The Potential and Limitations of Critical Race Theory

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Abstract

This article examines the potentials and limitations of critical race theory in terms of its capacity to foster a more just, free, and democratic society. The article analyzes impacts of critical race theory on education as well as the daily life of citizens. The article argues that from 1980 onward, the anti-racist movement in the U.S. lost its revolutionary vision and became domesticated. The article concludes that critical race theory is not revolutionary but a petit bourgeois standpoint.

Key Words: critical race theory, critical theory, race, class, equality, justice, capitalism and education.

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INTRODUCTION

The police killing of George Floyd in May 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, triggered anti-racist protests in the U.S. and other countries around the world. This movement popularized discussions of race, racial relations, racism, equity, and justice in education as well as in other domains. With few exceptions, it seems that critical race theory (CRT) largely shapes perceptions of anti-racism and informs and inspires movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM). In this article, I discuss the potentials and limitations of CRT.

Anti-racist movements in the U.S. made historically progressive gains and created significant cracks in hegemony of racist discourse in 1960s and 1970s. When we review the rhetoric and political practices of leading figures of these struggles such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, we see that the social, political, and economic structures of the system were central to their criticism and political actions: they were radicals (Howard-Pitney, Davis, & May, 2004). In other words, the anti-racist movement at that time was part of a larger struggle toward freedom, equality, and justice for all (Reed, 2020). However, since the early 1980s, the anti-racist movement lost its momentum and larger emancipatory vision. In academic studies in the 1990s, especially, race became a primary unit of analysis with an unclear political vision. Simultaneously, in the social sciences and humanities, class as an identity marker seemed to be forgotten (Avcı, 2019; Gottesman, 2016; Orlowski, 2012). A set of political events at global scale led to this domestication process of anti-racist theory and practices.

After the de facto failure of Bolshevik revolution 1980s, Marxism lost its prestige among intellectual circles and in academia. As neoliberalism became the dominant ideology starting from about 1980, Weberian\(^2\) notions of status, identity, and lifestyle replaced the Marxist concept of socioeconomic class to analyze, understand, and change society: based on this Weberian perspective, CRT in the academic world emerged and has been largely promoted by bourgeois scholars as it

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serves bourgeois interests and keeps the debate about inequality and justice confined to the limits of the neoliberal (capitalist) system. It is no coincidence that bourgeois scholars are fierce supporters of an ideology (CRT) that covers a list of oppressions, which somehow misses class exploitation entirely off the list.

CRT defines racism as a problem of White individuals; it takes race as the prime unit of analysis to understand oppression, inequality, racism, and unjust racial relations. CRT largely ignores the concept of class: while informed by identity politics, CRT also resonates with neoliberal ideology, which separates politics from the economy. Refusing to define anything at the societal level, neoliberal ideology considers everything at the individual level (Ventura, 2012).

As CRT gained popularity, it received criticism from Marxian scholars, who contend that:

CRT problematically prioritizes race over class, fails to account for the political-economic foundations of racial inequities and racialized process, and focuses on White supremacy as the explanation of the persistent oppression of people of color, without due attention to the impact of capitalism and market forces. (Dumas, 2013, p. 114)

Drawing on my lived experiences as an educator, I will elaborate on the criticisms made by Marxian scholars to answer the following questions: (a) Can CRT lead to radical, long-lasting solutions to racism? (b) Is CRT revolutionary or reformist-conservative in ideology? (c) What are the Marxian arguments critical of CRT?

