

RADICAL TEACHER

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Teaching Note
Teaching Racial Reckoning:
The CRT Panic as a Challenge and an Answer

by Matthew Jerome Schneider



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We are living in a time of racial reckoning. As a scholar of racism, antiracism, and whiteness working at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, a minority serving institution with strong historic and contemporary ties to the local Lumbee tribe and a large percentage of students identifying as American Indian (12%), Black or African American (29%), and Hispanic or Latine (9%), I feel incredibly privileged to be working through current events alongside my students (UNCP, 2022). Regular media coverage and social media discussion about Black Lives Matter, prison abolition, racialized police violence, and voter disenfranchisement have meant that students arrive to my Race and Racism sociology course already primed to discuss and reckon with questions of racial justice and racial oppression and privilege.

However, as political scientist Hakeem Jefferson and sociologist Victor Ray have written, “White backlash is a type of racial reckoning, too” (Jefferson & Ray, 2022). With renewed support for Black Lives Matter prompted by the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 (Pew Research Center, 2020), we have observed a groundswell of white Americans mobilizing in defense of white supremacy. Although this reckoning has been long in the making (Belew, 2021; Belew & Gutierrez, 2021), recent successes of a violent and increasingly mainstream political movement have created new challenges for instructors teaching about racism. Since 2020, we have seen peaceful racial justice protesters frequently met by armed counter-protestors “protecting private property” (Jalal & Schneider, 2022). A theory of a “great white replacement” promoted online by prominent media personalities and by conservative politicians has fueled white anxieties and has been connected to mass shootings in places like Buffalo, New York and Christchurch, New Zealand (Noack, 2019). For well over a year, storylines about Critical Race Theory (CRT) have been prominently featured by news outlets, with conservative media wrongly framing CRT and its supposed incorporation into the American education system as a form of anti-white racism and an assault on American history (Tensley, 2021).

Again, this has created challenges for university instructors who integrate critical perspectives on race and racism into their courses. How does one effectively teach about racism when students enter with strong opinions about what racism is and is not? How does one effectively teach about racism when, on a day-to-day (if not minute-to-minute) basis, ideas about racism and its relevance to contemporary American society are negotiated, modified, and reenforced in ways that often fail to account for the social and historical context that brought us to this moment?

The CRT bans in places like Texas, Florida, and Arkansas and news coverage of CRT, in particular, have proven effective at shaping popular understanding of what constitutes appropriate or reasonable conversation about racism. This movement against CRT, as the eminent legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw has been quick to point out, attempts to limit discussion of racism, both past and present, and in turn limits understanding of and effective responses to persistent patterns of racial inequality (Crenshaw, 2021). While very few people outside the social sciences and humanities understand what Critical Race Theory actually is – an academic theory originally advanced

to explain the ways in which unequal racial outcomes are built into the criminal legal system, not a form of anti-white hate nor an assault on American history (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) – anti-CRT stances have seemingly become an accepted, if not legitimate, political opinion. In fact, as someone who teaches about race and racism at the university level, I have found that even sociology majors at my minority serving institution, many of whom have strong orientations toward social and racial justice, have come to view CRT as divisive without a full understanding of what it is.

In the first week of my Fall 2022 Race and Racism course, I asked my students to complete an informal and anonymous knowledge assessment. Tucked into the assessment was a series of opinion questions asking them whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with the statement, “Critical Race Theory (CRT) is divisive.”¹ While the students completed their knowledge assessment, a few of them raised their hand and asked me to define Critical Race Theory, highlighting that many knew there were blind spots in their knowledge. Yet, despite these gaps in knowledge, in a class of 18 students, only three of whom were white, eight (44.4%) indicated that they agreed that CRT was divisive. Four (22.2%) disagreed, and six (33.3%) strongly disagreed. While no one strongly agreed, it was clear that when asked to take a position, at least some students defaulted to ungrounded and, in my opinion, harmful political messaging about race and racism.

