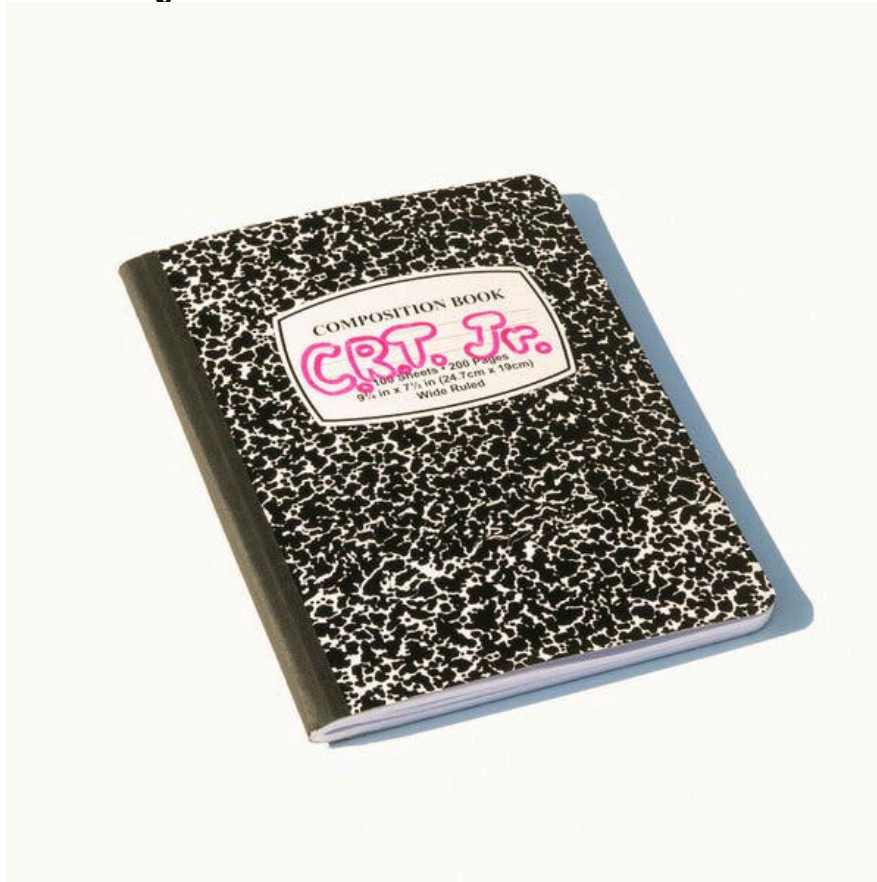


OPINION

If It's Not Critical Race Theory, It's Critical Race Theory-lite



Nov. 9, 2021,

By John McWhorter
Opinion Writer

Former Gov. Terry McAuliffe lost last week's Virginia race for governor in part because the victor, Republican newcomer Glenn Youngkin, pledged, "On Day 1, I will ban critical race theory in our schools." This followed an October CBS News poll that found that 62 percent of likely Virginia voters considered "school curriculums on race and history" a "major factor" in how they'd vote.

Yet for some who see racism at play in much of life today, the wokest insight about the result is that a racist backlash against our national racial reckoning cost McAuliffe the election: MSNBC's Nicolle Wallace concluded "that the real ominous thing is that critical race theory, which isn't real, turned the suburbs 15 points to the Trump-insurrection-endorsed Republican." By ominous, I assume she means that racism was the background issue. On the eve of the election, Fox News's Juan Williams wrote that Republicans have seized on critical race theory as "a boogeyman to excite racial divisions and get their base to the polls."

A common justification for this view is the observation that critical race theory is in fact not being taught in Virginia's schools or anywhere other than law schools and

university seminars and that political opposition to it is cover for something smaller and meaner. That a critical mass of white people doesn't want schools to teach about the realities of slavery or America's past racist injustices at all, favoring instead a glossed-over, triumphalist apple-pie-and-Chevrolet narrative.

