

CRT Smart Book

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Critical
Race
Theory

WHAT IS CRT?

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a legal theory which spread to education: developed in the 1980s, standardized in the 1990s, and spread in the 2000s and 2010s at universities, corporations, and eventually schools by academics, some with Marxist training in Critical Theory. It holds that America's constitutional system and therefore American society is systematically racist—defined by law's role as an instrument of oppression against minorities and other marginalized groups.

Four main themes are important to grasp:

1. CRT didn't emerge randomly: it came from a group of interconnected academic operators - most important the Marxist critical theorist Paulo Freire, the critical race theorist Derrick Bell, and the critical race theory education specialist Gloria Ladson-Billings - with long-held radical beliefs and a definite agenda to spread them from the top-down.
2. CRT didn't emerge without help: universities, the media, Democratic administrative appointees and political consultants all gave its practitioners platforms for their own protection or gain.
3. CRT spreads both via the national outlets that started it but also, simultaneously, at the state level through operators working through legislatures and governors.
4. CRT is a Marxist ideology connected to Critical Theory via Paulo Freire, but operators will try to use dodges (it's really postmodern!; it can be taken in small doses!; it's just for graduate students!); and these dodges need to be understood to be answered.



Critical Race Theory



CRT's KEY PRACTITIONERS AND TEXT

Much like SEL and surfacing at almost exactly the same time, Critical Race Theory (CRT) is the product of academics in the Ivy League. If Daniel Goleman's Emotional Intelligence, which appeared in 1995, is the "bible" of SEL, Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement, which also appeared in 1995, is the "bible" of CRT. In it are the field's major names—**Derrick Bell, Kimberle Crenshaw, Cornel West, Lani Guinier, and Mari Matsuda**. Most of these operators had heritages in Leftist academia: they were consciously continuing intellectual projects their parents or mentors had started. Lani Guinier was the daughter of the founding director of the African American Studies Department at Harvard, where West was teaching by 1995. Crenshaw and Matsuda both attended Harvard Law and organized an "alternative course" there on "Racism and American Law" modeled on the work of Derrick Bell. **Bell began teaching at Harvard Law in the 1960s, and quickly started studying and teaching Marxists, particularly Antonio Gramsci and the critical theorist Paolo Freire.** Later he taught Barack Obama and collaborated with Obama Supreme Court

appointee Elena Kagan, before moving to NYU School of Law. Most importantly, all of them except West were lawyers—and, like Daniel Goleman with trauma psychology, they advanced a view of American law that most lawyers and legal scholars don't share and that changed the way readers understood our country. At the hands of some of these eager readers, foremost among them Gloria Ladson-Billings at the University of Wisconsin who found Bell's work "revolutionary," CRT began to enter education. (Harvard Graduate School of Education has said it was **Billings "who set out in the 1990s to adapt critical race theory from law to education."**) At this point the spread was only occurring in graduate seminars, but it was laying the groundwork for what was to come.



CRT's CORE DEFINITION

According to West, who described CRT as a tool of “liberation-minded scholars,”

the genesis of Critical Race Theory as a scholarly and politically committed movement in law is historic. Critical Race Theorists have, for the first time, examined the entire edifice of contemporary legal thought and doctrine from the point of view of law's role in the construction and maintenance of social domination and subordination.

Remember that in America, law has always been understood to be neutral, which means it's accessible to everyone: this is a view common to most lawyers, many legal scholars, and non-expert Americans. Since the 1780s in this country, every marginalized group from working class men to women to Blacks to Hispanics have advanced their interests using their rights under our Constitution to petition legislatures and form associations. Critical Race Theory wiped all that away. Now law was a product of racially oppressive systems that reached so deep they affected every aspect of a person's life and had to be dismantled. **This is Marxist: replace “domination and subordination” with their synonyms “oppression and oppressed,” and you have the model used by Marx, Gramsci, Marcuse, and Freire and passed down using different language by practitioners like Bell.**

Despite its constant use of the word “democracy,” this approach was anything but democratic. CRT academics didn't want to do the hard work of persuading their fellow citizens by attending city council or school board meetings and petitioning state legislatures. Derrick Bell, arguably the main founder of CRT, came up in the world of elite public interest law, specifically the Justice Department and the NAACP of the 1960s. Then he radicalized himself at an elite institution, Harvard Law, and used its power to push his new agenda—like many post-60s radicals, radicalizing students to push elite university administrations to radicalize themselves.

