

Australia's absurd moral panic around critical race theory aims to silence demands for justice

Racial justice protests call for reflection on vast historical inequity, and the fact our institutions were designed to favour white people



Protesters at a Black Lives Matter rally in Sydney in 2020. Racial injustice is best understood as a product of a racist system, designed to maintain white supremacy.

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Last month Australia's Senate voted to exclude critical race theory from the national curriculum. It's not clear that this was apropos of any proposed curriculum materials, nor that the Senate has the authority to so constrain the national curriculum.

Mostly this should be understood as another example of the Australian right – which has never had many new ideas of its own – injecting copy-pasta from US conservative media into our political process.

But the absurdity shouldn't stop us from probing the anxieties underpinning the right's efforts – on both sides of the Pacific – to make a bugbear of a branch of academic research that very few students will have ever been directly exposed to.

Originally, critical race theory was an attempt by African American scholars to explain a simple, staggering fact: well over a century since the emancipation of black slaves in the US, and decades after the end of the "Jim Crow" system of segregation and the denial of civil rights, massive racial disparities still exist.

These disparities are visible in measurable material inequalities in almost every sphere of social life. Last year the Brookings Institution assembled a range of startling data analysis showing how pervasive that inequality is.

One in three black families in the US have no or negative net wealth, the median white family is 41 times more wealthy than their black counterparts, and this gap has grown significantly over the past 30 years. One in three black children live in extreme poverty, against one in 11 white children. And while 7% of whites under 64 have no health insurance – which severely limits access to healthcare – black Americans are uninsured at a rate of 21.5%.

The contrasts are perhaps most stark in the area of criminal justice. Mass incarceration has seen many more people from all races spend time in prison, but its burden has fallen overwhelmingly on black men – of those born in 2001, one in three black men are expected to spend time in prison, but just over one in 20 white men expected to suffer the same fate.

The problem of racism was best understood ... as a product of the system ... whose function was maintaining white supremacy

Some accused of crimes never go to prison because they are killed by police. One in 1,000 African American men die at the hands of police, and their chances of dying in this way are 2.5 times greater than those of white men.

Beginning in the 1960s, a group of legal scholars saw that these patterns could not be satisfactorily accounted for by the character failings of hateful individual racists.

They saw structural issues at work, and proposed racism as a systemic problem, discernible in the way in which institutions like police, the courts and prisons – as well as educational institutions, workplaces and housing markets – treated different groups.

Racism a systemic problem

Although racism was a force with material effects, race itself was a social construct, with racial categories socially rather than scientifically defined, and primarily functioned as a means of social ordering and social control. (Increasingly many scientists agree that familiar racial categories have limited scientific utility.)

The problem of racism was best understood not only in terms of the sheriff who stopped and frisked every black man he saw, or the redneck yelling slurs outside a desegregated school, but as a product of the system that stood behind them, and whose function was maintaining white supremacy.

The argument was that nothing about the system is neutral. It was designed by and for white people and favours their interests. (This is just a brief summary of these arguments – for more depth check out this article at the Conversation by Leticia Anderson and Kathomi Gatwiri.)

This did not just affect African Americans, and nor did the analysis speak to them alone. Native Americans developed a related analysis in the form of tribal critical race theory which analysed the relationship between colonisation, white supremacy and their ongoing dispossession.

Inequalities remain in Australia

In Australia, scholars working in the related field of critical race and whiteness studies have for decades analysed Australia's nature as a colonial state, founded on stolen land, which excluded Indigenous people and non-white immigrants from its commonwealth at its foundation, and where vast inequalities remain between Indigenous and white Australia.

There are several possible responses that a white person can have to this. One possible response is visible in the moral panic around critical race theory.

The New Yorker reported this month on how a single US conservative activist saw the opportunity to weave critical race theory into a scare campaign and a conspiracy theory which responded to the nationwide protests against police brutality.

That activist, Christopher Rufo, spelled it all out in the New York Post in May, in an op-ed which depicted current critical race theory in terms of the familiar rightwing conspiracy of "cultural Marxism", which holds that a coterie of mainly Jewish leftwing academics led an effort from the latter half of the 20th century to subvert the west through cultural means, rather than the traditional leftist methods of class struggle.

A kind of white response is to simply deny the role of history, and to blame people of colour for the inequalities they are protesting

As an outgrowth of this effort, Rufo says, critical race theory is "a revolutionary program that would overturn the principles of the declaration and destroy the remaining structure of the constitution".

Conservative media, which subsists on hate clicks, has eagerly jumped on this train. Australia's dim-bulb rightwingers have followed.

The real function of these arguments is to close white ears to demands for justice which are premised on simple facts about how their settler-colonial societies were built – including by means of theft, forced labor, and the consolidation of stolen property with state power.

In this version of history, white America is itself the victim of the scheming of European marxist academics, with critical race theorists pulling the strings of protesters in the streets.

It's true that many of the arguments of these academics were echoed not only in last year's protests after the murder of George Floyd by a police officer. They have also been cited in the longer-term fights for racial justice, for example in the drive to remove monuments of the confederacy from public places throughout the US.

But that may just be because protesters see in some of these academic concepts useful tools to understand the realities that shape their lived experiences.

A second kind of white response – closely related to the first – is to simply deny the role of history, and to blame people of colour for the inequalities they are protesting.

This is the approach favoured by those who seek to explain these inequalities by arguing some innate defect in people of colour – lower intelligence, a greater propensity for crime, a lower propensity for work or thrift.

And such is the demand for this flavour of denial that it is possible for a shoddy kind of public intellectual on either side of the Atlantic to make a living in elaborating it.

Another is available for those who see all of this as a compelling analysis of a vast historical injustice, which matches a systemic explanation with a systemic problem. The next step for them is to engage with and listen to the demands emerging from racial justice protests; to acknowledge how, why, and for whom our institutions were designed, and how they and other white people have benefited from it; and to find ways to assist with the enormous task of righting an almost incomprehensible wrong.

If you're white, this approach may be worth a try. Denying history uses up a lot of energy that could be spent on building a better, more inclusive future.