

Critical Race Theory

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Critical Race Theory, or CRT, is a theoretical and interpretive mode that examines the appearance of race and racism across dominant cultural modes of expression. In adopting this approach, CRT scholars attempt to understand how victims of systemic racism are affected by cultural perceptions of race and how they are able to represent themselves to counter prejudice.

Closely connected to such fields as philosophy, history, sociology, and law, CRT scholarship traces racism in America through the nation's legacy of slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, and recent events. In doing so, it draws from work by writers like Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others studying law, feminism, and post-structuralism. CRT developed into its current form during the mid-1970s with scholars like Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado, who responded to what they identified as dangerously slow progress following Civil Rights in the 1960s.

Prominent CRT scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia Williams share an interest in recognizing racism as a quotidian component of American life (manifested in textual sources like literature, film, law, etc). In doing so, they attempt to confront the beliefs and practices that enable racism to persist while also challenging these practices in order to seek liberation from systemic racism.

As such, CRT scholarship also emphasizes the importance of finding a way for diverse individuals to share their experiences. However, CRT scholars do not only locate an individual's identity and experience of the world in his or her racial identifications, but also their membership to a specific class, gender, nation, sexual orientation, etc. They read these diverse cultural texts as proof of the institutionalized inequalities racialized groups and individuals experience every day.

In their seminal book, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Delgado and Stefencic introduced critical race theory to the social sciences more broadly. Delgado and Stefencic claimed that critical race theory is based around the following premises:

- Racism is ordinary, not aberrational.
- Racism serves important purposes.
- Race and races are products of social thought and relations [and] categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient' (Delgado and Stefencic, 2001: 7).
- Intersectionality: 'No person has a single, easily stated, unitary identity [...] everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping

identities, loyalties and allegiances' (Delgado and Stefencic, 2001: 9).

More recently, **Bonilla-Silva** (2015: 74) has redeveloped the tenets of CRT to the following:

- Racism is 'embedded in the structure of society'.
- Racism has a 'material foundation'.
- Racism changes and develops over different times.
- Racism is often ascribed a degree of rationality.
- Racism has a contemporary basis.

Central to critical race theory is that racism is much more than individual prejudice and bigotry; rather, racism is a systemic feature of social structure. Given that racism is so deeply embedded in social structure, **Bonilla-Silva** argues that racial inequality often gets misrecognised as a natural process rather than a by-product of a system of racial domination (what he refers to as a 'racialised social system'). One example Bonilla-Silva uses is the issue of white segregation in the US: while they remain one of the most socially segregated groups in the country; rather than explaining this through processes such as housing discrimination and whites seeking to 'flock together', this reality is often explained away through a colourblind logic such that 'like-minded people naturally gravitate towards each other'.

Critical race theory offers an invaluable set of literature for scholars of race and society to engage with. As a social scientific approach, it encourages us to appreciate how races are constructed into hierarchies, with societal resources distributed unequally across this hierarchy. In a time often declared as 'post-racial', critical race theory helps remind us that race is omnirelevant – it may not always be the single determining factor of a given inequality, nor even the most important one, but 'race' is fundamental to understanding current regimes of inequality, and that analyses of inequality and its inverse (privilege and domination), are incomplete without a systematic discussion of race.

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Recommended Sources for Additional Research

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