

## Removing the Bedrock of Liberalism

by Andrew Sullivan

As the origins of our current moral panic about “white supremacy” become more widely debated, we have an obvious problem: how to define the term “Critical Race Theory.” This was never going to be easy, since so much of the academic discourse behind the term is deliberately impenetrable, as it tries to disrupt and dismantle the Western concept of discourse itself. The sheer volume of jargon words, and their mutual relationships, along with the usual internal bitter controversies, all serve to sow confusion.

This conceptual muddle also allows everyone to have their own definition and gives critical theorists the opportunity to denounce anyone from the outside trying to explain it. So it may be helpful to home in on one what I think is a core point. No, I’m not a trained critical theorist. But no one should have to be in order to engage a field of thought with such vast public ramifications. But I have spent many years studying political theory, which is why, perhaps, I am so concerned. And, for me, the argument is not really about race, or gender, or history, or identity as such.

It’s about epistemology at its most basic. Which, of course, is just a fancy word for the question of what we can know and how we can know it. It’s the beginning of everything in any political system. Get it right, and much good follows. Get it wrong, and we’re in deep trouble.

In his forthcoming book, “The Constitution of Knowledge,” Jonathan Rauch lays out some core principles that liberal societies rely upon. These are not optional if liberal society is to survive. And they are not easy, which is why we have created

many institutions and practices to keep them alive. Rauch lists some of them: *fallibilism*, the belief that anyone, especially you, can always be wrong; *objectivity*, a rejection of any theory that cannot be proven or disproven by reality; *accountability*, the openness to conceding and correcting error; and *pluralism*, the maintenance of intellectual diversity so we maximize our chances of finding the truth.

The only human civilization that has ever depended on these principles is the modern West since the Enlightenment. That's a few hundred years as opposed to 200,000 or so of *Homo sapiens'* history, when tribalism, creedalism, warfare, theocracy or totalitarianism reigned.

The genius of liberalism in unleashing human freedom and the human mind changed us more in centuries than we had changed in hundreds of millennia. And at its core, there is the model of the single, interchangeable, equal citizen, using reason to deliberate the common good with fellow citizens. No ultimate authority; just inquiry and provisional truth. No final answer: an endless conversation. No single power, but many in competition.

In this open-ended conversation, all can participate, conservatives and liberals, and will have successes and failures in their turn. What matters, both conservatives and liberals agree, is not the end result, but the liberal democratic, open-ended *means*. That shift — from specifying a single end to insisting only on playing by the rules — is the key origin of modern freedom.

My central problem with critical theory is that it takes precise aim at these very core principles and rejects them. By rejecting them, in the otherwise noble cause of helping the marginalized, it is a very seductive and potent threat to liberal civilization.

Am I exaggerating CRT's aversion to liberal modernity? I don't think I am. Here is how critical theory defines itself in one of its central documents. It questions the very foundations of

“Enlightenment rationality, legal equality and Constitutional neutrality.” It begins with the assertion that these are not ways to further knowledge and enlarge human freedom. They are rather manifestations of white power over non-white bodies. Formal legal equality, they argue, the promise of the American experiment, has never been actual equality, even as, over the centuries, it has been extended to everyone. It is, rather, a system to perpetuate inequality forever, which is the single and *only* reason racial inequality is still here.

Claims to truth are merely claims to power. That’s what people are asked to become “awake” to: that liberalism is a lie. As are its purported values. Free speech is therefore not always a way to figure out the truth; it is just another way in which power is exercised — to harm the marginalized. The idea that a theory can be proven or disproven by the empirical process is itself a white supremacist argument, denying the “lived experience” of members of identity groups that is definitionally true, whatever the “objective” facts say. And our minds and souls and institutions have been so marinated in white supremacist culture for so long, critical theorists argue, that the system can only be dismantled rather than reformed. The West’s idea of individual freedom — the very foundation of the American experiment — is, in their view, a way merely to ensure the permanent slavery of the non-white.

And nothing has really changed since the beginning: slavery, segregation, mass incarceration are just different words for the same experience of oppression. Our world is just a set of interlocking forms of oppressive structures, and has been since the West’s emergence.