THE CONTEXT OF CRT's RISE: Affirmative Action and Media Pushes 1968-2020

CRT rose against a backdrop of racial politics—affirmative action at universities and in Washington; and concerted media pushes—which paved the way for its quick spread and acceptance these past five years.

Over the 20 years after the 1960s, as a result of radical protests pushed by people like Bell and capitulated to by soft and corrupt administrators, ethnic studies courses went from literally zero to 700. **Affirmative action**, pushed by the Kennedy-Johnson Administration and every Democratic Administration that followed, supplied followers for the credo. These included former First Lady Michelle Obama, whose dissertation focused on the experience of black students in the Ivy League, and current Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, who was influenced by CRT.

Beginning in the mid 1990s, politicians helped this spread. Bill Clinton was installing the first crop of affirmative action appointees into federal judgeships and executive agencies like the Department of Education. (Among them was Eric Holder, who famously called America a “nation of cowards” on race.) These legal operators used law fare to get their way, increasing enforcement on schools over alleged racial discrimination. Establishment media in Washington and New York also pushed “thinkers” who fused CRT with psychology. The most prominent were **Ta Nehisi Coates and Robin DiAngelo**, an Atlantic Magazine journalist and academic-turned-corporate consultant, who wrote books **arguing that racism was so deeply rooted in every part of American law that it had infected our society and permeated white people’s psychology**. DiAngelo’s work, in particular, led corporations to adopt **DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion)**, creating a thriving for-profit market for DEI consultancies. Then there was **The 1619 Project**, which took the original legal framework of CRT and set it up against the broad backdrop of American history, arguing that that history was defined not by our Declaration of Independence or Constitution but by the year the first slaves entered the Virginia colony, 1619. Finally there was **Black Lives Matter**, which spearheaded many of the protests-turned-riots in the 2010s. BLM was consistently treated by the media as an organization working for social change, rather than what it clearly was: a Marxist operation. All of this created an environment in which CRT was “normalized,” introduced to Americans via major media outlets and given the cover of respectability.



HOW CRT SPREADS NATIONALLY:

From Trauma to Racism, Federally Funded

2004-2025

It was only a matter of time that theories like this would spread via government to public schools. As learned in M4LU’s month on Social Emotional Learning (SEL), trauma was redefined from being a momentous, life-changing event, such as war, to broadly include any negative experience, like social rejection. With this new definition, it was a short step to convince the public that racism is a traumatic experience rooted in America’s history of “subordination” and “domination”. It was helped by changes to history curricula: namely, by 2020, The 1619 Project was taught in 3,500 classrooms. At the same time, education scholars educated in Critical Race Theory in American universities, whose work was featured in conferences and in education journals, were proposing “anti-bias” education on a bed of Critical Race Theory for children as young as 5. In this context, the ground was laid for CRT’s fast spread.





2014 was the first year SEL was federally funded: 10 percent of the Every Student Succeeds Act’s \$4 billion funding was allocated through at least six channels to SEL. To get more funding, in other words, schools had to commit to SEL. By 2020, **CASEL, SEL’s flagship nonprofit, had changed its curricula, using the phrase “Transformative SEL,”** to lead directly to CRT, arguing that “having a healthy sense of identity buffers against negative or traumatic experiences” and connecting identity directly to race. It also directly recommended “culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy,” an approach coined by CRT-in-education’s founder Gloria Ladson-Billings. In states, as examples in the following section will show, this race-to-SEL linkage was already being made in the wake of racial upset in the early 2010s; and, after the George Floyd riots, what began as a trickle became a flood. From 2019 to 2021, SEL spending grew 45 percent to \$765 million to help students “cope” with racial “trauma”; \$122 million in 2021 alone. Some of this spread came through the “private sector” via schools spending federal money to pay outside contractors to “educate them” on CRT. **Education contractors modeled themselves after corporate DEI contractors.** Panorama, a private contractor which pushes CRT, as of 2021 serviced 23,000 schools in the country. It is also run by former Biden Attorney General

Merrick Garland’s son-in-law, and it may not be a coincidence that in 2021 Garland authorized the FBI to investigate CRT pushback. BrainPop, a New York-based education website, is another source—and again, it’s probably not a coincidence that one of its founders works for the National Institutes of Health. Resilient Educator and Education Advanced sell strategies for “cultivating diversity, equity, and inclusion” and for advancing “equity.” Diversio pushes “DEI in education” which it says is “shaping the next generation of thinkers, leaders, and global citizens.”



