Lecture 3: Critical Race Theory

Learning Goals and Objectives:

- To have a historical and contemporary perspectives on race and ethnicity.

- To have an intersectional understanding of race and ethnicity.

- To be familiar with different disciplinary methods applied to race and ethnicity.

- Facility with theoretical approaches to studying race and ethnicity.

- Familiarity with social and cultural movements.

Introduction

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theoretical and interpretive mode that looks at how race and racism manifest themselves throughout hegemonic cultural modalities of expression. CRT researchers use this approach to try to figure out how victims of systematic racism are affected by cultural ideas of race and how they might represent themselves to combat prejudice.

CRT studies traces racism in America through the nation's legacy of slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, and modern events, and is closely linked to subjects like as philosophy, history, sociology, and law. It does so by referencing authors such as Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others who studied law, feminism, and post-structuralism. CRT was founded in the mid-1970s by intellectuals such as Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado in response to what they saw as dangerously slow progress following the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

I. Basic Concepts

1. White privilege

Discussed by Lipsitz, Lee, Harris, McIntosh, and other CRT scholars, white privilege refers to the various social, political, and economic advantages white individuals experience in contrast to non-white citizens based on their racial membership. These advantages can include both obvious and subtle differences in access to power, social status, experiences of prejudice, educational opportunities, and much more. For CRT scholars, the notion of white privilege offers a way to discuss dominant culture’s tendency to normalize white individuals’ experiences and ignore the experiences of non-whites. Fields such as CRT and

whiteness studies have focused explicitly on the concept of white privilege to understand how racism influences white people.

2. Microaggressions

Microaggressions refer to the seemingly minute, often unconscious, quotidian instances of prejudice that collectively contribute to racism and the subordination of racialized individuals by dominant culture. Peggy Davis discusses how legal discourse participates in and can counteract the effects of microaggressions.

3. Institutionalized Racism

Camara Phyllis Jones elaborates on this notion, which relates to the structural ways in which dominant society restricts a racialized individual's or group's access to chances. These inequalities, which include an individual's access to material conditions and power, are not only profoundly ingrained in legal systems, but have also become so ingrained in American culture that they are frequently unseen or easily disregarded.

4. Social construction

"Social construction" refers to the idea that race is a result of social cognition and connections in the context of CRT. It implies that race is a social invention rather than a product of biology or genetics.

5. Intersectionality and anti-essentialism

These terms refer to the idea that one part of a person's identity does not always determine their membership in other groups. "Everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances," Delgado and Stefancic argue (CRT: An Introduction 10). To put it another way, we can't predict an individual's identity, beliefs, or values based on categories like race, gender, sexuality, religion, nationality, and so on; instead, we must recognize that people can claim membership in a variety of different (and oftentimes seemingly contradictory) categories and belief systems, regardless of the identities imposed on them by others.

II. Basic tenets

Despite the wide range of beliefs among critical race theorists, according to historians Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, there are certain general statements about race and racism that many critical race theorists would accept. These propositions form a set of CRT's "fundamental tenets":

1. Everyday Racism

Racism is not uncommon; it is the everyday experience of the majority of people of color. Although extreme racist attitudes and beliefs are less common among whites than

they were before the mid-twentieth century, and explicitly racist laws and legal practices—epitomized by Jim Crow laws that enforced racial segregation and denied basic civil rights to African Americans in the South—have been largely eliminated, most people of color continue to be routinely discriminated against or otherwise unfairly treated in both public and private spheres, as numerous social indicators. For example, African Americans and Hispanic Americans (Latinxs) are more likely than whites to be denied loans or jobs; they pay more for a wide range of products and services (e.g., automobiles); they are more likely than whites to be falsely accused of criminal behavior by police or private (white) citizens; and they are more likely than whites to be victims of police brutality, including the unjustified u-turn. People of color, particularly African Americans, are incarcerated more frequently and for longer durations of time than whites who are convicted of the same crimes. Because of zoning limitations in many primarily white neighborhoods that effectively exclude lower-income people, many Blacks and Hispanics continue to live in racially segregated and disadvantaged neighborhoods. Neighborhoods with a majority of Black or Hispanic residents also receive less or inferior public services, particularly in the area of public education. Due to a lack of excellent education, work prospects are limited, making it even more difficult to leave impoverished areas. Blacks and Hispanics, on average, receive less or inferior medical treatment than whites, and as a result, live shorter lives.