It is important to recognize that an informal knowledge assessment of 18 students in a sociology course at an MSI cannot lead us to generalizable conclusions. Still, *the fact that eight of 18 students in a sociology course titled “Race and Racism” at a minority serving institution – perhaps the last place one might expect to find anti-CRT opinions – agreed with this statement speaks to how deeply seated racism is in American society.* It was uncomfortable to see that a sizable group of Black and Brown students could be swayed to view a well-supported theory of racial inequality as divisive by a moral panic politically engineered to stoke white racial anxieties (Tensley, 2021).

Incidentally, that race (and our ideas about it) is derived through social processes and that racism is a normal and ordinary part of everyday life, built into our interactions, culture, and social intuitions, are among Critical Race Theory’s core tenets. Thus, in this way, the wide discussion and (mis)understanding of CRT can also serve as a learning opportunity. I had not exactly planned it, but it was an opportunity on just the second day of the semester to show my students how our perception of race and racism are swayed by social and political discourse. After we finished reviewing the knowledge assessment as a class, I asked students to open their course syllabi to the first page and read a rather benign set of course objectives and goals:

By the end of this course, students will have built a strong foundation for understanding race and racism in contemporary US society. In particular, students will be familiar with critical perspectives on race and racism. They will be asked to consider:

1. The social construction of race.

2. How the process of racialization varies across time and place.
3. How intersecting identities, including race, gender, sexuality, social class, etc., shape one's experiences and their access to opportunities and resources.
4. The ways in which racism is a normal and ordinary part of everyday life.
5. How racism is to the material, social, economic, political, and psychic benefit of the dominant racial group (i.e., people racialized as white).

After reading them aloud, I asked if the course objectives seemed reasonable. Did my students think exploring such ideas was a worthwhile use of time in a college course? Most nodded in affirmation. Some looked up or down in pensive consideration. The class offered no objection. These were appropriate goals to work toward and likely not at odds with their understanding of race and racism in the United States.

Next, I offered some version of "What if I told you that these were the core tenets of Critical Race Theory?"² A few jaws dropped. They sat silent for another moment, now feeling the discomfort of knowing that eight of them, likely without fully recognizing what position they were taking, had objected to such simple and reasonable ideas about race and racism in the United States.

As I have written elsewhere, the point of activities that hide the main takeaway and implicate students in systems of white supremacy is not to shame them for being complicit. Rather, such lessons are meant to expose the ways in which a failure to critically question our thoughts, beliefs, and actions can support systems of oppression and privilege, often without our knowing, through ambivalence, or even despite intentions to do the opposite (Schneider, 2022). Thus, the panic over CRT represents an interesting case for instructors to work through as a class. While the popularity of anti-CRT narratives creates some challenges for instructors trying to provide critical perspectives on race and racism, these same narratives also provide fertile ground for students to consider the merits of critical race scholarship. As we navigate this time of racial reckoning, backlash against CRT serves as a concrete and relatable example of how cultural narratives and state policy shape our understanding of the world around us. In this case, frames that cast CRT as divisive also serve to limit productive consideration of race and leave systems of white supremacy unchallenged. In my class, however, asking students to directly consider the "divisiveness" of CRT demonstrated to them the validity, and I would say necessity, of critical race perspectives. Likewise, creating space for open and honest discussions about the teaching of Black history, the historic function of policing and incarceration, and the Black Lives Matter movement could also prompt students to revisit and question what they "know" about systems of white supremacy and racial inequality.

To be sure, most of us (instructors) use a broad range of tools to ensure our students are able to walk away at the

end of the course having had a useful learning experience, and the experiences and perspectives our students bring with them to discussion play a huge role in this effort. That said, if the goal is to prepare students to effectively engage with their communities and to act as agents of change, this experience shows the importance and potential of directly integrating, questioning, and responding to politicized opinions in our courses on race, racism, and antiracism, as well as in our courses on (in)justice and inequalities more generally.

Notes

1. Meant to get students thinking about the ways in which racial meaning is made and remade through the social world we navigate daily, this was just one of a handful of questions/statements to which students were asked to respond. For example, students were also asked for their opinions about affirmative action, "law and order," and notable events/figures in American history.
2. Tenets were adapted from Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic's *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (Delgado and Stefancic 2012).

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