

OPINION | COMMENTARY

Battle Over Critical Race Theory

Advocates and media circle the wagons and try to conceal the truth about a pernicious ideology.

By Christopher F. Rufo

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A rally against teaching critical race theory in schools in Leesburg, Va., June 12.

PHOTO: ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

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Critical race theory is the latest battleground in the culture war. Since the murder of George Floyd last year, critical race theory’s key concepts, including “systemic racism,” “white privilege,” and “white fragility,” have become ubiquitous in America’s elite institutions. Progressive politicians have sought to implement “antiracist” policies to reduce racial disparities, such as minorities-only income programs and racially segregated vaccine distribution.

The ideology has sparked an immense backlash. As Americans have sought to understand critical race theory, they have discovered that it has divided Americans into racial

categories of “oppressor” and “oppressed” and promotes radical concepts such as “spirit murder” (what public schools supposedly do to black children) and “abolishing whiteness” (a purported precondition for social justice). In the classroom, critical race theory-inspired lessons have often devolved into race-based struggle sessions, with public schools forcing children to rank themselves according to a racial hierarchy, subjecting white teachers to “antiracist therapy,” and encouraging parents to become “white traitors.”

Alarmed state legislators have pushed back. In recent months, lawmakers in 24 states have introduced, and six have enacted, legislation banning public schools from promoting critical race theory’s core concepts, including race essentialism, collective guilt and racial superiority. Parent groups around the country have mobilized to oppose critical race theory in the classroom, arguing that it cultivates shame in white students and fatalism in minority students. According to a recent YouGov survey, of the 64% of Americans who have heard about critical race theory, 58% view it unfavorably, including 72% of political independents.

That’s a major liability for the political left. Sensing that they are losing control of the narrative on race, left-leaning media outlets have launched a furious counterattack. Liberal pundits at the New York Times, Washington Post, MSNBC and elsewhere have begun spinning a new mythology that presents critical race theory as a benign academic concept, casts its detractors as right-wing extremists driven by racial resentment, and portrays legislation against critical race theory as an attempt to ban teaching about the history of slavery and racism. All three charges are false.

First, critical race theory isn’t an exercise in promoting racial sensitivity or understanding history. It’s a radical ideology that seeks to use race as a means of moral, social and political revolution. The left-leaning media has sought to portray it as a “lens” for examining the history of racism in the U.S., but this soft framing obscures the nature of the theory, which maintains that America is an irredeemably racist nation and that the constitutional principles of freedom and equality are mere “camouflages,” in the words of scholar William F. Tate IV, for white supremacy. The solution, according to prominent exponents of critical race theory such as Ibram X. Kendi, is to abolish capitalism and install a near-omnipotent federal bureaucracy with the power to nullify any law and silence political speech that isn’t “antiracist.”

Second, the grassroots movement against critical race theory is nonpartisan, multiracial and mainstream. Parents have revolted against critical race theory training at high schools in liberal cities such as New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco. The most successful campaigns have been led by racial minorities who oppose the manipulative and harmful practices of critical race theory in the classroom. Asian-Americans in particular have argued that critical race theory will undermine merit-based admissions, advanced learning programs and academic standards.

Third, state legislation about critical race theory bans a specific set of pedagogies—not teaching about history. Left-leaning media outlets have claimed that bills in states such as Idaho, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Texas would ban teachers from discussing racism in the classroom. This is patently false. The legislation in these states would simply prohibit teachers from compelling students to believe that one race “is inherently superior to another,” that one race is “inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive,” or that an individual “bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race.” The same bills explicitly say that teachers may and should discuss the role of racism in American history, but they may not shame or treat students differently according to their racial background.

This issue isn’t going away. Critical race theory has taken a dominant position in many elite institutions, including public-school bureaucracies and the graduate schools training new teachers and professors. Parents, honest journalists and lawmakers should continue to combat the wave of misinformation, share stories about the damage critical race theory is doing to their communities, and develop a plan to combat it in local institutions. Critical race theory is a dangerous ideology that will take the nation into racial retrograde; Americans should have no hesitation in opposing it.

Mr. Rufo is a contributing editor of City Journal.

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