

Inequality and Liberal Ideology: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Conservative White Opposition to Critical Race Theory in the United States

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Abstract: Politics is the vessel in which inequality is negotiated. The theoretical base I begin with is that as ideological preferences either expand or restrict equality, these preferences implicate certain groups more than others. Previous research shows that right-wing conservative ideology prefers to resist societal change, is driven by dogmatic and existential motivations, and has a tendency to perpetuate hierarchical structures in society, thus perpetuating inequality. On this basis, I take the case study of the opposition to Critical Race Theory in the United States to illustrate how conservative whites use the language of liberal ideology to indirectly express racial views. This research aims to look at how the language of liberalism, what I refer to as 'abstract liberalism', is used to reject racial equity policies, in this case, CRT, to show that liberal cases for race neutrality are a form of hierarchical racial power. This contributes to the conclusion that conservative whites oppose CRT by using liberal arguments as an artificial view of racial equality to appear non-racial and fair in their opposition to CRT despite it reinforcing racial inequality.

Introduction

Liberalism has been a political ideal in the U.S. since its founding however, its principle truths and rights have not been applied to all people equally. At the core of polarization in the U.S. is the division between how people on the ideological spectrum interact with the tenets of liberalism — merit, justice, individualism, freedom — and the measures in which these are applied have consequences for inequality. The origins of this ideological division lay in the fundamental distinction between left-wing liberals and right-wing conservatives. It is argued that liberals are open to societal changes and, by extension, policies that expand equality among society as a whole. Conversely, conservatives are characterized by their preference for traditionalism and resistance to (Nosek, Banaji and Jost 2009; Stone and Schaffner 1988). Previous research shows that right-wing conservatives' ideological perceptions are driven by dogmatic, strict, and existential motivations with a tendency to prefer hierarchical structure in society (Wilson 1973; Pratto 1999; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth and Malle 1994; Sidanius and Pratto 1999). Arguably, these preferences perpetuate social inequality.

The phenomenon of Critical Race Theory (CRT), or more accurately incorporating courses on racial equity and race theory in public school education, is one expression of this ideological discord in the U.S. On one side is the view that the ideology of liberalism upholds the racial status quo of white domination on the political, social, and economic levels. The consequence of this is the unequal distribution of wealth, health, power, and privilege. On the other side is the belief

that the U.S. is constantly achieving its highest ideals through the promise of liberalism and the waves of racial progress in the last 70 years is a testament to this achievement: The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling; the 1963 March to Washington; the Civil Rights Act of 1964; the 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery marches; the 2008 election and re-election of a Black president; in 2021, the first woman of Black and South Asian descent elected as vice president. It is hard to deny the progress that the U.S. has made. In this paper, my overarching question asks, what liberalism-based arguments are used to oppose CRT and how are they used? I argue that meritocracy, equal opportunity, individualism, and resistance to force are the core liberalism-based arguments used to oppose CRT because they effectively appear non-racial and fair despite reinforcing racial inequality. As this research suggests, the control of liberal discourse as an optimistic movement of equality and progress is a form of white racial domination because it functions to validate whites' position as deserved and earned, rather than confronting it as a result of structural advantages built into the design of U.S. law and society.

In section one, I introduce the origins of CRT and the background to its present-day opposition. In section two, I introduce the theoretical framework where I establish that the opposition to CRT is rooted in a 'colorblind ideology' (Bonilla-Silva 2014). This theory consists of four frameworks that justify racial inequality in abstract and nonracial ways. Of the four frameworks, I focus on 'abstract liberalism' to demonstrate how this new racial ideology is implicated in the CRT opposition. In section three, I introduce the methodological framework, a critical discourse analysis, to illustrate how racial inequality is discursively constructed through the lens of liberalism. In section four, I analyze specific liberalism-based arguments that oppose CRT to demonstrate how 'abstract liberalism' is used to implicate 'the self' within liberalism discourses and, therefore, is emotional because it is perceived as putting whites' morality on the line. I follow up with concluding remarks.

CRT Background and Opposition

This section will introduce the core themes of CRT to establish that CRT, as an academic legal discipline, is about establishing that race is formative in modern laws and institutions in the U.S. The section provides an overview of what opposition to CRT looks like in the U.S. political media landscape today to contrast the academic discipline with how it has been framed and politicized by the conservative media who actively conflate CRT with any type of diversity program or social justice theme to drive the point that CRT is anti-liberalism and anti-white.

Critical Race Theory is a broad framework of legal analysis that establishes the ways in which race and racism are embedded into laws and modern institutions in the United States in ways that maintain racial inequality indefinitely on the social, economic, political, and psychological levels, especially between whites and Black Americans (Britannica 2021). CRT developed out of the work of legal scholars in the 1970s who challenged the notion of 'progress' made during the civil rights movement (Delgado and Stephancic 2005). CRT was born out of Critical Legal Studies (CLS) a precursor movement in the 60s and 70s that first sought to establish how legal systems have been set up to benefit the elites and wealthy at the expense of the poor and exploited (Britannica 2021). CRT borrows from the core characteristic of CLS that liberalism, as a political framework for organizing society and laws, is insufficiently capable of remedying the outcomes of racism in day-to-day life (e.g. job opportunity, relationships with law enforcement, segregation in housing, and education). This criticism of liberalism especially extends to the critique of legal advancements made during landmarks civil rights laws and U.S. Supreme Court rulings. CRT