White people's denial that racism exists or has occurred in a specific case is perhaps one of the most upsetting aspects of daily racism. People of color are accused of being overly sensitive to discrimination, ethnic jokes, mocking in public, condescension, and rudeness. In other words, they're accused of perceiving racism where it doesn't exist when it does, but the white people who are exhibiting or watching it are unable or unable to identify it as racism.

2. Interest Convergence

This term was coined by Derrick Bell to describe how racism is ubiquitous in our culture because it frequently converges, or overlaps, with a white individual's or group's interest—with something needed or desired. Racism, for example, serves the financial interests of upper-class whites who exploit black laborers by paying them less than white counterparts, as well as the psychological interests of working-class whites whose own experience of being underpaid and exploited by wealthy whites drives them to feel superior to others.

Derrick Bell's claim that the United States Supreme Court's landmark decision in Brown v. Board of Education (1954), which overturned the segregation-supporting "separate but equal" doctrine established in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), occurred at the time it did because (1) elite whites were concerned about potential unrest among Black former soldiers who had bravely served their country in World War I, was perhaps the most provocative argument offered in support of this argument.(2 the world's perception of the United States as a virulently racist society posed a threat to American influence

in developing countries and to the country's Cold War strategic operations against the Soviet Union.). Even though it was widely dismissed at the time, Bell's theory that the Brown decision was the result of interest convergence between whites and blacks was later supported by historical research, which revealed that the US Department of Justice's decision to side with desegregation supporters was influenced by a slew of secret communications from the US State Department about the need to improve the country's image abroad. The interest convergence concept has now been applied to a slew of additional legal disputes regarding people of color's rights.

3. The Social Construction of Race

How can we define race as a question of physical characteristics when, for example, the physical differences between light-skinned blacks and dark-skinned whites are significantly smaller than the physical disparities we detect among individuals of each group? Delgado and Stefancic (Delgado and Stefancic 75). However, in 1790, the United States Congress limited naturalization (the process of becoming a citizen of the United States) to white men, and this racial criterion remained in place until 1952, with only minor changes. So, throughout the span of 162 years of racial restrictions, the United States' judicial system had to determine which men were white and which were not among the countless petitioners for citizenship.

A comparison of the racial classifications employed by the United States Census Bureau between 1790 and 1920 (the census is done every ten years) should reveal that racial categorization does not represent biological fact, but rather existing opinions about race at different times. For example, from 1790 to 1810, the Census Bureau designated the following populations as different races: (1) free whites, (2) all other free persons except Indians not taxed, and (3) slaves. From 1820 to 1840 racial categories were as follows: (1) free whites, (2) unnaturalized foreigners (foreigners who were not U.S. citizens), (3) free colored, and (4) slaves. In 1850 and 1860 we had (1) whites, (2) blacks, (3) mulattos (half-white, half-black), (4) mulatto slaves, and (5)black slaves. From 1870 to 1920 we had (1) whites, (2) blacks, (3) mulattos, (4) quadroons (one-quarter black), (5) octoroons (one-eighth black), (6) Chinese, (7) Japanese, and (8) Indians. In short, our definitions of race change as economic and social pressures change (Ferrante and Brown, “Introduction to Part 2” 115–16). Although the prevailing culture believes that "races" are fixed categories, our history indicates that race has always been a matter of categorization in this country. If these statistics pique your interest, consider this: "[i]n parts of the Caribbean, class has affected racial classification so that the wealthier one is, the whiter one is seen to be".