The pessimism in this take on America's racial progress can seem almost fantastical considering clear advances in attitudes about race in recent years: A 2020 Monmouth University poll found that 76 percent — including 71 percent of white respondents — considered racial and ethnic discrimination in this country a “big problem,” compared with just 51 percent who said the same in 2015. Gallup found that from 1958 to 2021, approval of marriage between white and Black people has gone from 4 percent to 94 percent. A July Reuters-Ipsos poll found that 78 percent “support teaching high school students about the impacts of slavery” and 73 percent support teaching high school students about the impacts of racism.

It's reasonable, yes, to note the partisan divide on some of these questions, but less reasonable to suggest that there's a consensus against any discussion of slavery and racism in schools. Let's give that suggestion its weight, however: If critical race theory isn't being taught to children — and in a technical sense, it isn't — then it's hardly illogical to suppose that some other concern may be afoot.

The problem lies in the name “critical race theory.” It's a no-brainer that the legal doctrine developed decades ago by scholars such as the Harvard Law professor Derrick Bell and the Columbia University and U.C.L.A. law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw is not being taught to tots. (Even one of critical race theory's principal critics, the Manhattan Institute's Christopher Rufo, has acknowledged that he's tried to make “critical race theory” a catchall term.) But today, this isn't what most voters mean when they object to critical race theory, and to participate in this debate as if otherwise is quibbling at best, and a smoke screen at worst.

Sunday night, Crenshaw defined critical race theory this way to MSNBC's Mehdi Hasan:

A way of looking at the world that we have inherited after a legacy of segregation, of slavery, of Manifest Destiny, of genocide. It basically links contemporary issues around racial inequality to the laws and policies that produced those very inequalities in the past. So, it's basically looking at the grounds upon which we stand, excavating those aspects of our history that have produced many of the problems that we still deal with.

OK. But consider the cultural critic Helen Pluckrose's — fair, I think — summary of the original body of critical race theory work:

C.R.T. is not just talking about historical and contemporary racism with a view to overcoming it — something that all approaches to addressing racism do — but a set of core beliefs that racism is ordinary and/or permanent; that white supremacy is everywhere; that white people don't oppose racism unless it suits them; that there is a unique voice of color that just so happens to be the one that agrees with C.R.T.; that lived experience and story-telling are primary ways of revealing racism; that

liberalism and the civil rights movement approach are bad; and that working for social justice means using the critical theories of race set out above.

It's difficult, certainly, to imagine a grade-school teacher in front of a classroom teaching this kind of thing. However, this "critical" approach has trickled down, in broad outline, into the philosophy of education-school pedagogy and administration — call it C.R.T.-lite or, if you prefer, C.R.T. Jr. — and from there migrated into the methods used by graduates of those education programs into the way they wind up running schools.

Under this approach, what alarms many parents and other observers is that kids will absorb the idea that it is enlightened to see white people as potential oppressors and Black people as perpetual victims of an inherently oppressive system. That it is therefore appropriate to ascribe certain traits to races, rather than individuals, and that education must "center" the battle against power differentials between groups and the subtle perceptions that they condition.

An implication some educators draw from these tenets is that various expectations of some of their students, based on what are generally thought to be ordinary mainstream assumptions, are instead onerous stipulations from an oppressive white-centric view. Hence an idea that it is white to be on time, arrive at precise answers and reason from A to B, rather than holistically, etc. Again, this is not what decades-old critical race theory scholarship proposed, but yes, the idea is descended from original C.R.T.'s fundamental propositions about white supremacy.

In Virginia itself, the Department of Education's website has a page devoted to "Anti-racism in Education," and at the end of a long list of "Terms and Definitions" it reads, "Drawing from critical race theory, the term 'white supremacy' also refers to a political or socio-economic system where white people enjoy structural advantage and rights that other racial and ethnic groups do not, both at a collective and an individual level."