breaks down the assumption that the civil rights movement in the US was not as revolutionary and transformational as it has been taught to be. This is one of the primary arguments of CRT studies: While advancements in the civil rights movement made blatant, overt, and individual expressions of racism “illegal”, this legal progress was wildly inadequate to address the structural, subtle, and systemic ways that racism is embedded institutionally in American society. While it could be said that the ultimate goal of CRT studies is to structurally eliminate racial hierarchies, it is also believed within the academic circle that racial equality in the U.S. is “not a realistic goal” (Delgado and Stefancic 2005, 73). The primary premise of CRT, therefore, is that racial inequality is not an aberrant but rather the ordinary lived experience of non-white groups in America. Not only is it inadequate, but political liberalism also functions as an ally to maintain white dominance in covert ways in the U.S. This is the primary point that will be explored further throughout this paper. As a field of scholarship, CRT academics call for a historical re-analysis of how current laws and social practices are tied to old structures of racial inequality to reassess how racial inequality is reproduced in U.S. society today. On this basis, racial inequality is reproduced with the commonplace notions that colorblind society is racially inclusive. In this way, the challenge to racism is either ‘race-neutrality’ (an inadequate outcome of the civil rights movement) or ‘colorblindness’ (the contemporary mainstreamed approach to dealing with race). Both of these approaches promote racial invisibility, which is self-defeating in the fight against racism.

Political Opposition to CRT

Political opposition to CRT can be traced to Donald Trump’s presidency. Trump and fellow Republican leaders mobilized conservative Americans by attacking CRT and politicizing social justice issues as ‘radical socialism’ and ‘anti-American’ such as policing of communities of color. Tension surrounding elements of CRT follows the growth of coverage of police brutality and murders that ultimately spurred the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013. The public conversations surrounding education on anti-Black racism in America that followed George Floyd’s murder in May 2020 and the subsequent anti-police protests in cities across America have further escalated CRT-related themes as a political flashpoint in the media. During his presidency, Donald Trump called for “patriotic education” and labeled classroom discussion on race and implicit bias as “left-wing indoctrination”. The Trump administration went so far as to ban diversity training programs for federal employees (Education Week 2021). Texas senator Ted Cruz likened CRT to be “every bit as racist as the klansmen in white sheets” (Hutzler 2021). Republicans have successfully fear-mongered conservatives to believe CRT curriculum is being implemented in k-12 public education, leading to the successful bans on racial diversity themes in school. As of January 2022, 26 Republican-led state governments have either signed into law or proposed bills to ban courses and curriculum perceived to be related to CRT. The effect of these policy bans is that they strictly limit how racism and sexism can be legally talked about in the classroom (Education Week 2021). The following “Model School Board Language to Prohibit Critical Race Theory”² illustrates this deep insecurity surrounding race-based theories and themes of racial inequality. A total of 88 words are conflated with CRT and are proposed to be banned from public school curriculum:

Critical Race Theory (CRT)	Land acknowledgement
Action Civics	Marginalized identities
Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)	Marginalized/Minoritized/Under-represented communities
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)	Microaggressions
Culturally Response Teaching	Multiculturalism
Abolitionist teaching	Neo-segregation
Anti-racism	Normativity
Anti-bias training	Oppressor vs. Oppressed
Anti-blackness	Patriarchy
Anti-meritocracy	Protect vulnerable identities
Obtuse meritocracy	Race essentialism
Centering or de-centering	Racial healing
Collective guilt	Racialized identity
Colorism	Racial justice
Conscious and unconscious bias	Racial prejudice
Critical ethnic studies	Racial sensitivity training
Critical Pedagogy	Racial supremacy
Cultural appropriation/misappropriation	Reflective exercises
Cultural awareness	Representation and inclusion
Cultural competence	Restorative justice
Cultural proficiency	Restorative practices
Cultural relevance	Social justice
Cultural responsiveness	Spirit murdering
Culturally responsive practices	Structural bias
De-centering whiteness	Structural inequity
Deconstruct knowledges	Structural racism
Diversity focused	Systemic bias
Diversity training	Systemic oppression
Dominant discourses	Systemic racism
Educational justice	Systems of power and oppression
Equitable	Unconscious bias
Equity	White fragility
Examine “systems”	White privilege
Free radical therapy	White social capital
Free radical self/collective care	White supremacy
Hegemony	Whiteness
Identity deconstruction	Woke
Implicit/ Explicit bias	
Inclusivity education	
Institutional bias	
Institutional oppression	
Internalized racial superiority	
Internalized racism	
Internalized white supremacy	
Interrupting racism	
Intersection	
Intersectionality	
Intersectional identities	
Intersectional studies	

The model's word selection above illustrates how the categorical definition of CRT has expanded to absorb nearly all social justice language and conflates these words to CRT. Attempts to control conversations that challenge the idea of normative American history or suggest the United States could be systemically racist illustrates how dominance includes both the control of action and as well as the control of thought by "influencing others ideological stance" (Wodak and Meyer 2009). Demonizing CRT and limiting the language associated with racial inequality severely takes away from the language, concepts, and words one can use to talk about race and history in a critical way. This illustrates how 'abstract liberalism' is tied to whites rejecting the idea that they have structural advantages over people of color and marginalized groups. This is also at odds with the belief in nationhood, meritocracy, and American egalitarianism all common pillars in the mainstream arguments against CRT, as this research shows.

Another argument against CRT is the claim that America has progressed significantly in the past 70 years and that claims of racism, though true in the past, are not as relevant anymore: A growing Black middle class; the election of the first Black president; the Civil Rights Acts that ended voter discrimination and Jim Crow; the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling that established racial segregation in schools as unconstitutional; the 1976 Supreme Court invalidation of race-based marriages; the election of the first Black female Vice President. While all of these are considered by some to be a testament to racial progress in the U.S., it misses the ways that racial inequality has been restructured through viewpoints, such as the ones, above that dismiss the presence of white supremacy today. This viewpoint sees racism as an attitude or ideology versus a structure that is sustained socially, politically, economically, and emotionally (Bonilla-Silva 2019, 1779; Harris 1993; Delgado and Stephancic 2005). What this point misses is that while individual attitudes or ideologies of racism may be more curtailed and taboo today, structural and material mechanisms such as legal, health, education, and housing institutions, to name a few, and systems of beliefs, emotions, and language continue to reinforce white power in U.S. society. Regardless that the opposition is misinformed on what CRT is, what they believe it to be is more important for this paper. Opponents argue that their opposition is centered on the view that CRT undermines liberal tenets of equality, individuality, fairness, and neutrality (Britannica 2021). This point will be further explored in the next section. In line with this tension, opponents also argue that CRT undermines capitalism, equity, and principles of fairness where hard work is the fair measure for success. Opponents also reject the concept of white privilege, white supremacy, and economic exploitation that advocates of CRT propose requires a redistribution of wealth and power via a race-based policy approach to rectify structural inequities.