HOW CRT SPREADS IN STATES:

Missouri, Oregon, and Florida Case Studies

But much of CRT's spread is more prosaic.

A case study in St Louis, at the heart of the deep Red state of **Missouri**, shows how this process works with the nonprofit Alive and Well Communities, which was founded in 2014 in the wake of the Ferguson riots and took as its central claim the idea that more than half the people in the region suffered from the “trauma” of everyday life, with a special focus on racial trauma. Alive and Well's break into schools came after 2016, when a Democratic state representative introduced an amendment to a Republican-sponsored bill instructing the Department of Education to establish the "Trauma-Informed Schools Initiative." The next year, the Trauma Roundtable and the Department of Education asked Alive and Well to draw up a guidance document for the process, which “reorient[ed] the trauma-informed movement . . . to recognize the trauma caused by racism.” Alive and Well reported training 1,200 teachers across Missouri and training 4,092 people in Trauma Awareness in 2022 alone.

What does it look like when schools implement recommendations like Alive and Well's? One on-the-ground example comes from **Oregon parent Kristine Strachan**, whose odyssey began in 2018, when her son, a third grader, had told two female students that one was white and another was black, and the students had become offended. The incident had been handled by Lisa Lane, a “Social Emotional Instructional Assistant,” who reported that in their conversation her son divulged that



“his mom was a little bit racist.” Kristine talked to her son, who “vehemently denied” the comment, and she emailed asking for an explanation. She was told that she could not correspond with the Social Emotional Instructional Assistant “due to district practice to not have paraprofessionals . . . respond to emails from parents.” And this was even before the school district doubled down on its CRT focus after the George Floyd riots. Administrative emails promised parents more **ABAR (Anti-Bias Anti-Racism) curricula**, as well as “hir[ing] an outside consultant to . . . eliminate our equity gaps” while having staff “explore [their] roles in identifying, interrupting and eliminating . . . bias and racism.” The school also promised that “future work will include...reviewing and possibly proposing revisions to our protocol for reporting and responding to incidents of bias and hate speech...” Soon CRT started showing up everywhere. In 5th grade, 9:30 - 10:00 am was devoted to race and racism. By middle school, “13 principles of **Black Lives Matter**” were taught to Kristine’s son in Advisory class (these included “Queer Affirming,” “Transgender Affirming,” “Unapologetically Black,” and “Globalism.”) The district also made “the decision to display and promote the Black Lives Matters (BLM) agenda, by posting 'Black Lives Matter' on...digital display boards. ” Much of this came out of **the district’s Equity and Inclusion office**, whose stated purpose is to “transform the educational system...to eradicate the predictability of student success based on students’ social and cultural backgrounds, explicitly related to race, socio-economic status, sexual orientation and gender identity. ” These aren’t one-off occurrences. At the end of 2022, the [Manhattan Institute](#) reported on a survey it had conducted of 1,505 18-20 year old Americans, “62 percent reported

either being taught in class or hearing from an adult in school that ‘America is a systemically racist country, ’” while “69 percent reported being taught or hearing that “white people have white privilege.” In images from rejected **Florida math textbooks**, some of the ways these ideas enter the classroom become clear. In one, the “**SEL Objective**” is to help students “build proficiency with social awareness as they practice with empathizing with classmates.” This translates to one of the lessons using as its example a graph “measuring racial prejudice by political identification” and another having students work with “models that measure bias,” specifically racial bias.



FIGHTING BACK:

Actions

1. The Federal Government

- a. Write, call and petition the Trump Administration to stop federal funding for CRT in schools, as well as any funding directly or indirectly going to nonprofits which practice CRT.

2. State Legislatures

- a. Write or call your state representatives urging them to pass legislation stopping their state Departments of Education from disseminating any CRT material in schools.

