CHAPTER   4

Critical Race Theory

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Numerous sociologists engaged in inter-disciplinary critical studies on race have embraced the writings emerging from critical race theory (CRT). These race scholars reject the traditional emphasis on assimilation or separating communities as ethnic or racial but rather recognize race "as a mode of constructing political communities" (Jung 2009: 390) and challenge discourses on a "post-racial" era of "color-blindness" and meritocracy. Critical race scholars focus on power relations and domination central in maintaining boundaries of national belonging and critique scholarship on multiculturalism and diversity, which emphasizes integration and assimilation.

Legal scholar Derrick Bell forged the path for CRT in his powerful narratives, such as *And We are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice* (1987) and *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (1992). Bell's use of personal narrative, critique of white supremacy, and commitment to an activist agenda, were ideal for teaching and researching the way that race is embedded in our social institutions and is reinforced and maintained through everyday practices. Weaving legal scholarship and the struggle for social justice, Bell's writings attracted race scholars in sociology who recognized that the study of race has never been neutral but has always involved issues of power, inequality, and oppression. CRT "rejects the prevailing orthodoxy that scholarship should be or could be 'neutral' and 'objective'" to pursue "engaged, even adversarial, scholarship" (Crenshaw 1995: xiii). In locating CRT in sociology today, we begin with a brief overview of CRT and its key themes. We then discuss the contributions of the founder of the sociology of race, W. E. B. Du Bois, to CRT, sociological perspectives that utilize CRT, and the works of some sociologists who have incorporated CRT into their research.

Origins of CRT

CRT did not emerge from a single person or moment, but rather grew from lawyers, law professors, and students actively working against racial inequity in legal systems, philosophies, and education. In the 1970s,

the founders and proponents of CRT, calling themselves RaceCrits, took an active stance against the purported institutional color-blindness of the legal academy and legal institutions, particularly the Supreme Court. Drawing on Critical Legal Studies (CLS), which critiqued the economics and classism of legal institutional practice and philosophy, and the Civil Rights Movement, early RaceCrits looked to "move beyond the non-critical liberalism that often cabined civil rights discourses and a non-racial radicalism that was a line of debate within CLS" (Crenshaw 2012: 1264).

CRT was born by building on existing legal scholarship and creating a forum for new ways of thinking about the interactions between race, gender, law, society, economics, and a variety of other fields. While early CRT scholars did not always agree on the breadth or scale of the movement they had created, or even the tenets of the framework they had begun to establish, the spark generated by activist students and scholars spread to other fields. The interdisciplinary nature of CRT in the law began to feed back into other fields they had drawn so heavily from, like sociology.

Drawing on the initial activist scholarship of Bell (1980; 1987; 1992), Crenshaw (1989; 1995; 2012), Gotanda (1991) and many others, CRT grew from its roots as legal scholarship to a plethora of academic fields and to branch into its own subfields. For example, LatCrit emerged as a means of focusing the lens of CRT on Latina/o communities and particularized issues of colorism and immigration to disrupt black/white binaries of race. It evolved into a perspective of "rotating centers" and "shifting bottoms" to contemplate the varied effects of race, ethnicity, class, immigration status, and other issues affecting blacks, Latina/os, Asian Americans and other marginalized groups (Mutua 1999; Hernández-Truyol 1997). LatCrit, though nominally and intellectually grounded in Latina/o communities and experiences, has shown the power of intercultural/interracial coalitions in the search for justice, particularly in the histories of immigration, exclusion, and borders in the United States

(Chang and Aoki 1997). Similarly, Critical Race Feminism broadens understanding of CRT by noting important contributions of feminist scholars of color in focusing on the links between law and the experiences of women from different social statuses, sexual orientations, geographies, and races (Wing 2003).

Key Themes of CRT

CRT has no definitive text, but grows organically from the activism and writing of key scholars, working to understand and change the "vexed bond" (Crenshaw 1995: xxi) between law, institutions, and racial power. However, several key themes ground CRT scholarship generally.

- First, racial inequality is enmeshed into social, political, and economic conditions of the United States (Carbado and Roithmayr 2014). Formal legal remedies, alone, are therefore ineffective in confronting racism in the everyday lived experiences of people of color, as "the elimination of intentional racism would not eliminate racial inequality" (Carbado and Roithmayr 2014: 152).
- Second, CRT contains the dual notions of intersectionality, originally theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), and anti-essentialism. There is no single identity for any individual person; rather each person exists at the intersections of cultural, social, class, gendered, and many other identities which define who they are.
- Third, as Derrick Bell's interest convergence theory describes, court decisions or apparent advancement for people of color, and Blacks in particular, only occur when such a decision maintains the privilege and self-interests of whites (Bell 1980).
- Fourth, race is a social construction, fluid in meaning and contingent on social structures of power and historical periods (Lopez 1997).