This section explores how the conservative right perceives CRT as fundamentally anti-liberalism and as an attack on the "natural order of things" (Harris 1993, 1778). This leads to the main point of this paper: that the narrative of American liberalism, as a political discourse of progress and equality, is a form of discourse control because it validates whites' position in society as earned and deserved rather than a product of these structural and material mechanisms of race thinking. In the next section, I will elaborate on how the philosophy of liberalism directly perpetuates racial inequality.

The Liberal Tradition

In this chapter, I introduce the relevant literature to construct the main theoretical and empirical framework showing that opposition to CRT is rooted in a colorblind ideology. First, I briefly evaluate the philosophy of liberalism to show that this tradition fundamentally resists policy

change that supports racial equality; then I will introduce Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's theories of a colorblind ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2014: 51-161); finally, I will define each of the four racial frames, with a focus on the framework of 'abstract liberalism' to show how this resistance is constructed to appear non-racial and egalitarian.

The Philosophy of Liberalism

To better understand the significance of 'abstract liberalism', it is important to first evaluate the liberal tradition in the U.S. The idea of how to achieve the 'common good of society' varies on the political spectrum. Philosophical liberalism extends to the views of liberty proposed by F.A. Hayek and Herbert Spencer who establish that liberty is equated to the most minimal interference of the state in public life as possible. This stems from the idea that there is no one universal way to achieve 'the good life', and therefore, individuals should have maximum freedom without government interference to be able to realize their version of 'the good life' (Young 1986). At the core of this view is the idea that every individual has the equal opportunity to use, advance, or fail in their talents and skills and that the opportunity to do so is shared by all members of society equally (Bellamy 1993). Because everyone has the same opportunity to achieve their version of liberty, one's life outcomes are reflective of the force of their effort rather than by any arbitrary barriers or circumstances. On this basis, the idea of subordination or domination is at ends with the commitment to egalitarianism. Additionally, The philosophy of liberalism asserts that society ought to reflect the efforts and skills of the individual, and that undeserved privileges and advantages must be curbed. However, this begs the question of who is considered undeserving and how curbing these advantages ought to be pursued (Bellamy 1993, 25). What I want to highlight is the fundamental distinction between conservatives ('right-wing' liberals) and 'left-wing' liberals. Left-wing liberals, especially in the U.S. advocate for change that increases equality, whereas conservatives espouse policies that keep society the same, which perpetuates inequality (Anderson and Singer 2008; Bobbio 1996; Giddens 1998; Jost et al. 2003; Sidanius and Pratto 1999; Sparkman 2016; Stone and Schaffner 1988).

On this basis, I conclude that when looking at philosophical liberalism as it relates to racial equity policies, such as CRT and the expansion of education focusing on race-based theories of history and equity discourses, a resistance to change is triggered amongst conservatives, particularly conservative whites. For this group, the government is only meant to maintain law and order and the rights of individuals and property and is not meant to impose particular views of history and law (Berlin, 1969). This helps better understand why opposition to CRT as it relates to 'abstract liberalism' is argued to be at ends with commitments to meritocracy, equality, and government enforcement. Right-wing liberalism, on this basis, is about maintaining the openness of society as a whole rather, for example, being against political correctness and against 'cancel culture' because it "feels unfree" (Berlant 2016) rather than about reducing inequality. This helps explain why arguments that espouse the idea of systemic racism and structural disadvantages for people of color, proposed by CRT advocates, is also at odds with a concept of liberalism because, for conservatives, the individual has trumped over any arbitrary form of power, namely abstract concepts such as 'systemic racism'. Next, I will introduce Bonilla-Silva's Colorblind Ideology theory.

The Colorblind Ideology and 'Abstract Liberalism'

The colorblind ideology provides the coherency necessary for conservative whites to justify opposing CRT using liberalism-based arguments and not 'be racist' in their opposition to racial

equality. The colorblind ideology is the present-day set of liberalism-based discourses that perpetuates racial inequality in covert ways. In this section, I will argue that liberal tradition is fundamentality at odds with policies, programs, and other direct approaches meant to pursue racial equality, and in this way perpetuates inequality. As this section establishes, modern laws and institutions are not designed to achieve racial equality so, the colorblind ideology continues this tradition by justifying inequality as an individual issue rather than a structural issue. In this section, I show examples from the data collected that fit into this framework.

The core academic and concepts I build this paper on is Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's seminal book *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (2014). Bonilla-Silva establishes that changes in constitutional law expanding racial equality did not have the capacity to change ingrained beliefs of racial subordination. Most notably, this colorblind ideology sustains racism by perpetuating the idea that individual attitudes and expressions are at the heart of racism rather than focusing on the ways that laws and institutions maintain the structural implications of racism (Bonilla-Silva 2014, 95). This new racial ideology emerged after the civil rights movement changed the way race is discussed in the U.S. So, while overt white supremacy is not the 'common sense' anymore, it's been replaced with more sophisticated and indiscreet language to maintain the racial status quo. The colorblind ideology consists of four frameworks that use nonracial language to show how inequality is justified in flexible ways using arguments that distort valuable parts of reality. The frames are: 'abstract liberalism', 'minimization of race', 'cultural racism', and 'naturalization'. For this article, I focus only on the framework of 'abstract liberalism' to show how the language of liberalism indirectly maintains race thinking as it relates to opposing CRT.

