

Anarchism and critical race theory

Fascist Panic over Race

Thomas Martin

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Until recently, Critical Race Theory (CRT) was unknown to most people other than law professors and their students. Now, thanks to right wing hysteria deliberately inflamed by Republican politicians, their malignant enablers, and their MAGA stooges, we all know the term even if we don't quite know what it means.

Anarchist thinkers have engaged with CRT for at least twenty-five years. In past decades, anarchists have had plenty to say about institutionalized racism as one aspect of domination and hierarchy. But we haven't said much about CRT as such. This is because we have always been saying what CRT says, taking it as a given of anarchist theory and praxis even before critical theorists invented terms like "interest convergence." In this sense, we have a lot to learn from CRT—not because it offers us new ideas, but because it offers ways in which we can be more coherent and explicit when we address racism.

The purpose of this article is not to break new ground, but to offer a summary of what anarchists ought to know about CRT in light of its recent demonization by the Right.

The current debate (if we can call it that; the word seems too tame) is not about critical race theory at all. It's about turning a highly nuanced and intellectual academic project into a political shibboleth. And, it's not about law school, which is the only place where CRT is formally taught.

It's no secret that public and parochial education have always been about indoctrination and brainwashing. But with its attacks on a theory which they don't understand, nor wish to understand, and which is not even taught below the graduate level, the Right has added more bricks to the conservative wall that already encloses K-12 education and is driving more and more conscientious teachers out of the profession.

It helps to remember that CRT did not spring full-blown from the mind of Derrick Bell, the late Harvard professor who coined the term, like Athena from the head(ache) of Zeus. CRT is solidly rooted in the field of critical theory, which had its origins in the 1930s among (mostly) German philosophers whose goal was to synthesize Freud and Marx.

At that time philosophers, like everyone else, were obsessed with understanding the events of their own time, especially Nazism and the Great Depression, as well as developments like mass culture and state capitalism. One offshoot of critical theory is critical legal theory, which in turn has sprouted its own sub-theories, such as CRT, critical gender theory, and the like.

CRT today still follows the basic rules of critical theory. These include: (1) improving society and the lives of individuals by uncovering the hidden or subconscious premises and postulates that prevent us from exercising full freedom; (2) analyzing how authoritarian political and social institutions have invaded and colonized our everyday lives and relationships; and (3) identifying the problem (theory) isn't enough; you have to offer ways to fix it (critical theory).

Most anarchists will resonate with these goals. The problem for us is not CRT as such; it's the distortion and outright lies about it from the deranged Right. "CRT wants to make white kids feel bad about themselves." "CRT teaches that white people are born racist." These lies are quite deliberate.

Most of what we non-specialists read about CRT oversimplifies critical theory in general, and even more so, critical race theory. For example, “race is a social construct”—well, yes, but there are nuances—such as the fact that DNA sequencing, which is not a social construct, can tell us with some accuracy the ethnic origins of any individual.

Another instance: the idea, according to the Right, that residential redlining is a main target of critical race theorists. Well, no—redlining is a symptom of the larger racist system, to be dealt with by the courts. It is not the disease, which lies much deeper and is hard to ferret out. That’s what CRT focuses on.

We can start by looking at two issues: essentialism, and interest convergence.

Anarchists generally reject essentialism, the idea that certain groups can be identified by just one abstract characteristic, and that by implication, that characteristic is the only one that matters for members of that group. The alternative is intersectionality. One might be black, and at the same time, Muslim, and gay, and an immigrant, and even wealthy.

To pluck out just one of these factors, to make it central, is identity politics. Most anarchists will agree that we all belong to many communities, a fact that makes identity politics misleading at best and demagogic at worst. Political misrepresentation of CRT has produced something that horrifies ‘real’ theorists, but was quite intentional: the reinforcement of white identity politics. That alone should be sufficient reason for us to reject essentialism.

CRT also studies interest convergence, the idea (which is already pretty obvious to anarchists) that the evolution of legal and judicial theory and praxis always benefits the interests of the ruling elite. As the dominant system increasingly colonizes our lives, these interests are buried deeper and harder to see or imagine. In the end, as Bell wrote, the rights enjoyed by minorities are no more than acts of generosity by that elite. The goal of CRT is to expose the hidden foundations of this reality so that it can be altered.

Oversimplification is always risky, but we can say this: today CRT means teaching factual history and culture, not myths aimed at distracting us from our oppression.

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