- Fifth, CRT contains a critique of color-blindness/post-racialism. This applies not only in legal institutions and the supposed strategies of courts that obfuscate the ongoing role of race in the United States, but also prevailing attitudes in private and public sectors that would limit opportunities for people of color. Post-racialism and color-blindness impact everything – from immigration policy on who may legally enter the United States, to perceptions of peoples (e.g., the model minority myth among people of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Indian descent) (Chang 1993), and the (in)ability of professionals of color to advance in professional settings due to coded experience and interview expectations (Carbado and Gulati 2013).

Sociological Tradition of CRT Themes

CRT themes can be traced to W. E. B. Du Bois's famous quote in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*: "[T]he problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line" (1903: v). By identifying the color line as the problem, the analysis shifted away from any perceived inferiority or superiority of individuals or groups of color and onto the "processes, practices, and institutions – of US society" (Treviño et al. 2008: 7). Du Bois began with the premise that racial inequality is not grounded in the inferiority of non-white people or their institutions, such as church and the family, as many sociologists have claimed. Rather Du Bois understood the sources of racial inequality were the social, political, and economic conditions blacks faced in the United States. He was the first sociologist to pursue major empirical studies investigating these conditions (i.e., see *The Philadelphia Negro* 1899; *Black Reconstruction in America* 1935). Unlike his white contemporaries who "preached a scientific objectivity and detachment despite the fact that [their] work on race was based on the prescientific assumptions of the inferiority of blacks and the saving graces of assimilation" (Morris 2007: 505), Du Bois's

scholarship focused on racial justice and practiced a connection between scholarship and activism.

Sociologists tracing the theoretical foundation of intersectionality in sociology have acknowledged Du Bois's contributions, particularly in explaining black political economy. The social hierarchies he identified were race, class, and nation (Collins 2000). While Du Bois's inclusion of gender is highly contested among black feminists, his writings do include a concern about the dangerous working conditions women workers faced – particularly sexual abuse in domestic service. More generally, he addressed the complexities of the black community, class, and family but did not specifically identify gender as a system of power (Collins 2000).

Critical race scholars in sociology, particularly those from the Du Boisian, anti-colonialism, or Marxist traditions were critical of civil rights reforms as "inadequate and tokenistic" (Winant 2007: 166) and pointed to the vast racial inequalities in education, income and wealth, housing, health care, and the criminal justice system. These scholars were galvanized by the Black Power Movement, the Chicano Movement and other social movements demanding the elimination of social inequality. As Robert Blauner (1972: viii) noted in the preface to *Racial Oppression in America*, he and other sociologists using a critical race perspective were developing a framework to understand racial inequality that "probably owes more to the social movements of the oppressed than to standard sociology …" His work identified four fallacies still entangled in mainstream sociology of race during the 1970s:

> First, the view that racial and ethnic groups are neither central nor persistent elements of modern societies. Second, the idea that race and racial oppression are not independent dynamic forces but are ultimately reducible to other casual determinates, usually economic or psychological. Third, the position that the most important aspects of racism are the attitudes and prejudices of white Americans.

And, . . . there are no essential long-term differences-in relation to the larger society-between the Third World *or racial minorities and European ethnic groups (Blauner 1972: 2).*

Critical race scholars conceptualized the roots of racial oppression in slavery, conquest, and colonization, and, therefore, began their research with an examination of each and their relationship to the continued racialization of privilege and opportunities.

At the same time, the post-racial ideology gaining ground in US society rejected notions of internal colonialism and institutional racism and advanced an assimilationist position. In the 1970s and 1980s, widely publicized policy-oriented writings advocated for the elimination of affirmative action and welfare (Glazer 1975; Murray 1984). The neoconservative paradigm had taken the position that the "United States was entering a 'postracial' era of 'color blindness' and meritocracy" (Winant 2007: 166) and embraced cultural deficiency models to explain racial inequality. Stephen Steinberg (1995: 97) referred to these neoconservative writings as the "scholarship of backlash" and pointed to their impact in shaping decades of national policy. In opposition to the neoconservative paradigm, critical race scholars countered with research showing that the United States has always been and remained color-conscious.

