with children had one adult working full-time, “the child poverty rate in the United States would be cut by 72 percent.”⁴⁰

For critical race theorists, however, entry-level and low-wage work are not considered a path out of poverty: They are a form of capitalist exploitation. In a discussion of the bipartisan welfare reform legislation of 1996, which sought to increase financial independence among poor families,

critical theorists Wendy Limbert and Heather Bullock explicitly reject the idea of “[promoting] personal responsibility through work,” dismissing it as a ploy to allow white male elites to “avoid responsibility for eliminating structural impediments to economic equality.”⁴¹ They argue that “critical theorists [should] situate welfare policy within a larger set of racist, sexist, and classist practices carried out by elite power holders to maintain the status quo,”⁴² which ultimately reinforce the myths of meritocracy and personal responsibility, “establishing an idealized standard of ‘independent’ workers and families that is unattainable for those exploited by the interlocking systems of racism, sexism, and classism.”⁴³

Finally, with respect to educational attainment, critical race theorists have increasingly begun to reject achievement-based admissions,⁴⁴ achievement-based testing,⁴⁵ and even achievement-based grading,⁴⁶ arguing that they serve to reinforce white supremacy. In a recent paper in *The International Education Journal*, University of Washington Bothell Professor Wayne Au makes the case that standardized tests such as the SAT are an oppressive practice that is rooted in “racism, nativism, and eugenics” and serve to maintain “racialised inequality.”⁴⁷

The fact, however, is that educational achievement has a profound influence on families and inequality. One of the strongest predictors of family poverty is the mother’s math and verbal skill levels; only welfare participation and family structure were stronger correlations.⁴⁸ Furthermore, educational attainment in itself is a key driver of intergenerational mobility.⁴⁹ Children born into the lowest economic quintile who earn a college degree have an 84 percent chance of moving up the income ladder; by contrast, children born into the lowest economic quintile who do not earn a college degree have a 45 percent chance of remaining in the lowest quintile as adults. The campaign to eliminate achievement-based academic systems, which charter school leader Ian Rowe describes as the “modern day version of the soft bigotry of low expectations,”⁵⁰ will do little to help the poorest students advance.

Rather than seeking ways to find common ground on these concerns, critical race theorists insist that the world must be divided into competing racial identity groups. Even worse, the race theorists dismiss the two-parent household, entry-level work, and merit-based education as manifestations of an entire class of harmful “isms” that must be subverted and ultimately dismantled. The evidence, however, suggests that what would happen after the collapse of those institutions is not human liberation, but human devastation. The real tragedy of critical race theory is that, in pursuit of racial equity, it undermines the very foundations of racial progress.

A Better Way to Address Racial Inequality

The ultimate irony of critical race theory is that, despite all of the recent attention paid to racial issues, race itself is becoming less determinative of social outcomes. In fact, according to a growing body of evidence, social class is gradually supplanting race as the most salient variable for producing inequality.

- With regard to family, as Harvard scholar Robert Putnam has observed, “[t]he class gap over the last 20 years in unmarried births, controlling for race, has doubled, and the racial gap, controlling for class, has been cut in half.”⁵¹
- With regard to workforce participation, Census data show that black and white Americans with the same educational attainment have roughly equivalent levels of workforce participation: Education as a proxy for class has a much greater impact than race.⁵²
- With regard to education, Stanford professor Sean Reardon shows that the class gap in academic achievement is “now nearly twice as large as the black–white achievement gap,” in contrast to a half century ago when “the black–white gap was one and a half to two times as large as the [class] gap.”⁵³

This presents a challenge, but it also presents an opportunity. Taken together, the norms of family, work, and education provide one of the most robust antidotes to poverty. As Ron Haskins has made clear, Americans who follow the so-called success sequence—graduating from high school, getting married before having children, and working full-time at any occupation—have a 98 percent chance of living above the poverty line as adults.⁵⁴

New research from Brad Wilcox and Wendy Wang confirms this hypothesis with millennials.⁵⁵ Wilcox and Wang find that millennials who have completed all three steps of the sequence have a 97 percent probability of avoiding poverty and that this general pattern holds across racial groups and childhood family income. Critical race theorists have denounced each step in the success sequence as inherently oppressive, but the evidence is clear: The success sequence works better than any real-world alternative, including for poor and minority families.

For Americans who care about poverty alleviation and constitutional government, critical race theory represents a critical threat. Although

critical race theory as a discipline does not articulate a singular proposal for public policy, its leading intellectuals have proposed a regime of race-based apportionment of rights, property, and income, overseen in some proposals by a centralized, unelected authority with nearly unlimited state power. If implemented, critical race theory's social policies would continue to erode the key preconditions for advancement—family, education, and work—and leave ostensibly “favored” groups more dependent on public subsidy and redistribution than ever.

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Conclusion

Policymakers should reject the tenets of critical race theory and orient public policy toward rebuilding the institutions of family, education, and work for Americans of all racial backgrounds. True equality will be achieved by maximizing the ability of Americans to become self-sufficient, not by dividing Americans on the basis of race and apportioning resources based on skin color.

Citizens who believe in a system of individual rights, private property, achievement-based advancement, and equal protection under the law should steel themselves against the seductive but ultimately destructive philosophy of critical race theory. In reality, the program of “antiracism” would deepen racial divisions, not transcend them; even worse, it would undermine the very institutions that are essential to addressing poverty and inequality in America. The better approach is to strengthen the foundations of the “success sequence,” which is a proven solution to poverty for Americans of all racial groups.

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