**Main Arguments of CRT**

Although a number of scholars contributed to the formation of CRT, historically CRT overall includes five basic tenets: (1) Interest convergence: the demands of Black people would be met only if that particular action also serves White interests (Lynn, Jennings, & Hughes, 2013); (2) Whiteness as property: the existing legal system protects White interests; Whiteness controls economic, social, and political power relations in the U.S. (Harris, 1993); (3) White supremacy: the concept of White supremacy is derived from the view that the structure of American society is based on Whiteness, which operates on different levels; because all White people
benefit from Whiteness, by definition, all White people are potentially racist. From a CRT perspective, racism is a permanent driving force of society: it is a totalizing concept (Annamma, 2015; Hiraldo, 2010); (4) Story-telling and counternarratives: individuals’ lived experience as recounted in their narratives can “undermine the claim of racial neutrality of traditional legal discourse and reveal that racism and racial discrimination are neither aberrant nor occasional parts of the lives of people of color” (Lynn & Dixson, 2013, p. 9); (5) Critique of liberalism: this tenet challenges the notions of color blindness, neutrality of law, and equal opportunity of all (Hiraldo, 2010).

In addition, CRT developed the concept of “intersectionality”: drawing on identity politics, CRT claims that although race is the prime unit of analysis, racial identities and racism intersect with other subordinated identities, such as gender, religion, sexual orientation, and the like. As such, the concept of socioeconomic class is given less emphasis; indeed, it rarely appears in CRT analyses. In other words, class and other identities are analyzed in relation to race and racism.

**Critique of CRT**

Marxism is a revolutionary ideology that is committed to fight against exploitation, oppression, and discrimination rooted in capitalism; it envisions a world without borders and classes. By definition, the Marxian approach includes an anti-racist and anti-fascist agenda as part of its larger sociopolitical and economic struggle oriented toward equality, justice, and freedom (Kellner, 1989). Long before CRT, Marxism recognized race and racism in its analysis of capitalism: he wrote, “Labor in the white skin cannot be free if in the black it is branded” (Marx, 1867, p.301). Marxism took an anti-racist stance as part of a larger emancipatory movement against capitalism and toward equality, justice, and freedom. In this sense, there has been ongoing debate between Marxian theorists-academics and CRT scholars. CRT has been criticized on three major points (Cole, 2009).
First, Marxian scholars argue that race itself does not provide a sufficient theoretical base to explain inequality and injustice. Drawing on critical theory (CT), Marxian scholars assert that the class, not race, is the central and global concept necessary to explain the human condition, encompassing oppression, equality, and freedom (Darder & Torres, 2009). The foundation of power relations and social and economic inequalities are embedded in capitalism. Under the neoliberal capitalist world order, workers worldwide—regardless of their race or other identities—are subject to exploitation. Taking class as the prime unit of analysis, Marxism directly takes race into its structure of analysis as a form of exploitation and oppression (Cole, 2009). In that structure, the capital-forming effects of racism are clearly defined.

CT provides a theory of capitalism that starts with economic categories “precisely because the economy plays a constitutive role within all areas of social life and provides the framework for developing a theory of society” (Kellner, 1989, p. 47). CT uses totalizing concepts, such as commodity, money, value, and exchange, to describe a (neoliberal) capitalist society that “attempts to impose its values, structures and practices throughout society” (p. 47). By doing so, CT provides a theory that explains the substructure and superstructure of society and the relation between them and provides a theory of life after capitalism (Bendix, 1974).

Second, Marxian scholars are highly critical of identity politics and therefore take issue with the notion of intersectionality in CRT. For CRT, race is the prime unit of analysis: class is given the same importance as sex, gender, or ethnic identity. Clearly, CRT scholars do not understand or accept the constitutive power of class, whereas Marxian scholars, as Dumas (2013) writes, “reject the idea that class is an identity akin to a range of others” (p. 116). CRT not only misunderstands the concept of class, but also the links between identities and capitalism itself. Darder and Torres (2004) explain that the way in which the concept of intersectionality is structured disregards “the fact that notions of identity result from a process of identification with a particular configuration of historically lived or transferred social arrangements and practices tied to material conditions of actual or imagined survival” (p. 106). Using the notion of intersectionality, CRT fails to connect the political and economic spheres, which results in deemphasizing class exploitation rooted in capitalism. Thus, as Cole (2009) shows, CRT, with its race-based analysis, has neither the desire nor the capacity to fight capitalism.
Third, CRT’s focus on White supremacy is another point that draws Marxian scholars’ criticism. The binary approach divides people into two—White and non-White—along with the claim that Whites benefit from White supremacy one way or another. However, CRT fails to recognize the fact that in today’s society, neither Whites nor Blacks are a homogenous community (Darder & Torres, 2004); they both are culturally, ethnically, religiously, and socioeconomically diverse. In the U.S., the majority of Whites come from the working class that has been and still is exploited by capitalism. The same holds true for the Black community.

