



# Introduction & Background

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# Critical Race Theory: Definitions and Background

Critical Race Theory (CRT) originated in the academic and legal world beginning in the 1970s. Its central tenet proclaims that “race is a social construct that was created to maintain white privilege and white supremacy” (Pluckrose and Lindsay, 2020). Today, social justice thinkers combine the frameworks of Marxian economics and postmodern deconstruction philosophy to support CRT. Frequently CRT-based ideas are cast in mild and innocuous language, allowing proponents to accuse opponents of overreacting. However, in its original form, CRT is intense. The theory’s name comes from Karl Marx’s demand that everything be “ruthlessly” criticized.

A number of distinctive terms are used in CRT and the social justice movement, as applied to education:

### Antiracist

The work of Ibram Kendi (2019) maintains that it is illegitimate to claim to be “not racist.” One is either a racist or actively working against racism (antiracist). Racism in this context is defined as “a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities.” Building upon this definition, social justice thinkers promote socialism-oriented public policies as the antidote for an inherently unfair American culture.

### Equity and Equality:

Equality of opportunity is the universally accepted ideal that all ought to be provided the same chance to achieve success. Under the traditional viewpoint, success is dependent upon individual gifts and effort. Equality of outcomes, however, is a requirement that regardless of individual effort or gifts, outcomes must be the same for all individuals. To many social justice advocates,

equality of opportunity is not desirable, as it accommodates inequality of outcomes. Under this view, what’s called “equal opportunity” actually favors those with an inherent social advantage.

### Woke

While traditionally this is simply the past tense form of the verb “to wake,” as currently used, “woke” is a cultural and political term referring to awareness of issues concerning social and racial justice. To be woke is to awaken from a sleep of ignorance to a full consciousness of pervasive injustice.

### Social Justice

The classical definition of justice concerns what an individual is due based upon natural or divine rights. Social justice has come to mean equality of outcome, achieved by whatever means are necessary, for all of society (hence the “social” part). In particular, social justice implies that traditional virtues and faith-based values are inferior to ideals such as social progressivism, cultural inclusivity, transgenderism, feminism, and multiculturalism.

# Flawed Curriculum and Textbooks

Social scientists spend their careers looking at multiple attributes of people to explore their diversity in depth. From this perspective, CRT is simply bad social science, throwing away multiple individual characteristics to rely on race alone. If society is systemically racist, there is little point in exploring institutions that promote human flourishing and commerce, as only race will matter in the end.

In curricula where CRT and social justice dominate, high-school students may never encounter the alternatives to these ideas, such as the benefits of free markets and individual liberty. Instead, they are frequently overwhelmed by antimarket curricular material and textbooks accompanied by teachers who are poorly informed on economics generally. A 2019 Gallup Poll found that capitalism and socialism are equally popular among young adults (Saad, 2021) for the first time since the poll began in 2010. Since 2010, the positive ratings of socialism have hovered near 50%. In this setting all too many students are not seeing alternatives to an unqualified narrative on the evils of capitalism and free markets.

Almost certainly the curricular materials school districts choose in the teaching of social studies and other areas have an impact. A report by the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty (WILL) found that the vast majority of Wisconsin's teacher-training programs at public universities include instruction in identity-based theories and ideas. Unfortunately, curricula that are biased, inaccurate, and cynical are pervasive in the social studies classroom, both in Wisconsin and in other states.

As an example, in August of 2019, The New York Times magazine published a special issue announcing "The 1619 Project." In the online announcement, the Times' editor in chief proclaimed the purpose of the project as follows:

The 1619 Project is a major initiative from The New York Times observing the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery. It aims to reframe the country's history, understanding 1619 as our true founding, and placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative." (Silverstein, 2019)

As Peter Wood points out in his book responding to this project (2020), this is an unusually ambitious goal for a magazine, typically left to historians and scholars of the field. In fact, well-known historians of diverse political views have written letters and articles pointing out numerous factual errors in this project.\* In response to reviews from these historians and many others, the Times quietly removed the reference to the "true founding" in its online announcement. Under the pressure of open criticism, the Times' editors issued corrections to other essays in the

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\* <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/20/magazine/we-respond-to-the-historians-who-critiqued-the-1619-project.html>

at All.” This essay by Nikole Hannah-Jones asserts that the Revolutionary War was fought primarily to protect slavery. Under criticism from historians on both the right and the left, the Times issued what it called a small clarification, saying that “some of” the colonists fought the American Revolution to defend slavery. Even after this correction, historians nearly unanimously reject the contention that slavery was a primary motivator for the Revolution. Even a basic examination of writings from the leaders of this time makes such an assertion difficult to maintain:

“There is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a plan adopted for the abolition of [slavery].”  
—George Washington, Letter to Morris, 1786

“...[E]very measure of prudence, therefore, ought to be assumed for the eventual total extirpation of slavery from the United States .... I have, through my whole life, held the practice of slavery in abhorrence ...”  
—John Adams, Letter to Evans, 1819

“Slavery is ... an atrocious debasement of human nature.”  
—Benjamin Franklin, an Address to the Public from the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, 1789

“The laws of certain states ... give an ownership in the service of negroes as personal property .... But being men, by the laws of God and nature, they were

capable of acquiring liberty—and when the captor in war ... thought fit to give them liberty, the gift was not only valid, but irrevocable.”

—Alexander Hamilton, Philo  
Camillus No. 2, 1795

“Every master of slaves is born a petty tyrant. They bring the judgment of heaven on a Country. As nations [cannot] be rewarded or punished in the next world, they must be in this. By an inevitable chain of causes & effects providence punishes national sins, by national calamities.”

—George Mason, James Madison’s Notes on the Federal Convention, 1787

Matthew Desmond’s contribution to the 1619 Project, “In Order to Understand the Brutality of American Capitalism, You Have to Start on the Plantation,” asserts that plantation slavery was a model for a capitalist economy. In this second essay in the project, Desmond cites plantation bookkeeping and concentrations of Southern capital as proof that American capitalism had its origins in slavery. Even a rudimentary understanding of economics makes clear that capitalism is built upon voluntary exchange and cooperation—exactly the opposite of the coercion and oppression inherent in slavery.

Nonetheless, The Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit not affiliated with the prize of the same name, released lesson plans and reading guides aimed at bringing “The 1619 Project” into American classrooms.\* The center updates and adds to these materials regularly. The Pulitzer Center’s

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\* <https://1619education.org/>

2021 annual report claims that more than 4,500 teachers reported using the materials since the project's launch.\*

Along the same lines, a textbook used in many schools is Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (2003). (We'll refer to it as *A People's History*.) Zinn's work has been criticized for its inaccuracies and selectivity of

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Wineberg, the Margaret Jacks Professor of Education at Stanford University and Director of the Stanford History Group, appeared as an article in *American Educator* in the winter of 2012-2013. Wineberg explains that *A People's History* is in some ways similar to traditional history

## ANECDOTES

Wineberg points to Zinn's claim that the attitude of African Americans toward World War II was one of widespread indifference, even hostility. In Zinn's view, this was no "people's war." Fighting against fascism, he claimed, was not important to African Americans at the time. Zinn made this assertion based on three pieces of evidence: a quote from an African American journalist, a quote from an angry college student, and a poem called the "Draftee's Prayer."

But there are contrary anecdotes that Zinn did not mention. Wineberg explains that in the same journal that voiced the angry college student, there appears the writing of Horace Mann Bond, president of Georgia's Fort Valley State College and father of the civil rights leader Julian Bond. Bond explained emphatically that African Americans did indeed care about the war and resented the suggestion of African American indifference.

The quotes and poem all came from one secondary source. Wineberg went to the source used by Zinn and discovered what Zinn omitted. The subject was data on the number of conscientious objectors enrolled by the draft. The total was about 50,000. It turned out that only about 400 African Americans were conscientious objectors and draft evasion rates were very low.

## QUESTIONS

Wineberg explains that Zinn regularly relied on loaded questions to pose false choices for readers. He counts 29 questions posed in Chapter 16 alone.

Here are three examples pointed out by Wineberg:

- Did the behavior of the United States show her war aims were humanitarian, or centered on power and profit?
- Was she fighting the war to end the control by some nations over others or to make sure the controlling nations were friends of the United States?
- With the defeat of the Axis, were fascism's "essential elements—militarism, racism, imperialism—now gone? Or were they absorbed into the already poisoned bones of the victors?"

Such questions present history as an "either/or" proposition that shuts down student thinking. Zinn was bullying students into accepting his one point of view.

## TIMELINES

Staying with World War II, Zinn wrote: "At the start of World War II German planes dropped bombs on Rotterdam in Holland, Coventry in England, and elsewhere." He added that these bombings were minor compared with the devastating U.S. and British bombing of German cities such as Dresden.

Wineberg accuses Zinn of chronological "bait and switch." In 1940, America had not yet entered the war and the Royal Air Force was limited for the most part to dropping leaflets over Germany. The bombing of Dresden did not take place until February of 1945, long after rules of air war had all changed. But it gets worse. Zinn fails to mention that at the time of the Coventry

raids, Germany had already flattened Warsaw, destroying half of the buildings, killing tens of thousands, and terrifying civilians.