'Abstract liberalism' is the most foundational of Bonilla-Silva's Colorblind Ideology and the most popular frame used by respondents in their opposition to CRT (Bonilla-Silva 2014, 120). Bonilla-Silva defines 'abstract liberalism' as using "ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g., 'equal opportunity,' the idea that force should not be used to achieve social policy) and economic liberalism (e.g., choice, individualism) in an abstract manner to explain racial matters" (Bonilla-Silva 2014, 122). As established in the previous section, liberalism has historically functioned to serve the dominant classes and its benefits did not often extend to the poor and marginalized. Historically this has been the wealthy and white (Conley and Glauber 2008; Oliver and Shapiro 2013). In a philosophical sense, the emphasis on hard work, individual responsibility, qualifications, "pulling yourself up by the bootstraps", and maximum individual freedom creates an internalized narrative of success that is welcomed by the exploited and marginalized alike in its promises to improve one's position in the hierarchical social structure, regardless of distorting valuable aspects of reality that undermine this promises.

A classic example of 'abstract liberalism' being employed to justify inequality is the conservative rights' argument to oppose affirmative action. This argument actively relies on using 'equal opportunity' arguments to defend opposition to affirmative action because it endorses discrimination based on race (Barnes and Moses 2021; Moore 2018; Gratz 2014;). Linda Chavez, Director of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights during the Reagan Administration argued civil rights are separate from social issues such as poverty, housing, and unemployment while affirmative actions prevent minorities "from having to learn the skills and habits they need to become truly successful" (Moore 2018: 57). This rhetoric reflects how equality and civil rights have become separated from each other while providing ways for conservative whites to appear nonracial in their resistance to racial equity programs. In this way, whites' appropriate the language of equality and civil rights to protect their interests without 'sounding racist' (ibid; Bonilla-Silva 2014: 445). Below, I

identify the language of ‘abstract liberalism’ in four predominant discourses: equal opportunity, meritocracy, resistance to force, and individual choice as they relate to CRT opposition.

Equal Opportunity

“The civil rights movement wanted to make sure there were equal rights in America for everyone. That means equal treatment of individuals regardless of race.”

Arguably, equal opportunity is a sacrosanct principle of liberal democracy in the United States. It is something that everyone wants and agrees we should have, making it difficult to challenge the downsides of such a principle for society at large. However, equal opportunity begins to fall short when it rationalizes disparities in well-being by assuming everyone has the same opportunities to succeed. The argument roughly follows: If one is not succeeding, then they did not take full advantage of the opportunity and are irresponsible and undeserving of the good things in life.

One of the primary shortcomings of equal opportunity is that it does not consider the numerous variables that shape one’s life and background: family, education, health, environmental background, generational trauma, mental illness, socioeconomic background, physical disabilities, gendered roles, sexuality, etc. Additionally, this view ignores the racialized legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, and the New Deal and how it has become embedded in modern institutions and structures (Castro et al. 2019). Equality of opportunity necessitates that some fail in order for responsible individuals to seize their opportunities. It abandons those whose disadvantages prevent them from fully participating in the zero-sum game in the same ways as those whose advantages in life allow them the resources for upward social mobility. Even though white wealth was built on the backs of people of color, equality of opportunity rationalizes inequality by promoting the idea that opportunities are there for everyone, they just need to be taken advantage of. On this basis, discrimination and adversity can be overcome by hard work and good decision-making.

Two primary expressions in this research comprise the equal opportunity category: Equating CRT to reverse racism and ‘all lives matter’ discourse. These both fall into equal opportunity because they make claims to being an oppressed or disadvantaged group that is being treated unfairly against the protections that equal opportunity is meant to ensure.

The following two examples come from the guide “Toolkit: Combatting Critical Race Theory in Your Community” and illustrates how reverse racism is used in an equal opportunity framework:

When they say ‘racial justice’ what they mean is racial favoritism. Which is: a violation of equality before the law; neo-racist (racism born as ‘progressive’); group stereotyping... when they say ‘diversity’ what they mean is: a violation of individual identity; enforced intellectual conformity; political quotas; an attack on merit and a form of soft bigotry.

In these examples, CRT is pitted against equal opportunity. Racial inclusivity is called “racial favoritism” because the white experience of America is challenged and is, therefore, portrayed as discriminating against whites. These arguments reflect the idea that ‘I’m all for equal opportunity and that’s why I am against affirmative action. Deferring to equal opportunity in these ways is an inactive position to remedying racial inequality, especially as it functions in public school education, which is what CRT proponents want to shed light on.

Championing for equal opportunity also misses an important point when it comes to inequality. Equal opportunity assumes the means for wellbeing — wealth, health, education, jobs, housing — are a zero-sum game where only the most equipped, educated, hard-working will rise to the top; it reserves membership for the most deserving in society. What CRT shows is that historically, whites have assumed the role of the deserving group. However, challenging homogeneity is considered progressive racism and “soft bigotry”. In this way, equal opportunity is used by whites to emotionally deny this reality by making sure the status quo remains the same.

Former Trump administration Justice Department spokesperson and organizer for ‘Fight for Schools’ Ian Prior showcased this point:

So, there’s a balancing act here of making sure that there’s equal opportunity for all, that we’re committed to meritocracy, but also that, when we are trying to figure out how to deal with any kind of social problems, so we do not overstep and overreact.