Almost three decades ago, Michael Omi and Howard Winant introduced the concept of the social construction of race in their germinal book, *Racial Formation in the United States, from the 1960s to the 1980s.* They called attention to "[c]ivil rights struggles and ghetto revolts, as well as controversies over state policies of reform and repression, [that] highlighted a period of intense conflict where the very meaning of race was politically contested" (Omi and Winant 1986: 2). They argued that mainstream theories on race suffered from "an inability to grasp the uniqueness of race, its historical flexibility and immediacy in everyday experience and social conflict" (Omi and

Winant 1986: 3). Racial formation and the social construction of race is now accepted in the sociology of race but has not yet fully replaced mainstream assimilation theories that turn attention to similarities and differences among groups rather than to the relations of power (Jung 2009).

Sociological Uses and Approaches to CRT

One of the most widely accepted themes of CRT in the sociology of race today is the recognition that racial inequality is systemic, and everyday practices that perpetuate inequality are integrated into the very fabric of social institutions. In his book, *Systematic Racism*, Joe Feagin (2006: xxi) focuses on "a broad range of racialized dimensions of this society: the racist framing, racist ideology, stereotyped attitudes, racist emotions, discriminatory habits and actions, and extensive racist institutions developed over centuries by whites." Feagin (2006: 16) argues that systematic racism in the United States "is an organized racist whole with complex, interconnected, and interdependent social networks, organizations, and institutions that routinely imbed racial oppression" (see Chapter 2 in this volume).

Recent debates between proponents of racial formation theory (RFT) and Joe Feagin and Sean Elias's systemic racism theory (SRT) illuminate the importance of Bell's theory of interest convergence, in naming the roles of the state, state actors, and communities of color in the persistence of racism in the United States (Bracey II, 2014: 13). Though Omi, Winant, Feagin, and Elias may all be considered a part of critical race scholarship in sociology, their perspectives illuminate the diversity of views on the current relationship between racism, the state, and peoples of color. While Omi and Winant's RFT considers "the present prospects for racial justice demoralizing at best," they argue that social and political victories for civil rights and racial justice cannot be overturned – particularly the "politicization of the social," making race and social identities political issues

(2012: 965–966). In this view, while the policies meant to benefit peoples of color may be rearticulated to benefit whites, specifically through color-blindness, the underlying benefits of these policies may not be eliminated. However, Feagin and Elias argue that this view fails to account for the overall system of white supremacy that produces racial justice only when doing so benefits whites and those in positions of power (Feagin and Elias 2012: 950). Omi and Winant's argument embraces key ideas shared by the themes of CRT – particularly the entrenchment of racial inequality, the social construction of race and the critique of color-blindness – while Feagin and Elias add in Bell's interest convergence theory to question whether the social gains of the civil rights movements are actually permanent, or merely temporary, formal accommodations by the state to diffuse racial tensions (but with an overall goal of keeping whites in power). Thus, while scholars in sociology and CRT similarly recognize how state institutions reify oppression (Bracey II, 2014; Feagin and Elias 2012; Jung et al. 2011; Omi and Winant, 2012), CRT adds skepticism on the permanence of progress, particularly in questioning why and how racial progress has been interpreted in legal institutions (Bell 1980).

Closely related to the study of systematic racism is the analysis of the social reproduction and transmission of race and privilege through schools. Given that several Supreme Court cases have been central to both maintaining (i.e. *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, 438 U.S. 265 1978; *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 2003) and challenging (i.e., *Brown v. Broad of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 1954; *Plyer v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 1982) racial inequality in schools, many in the sociology of education have adopted CRT as a challenge to legal regimes that attempt to define standards for education. Among the key scholars in this area are Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate, who argue that race is "a significant factor in determining inequality in the United States" (1995: 47). Since US society is based on property rights,

Ladson-Billings and Tate note that "the intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool though which we can understand social (and, consequently, school) inequity" (1995: 47).

In *Reproducing Racism: White Space, Elite Law Schools, and Racial Inequality*, Wendy Leo Moore (2007), a sociologist and lawyer, examines social reproduction and systematic racism occurring in elite law schools. Based on her ethnographic research at two elite law schools, Moore points to the cultural practices and racist ideology and discourse that maintain the law schools as white institutional spaces.

Daniel Solórzano (1998) and his former students (i.e., Solórzano and Villalpando 1998; Solórzano and Yosso 2001) have also extended the key themes of CRT to education, from laws to classroom environments and pedagogy. They examine racialized oppression in schools based on race, gender, class, immigration status, surname, phenotype, accent, and sexuality. These researchers have written extensively on micro-aggressions and used counter-storytelling to capture the permanency of racism in American schools.