## CERTAINTY

A common interpretation regarding the use of atomic bombs was that they were used as a last resort to end the war in the Pacific and save thousands of American and Japanese lives. Zinn disagreed, saying the United States was all too ready to drop the bombs.

Historians debate the possibility of Japanese surrender under certain conditions. Wineberg calls these the conventional use of counterfactuals where words like “might” and “could have” are used to help frame the question.

But Zinn’s narrative claimed to know for certain what would have happened. He wrote: “If only the Americans had not insisted on unconditional surrender—that is, if they were willing to accept one condition to the surrender, that the Emperor, a holy figure to the Japanese, remain in place—the Japanese would have agreed to stop the war.” (Page 423) Zinn seemed to consider himself to be all-knowing.

Only a handful of article-length critiques of A People’s History

Progress.” The first words in Zinn’s book described Columbus’s encounter with native people. It turns out that Zinn’s opening description of what was claimed to be a ground-breaking revelation regarding genocide was taken nearly word for word from a book written by one of Zinn’s friends, Hans Koning. Koning, like Zinn a Marxist, had already come under severe criticism for what was considered an oversimplified argument showing little understanding of the context in which Columbus was operating.

Grabar focuses on the words: “They would make fine servants.” The implication is Columbus wants to take these people as slaves, the beginning of genocide. Here is what Zinn left out by his use of the ellipsis just before the quote saying “they would make fine servants”:

“ I saw some who bore wounds on their bodies, and I made signs to them to ask how this came about, and they indicated to me that people came from other islands, which are near, and wished to capture them, and they defended themselves. I believed, and still believe, that they come here from the mainland to take them for slaves.”

So, leaving out these words allowed Zinn to attribute a meaning to the words of Columbus that they did not have. Columbus was saying that these people would be fine servants—slaves—for the people from the other islands, and thus they were vulnerable.

Grabar continues in this fashion, rebutting Zinn at every turn. In Zinn’s world, America is the most racist country in the world. Capitalism is America’s greatest evil. Hitler’s Germany was no worse than the United States. The Soviet Union was never a threat to the West. The Cold War was just a power grab. The American Revolution was merely a way for the elites to remain in power.

Zinn never claimed to be an objective historian. He wrote from a Marxist narrative model of history which means that he decided in advance on the overall story and then forced the evidence he cited into that story. How on earth would young readers know they were being deceived? After all, the book was probably given to them

by their teachers. Thus, young people are led through a series of errors of omission, errors of commission, and flat-out falsehoods to conclude that America is truly evil.

# Hopeful Lessons for Social Studies Instruction

What if Wisconsin school districts and individual teachers wanted to reject this kind of race-focused and Marxist instruction and instead consider the more hopeful ideas and outcomes that free market-oriented economics can provide? Economics is, of course, a social science. Accordingly, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) has promulgated standards in it as well as the other social studies topics like history, geography, political science and the behavioral sciences (anthropology, psychology, and sociology).

Here we present some basic pedagogical tools





human history people lived on something like  
\$1 to \$3 per day. Yet today the average American

transfer the right of ownership with the sale. The transactions are voluntary. No one can force you to purchase a hamburger from McDonalds or an iPad from Apple.

## Competition

Markets foster competition because they allow many producers to enter market sectors and strive to meet the demands of consumers. Competition puts pressure on businesses to satisfy consumers. Businesses that fail to satisfy consumers are eventually forced out of business, making room for others to try to do better.

## Profit Motive

Profits are the money left after a business has paid all of its expenses. Profits act as incentives for businesses to produce the goods and services consumers want. Those businesses that satisfy consumers and produce efficiently are rewarded with profits.

## Voluntary Exchange

Producers and consumers participate voluntarily in market transactions. Nobody is required to produce particular products; nobody is required to buy particular products. Producers can specialize and focus their efforts on what they do best and trade their surplus production to others. Markets encourage trade and thus create wealth.

Taken together, these four characteristics go a long way toward describing a capitalistic or

grounds. He regarded slavery as economically unsustainable. He wrote in *The Wealth of Nations*:

I believe that the work done by free men comes cheaper in the end than the work performed by slaves. Whatever work he [a slave] does . . . can be squeezed out of him by violence only, and not by any interest of his own.”

Smith and nearly all economists would agree that private ownership of property is the fundamental economic freedom. And from that point of view, the right to own oneself is surely the most fundamental property right. If this right is not protected by the government, then the system is one of exploitation, not market exchange. Coercion—or the threat of force—must be used to induce individuals to make transactions to which they do not voluntarily agree, such as getting abducted and being forced to pick cotton in another man’s field, for no pay. It is here that slavery fundamentally fails the test of being a market institution. At its root, it depended on coerced, involuntary exchanges. Enslaved people

never gave their consent to be involved in any transaction with slave holders. They complied only because of threats of dire consequences for noncompliance.