In today’s America, Black people are divided into different social classes: there are working class Black people, middle class Black people, and upper class Black people, as well as immigrant Black people. In contrast to the 1960s and 70s, today Black people seem to be able to take up important academic, bureaucratic, cultural, and political positions in society. Needless to say, the class division is also reality for White people: ruling class—White elites of course benefit from the existing system. That is, neither Black nor White communities are homogenous. Ignoring this fact by using the notion of White supremacy, CRT claims, without any substantiation, that all Whites are potentially racist. This claim not only alienates poor and working class Whites, but also prevents them from organizing a united front against fascism.

As for White privilege in relation to capitalist society, what CRT fails to understand can be illustrated through an example. Suppose a Black worker gets paid $8 per hour and with the similar conditions, a White worker gets $10. As part of a divide-and-conquer strategy, the system’s message here to the White worker is that “Perhaps your pay is not very good, but at least it’s better than a Black worker’s.” In the name of equity and justice, CRT suggests that if the Black worker gets paid the same as the White worker, then justice is served. CRT assumes that the White worker’s pay is fair and reasonable. The Marxist perspective, on the other hand, argues that both workers’ labor is exploited: they should be getting paid $25 or so.³

³ For example, Barack Obama was President (highest elected position) and Condoleezza Rice was Secretary of State (highest appointed position).

⁴ I picked random numbers to illustrate the situation; workers may deserve much more than $25/hour.
Therefore, it suggests that Black and White workers should get together based on their socioeconomic background to fight against the common enemy—the capitalist ruling class—to create more equal, just, and free world.

As the example above illustrates, capitalism uses racism for capital accumulation and to maintain its ideological and political domination. CRT’s position is to blame the White worker without problematizing the capitalist mode of production and its exploitative and oppressive economic politics; this standpoint pits White and Black working class people against one another, to the advantage of the capitalist ruling class. On the other hand, Marxist perspective, as a project of emancipation and liberation, critically examines capitalism as the root cause of exploitation and oppression. It envisions a life after capitalism where there is a material ground for brotherhood/sisterhood of all people regardless of their background.

**CRT in Education**

The same ambiguity and lack of strategy in CRT is also visible in the education literature. CRT references White students’ statistics to indicate inequality and injustice in education: As I have indicated elsewhere, CRT simply demands that “Black students should have equal opportunities with White students. Which White students? Do all White students have the same opportunity?” (Avcı, 2019, p. 50). When we compare poor Black and White students’ academic success, there is not much difference; there is, however, a clear gap between students in well-off schools and those who go to school in poor areas. The real gap in America exists between schools in poor neighborhoods and schools in the middle and upper middle class areas. In other words, socioeconomic inequality—poverty—is the main predictor of students’ academic success and failure. Looking at race and ignoring class is misleading; it results in a call for an anti-racist position. To radically criticize this situation, class, not race, should be the point of departure.