Furthermore, many Americans have belonged to more than one race throughout history. However, until the 2000 census, the Census Bureau did not allow Americans to check more than one box for race, which has consisted of various forms of four racial categories since the nineteenth century—Caucasians, Africans, Asians, and Native Americans—to which it added "a fifth, Hispanics, who can be of any race" a few decades

ago (Sollors 102). Although some individuals believe it is, Hispanic is not a racial term. It's an ethnic term for Spanish-speaking immigrants from a variety of nations, and while it include people of all races, the majority of Hispanics identify as white (Muir 95). Paradoxically, despite the Census Bureau's centuries of statistical manipulations to classify Americans by race, there is no biological or scientific evidence to support the premise that humans are divided into races or that there is such a thing as "race." Indeed, the term "race" was coined in the study of natural history to refer to groupings of humans in different geographical places rather than to categorize them into physiologically distinct groups. By the nineteenth century, however, scientists had established permanent categories for these groups and claimed that physical differences corresponded to a biologically based cultural hierarchy: human beings, they claimed, belong to different races, and some races—particularly the white race—are superior to others. It does not appear to be an accident that scientists adopted this attitude at a period when Americans were grappling with issues of race and racial superiority, at a time when most white Americans believed in a degree of black racial inferiority that warranted, if not slavery, racial segregation.

4. Differential Racialization

"The dominant society racializes [defines the racial features of] different minority groups [in different ways] at different times, in response to [its] altering demands," according to differential racialization (Delgado and Stefancic 8). Before the Civil War, for example, depicting Africans as simple-minded, in need of white supervision lest they revert to their "heathen" ways, and delighted to serve white people fit the needs of white plantation owners. The plantation owners believed that this fictitious portrayal helped justify their enslavement of Africans. Later, African Americans were portrayed as menacing, violent, and, frequently at the same time, lethargic, especially when they were seen to be in competition with whites for jobs. To say the least, the logic of this one appears skewed (how can someone be menacing and violent if they are lazy?), but stereotypes are often illogical because they are based on prejudice rather than fact.

Other minority groups face the same kind of unequal racialization for similar reasons. Native Americans have been portrayed as pleasant and noble, lazy drunkards, thieving heathens, or violent savages, depending on the historical period and the demands of white culture. Similarly, depending on white society's need to perceive them one way or the other, Chicanos/as have been classified as devoutly religious and immensely family centered, superstitious and gullible, or lazy, good for-nothing freeloaders. Chinese American males have been characterized as wise, fatherly guardians for children of all races; Chinese American women have been depicted as obedient to men; and both men and women have been stereotyped as cunning and devious. Although Japanese Americans are typically thought to be hardworking and trustworthy, they were viewed as dangerous potential traitors during World War II and interned for the length of the conflict. Despite the fact that the US was at war with Germany and Italy, German and Italian Americans were not racialized in this way.

5. Intersectionality

No one has a straightforward, clear identity based just on race. In establishing each person's complex identity, race intersects with class, sex, sexual orientation, political inclination, and personal history. "Everyone has several identities, loyalties, and allegiances that may conflict or overlap" (Delgado and Stefancic 9). For example, a black, underemployed, working-class male could be considered. Such people will face oppression from multiple sources and will frequently be unsure why they are being discriminated against in any given situation (Delgado and Stefancic 51–52). Am I being treated unfairly at work because of my race, class, or past employment?

6. Voice of Color

Many critical race theorists argue that minority authors and thinkers are in a better position to write and speak about race and racism than white writers and thinkers because they have firsthand experience with racism. The voice of color refers to this positionality. "Black, Indian, Asian, and Latino/a writers and intellectuals may be able to explain to their white counterparts issues that whites are unlikely to know," according to the article (Delgado and Stefancic 9). One could argue that the logic of this argument is so compelling that the term "matter that most whites are unlikely to know" could be replaced with "matter that most whites almost surely don't know." White people can and do experience various forms of oppression, including oppression based on race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, and other factors, and all forms of oppression are awful. But to believe that racial oppression isn't distinctive in a variety of ways is to deny over three centuries of American race history.