## SLAVERY AND THE U.S. CONSTITUTION

Did the Constitution protect slavery, as suggested by critics, or did it envision the end of slavery? This is a controversial question. The Constitution did not abolish slavery. One view is that it protected slavery. For example, it delayed ending the external slave trade until 1808. And it is true that many of the signers of the Constitution were slaveholders, including James Madison himself, sometimes called the “Father of the Constitution.”

Another view is that the Founders believed



slavery wished to count all people, free and enslaved, for the purposes of representation. The supporters of counting all people hoped that this approach to allocating representatives would strengthen the power of the slave states in Congress and thus make emancipation less likely.

Delegates who opposed slavery wished to count only free citizens. They hoped that this approach would weaken the power of the slave states in Congress and thus make emancipation more likely. Unable to agree on counting zero slaves or all slaves by state, the Founders decided that enslaved individuals would be counted as three-fifths of a person by counting three-fifths of the slaves for representation. This is a great example of how history is often twisted in schools. What was actually a move to limit the power of slave states is often presented as an effort to treat slaves as something less than human.

The best opportunity to abolish slavery almost certainly occurred at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 when the delegates debated it. But they failed. Slavery became profitable with changes in the production of cotton. It would take the bloody Civil War to finally abolish it.

## AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE DENIAL OF ECONOMIC FREEDOM

It is not free markets or capitalism but the lack of fully functioning free markets that has held African Americans back. As mentioned earlier, the key to free markets is voluntary exchange or the ability of people to negotiate contracts and voluntarily trade with one another. It is hard to overstate

how profoundly state-sponsored racist policies suppressed the economic freedom of African Americans as well as other people of color.

The power of racist state policies stymied African Americans economically at nearly every turn. Let's start with the Jim Crow laws. Jim Crow, on the surface, sure seems like a poor business practice for whites and African Americans. Free labor markets were impaired. White-owned businesses could not easily sell to willing African Americans. Jim Crow laws prevented African Americans from moving into better paying jobs.

If separate but equal treatment under the law was to be taken seriously, it was an expensive and inefficient proposition. Two of everything would need to be provided—or more likely, matching facilities for African Americans often would not be provided at all. Throughout the Southern states, by the early 1900s the Jim Crow practices meant that towns often had no libraries, parks, or other public services for African American residents. Privately owned facilities were also segregated. Jim Crow laws and customs were applied to restaurants, stores, hotels, and other facilities, sometimes by extraordinary means. African American customers might be served at separate counters or areas within a store, for example, barricaded off from areas reserved for whites, or simply not served at all.

Protection of life and property, a fundamental economic freedom, was often denied African Americans. Law enforcement did not prevent acts of terror perpetrated against African Americans. This included thousands of lynchings, threats by members of the Ku Klux Klan, and wholesale riots such as East St. Louis in 1917, Atlanta in 1906, Omaha and Chicago in 1919. Perhaps worst of all was the Tulsa race massacre of 1921. African



Maceo Crenshaw Daily, Jr., stating that the purpose of the organization was to bring “black businesses men and women . . . from around the nation to share success stories, describe economic opportunities, establish partnerships, discuss strategies for increasing consumption,

## INCOME MOBILITY AND FINANCIAL LITERACY

Myths are widespread regarding who is financially successful. The image of the wealthy as high-living heirs of family fortunes is inaccurate. In fact, wealthy families tend to earn rather than inherit their wealth. Most live in modest homes and drive used cars. Most are married. Most rich people earned their income by providing consumers with goods and services that improve our lives. Then, they saved and invested over many years to finally achieve a high net worth.

The degree to which people move up and down in terms of income is called income mobility.

Income mobility in the United States has remained steady over the past several years. It may not be as robust as we would like, but Americans continue to move up and down the income ladder. Families with very high wealth rarely persist in the ranks of the most wealthy for multiple generations. Meanwhile, the poor are still able to rise out of poverty. More importantly, there is little relationship between inequality and poverty. The fact that some people become wealthy does not mean that others will become poor.

The difference between the narrative of growing income inequality and reality is illustrated by the following chart from the American Enterprise Institute.\* The narrative often focuses on the first

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\* <https://www.aei.org/carpe-diem/yes-the-us-middle-class-is-shrinking-but-its-because-americans-are-moving-up-and-no->





Here are Wisconsin Standards for Personal Financial Literacy At-a-Glance taken directly from the document.

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