I know all this sounds highfalutin. But I honestly don’t think what I have described is a “straw man.” It is rather the core argument. I also know that the vast numbers of people who have adopted this rejection of foundational liberal principles often know only

bastardized versions of this, and believe that they are merely helping encourage racial sensitivity and tolerance.

But notice what CRT is not. It is *not* an open-ended inquiry into buried history, a way openly to acknowledge the true brutality and evil that white supremacy once was, to stop whitewashing the past, and to face squarely the evils that America has contained — evils that continue to echo today. That project is a profoundly worthy one, and overdue. Countless historians, black and white, operating in the liberal tradition, have done this. They need to do more of it. We have indeed prettified and air-brushed the near-genocidal system of labor camp gulags this country once designated to people entirely because of their “race.” We have forgotten some of it because it is convenient. If this were the central thrust of CRT, I’d be among its strongest defenders.

The 1619 Project is a case in point. It doesn’t just expose some of the hideous past we’d rather forget. It insists that “white supremacy” is the *definition* of the United States, that its true founding was therefore 1619, that its core principle from the get-go was not freedom but slavery, that slavery is the true basis for American wealth, that the police today are the inheritors of slave patrols, that only black Americans fought to end slavery, and so on. It insists that the Declaration of Independence was “false”, not merely imperfectly implemented, and designed to obscure the real project of racist oppression. And its goal is the dismantling of liberal epistemology, procedures, ideas and arguments in order to revolutionize what cannot by definition be reformed.

This is what makes CRT different. When it began, critical theory was one school of thought among many. But the logic of it — it denies the core liberal premises of all the other schools and renders them all forms of oppression — means that it cannot long tolerate those other schools. It must always attack them.

Critical theory is therefore always the cuckoo in the academic nest. Over time, it throws out its competitors — and not in open free debate. It does so by ending that debate, by insisting that the liberal “reasonable person” standard of debate is, in fact, rigged in favor of the oppressors, that speech is a form of harm, even violent harm, rather than a way to seek the truth. It insists that what matters is the identity of the participants in a debate, not the arguments themselves. If a cis white woman were to make an argument, a Latino trans man can dismiss it for no other reason than that *a white cis woman is making it*. Thus, identity trumps reason. Thus liberal society dies a little every time that dismissal sticks.

Every time a liberal institution hires or fires someone because of their group identity rather than their individual abilities, it is embracing a principle designed to undermine the liberal part of the institution. Every university that denies a place to someone because of their race is violating fundamental principles of liberal learning. Every newspaper and magazine that fires someone for their sincerely-held views, or because their identity alone means those views are unacceptable, is undermining the principles of liberal discourse. Every time someone prefers to trust someone’s subjective “lived experience” over facts, empiricism and an attempt at objectivity, liberal society dies a little.

And every student who emerges from college who believes that what matters is whether you are on “the right side of history” rather than whether your ideas can be tested by the ruthless light of open debate is a student who does not have the ability to function as a citizen in a liberal society. The ability to respect and live peaceably alongside people with whom you vehemently disagree is a far harder skill than cheering on one of your own. And yet liberal institutions are openly demonstrating that it is precisely this kind of difficult toleration they will not tolerate.

I'm sorry but this matters. It's not the only thing that matters right now, I know. But if we remove the corner-stone of liberal democracy — the concept of a free, interchangeable citizen using reason to deliberate the common good with her fellow citizens, regardless of any identity — then it is only a matter of time before it falls. This does not mean ignoring or overlooking the real struggles that African-Americans in particular have endured and continue to endure. It is to insist that we can do better — within a self-correcting, open liberal system — without surrendering to tribalism, race obsessiveness, or utopian attempts to *force* racial justice which violate the core guardrails against tyranny we rely upon for the survival of liberal democracy.

This debate is not about whether you are a racist or an antiracist. The debate is about whether, in your deepest heart and soul, you are a liberal or an anti-liberal. And of those two options, I have no doubt where I stand. Do you?