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OPINION

The Maddening *Critical Race Theory* Debate



By Michelle Goldberg
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Christopher Rufo, a clever propagandist who has done more than anyone else to whip up the national uproar over critical race theory, tweeted out in March an explanation of how he was redefining the term.

“The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think ‘critical race theory.’ We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans,” he wrote.

Credit where due: Rufo has pretty much succeeded. The debate about critical race theory has become circular and maddening because the phrase itself has been unmoored from any fixed meaning. Progressives argue, correctly, that teachers aren’t instructing young kids in law school scholarship about structural racism. But even some people who oppose bans on critical race theory insist that this misses the point.

In a recent piece in *The Week*, Damon Linker criticized the left for being what he called “anti-anti-critical race theory,” sidestepping legitimate objections to what he described as a “pernicious” phenomenon.

Parents protesting critical race theory, he wrote, “do not want their children taught in state-run and state-funded schools that the country was founded on an ideology of

white supremacy in which every white child and family today is invariably complicit regardless of their personal views of their Black fellow citizens.” He compared the anti-anti-critical race theory camp to leftists in the 1950s who, while condemning McCarthyism, dismissed justified concerns about Soviet Communism.

That someone as smart as Linker, author of an essential book on the Catholic right, would analogize Communism to critical race theory strikes me as a sign of a moral panic, but leave that aside for a moment. It’s nearly impossible to have a straightforward discussion of the educational content that’s being labeled critical race theory precisely because people like Rufo have succeeded in turning critical race theory into a catchall term for discussions of race that conservatives don’t like.

My own position is basically anti-anti-critical race theory, in that I disagree with some ideas associated with C.R.T., especially around limiting speech, but am extremely alarmed by efforts to demonize and ban it. There’s certainly some material that critics lump in with C.R.T. that strikes me as ridiculous and harmful. I’ve seen the risible training for school administrators calling worship of the written word “white supremacy culture.” There’s a version of antiracism based on white people’s narcissistic self-flagellation that seems to me to accomplish very little.

But I’m highly skeptical that many public schools are teaching that “every white child and family today is invariably complicit” in white supremacy. Rather, the campaign against critical race theory is doing exactly what Rufo wanted it to: taking inchoate anger about what’s often derided as wokeness and directing it onto public education. In some ways, it’s like the campaign against sex education, where conservative activists would either cherry-pick or invent lurid anecdotes to try to discredit the whole project.

At my own kids’ fairly progressive Brooklyn public school, they were assigned an age-appropriate book about police shootings, “Something Happened in Our Town,” which I appreciated because it helped me explain last summer’s demonstrations to them. They have not, to the best of my knowledge, been ordered to confess their white privilege.

I emailed Bonnie Snyder of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education to ask if we are outliers. FIRE plays an interesting role in the debate over C.R.T., because it both defends students and teachers from left-wing overreach and fights C.R.T. bans on free speech grounds. Snyder seems sympathetic to Linker’s view; she has a book coming out in the fall denouncing classroom indoctrination. So, I asked her, where is this indoctrination happening?

“We’ve noticed that the problem of unbalanced curricula seems most advanced in elite, affluent private schools and then also in so-called public-private high schools in affluent areas,” she said, though she believes it’s spreading to more average schools. Even if you agree with her definition of “unbalanced curricula,” it’s hard to see how something happening mostly in rarefied liberal milieus explains the fights over C.R.T. breaking out all over the country.

Families in the wealthy Dallas suburb of Southlake, for example, revolted after the district tried to address nakedly racist incidents, including a Snapchat video of laughing white students using a racial slur. Florida just barred public schools from

teaching “American history as something other than the creation of a new nation based largely on universal principles stated in the Declaration of Independence.”

A recent Time magazine cover story about the battle over critical race theory featured a Missouri mother worried about the discussions of identity in her son’s ninth-grade classroom. The example she showed a reporter was an English assignment asking students to reflect on the “assumptions that people make about people in the different groups you belong to.” This is not exactly a Maoist struggle session. The sort of antiracist education that’s sparked a nationwide backlash isn’t radically leftist. It’s elementary.

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