3. School Districts—*THE MOST IMPORTANT*

- a. Examine the materials your kids receive: if these materials de-emphasize the Constitution, or equal rights under the law, and if they talk about our history as defined by oppression or racism, you are dealing with CRT or its outgrowths.
- b. Since Republican officials, like the Senators from Missouri and Tennessee, try to “pass the buck” to local districts to handle CRT issues in the name of local control, school boards are the ground zeros of the fight
 - i. Research the CRT program your school uses and expose the radical agenda.
- c. Attend all school board meetings and stop any contracts or grants that extend the use of CRT programs.



FIGHTING BACK:

Arguments

1. **Claim:** CRT is an educational tool.

Response:

- CRT is an ideological and partisan project promoted and disseminated from giant institutions.
- CRT was developed by Democratic-affiliated universities, Liberal-oriented media, and corporations looking to avoid liability.
- CRT doesn't persuade in the public square, it uses powerful institutions funded by Washington, D.C. to push its agenda.
- Its implementation is explicitly partisan: Pew Research reported that “a 56% majority of districts in Democratic-voting areas mention their diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in their mission statements” while that is true of just 26% of districts in Republican-voting areas, a difference of 30 percentage points. ”
- This makes it unacceptable curriculum for schools. Regardless of your politics, schools receiving taxpayer funds shouldn't be pushing partisan agendas not approved by voters.

2. **Claim:** CRT helps fulfill the American dream of equality for all.

Response:

- CRT is also anti-Constitutional, and the Constitution is the foundation of America.
- CRT doesn't argue for equal justice under the law, or about how power should be distributed between state and the federal government or between branches of government. These are all constitutional claims.
- CRT argues that the law itself is racist and that this racism has corrupted society and people. This is way outside of any Conservative-Liberal Constitutional argument.
- No program that teaches anti-Constitutional doctrine should be allowed in public schools funded by governments set up under the Constitution.

3. **Claim:** CRT is for the benefit of the students.

Response:

- CRT is a for-profit boondoggle.
- Schools receive funding for SEL and then are urged to pair it with a focus on CRT by the federal government.
- Many of the nonprofit or for profit contractors these schools contract with use CRT already.

FIGHTING BACK:

Arguments *(continued)*

4. Claim: CRT Educates Kids

Response:

- CRT is the opposite of educational.
- Students get distracted from learning by a worldview that creates divisions among them, which some use to gain power over others.
- They endure a classroom dynamic that involves pressure to agree with CRT claims (e.g. not think for themselves).
- They are taught by people in “authority” that American history is a catalogue of oppressions that can only be solved with “collective action” that gives the government more power to protect them from racial harm.

FIGHTING BACK:

Arguments Meant to Confuse

CRT is a blunt instrument of indoctrination, but its defenders often try to muddy the waters by diminishing its radicalism. Here are three arguments meant to mask the true nature of CRT, and possible responses for each.

1. Claim: CRT really isn't Marxist, it's postmodernist.

- Writing in EdWeek in 2021, Stephen Sawchuk claimed that Critical race theory emerged out of postmodernist thought, which tends to be skeptical of the idea of universal values, objective knowledge, individual merit, Enlightenment rationalism, and liberalism—tenets that conservatives tend to hold dear.

Response:

- Postmodernism is an academic theory of knowledge; CRT is a legal movement founded on clear Marxist principles.
- While critical race theorists describe their discipline, as West did, as “examin[ing]...law’s role in the construction and maintenance of social domination and subordination,” one main postmodernist practitioner has described his approach as “a rarified form of academic talk.” Another has described his approach as arguing that “we are always dealing with multiple and conflicting claims of truth, none of which can be conclusively established.”

FIGHTING BACK:

Arguments Meant to Confuse *(continued)*

- This means postmodernism is a philosophical tool that can be used different ways. Indeed, practitioners like Cornel West may cite postmodern philosophers to bolster their claims that large institutions oppress people based on race—but some conservatives also use postmodernism's skepticism of authority and language to attack institutional wokeness. Postmodernism, then, isn't really a political agenda even though it can be politicized—whereas CRT most definitely is political.