Here, equal opportunity and meritocracy semantically ‘balances’ out fairness for whites by addressing “social problems”, which more specifically is racism. People are not meant to “overstep” or “overreact” to racism because, at the end of the day, meritocracy ensures a balanced outcome with the most qualified benefiting, while equal opportunity safeguards white privilege. In this capacity, the race-neutral ideologies of liberalism allow for a laissez-faire approach to rationalizing why CRT will perpetuate racial inequality. One parent’s analysis illustrates this point of CRT being racist:

What are you going to teach the child who’s biracial in our community? Mommy’s an oppressor and daddy’s a victim? What do you think that’ll do to our children’s confidence and their drive to succeed? Maybe that’s the objective. You don’t want our Black, Brown, and biracial students to succeed and you want to kick the white students in the teeth for something that they have no control over.

Curiously, this argument veils anger for white oppression as concern for children of color and their success and is used to counter the idea that whites are against CRT because they are inherently racist, or in Bonilla-Silva’s words, following a colorblind ideology.

Meritocracy

“My point is, it doesn’t matter what race you are, it matters how hard you work... I think it has much more to do with the choices you make and the place you live, the people that you surround yourself with than the color of your skin when you’re born.”

The second tennant of ‘abstract liberalism’ follows closely to equal opportunity and demonstrates the interrelatedness of these four sub-categories. Meritocracy is a social ideal that focuses on skills and qualifications as means to defend the advantages some have over others in a fair and nonracial way. Meritocracy argues that, whether it be wealth, occupation, university admission, the rewards of life should be distributed according to one’s qualifications, skills, and effort. Meritocracy mimics a laissez-faire approach to inequality: if you are truly deserving of the rewards of life, then the opportunity is plenty and neutral enough to compensate you for your effort and hard work. One study shows that 69% of Americans believe that people are rewarded for their intelligence and skill (Isaacs 2016). Meritocracy argues that economic wellbeing, education level, housing (or lack of it) etc. are reflective of the choices one has made in life. For this reason, meritocratic outlooks see redistribution policies, affirmative action programs, or welfare policies

as rewarding undeserving groups.

What this position misses, however, is that hard work doesn't pay everyone the same. As the British philosopher, Adam Swift writes in his paper "Would Perfect Mobility be Perfect?" (2004), the premise that "origins and destinations" are independent of each other ignores how institutions of education, health, and family, to name a few, are interrelated and key contributors to contemporary inequalities. Indeed, this is a pervasive discourse from the conservative right. The idea, proposed by Ron Haskins, of a so-called "success sequence" —graduating from high school, getting married before having children, and working full time—makes claims to providing a 98% chance of living above the poverty line in adulthood (Haskins and Sawhill 2009; Rufo 2021). However, the success sequence illustrates why meritocracy is not the rewarding and fair system it is touted to be, especially when it comes to remedying racial injustices. If we take the success sequence example above, a meritocratic approach would assume, for example, that everyone is growing up in a two-parent, economically secure household compared to one where a child may have to drop out to support their family; or that a teenager won't accidentally become pregnant while living in a state like Texas or Mississippi where abortion is illegal and access to birth control and comprehensive reproductive health education is difficult to access; Or even that that a physical, mental, or learning disability will not prevent someone from being able to work full time. While these external factors are not limited to only one particular racial group, institutionalized racism has allowed external factors to disproportionately affect people of color.

The success sequence is one example that illustrates the ways conservative whites tout hard work, responsibility, and effort to justify their advantaged position in society as being earned and merit-based (Kraus et al. 2017). This view helps to understand why whites deny racial privilege or systemic racism (Lowery et al. 2007; Phillips and Lowery 2015). This is verified by the Kraus et al. study (2017) which finds that merit-based belief systems, like the "success sequence", are more pervasive among higher status, dominant group individuals (Kraus et al. 2017; Sidanius 2001). Indeed, the study finds that whites wildly overestimate racial economic equality by as much as 25% (Kraus et al. 2017: 10324). However, this is understandable because these groups are more self-motivated to see society as fair to "protect the self" from the reality that social outcomes, especially concerning race, are structurally disparate (Kraus et al. 2017, 10325). Furthermore, motivation to see socioeconomic mobility as fair justifies whites advantaged position as merit-based and deserved, which may contribute to whites being three times more likely than Blacks to perceive racial fairness as improved in the U.S. (Bialik and Ciluffo 2017). There are three repeating expressions of meritocracy from the data that I will expand on: American exceptionalism; the tokenization of MLK; and equating CRT to Marxism.

American Exceptionalism

"There's no better place to live in human history than the United States right now."

The themes that define this category are praise for 'western' values as uniquely modern compared to alternative sociopolitical values, as well as appraising America's history as uniquely superior in the world that makes America a uniquely meritocratic society. Views of American exceptionalism, fail to fully acknowledge how the U.S. is deeply flawed. From voter suppression laws, the militarization of police, to the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is hardly anything exceptional America today, especially with how it treats its minorities and people of color.

As mentioned earlier, whites wildly overestimate racial economic equality by as much as 25% (Kraus et al. 2017). The authors suggest that popular notions of ‘hard work’ skew the reality of poverty and economic inequality and distort whites’ views of what fairness and freedom look like in American society. These views “coupled with boundless optimism” mark the problems of American-exceptionalism that is seen in the opposition to CRT (ibid). Roy Brooks, professor at University California San Diego adds that the success of prominent Black figures in society adds to this comfort that whites feel in believing racism and discrimination is over and facilitates the notion that wealth is attainable to anyone. One teacher, Deb Filman with a Youtube channel “The Reason We Learn: Education for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” illustrates Brooks’s point. In a commentary video to a recorded class session of 5th-grade students answering questions on race and power in the U.S., Filman comments, “so THAT’S [emphasis added] why Black people don’t have power? Black people don’t have power? Oprah doesn’t have power?”. Filman’s comeback is used to ‘prove’ in a no-brainer way that Black people indeed do have power, which allows for whites to comfortably reject any guilt related to claims of systemic racism and white privilege. While it is true that the U.S. is not as overtly racist as it was four decades ago, the gap in education, housing, wealth, health, to name a few examples, is glazed over by the tokenization of famous Black figures in American culture. This version of Black progress, coupled with tokenizing Oprah as the measure for power across the spectrum, further illustrates how white comfort operates in tandem with American exceptionalism and, by extension, ‘abstract liberalism’.