In the 2022 draft revision of the California Department of Education's "Mathematics Framework," the chapter on "Teaching for Equity and Engagement" includes this language: "Empowering students with mathematics also includes removing the high stakes of errors and sending the message that learning is always unfinished and that it is safe to take mathematical risks. This mind-set creates the conditions for students to develop a sense of ownership over their mathematical thinking and their right to belong to the discipline of mathematics" — a truly artful way of saying that "diverse" kids should not be saddled with the onerous task of having to get the actual answers.

In February, the Oregon Department of Education sent an update to math educators that linked to a document titled "A Pathway to Equitable Math Instruction/Dismantling Racism in Mathematics Instruction." It contains a section on "Deconstructing Racism in Mathematics Instruction" positing that "white supremacy culture in the mathematics classroom can show up" in a variety of ways, including when "Preconceived expectations are steeped in the dominant culture," "Superficial curriculum changes are offered in place of culturally relevant pedagogy and practice" and "Students are required to 'show their work' in standardized, prescribed ways."

Perhaps a reasonable objection would be that these are only teacher guidelines and that we cannot know exactly how, or whether, teachers are adhering to them in classrooms. But these guidelines, apparently sanctioned by state departments of education, contradict the notion that concepts derived from critical race theory — or are, at least, C.R.T.-lite — is nowhere near our schools, that the C.R.T.-in-schools debate “isn’t real,” merely a fiction designed to cloak racism.

In some cases, evidence of C.R.T.-lite is easier to spot at various private schools. Granted, governors can’t “ban” private school curriculums, but the experience at some tony New York prep schools, for instance, demonstrates how C.R.T.-lite isn’t simply found in teacher trainings but can make its way into the classroom and schools’ educational philosophy. As *The Times* reported earlier this year:

The Brearley School declared itself an antiracist school with mandatory antiracism training for parents, faculty and trustees, and affirmed the importance of meeting regularly in groups that bring together people who share a common race or gender.

Kindergarten students at Riverdale Country School in the Bronx are taught to identify their skin color by mixing paint colors. The lower-school chief in an email last year instructed parents to avoid talk of colorblindness and “acknowledge racial differences.”

Some of those who say that critical race theory isn’t being taught in schools may not be aware of these developments. Others most likely are, and suppose that they are healthy, that this is indeed how education should be.

That’s a respectable stance, but one ought not harbor it in disbelief that any intelligent, morally concerned person could feel differently. One can ardently support that students learn about racism and its legacies in a way that doesn’t crowd out obvious lessons about the history of undeniable racial progress. One can do that while questioning whether students should be immersed in a broader perspective that offers overbroad, clumsy and, frankly, insulting portraits of what is inherently white and what is Black, Latino, Asian American or Native American, and fosters — even if unintentional — a sense of opposition between the groups in question.

To be sure, voices on the political right, including Youngkin, must do better when it comes to specifying what they oppose. They, and we, would be better off if they explained that they oppose philosophies *influenced* by critical race theory, rather than claiming C.R.T. itself is being taught. Bills intended to ban the teaching of C.R.T.-lite shouldn’t be worded as if the intent was to ban the teaching of anything about race at all. And if that’s what any of these bills do mean, they should spell it out in clear language in order to expose that intent to debate — one within which I would be vociferously opposed, I should note. The horror of slavery, the hypocrisy of Jim Crow, the terror of lynching, the devastating loss of life and property in Tulsa and in other massacres — no student should get through, roughly, middle school ignorant of these things, and anyone who thinks that is “politics” needs to join the rest of us in the 21st century.

But the insistence that parents opposed to what is being called critical race theory are rising against a mere fantasy and simply enjoying a coded way of fostering denial about race is facile. It is an attempt to wrest a woke object lesson from the nuanced realities of life as it is actually lived, in which the notion of a white backlash against racial progress may appeal as narrative, or as analysis of an electoral upset, but rarely tracks with on-the-ground reality.