Counter-storytelling has been used by other CRT scholars as well, to counter meta-narratives of whiteness by challenging dominant paradigms, as well as to analyze, subvert, and intervene in dominant conceptual frameworks that mask oppressive experiences. Adalberto Aguirre (2000) used counter-storytelling to study the institutional practices surrounding affirmative action programs that actually assure the marginalization of faculty of color. Likewise, Margaret Zamudio and her colleagues (2011) examined the disadvantages that university students of color face through narratives, testimonies, and storytelling.

Researchers examining the everyday practices that maintain and reinforce racism frequently build on Peggy Davis's (1989) use of micro-aggressions, which she adopted from psychologist Chester Pierce. He defined micro-aggressions as "subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are 'put downs' of blacks

by offenders" (Pierce et al. 1978: 66). Sociologists of education (i.e., Solórzano 1998; Solórzano and Yosso 2001), criminal justice (Russell 1998; Russell-Brown 2004; 2006; Milovanovic and Russell 2001; Glover 2009) and immigration (Romero 2006) have used micro- and macro-aggressions to capture how inequality is maintained in institutional practices and everyday social interactions. Dragan Milovanovic and Katheryn Russell (2001) applied micro- and macro-aggressions to covert-informal and overt-formal discriminatory practices in the criminal justice system. Mary Romero (2006) used the concepts to capture the use of racial profiling in immigration law enforcement.

Following Omi and Winant's (1986) initial theorizing of the social construction of race, scholars in sociology turned to CRT writings to further capture the fluidity and the contingency of racial construction on social structures. For example, Andrew Penner and Aliya Saperstein (2008) Saperstein and Penner (2012) used data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and found that whites who experienced sustained periods of incarceration, unemployment, or poverty, or other characteristics normally attributed to blacks, were less likely to be classified as white. Looking at the impact of identity and mental health, Mary Campbell and Lisa Troyer (2007) researched the discrepancies between the ways that American Indians constructed their racial identities and how others' perceived them. They found the higher the discrepancy, the higher levels of psychological distress when faced with racism and discrimination.

Numerous family scholars have advocated CRT in examining race, ethnicity, and culture in family processes (Few 2007; DeReus et al. 2005; Burton et al. 2010). For example, April Few (2007) argues that a critical race feminist approach considers how racism shapes families' life chances, the power dynamics and politics of family decision-making, and creative culturally sensitive interventions. Linda M. Burton and her colleagues' (2010) accessed CRT's contribution to research on families of color

and found emerging interests in inequality and socio-economic mobility within and across families, interracial romantic pairings, and the racial socialization of children.

Sociologists focusing on the way that race shapes the immigrant experience, immigration policy, and law enforcement have incorporated CRT's perspective on the social construction of race and citizenship (Johnson 1996; Chang 1999). For example, in her study of immigration law enforcement, Romero (2006; 2008) and colleagues (Goldsmith et al. 2008; 2009) analyzed the social construction of racialized citizenship, particularly the use of racial profiling in immigration law enforcement and citizenship inspection. Attending to the intersectionality of race, class and citizenship in immigration raids and law enforcement practices, they point to five patterns that place low-income racialized immigrants and citizens at risk before the law: (1) discretionary stops based on ethnicity and class; (2) use of intimidation to demean and subordinate persons stopped; (3) restricting the freedom of movement of Mexicans but not others in the same vicinity; (4) reinforced stereotypes of Mexican as "alien," "foreign," inferior and criminal; and (5) limited access to fair and impartial treatment before the law (Romero 2006: 463).

Conclusion

CRT in sociology blends with the ongoing development of critical race studies that emerged from challenges to assimilation theories entrenched in studying inequality. Critical race sociologists understand that the roots of inequality are embedded in society's social structure, recognize intersectionality, and produce activist scholarship in opposition to color-blind ideologies and policies. Sociologists who use a critical race perspective engage in an ongoing exchange with CRT from other fields as they work together to understand and address racial inequality in society. Key themes of CRT – including the social construction of racism and its presence in

everyday life, intersectionality and the complexities of identity that go unrecognized by the law, interest convergence, and critiques of post-racialism/color-blindness in liberal democracies – have become crucial to the sociological imagination. CRT not only contributes a critical lens to scholarship and research, but an activist paradigm that pushes for social change through legal and social reforms. Both sociologists and legal scholars have pushed CRT beyond its original critique of civil rights and retrenchment into various other areas, such as education, immigration, law enforcement, microaggressions, citizenship, families, and whiteness. Sociology and CRT have become intertwined in a larger activist-scholar effort for racial, gender, legal, and economic justice.

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