Tokenization of MLK

“The term ‘equity’ is literally stomping on the legacy of MLK.”

This leads to the second category: Tokenization of MLK. Tokenization is a strategy that attempts to naturalize racism by providing exceptions to disprove an otherwise obvious disparity. Tokenizing MLK and civil rights are used curiously in the context of CRT opposition. In the above example, tokenization is illustrated with Oprah ‘having power’ and thus serves as a point to disprove the entire argument of CRT: That America has been socially, economically, and legally designed to benefit white people and that these disparities are perpetuated by seemingly neutral laws and practices of everyday life (Delgado and Stephancic 1998; Muddle 2021; Peller 2021). Deferring to MLK and his legacy is commonly used to project a position of anti-discrimination in arguments against CRT. Tokenizing MLK and civil rights work a bit differently as it discursively absolves whites of their opposition to CRT. Take for example this statement by Mississippi governor Tate Reeves, “In what world are we living in where it’s OK to teach children that they’re born racist? In what world is it OK to teach children that they’ll be judged by the color of their skin, not by the content of their character?” (Wagster Pettus 2021). This statement completely manipulates MLK’s words to fit the ideas of Reeves and is used to projects the ‘real racists’ onto the CRT proponents and veils conservative anger of white oppression as concern for Black and Brown children and their success. Furthermore, it projects their ‘non-discriminatory’ intentions by self-associating with MLK. The example below is a Fox interview of anti-CRT moms who are mobilizing local parents in opposing what they interpret as CRT related curriculum in their school board:

It [CRT curriculum] did NOT relay the achievements of Black Americans. It did NOT show the resilience, fortitude, and how Black Americans overcame slavery, the moral failings of reconstruction and the Jim Crow era, and how that led to the civil rights movement. It doesn’t show how Black Americans made this country great by using

a system based on individual rights and liberty to hold the nation accountable to the promise of the Declaration of Independence.

At first glance, these words sound nice and seem as if anyone could support them. However, deconstructing them through the lens of people actively opposing racially inclusive policies and education leads me to argue that the above example is a racist mission through the power move of tokenizing signature progress moments of Black history in America to disprove the claim that America is systemically racist. Essentially, this statement argues that the system which CRT is denouncing is the same system that people of color used to achieve great things and for this reason ought to be maintained.

The below example also illustrates tokenization and resonates with Bonilla-Silva's argument that whites rely on semantics to save face in an otherwise racist assertion (Bonilla-Silva 2015). These semantic moves function as the "emotional glue and the seal of authenticity needed to validate strong racial claims" (Bonilla-Silva 2014, 188):

The curriculum cherry-picks facts to create, what I feel, is a predetermined narrative which stigmatizes certain groups of people and yet there are many facts which are not included in the curriculum which I think are not included because they do not fit the official narrative. For example, first-generation Nigerian immigrants excel at the top of the academic socioeconomic ladder of success.

Similar to the above example, this response semantically selects a certain group of Black people to 'prove' that structural disadvantages do not exist by showing how one group is successful today by using a system that CRT advocates are denouncing. For him, the real problem is the personal failings of individuals. While it may be true that first-generation Nigerian's excel, this is missing the point. This is 'abstract liberalism' at play because it defends the promise of hard work and success and fails to acknowledge the reality that outcomes are vastly disparate among racial groups due, in part, to structures of liberalism, not because of individual shortcomings.

Equating CRT to Communism

"Critical race theory is Marxist mumbo jumbo."

The last category is the association of CRT to Marxism/ socialism/ communism. This category was especially emotionally charged in the ways that fear-mongering was combined with the existential fear element of socialism. If liberalism is a quasi-religious ideology of life and the pursuit of happiness, then socialism is positioned as the antithesis of this. In this way, it is not all surprising that existentialism and fear-mongering are part of this category as well. Some interesting quotes below illustrate fear-mongering in CRT as it relates to communism:

The imposition of state-sanctioned racism by progressive ideologues is intended to corrupt children and future generations into both self-loathing and hatred toward their fellow countrymen.

You can see what the strategy is: they want to split people into groups, tell them that they are oppressed victims, and then get those groups to overthrow our society and replace it with their ideology. This is divide-and-conquer at play.

Their goal is to tear down and destroy institutions that they claim serve as “white dominant” power structures that perpetuate societal ills. It is no coincidence, therefore, that nearly all of these institutions or “systems” mirror Marxism’s alleged culprits: capitalism, the nuclear family, a republican form of government, rule of law, and Christianity.

I was taught at a very young age what to look for in socialism. What do they do? They go right to the children.

In short, these fears are rooted in the idea that the best our society has to offer is abrasive patri-otism, abstract unity, and a deep love for capitalism, and CRT is perceived as a direct violation of this allegiance.

Resistance to Force

“My children will never be taught to be ashamed of or apologize for who they are.”

The case against CRT is not just about the principles of liberalism. It is about people avoiding and rejecting being forced to feel any discomfort, guilt, or shame at one’s advantages and others’ disadvantages. When it comes to matters of socio-racial issues that CRT seeks to re-platform, a ‘resistance to force’ approach effectively perpetuates the status of racial inequality. This echoes the idea “you cannot legislate morality” which was used during the Jim Crow era to suggest a slow, organic approach to changing race relations as being the more democratic approach to remedying racial inequality compared to executive government policies (Bonilla-Silva 2014, 101). However, this approach, which is demonstrated in the CRT opposition, only justifies inaction and complacency. CRT and the incorporation of race-based theories of inequality into public school education against parents’ wishes are readily considered a threat to the autonomy and will of the people which liberalism cherishes. Below are examples from the data.