Public schools in America have been colonized by corporate agendas aimed at stripping public education of its democratic mission. Underwritten by corporate agents, the standardization movement, charter schools, and privatization have been turning schools away from democratic education and toward for-profit sites (Avcı,
2019; Giroux, 2002; Hill, 2009; Leistyna, 2007; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007; McNeil, 2009). Having failed to critically examine neoliberal capitalism, the CRT literature offers almost nothing to address this corporate colonization of education. Furthermore, it does not propose any education system that counters neoliberal colonization and is oriented toward freedom, equality, and justice. Therefore, CRT is unable to substantiate its arguments about—and potential solutions for—the achievement gap. Instead, studies inspired by CRT keep saying the same thing over and over, like a broken record: “White students have more opportunity than Blacks.” This claim assumes that in America today, all White kids receive a quality education. This falsifiable claim\(^5\) alienates poor White students, promotes ethnic pride (chauvinism) among students of color, provokes students of color against White students, and eradicates material ground of a genuine multicultural and democratic education.

Racism is a reality in the U.S. and it impacts many aspects of life, both public and private. It should be recognized that any attempt (theoretical, political, activist, etc.) to disrupt racism is important. CRT’s anti-racist contribution is also important. However, CRT as a whole has failed to criticize the political economy of capitalism that produces and reproduces inequality and exploitation. The consequent lack of a political-ideological transformative vision among CRT scholars often results—intentionally or not—in conservative and backward narratives and perception in and out of schools.

For example, CRT promotes ideas like “White teachers cannot/should not teach Black students,” and vice versa. If CRT were to fight for an education system where our children receive a democratic education to become loving, lovable, and caring individuals and critically engaged citizens, it would promote teachers who have intellectual quality, democratic values, and caring personalities regardless of their skin color. What is needed is the creation of democratic schools where students and teachers from diverse backgrounds can find “unity in diversity,” as Freire (2000) proposed. In poor schools, White and Black working class students can learn from

\(^5\) In my 16 years of classroom teaching, I have witnessed that fact on a daily basis.
and with one another to develop critical literacy to become engaged and critical citizens. On the other hand, the CRT proposal would only bring about further segregation and ghettoization that is in interest of the ruling class.

The way in which CRT defines race and racism disables its capacity to challenge the system and promote a better one. Because it ignores the constitutive power of class and class-based society, CRT fails to understand diverse nature of human conflict, as well as the dynamics and contradictions of class-based society. This shapes Black people’s perception, resulting in their tendency to explain every problem, at both social and individual levels, through race and racism. This unfortunately wears out the effectiveness of anti-racist discourse in general and alienates White working class people, who otherwise could be an ally to form a strong united front against fascism and racism.

It is statistically correct that students of color get involved in disciplinary problems in school in America. Popular narratives inspired by CRT explain this issue by racism. The CRT argument goes as follows: if 10 percent of White students receive disciplinary referral, Black students’ referral rate should also be around 10 percent. While race may play a role in this, it is known for sure that family background (poverty, homelessness, domestic violence, single parenthood) has a significant impact on how students behave in school. It is no coincidence that the majority of students who receive disciplinary referral also qualify for free/reduced-cost meals. The root cause of disciplinary issues is thus poverty, and our focus should be the social, political, and economic structures that produce inequality and poverty. But instead of demanding a quality education for all students in poor neighborhoods, CRT keeps proposing the same Black-White binary approach that changes nothing.

Another CRT-related ambiguity often takes places in math education. According to this viewpoint, Black students struggle with learning mathematics because current math education is made for Whites. For example, in Washington state, the Seattle school district⁶ adopted a curricular policy that explains the achievement gap in math as a product of racism: math education is claimed to be

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⁶ The article in the following link looks at the issue from a right-wing perspective. CRT-inspired policies and implementations like these provide the Right with a strong hand to argue against an
racist. These kinds of CRT-infused educational policies and implementations confuse public opinion and divert attention from the root causes of inequality and injustice. As I have mentioned earlier, overemphasizing race and racism while ignoring the capitalist socioeconomic structure results in class division and oppression, leading to ambiguous and baseless political viewpoints and actions. Claiming that math education in America is racist has no substance. As a math teacher, I can confidently assert that the issue in math education is not racism.