2. **Claim:** Incorporating CRT into curriculum simply represents another “perspective”; part of a bigger focus on “social justice.”

Response:

- CRT is the opposite of a “small-dose” approach: it's an absolutist view of the world that, like most Marxism, hijacks thought and conversation.
- Even in theory, CRT doesn't want to be accepted in small doses; CRT wants to reorient our view of law, which structures our society and our interactions, so that we see law as a tool of “subordination.”
- In practice, CRT is presented in conjunction with psychology, particularly SEL, which argues that before any kind of learning can take place, trauma, particularly race-based trauma, has to be overcome. This means that, thanks to SEL, CRT isn't becoming a part of the discussion, it's hijacking it.
- Just as CRT argues that racism is so deeply embedded in our society that it affects every interaction we have, “social justice” makes injustice a matter of calling out “injustice” and “inequities” in daily interactions and tracing them to bigger “systemic issues” (e.g., a student complaining because another student identified her as being “black,” which gets connected to “systemic racism” dating back to 1619.)

3. **Claim:** CRT has been made into a bogeyman: in the words of CRT-in-education's founder Gloria Ladson-Billings, “the term has been literally sucked of all of its meaning and has now become 'anything I don't like.'” In reality, Ladson-Billings argues, “this is an older, like graduate school level, understanding and learning in education, not something for K–12 kids, not something my kid's going to learn in elementary school.” Even “establishment” Republicans get in on this act, criticizing James Lindsay's contention “that our kids go to Paulo Freire's schools” and arguing that the education system is too vast for systemic indoctrination to occur.

Response:

- The facts of CRT's development and spread show that CRT is the highly specific Marxist threat Lindsay and others say it is.
- CRT-in-education founder Ladson-Billings's own teaching theories are directly incorporated into SEL curricula—including in states like California, where she advises on education policy.

FIGHTING BACK:

Arguments Meant to Confuse *(continued)*

- CRT's core argument, that American law and therefore life is based on “domination” and “subordination” according to race, is the core of race-based instruction in schools.
- Early education scholars have explicitly linked CRT and “anti-bias” education for children as young as five.
- A clear line can be drawn using their own words from (a.) Paulo Freire’s Marxist Critical Theory to (b.) Derrick Bell’s Critical Race Theory to (c.) Gloria Ladson-Billings’s application of Critical Race Theory to Education to (d.) the dissemination of Ladson-Billings’s approach via SEL.



FURTHER READING

SELECTED SECONDARY SOURCES: CRITICISMS OF CRT, ITS OUTGROWTHS, AND ITS SPREAD:

- Dr. James Lindsay, [Race Marxism](#)
- Dr. James Lindsay, [What is Critical Race Theory?](#)
- Christopher Rufo, [America’s Cultural Revolution: How the Radical Left Conquered Everything](#)
- Max Eden, [The Trouble with SEL—and its Links to CRT](#)
- Matt Wolfson, [SEL-based Trauma and CRT: A Missouri Case Study](#)
- Matt Wolfson, SEL and CRT on the Ground: An Oregon Case Study [Parts 1](#) and [2](#)

SELECTED PRIMARY SOURCES: CRT PRACTITIONERS’ WRITINGS AND SYMPATHETIC NEWS REPORTS:

- Nikole Hannah-Jones, [The 1619 Project](#)
- The Harvard Crimson, [What Critical Race Theory Was—and Is—at Harvard Law](#)
- Cornel West, Derrick Bell, et. Al. [Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement](#)
- [Dialogues in the Direction of “Liberation”](#): Derrick Bell’s Influence by Critical Theorist and Marxist Paulo Freire.
- Harvard Graduate School of Education, [An Interview with Gloria Ladson-Billings, the acknowledged founder of Critical Race Theory in Education](#); another interview with Ladson-Billings in which [she testifies to Bell’s influence](#)
- [California Council on Teacher Education’s 2019 report on Social, Emotional Learning and Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Teaching Practices](#)—directly incorporating Ladson-Billings’s work
- [CASEL’s Transformative SEL: the Explicit Link Between SEL and CRT](#)
- [How EdWeek Covers for CRT](#)
- [Fusing CRT and “Anti-Bias” Education for Children as Young as Five: One Scholar’s Proposal](#)

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