The theme of ‘resistance to force’ showed up in multiple ways in the data: Rejection of being forced to feel ‘complicit’ in racism; forced to feel guilty for being white; forced ‘intellectual conformity’; forcing an alternative history to be taught to children:

These are my babies. Not yours. If you are embarrassed or ashamed of your skin color, that’s your issue. Not mine or my children.

This example illustrates the idea that racism is an individual ‘issue’ which boils down to feelings of being “embarrassed” and “ashamed of skin color”. This is a semantic take on what, arguably, is rejecting white guilt. White people cannot say in public ‘I am proud of my skin color’, but they can say, as this response illustrates, that they will not be forced to feel bad because of it.

The belief in ‘white oppression’ is arguably the crux of the opposition. The following example illustrates how whites view CRT and what they think systemic racism means for white people:

Straight white people, children included, are inherently and irredeemably racist, and benefit from — as well as systematically rig — all the social institutions, rules, laws, and norms that white people invented and keep in place for their disproportionate success and to maintain their stranglehold on power.

This could, arguably, be the core of rejecting CRT: the rejection of forcing a particular identity and set of feelings onto whites, an identity that white people feel they have no power or choice over. In this way, CRT is seen as a form of domination over white peoples' morality and discomfort in their own bodies. Therefore, it makes logical sense why the opposition is expressed as a denial of systemic racism as a whole.

The rejection of force is an orthodox characteristic of liberalism, primarily through the political belief that social change happens best organically without any imposition or 'intrusion' by the government. This quality of liberalism is evident in the fear that CRT will encourage socialism to manifest in American society (see the section on "Marxist Mumbo Jumbo"). In line with the socialism/capitalism duality, CRT and 'laissez-faire' racism are two competing approaches to racial change. While CRT is perceived as radical and relying on the government to implement change, white conservatives seem to prefer talking about racism as it relates to how the U.S. has "recovered from the ugly" rather than talking about how it is still a structurally very racist country. The below example illustrates this existential fear associated with the fear of a 'forced socialism':

The goal...is to replace parents. The government will tell your children what to think about themselves and other people. That is the goal pure and simple...this is a fight to save our state and our country.

The suggestion that CRT will lead to communism operates as, what Noam Chomsky terms, the "dangerous other" trope (Chomsky and Waterstone 2021). These tropes are utilized to create imaginary threats to reinforce citizens' allegiance with their nation's ideals. Historically, this has been foreign communism, which morphed into Nixon's War On Drugs, Middle East terrorism which then shifted to immigrants and refugees 'taking over' (ibid). Similarly, CRT and racial equity discourse embody a "dangerous other" for whites' racial status quo of the United States. These tropes rely on leveraging racialized emotions, patriotism, fear, and anger to legitimate and reinforce a liberal ideological allegiance (ibid). In regards to CRT and whiteness, Victor Davis Hanson, a conservative commentator demonstrates how this 'dangerous other' theme operates with the issue of CRT:

The border is being breached at a time of the pandemic. Migrants barge in without either COVID-19 testing or vaccinations...whiteness is supposedly the cause of America's problems. But our inner cities are suffering historic levels of violent crime. Couldn't our Critical Race Theory accusers take time out from their merchandising to address the soaring violence?

Here, whites are angry because they are being blamed for intangible and abstract issues like racial inequality. Meanwhile, immigrants are "barging in" and whites are the ones suffering from immigration and inner-city violence, yet are being blamed for abstract social problems when the real problems are the ones coming across the border. These "dangerous others" are those that embody the symbols understood as a violation of a "fantasy" (Ahmed 2004, 43) of a fair and equal America.

Individualism

"You are a victim only if you make yourself a victim."

Individualism is the fourth tenet of 'abstract liberalism'. Individualism prioritizes the interest of the individual over a social group. It preaches the idea that everyone has the individual power

to make their choices and opposes external interference when exercising these choices. In this way, the trajectory of one's life is independent of any 'white privilege' or 'systemic racism' discourse that CRT promotes. This belief system works similarly to the tenet of meritocracy in that it is not any lopsided advantage that propels whites to succeed at higher rates. Rather, individualism preaches an ethic of responsibility and the ability to make the right choices, something that everyone has equal access to, that leads to success. In the data, the sentiment that CRT promotes victimization was common. These responses expressed the resentment towards the idea that some groups do not have the same agentive capacities as others:

When you talk about "groups" it is collectivism...some groups of children are taught to be ashamed of who they are. The other groups are taught they are victims without the ability to further themselves.

The next example shows the irony of an 'individualism' approach when attempting to be race-neutral in opposing CRT:

I want my children to learn the truth about what America is and to see the achievements of Black Americans and I think right now, that is being undermined. And they're painting Black Americans as victims.

This response claims it wants the achievements of Blacks recognized. However, it also contends that Black achievement cannot co-exist with the fact that this same group idea has been historically exploited to benefit white interests. Here, the individualism framework is upset that Black people are "painted" as victims at the cost of white people, such as herself, being the victimizers. Arguably, this woman's opposition doesn't stem from an altruistic view of wanting her kids to know the achievements of Black Americans. Her opposition stems from resentment that the liberal philosophy of choice and agency is being challenged rather than blaming the individual and their choices. This highlights the problematic ways that individualism is used: It protects white feelings, and by extension, the "relationship between subordination and domination" (Bonilla-Silva 2014, 138).

When you talk about "groups" it is collectivism...some groups of children are taught to be ashamed of who they are. The other groups are taught they are victims without the ability to further themselves.

