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The language of Critical Race Theory

By Steve Bakke  July 14, 2021



Mixed messages and confusion abound regarding the influence Critical Race Theory (CRT) has on school curricula, along with the minimally understood impact of a new theory of racism and antiracism.

There's a public debate going on, but the adversaries are talking past each other, often creating disconnected comments as if reading from different scripts. Part of the confusion is because opponents of CRT aren't adequately familiar with the new language of racism and antiracism. That disconnect is working to the advantage of CRT advocates.

Most pundits define racism using words like prejudice, discrimination, and antagonism toward another race or ethnicity. It's often associated with an act causing a detriment for another. Feelings of superiority/inferiority are implied. That definition would make sense to most people, right?

Using Ibram X. Kendi's book "How to be an antiracist" as a resource, the reason for much of the confusion becomes clear. Here is Kendi's definition of racist: "One who supports a racist policy through action or inaction or expression of a racist idea." An antiracist is: "One who is supporting an antiracist policy or expressing an antiracist idea."

What makes a policy racist or antiracist? Suppose someone is making a distinction in favor or against an individual based on race. That's racist, right? "Not necessarily" argues Kendi. That action isn't inherently racist because for determining racist discrimination, "the defining question is whether the discrimination is creating equity or inequity. If discrimination is creating equity, then it is antiracist. If discrimination is creating inequity, then it is racist."

Kendi uses the term equity to represent different groups being on "approximately equal footing." Equity always refers to "equal results" rather than "equality of opportunity."

To help understand antiracist theory and CRT, I'll summarize some basic tenets:

- Discrimination against White persons isn't racist. That surprises some observers. According to antiracism theory, that action is actually promoting equity, and therefore is antiracist. If discrimination against any group advances "equity" it cannot be considered racist.
- Kendi explains that the only remedy to racist discrimination is antiracist discrimination." That seems to reflect what Justice Blackman meant in 1978 when he wrote: "In order to treat some persons equally, we must treat them differently."
- Racism and antiracism complete the entire spectrum of racial actions. Race neutrality has no place in this theory, except for the assertion that claims of race neutrality are proof of racism. Colorblindness is an impossibility.
- Following is one of Kendi's assertions that surprised me most: "The most threatening racist movement is not the alt right's unlikely drive for a White ethnostate but the regular American's drive for a 'race-neutral' one."
- In order to escape being a racist, one must be pursuing antiracism through personal actions. It seems that if you aren't an activist, you are a racist.

CRT definitions and rules aren't simply ideas being offered for consideration as we search for solutions to racial issues. Rather, they are anointed as the one and only appropriate way to address the racism problem. But is equity possible? Who will define equity and measure success? Does outlawing the traditional civil rights goal of achieving "colorblindness" doom the movement? Those are important questions.

CRT and its recent intellectual "engines" such as Ibram Kendi and The 1619 Project, have changed the rules and definitions, and that fact isn't adequately understood by CRT opponents. Consequently, the debate goes nowhere – or more accurately, CRT gains ground.

Those resisting CRT curricula in schools wouldn't be fighting such a frustrating uphill battle if, after educating themselves, this resistance movement were to inform the public on how antiracist language and theory differ from traditional "colorblind" goals of the civil rights movement. Many believe CRT and Martin Luther King have parted company in many important ways – something most CRT proponents deny.

Will the participants in this debate every climb onto the same stage, agree on a common language, and begin solving our racial problems? I doubt it. That's unfortunate because somehow, we need to start addressing important other questions such as: Is CRT taught in our classrooms? And, is the objection to teaching CRT a refusal to discuss important racial issues?