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Critical Race Theory

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Critical race theory refers to a historical and contemporary body of scholarship that aims to interrogate the discourses, ideologies, and social structures that produce and maintain conditions of racial injustice. Critical race theory analyzes how race and racism are foundational elements in historical and contemporary social structures and social experiences. In defining critical race theory, it is important to make a distinction between the deep historical tradition of critical theorizing about race and racism and a specific body of American legal scholarship that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s in response to the successes and failures of the Civil Rights Movement struggles for the freedom and liberation of people of color of the 1950s and 1960s. While this new school of legal thought coined the phrase “critical race theory” to signal a new critical analysis of the role of the law in propagating and maintaining racism, this movement is part of a broader intellectual tradition of critical theories of race and anti-racist struggle that has political roots in the work of pioneering scholar-activists like Frederick Douglass, Ida Wells-Barnett, and W. E. B. Du Bois. Using this broader framework, critical race theory can be viewed as a diagnostic body of “intellectual activism” scholarship that seeks to identify the pressure points for anti-racist struggle. Given the historical scope of critical race theories, this essay highlights several core themes that tie together this eclectic body of explicitly political theorizing.

The first core theme deals with how critical race theories frame their two focal objects of study: race and racism. First, critical race theory understands the concept of race as a social construction that is produced as a result of the cultural and political meanings ascribed to it through social interactions and relationships across multiple levels of social organization. Since the 1600s, race has been a constitutive feature of global social, political, economic, and cultural organization. Critical race theories have demonstrated how race concepts and their accompanying racisms were foundational to the administration of colonial social systems, the rise and expansion of global capitalism, and the

emergence of the human biological sciences and medicine of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries.

Second, critical race theorists have rejected the notion that racism is limited to malign individual prejudice and have embraced a more structural understanding of racism. An organizing theme of critical race theory is that there is not, and has never been, one monolithic and universal form of racism. In 1967, black radicals Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton coined the term “institutional racism” to identify how racism is embedded in social structures and multiple institutions. In highlighting the structural dynamics of racism, critical race theorists challenge the idea that people of color are solely responsible for their own oppression. Drawing on these formulations, contemporary critical race theories understand racism as a vast and complicated system of institutionalized practices that structure the allocation of social, economic, and political power in unjust and racially coded ways.

The second core theme is that critical race theories are grounded in the lived experiences, unique experiential knowledge, and narrative voice of racialized and subordinated communities. Strongly influenced by prior freedom movements against colonialism, segregation, and racial violence, critical race theorists engage pragmatist engagement in “intellectual activism” that aimed not only to theorize, but also to resist these conditions of racial oppression. These lived experiences are not always reflected in the activities of scholars located in professional academia. Critical race theorists have helped to spawn and have drawn upon social and intellectual movements for liberation and empowerment in the United States and elsewhere such as the Harlem Renaissance, Black Nationalism, and Afrocentrism. Not only have critical race theorists tended to emerge from subordinated social groups, their theories attempt to use the voices and experiences of people of color in the pursuit of social and economic justice.

The third core theme is that critical race theory has traditionally used and continues to represent an interdisciplinary approach to the study of race and racism. The interdisciplinary and, indeed, extra-disciplinary nature of critical race theory enables the analysis of a wide range of social, economic, and political phenomena that shape race and racism as social structures. Critical race theory draws upon an interdisciplinary body of scholarship that has intellectual roots and practitioners in sociology (Brown et al. 2003), critical legal studies (Bell 2004; Matsuda et al. 1993), political theory and philosophy (Goldberg 1993, 2002), neo-Marxist British cultural studies (CCCS 1982; Hall 1992), African American literary criticism (Carby 1998; Murray 1970), history (Fredrickson 2002; Marable 2000), and philosophy (Harding 1993; Outlaw 1996; West 1999). Inside of sociology, critical race theories draw heavily upon the theoretical and philosophical orientations of Marxism, pragmatism, and poststructuralism. Drawing on psychoanalytic and literary theories, critical race theorists have analyzed the relationships between forms of cultural racism and colonial domination. Critical race theorists have also documented and critiqued the role of nation-states in the formation of racial categories in the enactment of different forms of political oppressions. From these various disciplinary locations, critical race theories entail the illumination and critique of these discursive and institutional relationships between social constructions of race and the social practices of racism in terms that make opposition to these racial discourses and racist practices possible.

A fourth core theme is that critical race theories embrace and deploy quantitative, qualitative, and discursive methodologies to illuminate different aspects of race and racism as social structural phenomena. Critical race theorists have used quantitative methodologies to map the contours of economic and spatial segregation, racist attitudes and ideologies, and racially coded health disparities. They have also deployed qualitative methodologies to understand the lived experiences and narratives of racially designated peoples and discursive approaches to investigate the relationships between racial discourses and the construction of racial subjects. As will be discussed later, critical race theories also draw heavily upon historical and comparative frameworks that allow for the analysis of race and racism as historically embedded social phenomena. This methodological pluralism, partly a consequence of the interdisciplinary scope of critical race theory, has enabled critical race theory to respond to the dominant social, political, and scientific practices and ideas that constitute race and racism in different historical periods.