A similar example further illustrates how an individualism framework is used to project and disguise white interests as a form of allyship towards people of color:

I don't want my kids or any child taught that children of color do not have agency. . . I think the idea of Critical Race Theory...and when I looked at some of the books they were expected to read, it did NOT relay the achievements of Black Americans. It did NOT show the resilience, the fortitude, and how Black Americans overcame slavery, the moral failings of reconstruction and the Jim Crow era, and how that led to the civil rights movement. it doesn't show how Black Americans MADE this country great by using a system based on individual rights and liberty to hold the nation accountable to the promise of the Declaration of Independence.

This idea of people 'choosing to be victims', as opponents of CRT argue, piggybacks off of meritocracy discourse which argues that the people and place you chose to surround yourself with will influence your life outcome more so than any 'race issue':

It doesn't matter what race you are, it matters how hard you work...I think it has much more to do with the choices you make and the place you live, the people that you surround yourself with than the color of your skin when you're born.

This response aims to come across as an ally of Black recognition. In defending the system that has made existence geometrically difficult and different for people of color, the response assumes that 'admitting' to this struggle absolves her whiteness, despite still operating within a white framework. In an 'abstract liberalism' framework, this statement tokenizes key progress moments for Black America to illustrate that despite the struggle to achieve this progress, minorities still managed to be resilient under these racialized structures, and therefore, the system ought to be maintained because people "made this country great by using the system". This position coincides with comfort and belief that whites' do not have any unfair structural advantage, but simply that everyone, regardless of race, is where they are at in life because of their decisions. All this is said in a way to come across as advocating and prioritizing Black existence to deflect from a white benefiting mission. In other words, victimhood doesn't exist when there is an equal opportunity because it is your choice to not be a victim.

In this section, I show how the language of 'abstract liberalism' — equal opportunity, meritocracy, resistance to force, individualism — is specifically used to oppose CRT as a racial equity educational program. 'Equal opportunity' is expressed by the belief that social and racial problems in society are balanced out by equal opportunity in law. 'Equal opportunity' is employed by arguing that CRT education is too racially subjective, and therefore contradicts equal opportunity in the ways that it oppresses whites. This is expressed in the 'all lives matter' discourse and claims of 'reverse racism'. 'Meritocracy' encompasses the expression of American exceptionalism which serves to airbrush a painful racial history, and parallels studies that show whites overestimate the gains for racial economic equality in the U.S. (Kraus et al. 2017). References to communism were significant in both 'meritocracy' and 'resistance to force'. 'Individualism' and 'resistance to force' embrace the ideas that whites' are also vulnerable groups, whether it be the threat of communism or that group grievances are prioritized over individual freedoms. These expressions show how power is discursively wielded when it reconciles with discourses of inequality. The phenomenon of CRT is just one example that shows the ways whites grip their control on the narratives of American liberal ideals to protect the narrative of whites' position as deserved and earned rather than a result of structural advantages consciously built into the design of U.S law and society.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research is to examine an existing framework of a new racial ideology, a colorblind ideology, and apply it to the phenomena of conservative whites' opposition to racial inequality discourse in public education. I argue that the liberalism-based arguments of meritocracy, equal opportunity, individualism, and resistance to force are the four core tenets of 'abstract liberalism' used to appear non-racial and fair in their opposition to CRT. In the same way that the conservative right is creating a false narrative of CRT as a dangerous and anti-American idea, the conservative right has also perpetuated a false narrative of what liberalism looks like regarding race in the U.S. These false discourses reinforce each other and perpetuate racial inequality in the U.S. I follow from Bonilla-Silva's argument that the liberal tradition, the modernity project, and the foundations of racial inequality are all encapsulated in the same historical movement. The philosophy of liberalism is a philosophy of the dominant classes and did not extend to the poor and marginalized. If political society resists change, as is espoused by conservatives, then

inequality, especially education on racial inequality, is perpetuated.

There are three implications that evolved from this research process. First, I would like to clarify that the goal of this research is not to establish any one theory on how conservative whites respond to racial inequality. The public conversation surrounding CRT is continuously evolving, and developing a concrete theory is unrealistic at this time. This research is just one small sample of how discourses on political ideology and inequality are inherently emotional and may lead to distorted rationalizations for inequality. My goal is not to demonize conservative whites for what motivates their views. Indeed, it is valuable to study the implications of left-wing liberals' perceptions of liberal ideology and racial inequality. This warrants further research.

Secondly, the case study of CRT is just one example of the ways that racism reproduces itself in ambiguous ways. As stated at the beginning of this paper, politics is about the negotiation of inequality. This paper illustrates just one of the ways racism reproduces itself in covert ways and how this negotiation of inequality is discursively constructed and shaped by the historical period and culture we are living in today.

Lastly, the rise of polarization in the U.S., especially following the tumultuous Trump presidency, has facilitated American society to talk about racism in a one-dimensional way. The focus on Trump and the public rhetoric surrounding racist events like the 2017 Charlottesville Unite the Right rally or the 2022 Buffalo supermarket shooting encourages Americans to think of racism in a one-dimensional manner by conflating racism to hate crimes, the KKK, and "bad apple" people. While this is partially true, focusing on the individual takes away from seeing the overarching structures that perpetuate the covert and *multi-dimensional* forms of racism as well. Discourses on racial inequality, therefore, need to incorporate the material, structural, and emotional dimensions of racism too.

If this research offers anything, it is that you cannot separate understanding social and racial inequality from the understanding that political liberalism in the United States has manifested into a system of control and domination. This research shows that many of the fears surrounding CRT are rooted in the idea that the best our society has to offer is a deep love for the empty promises of liberalism — meritocracy, individualism, equal opportunity, resistance to force — as well as an optimistic comfort from the artificial founding stories of American liberalism. The phenomenon of opposing CRT is, therefore, just one example of how liberalism falls short to meet the challenge of expanding the common good of society to *all* of society.

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Notes

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²<https://citizensrenewingamerica.com/issues/model-school-board-language-to-prohibit-critical-race-theory-2/>

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