

The Critical Turn in Education That Led to Harmful CRT Lessons

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We must prevent harmful lessons being taught in our public schools by any teacher that is anathema to the idea that a person should be judged solely by the content of their character. There are some teachers trained in what is called **critical race theory** (“CRT”) that do not believe what Dr. Martin Luther King said in his famous “I Have a Dream Speech” given at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963. As Charles Mills explains in the epilogue of his 2017 book, *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism*, critical race theorists take up two tasks. The first is descriptive: “to recognize and theorize the centrality of race and white supremacy to the making of the modern world”; and the second is prescriptive: “[to recognize and theorize] the implications for normative theory and an expanded vision of what needs to be [subjected to a liberation critique] to achieve social justice.” Unfortunately, this philosophical foundation of CRT sometime warps into the belief that all people of a certain skin color (white) have established systems and institutions to promote and preserve their class, values, and privilege, and therefore, their racism. When critical race theorists believe racism is normal, is everywhere in America, and that white kids and parents are incapable of righteous actions on race relations unless they themselves benefit, they go too far. This iteration of CRT must be rejected in our public schools.

A perverted CRT is the wilted flower that grew from a seed sown back as early as 1921 when the Mussolini government in Italy began a major reform of the Italian education system. One significant reformer was Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) who was a leading Italian Marxist. Gramsci’s significance comes from his expositions and writings on the notion of hegemony, and how educators should understand it to critique and reform education. Gramsci accepted the analysis of capitalism put forward by Karl Marx that the struggle between the ruling class and the oppressed classes was the driving force that moved society forward. Gramsci pointed out how school life was coercive when it served the ruling class in power, and that there was a hidden curriculum in the schools that made this so. Gramsci’s writings were meant to unveil the shared ideas and beliefs that served to justify the interests of the dominate group, and how this ideological hegemony socialized the oppressed classes to keep the status quo.

There were two significant liberation movements that occurred in Latin America in the late 1960’s and through the 1970’s that used similar Gramsci terms and hegemony concepts that will lead us eventually to what is now known as CRT. Within the reformed Catholic Church in Latin America following Vatican II, a new “liberation theology” was developing based on the biblical messages of justice and judgement found in the Old Testament books of the minor prophets (Joel, Amos, Hosea, Micah, etc.) that were also used by Reverend King in many of his speeches. Liberation theology, and the clergyman that promoted it, became a positive force to counter the wave of U.S. supported military dictatorships, and the perceived devastating impact of multi-national corporations that preyed on the developing countries of Latin America. Unable to develop their own economies free from the rules and dominance of these U.S. and other colonial power

dictators and companies, many of their civic leaders sought freedom from this hegemony by aligning with groups such as the “Workers Catholic Action Movement” founded by Catholic bishops and priests who began to speak out for the working class, the poor and oppressed.

A second liberation movement occurring during this same period is traced to Brazil’s educational philosopher Paulo Freire who wrote the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and later *The Politics of Education*, in which he posited the idea that literacy best emerges when instruction is grounded in life experiences, including the political reality of one’s own position in society. Freire was deeply influenced by the critical Marxist tradition, and by the liberation theology coming from the Latin American Catholic Church. Freire’s work became popular in U.S. education circles, eventually garnering him an assignment at Harvard University as a Fellow at the radical Center for Studies in Development and Social Change. In the 1980’s a former American high school teacher named Henry Giroux, now a professor at McMaster University and well know author and speaker on education topics, forged a long friendship with Freire. The friendship led to years of collaboration between the two, and eventually the goal to bring what they called “**critical education**” (also called “critical pedagogy”) to all of the departments of education in the United States universities. That goal may have been achieved. Freire and Giroux’s books, theories and instructional methods are a mainstay in teacher education and certification courses across the U.S. today. In 2022 most educators that have been teaching for 20 years or less have probably been heavily influenced by Freire, Giroux and their disciples. Educators who identify with this type of intervention in education see their cause as revolutionary.

Today’s critical race theory spawned from these two movements and are based primarily on the critical legal studies of Derrick Bell, a law professor at Harvard. Two of his books are regarded as the foundation texts for CRT: *Race, Racism and American Law*, and *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*. In these texts Bell lays down the arguments for what has become the core tenets of CRT, which included that race is a by-product of social forces; that white people are unaware of their prejudices, so minorities must point it out; and that racism is a permanent feature of American society, among others. While Bell does not define CRT as far as I can tell, it clearly flows from the same intellectual legacy laid down by Gramsci, Freire, Giroux and their disciples in the critical education movement.

Using the tools of **critical education**, and **CRT** to uncover the hegemony by the dominate group ruling over many of our public K-12 schools and public universities today, one may arrive at a similar conclusion, but with a different enemy. For critical educators and critical race theorists their hegemonic enemies are capitalists, white people, males, Republicans and Christians to name a few. Don’t take my word for it, just read what they have to say in their books, articles and speeches. Today, the evolving dominate group that must be toppled are critical educators and critical race theorists who only see oppression through the lens of their own reverse racism. Gramsci was certainly right about one thing, that school life can be coercive, and that is why we should reject all attempts to reeducate our kids by these so called “critical education reformers”.