Fifth, critical racial theories have long recognized and opposed the centrality of science to the construction of racial meanings and practices. In fact, in what might be considered the first treatise of critical race theory, W. E. B. Du Bois's detailed analysis in *The Philadelphia Negro* was intended to refute the claims that rates of poverty and destitution among the city's black population were the result of inherent biological and cultural inferiorities (Du Bois 1899). Scientific racism consists of ideas of race based on presumed physiological, biological, and/or genetic differences and the practices of deploying such ideas as essentialist explanations for racial stratification and oppression. Critical race theory has long contested these scientific claims that upheld racial hierarchies and justified ideologies of white supremacy. Whereas science had long been a tool of racial oppression, it emerged as the spearhead and epistemic foundation of the critical race theories of the post-World War II era.

While critical race theories have relied on a wide range of theoretical approaches, a core theoretical framework embraced by many contemporary critical race theorists is that of racial formation, which emerged in the 1990s as an explicitly

historical and political approach to analyzing race as an organizing system of knowledge and power that combines both discursive and institutional elements (Omi & Winant 1994; Winant 2001). The racial formation framework stands in stark contrast to demographic approaches to race that conceptualize race as a quantitative variable trait in population studies, biological approaches that view race as something rooted in biology and/or genetics, and colorblind approaches that wish to abandon the study of race concepts altogether. The racial formation understands the construct of race as “a concept that signifies and symbolizes sociopolitical conflicts and interests in reference to different types of human bodies” (Omi & Winant 1994). Analytically, this means always interpreting the meaning of race in relation to the discursive practices that produce the idea of race, the social processes through which racial categories are created, embodied, transformed, and destroyed, and the institutionalized power relations that are brought to bear in shaping racial conflicts and interests (Omi & Winant 1994).

These discursive and institutional elements form what are called “racial projects” in which social and political conflicts and interests are waged over raced bodies and racialized groups. The idea of racial projects is central to the racial formation approach because it draws the discursive and institutional elements of race and racism together into a single analytic framework. Omi and Winant define racial projects as the discursive and institutional deployments of race that are both an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics and/or an effort to organize and distribute resources using racial categories (Omi & Winant 1994: 56). Racial projects combine what race means in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized based upon that meaning (Winant 2001, 2004).

Some critical race theorists, particularly black feminist theorists, have also articulated an intersectional theoretical approach to analyzing the ways in which systems of gender, sexuality, and nationalism are implicated in the production and maintenance of racial subordinations (Collins 1990, 1998; Matsuda et al. 1993). Drawing on this earlier work, critical race theorists continued to turn their attention to the ways in which the formulation, production, and dissemination of cultural images and representations are placed in the service of white supremacy (Collins 2005; hooks 1981, 1990).

In the post-civil rights era, critical race theorists have exposed and criticized the ways that the myths of American democracy, meritocracy, and progress and the ideology of individualism function to justify changing forms of racial domination. In particular, critical race theorists have analyzed new forms of colorblind racism that enable and conceal the reproduction of racial inequality without direct reference to social constructions of race (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Williams 1997). Colorblind racisms assume that racial inequalities are the outcome of natural, economic, and/or cultural differences between racialized groups, and advocate that not using constructions of “race” is necessary for the principled end of racism.

A major trajectory in this analysis of colorblind racism is the analysis of the law and legal institutions as crucial sites for the production of colorblind policies and practices. Legal scholar Derrick Bell, considered to be the intellectual inspiration for the consolidation of critical race theories of the law, has demonstrated that conditions of racial segregation have ideological and pragmatic foundations in the speech about socially denigrated groups (Bell 2004). Bell's primary target of critique is the absolutist position on the First Amendment protection of free speech and how this strong position allows racist speech ideology to ripple throughout society, especially in universities. Bell and his followers have also targeted the assumption that racial progress has been achieved in the post-civil rights era. Bell illuminates the partial truths of racial progress in the American society by a close rereading of American political and legal history armed with the notion of silent covenant, a backdoor agreement among white elites to advance black interests and civil rights if and only if they will also benefit whites. The implication of his analysis is that political freedom for oppressed racial groups is only achieved when it can be accomplished in the context of furthering white political domination. Bell recounts key moments in American social history that illustrate this relationship: the signing of the Constitution, the Emancipation Proclamation, and, most importantly, the *Brown* decision. Bell argues that conditions of racial injustice are so entrenched in the United States that when modest gains for racial equality are achieved, they are too often interpreted as evidence that the struggle for racial equality is complete.

A final theme is illustrated in a recent exemplar of contemporary critical race theory. Many critical race theories go beyond diagnosis and critique to offer arguments and proposals for specific social policies that, if implemented, can work to undo the systemic disadvantages that impair the life chances and conditions of people of color in the United States. These theories continue to challenge entrenched racial inequalities in health, education, criminal injustice, political representation, and economic opportunity (Brown et al. 2003; Guiner & Torres 2002; Shapiro 2004). In a recent exemplar of contemporary critical race theory, a group of prominent sociologists attack racial realism, a variant of colorblind ideology in which it is claimed that racism is largely over and the racial inequalities that remain are the result of the natural proclivities and cultural pathologies of people of color (Brown et al. 2003).

SEE ALSO: [Black Feminist Thought](#); [Du Bois, W. E. B.](#); [Race](#); [Race \(Racism\)](#); [Race and Ethnic Politics](#); [Racism, Structural and Institutional](#); [Stratification, Race/Ethnicity and](#)

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