Math, more than any other subject, is constructed cumulatively, from kindergarten to high school: from basic addition and subtraction, to order of operations, to calculus. At each grade, a certain portion of mathematics needs to be learned with understanding. Regardless of color or ethnicity, students who live in affluent areas have many more chances to learn math thoroughly at each grade level without any gap between levels. Therefore, the way math education—and, of course, the entire education system—is designed reveals class-based discrimination: the failure of students of color in poor schools can be understood from a class-based, not race-based, analysis. Class-based capitalist society and its education system in America and elsewhere in the world uses math as a gatekeeper. Students from well-off families have an excellent chance to learn math as a structured sequence, and are therefore well positioned to be successful at standardized exams. Students from poor families, on the other hand, will probably miss something along the way, and consequently do poorly on exams. For example, if a student fails to learn order of operations in sixth-grade math class, it will be very difficult to make it up later. The capitalist ruling class thus uses math as a control device to discourage working class students and encourage well-off ones to reproduce the class system. CRT wastes an opportunity to expose the inequity and injustice embedded in math education.

approach that could be otherwise very effective. https://www.hoover.org/research/seattle-schools-propose-teach-math-education-racist-will-california-be-far-behind-seattle

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CRT AND BLM

The BLM movement became much more popular after George Floyd’s murder. As we review the list of black individuals killed by police in America, we see that poverty is the common denominator of all these incidents: none of these killings took place in neighbors where middle and upper middle class Black people reside with their White fellows from the same class background. However, instead of class-based discrimination and poverty, the notion of White supremacy became a key point in any conversation about BLM and anti-racism.7 Where can White supremacy theory lead us? The notion of White supremacy seems to not have led to any democratic change so far. Assuming all White people benefit from racism, expecting them to say, “Yes, I am racist” and go through a process of self-healing has no sociological, psychological, or ontological basis. However, it is an observable fact that the publicity given to BLM has made Black people more likely to indiscriminately hate Whites. Neither BLM nor White supremacy seems likely to deliver a more just and democratic society. However, BLM has the potential, as Darder and Fletcher (2020) suggest, for becoming part of a larger struggle toward a more just and equal world:

More than ever, strategic unity is essential to ameliorate the torment of working people in this country and abroad. Such unity can open the way to rebuilding the labor movement and putting forward a challenge in the electoral arena, where pivotal battles are being fought over whether this country continues on its path toward neofascism, or embraces a transformative political direction of social and economic justice. (Darder & Fletcher, 2020)

Such a unity is, I argue, possible only if CRT-inspired theories and practices adopt an anti-racist perspective such that working class people, regardless of their ethnicity, can come together and fight for a better world for all.

CONCLUSION

CRT is important because it generates awareness about race and racialization. However, in terms of what it brings to and takes away from movements against neoliberal capitalism, CRT is seen to be a petit bourgeois ideology. Using race as the

7 BLM official website: https://Blacklivesmatter.com/about/
prime unit of analysis, CRT ignores class: it does not identify capitalism as the root cause of inequality and oppression. Instead, CRT provokes White and Black working class people against one another, and then reduces racism to the intrapersonal, psychological problem of Whites who allegedly benefit from White supremacy. Regrettably, this standpoint offers no solution that would potentially diminish racism; instead, it enhances hegemony of neoliberalism. CRT seeks for some betterment within the capitalist system, and therefore it is far from challenging the sociopolitical and economic structures that result in exploitation, inequality, and injustice for the majority. In short, CRT is a petit bourgeois ideology, not a revolutionary one.

CRT needs a whole new language and an ideological-political perspective about racism that distinguishes, as I have indicated elsewhere,

between problems of Black and brown people in the back streets of America and the problems of a Black Hollywood star who complains that no Black actors or actresses were nominated for an academy award. While the Hollywood star’s race-related problem could be solved within the [capitalist] system, solutions to problems of working class Black people require radical and revolutionary changes. (Avcı, 2019, p. 49)
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