on_education
Journal for Research and Debate

reply: critical race theory and antiracism: lost in translation

Franz Kasper Krönig

This response to Karim Fereidooni's article "Critical race theory in political education" does not deal with either of that article's two premises. Both the explicit thesis, that it is necessary to "tackle racism through education" (Fereidooni, 2022), and the implicit one, that the practice of political education requires a theoretical foundation, are hardly in need of defense. However, Fereidooni presents us with only two options regarding this choice of theory and decisively argues in favor of one. His arguments are based on outlines of these theories, namely critical race theory and antiracism, that seem to contradict their core principles as laid down in their foundational texts. This response does not interpret this observation as a mistake of one particular author but rather as a hint at a not only linguistic but also theoretical divide between the English and the German-speaking discourses in this field. Before briefly analyzing the theories in question and the arguments provided, it is appropriate to first examine current political and mass media discourses that have tended to drown out these academic and educational questions.

Keywords: antiracism, critical race theory, political education, racism

The question of whether the inclusion of critical race theory (CRT) or antiracism in political education is favorable has arisen at a critical point in time. A time when "the criminality of CRT as the enemy of American democracy" (Gates, 2022, p. 138) is on trial, literally. More than 10.000 media stories have been published on this issue, and "35% of all K–12 students in the United States, have been impacted by local anti 'CRT' efforts" (Pollock & Rogers, 2022, p. vi). The "[a]ttacks on Critical Race Theory" (López et al., 2021, p. 3), which first became widespread 2020 in the United States, have led to the passing of restrictive legislation in at least 35 states. The *PEN America Index of Educational Gag Orders*[1] documents the current "progress" of passed bills, introduced legislation, laws, state policies, and executive orders, which, by the way, more and more widen their focus from K-12 education to colleges and universities (see Arrojas, 2022). Although the debate is nowhere near as heated in the UK, it is quite notable that the Minister for Women and Equalities, Kemi Badenoch, plainly asserts the criminality of CRT, when taught as valid and undisputed knowledge:

> Lots of pernicious stuff is being pushed, and we stand against that. We do not want teachers to teach their white pupils about white privilege and inherited racial guilt. Let me be clear that any school that teaches those elements of critical race theory as fact, or that promotes partisan political views such as defunding the police without offering a balanced treatment of opposing views, is breaking the law (*Hansard*, 20 October 2020, col 1012).

In this climate, a certain defensiveness of proponents of CRT is more than understandable. These proponents typically defend CRT as being a highly specialized theory in the context of legal studies that plays no role whatsoever in K-12 education.[2] CRT has, then, been conflated or even identified with the critical legal studies movement–an assessment that was at least arguably not entirely wrong in the 1990s (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xiii). However, as early as 1995, the first influential and programmatic articles on CRT in education emerged (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Today, there can be no doubt that CRT made its way "from the Law School to the Ed School" (Busey et al., 2022, p. 3). One could even go as far as to claim that "CRT has rapidly established itself as one of the most important strands in contemporary educational theory" (Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2010, p. 38).

Setting aside the many misunderstandings that underlie the attacks on CRT in education, some lines of critique can be substantiated on the basis of seminal CRT texts. Of course, this does not mean that the critiques cannot be refuted. However, the following four theory principles of CRT offer an insightful ambiguity. For its proponents, these theoretical and partly normative principles define CRT and are displayed on the surface level of the theory's seminal texts. For its critics, the same principles, as formulated, are proof of the problematic, if not evil, nature of that same theory–no exaggeration, distortion, or crude interpretation needed. Consequently, both the proponents and the critics of CRT agree on these principles as–surely not comprehensive, probably not sufficient, but arguably necessary–structural components of CRT.

Before addressing Fereidooni's arguments for including CRT in political education, the following principles serve as a brief introduction to CRT. This is necessary since the even briefer introduction by Fereidooni–this is the argument of this reply–contradicts fundamental principles of CRT as laid down in its most prominent texts due to a language barrier between the English and the German discourses in this field. The following outline of the four selected principles begin with paraphrases or references of the self-descriptions of CRT, complemented with critical observations of these principles that challenge the aptitude of CRT for political education.

1. CRT describes itself as a political, left-wing, engaged, activist movement (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xiii; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 7). Consequentially, when used in educational settings, students may be prone to political indoctrination in the pedagogically problematic sense of antagonistic conflictuality (see Mouffe, 2013, pp. 9-15). Introducing a binary conflictuality to education (oppressors vs. oppressed), many critics of CRT argue, would be ethically and pedagogically irresponsible, divisive, and dangerous.

2. CRT is fundamentally critical of the enlightenment principles and values including liberalism, truth, objectivity, neutrality, justice, rights, and merit (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Peller, 1995, p. 104). The (selective) school system, as it is, would have difficulty operating outside of these principles (e.g., without these principles, assigning students grades would be indefensible). The consequences of abandoning these principles would be revolutionary (as the conservative critics suspect), which is, again, not a refutation of CRT as such. However, it is evidence of the impossibility to integrate CRT in a more or less constant school structure or curriculum. This argument, admittedly, loses plausibility in the field of nonformal political education.

3. CRT is based on the universal prevalence, permanence and normality of racism, and is hence premised on the irremediability and irredeemability of (Western) societies (Bell, 1995b; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 7). Would that not involve either calling students to revolutionary action or to depression?

4. CRT offers no pathway out of racism for White students. The interest convergence principle is "a pillar of the Critical Race Theory" (Crowder, 2014, p. 695), certainly "one of the most influential concepts in the CRT canon" (Gillborn, 2013). It provides that the "interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interest of whites" (Bell, 1995a, p. 22). From this perspective, the purported allyship of White students must be interpreted as a self-serving practice that is rendered instantaneously obsolete when the allyship no longer serves White students' interests. Whites can benefit from both racism and the pretense of antiracism and choose between them situationally and strategically. More radical but still integral (Peller, 1995, p. 150) strands of CRT like the Black Nationalists consequently "look with skepticism on members of their groups who date, marry, or form close friendships with whites" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 68).

In his article *"Critical Race Theory in Political Education"* (Fereidooni, 2022), Karim Fereidooni argues in favor of CRT in political education. He interprets the CRT principle of the universal prevalence, permanence and normality of racism (see point 3 above) – that is, the assumption "that racism is a structural feature of society" (Fereidooni, 2022) and not an aberration – as an invitation to *all people* to struggle against racism. By evading the simple binary of "perpetrator (of racism) and victim (of racism)" (Fereidooni, 2022), CRT is not divisive and provides White people with the basic "ability to be critical of racism" (Fereidooni, 2022), which are arguably both necessary conditions for the possibility of an pedagogical approach towards racism.

A reader would likely be puzzled by the clear incompatibility of this account of CRT with the principle of interest convergence as presented above. According to this foundational principle, there can be no common struggle, much less allyship between Black and White students. However, one theory, Ibram X. Kendi's representation of antiracism, seems to be fully in line with Fereidooni's description of CRT. Kendi combines the claims of structural racism (universal prevalence, permanence, and normality of racism) with a praxeological turn. For Kendi, "there is no such thing as a not-racist idea, only racist ideas and antiracist ideas" (Kendi, 2019, p. 20) and "there is no neutrality in the racism struggle" (Kendi, 2019, p. 9). At the same time, for him, "racist and antiracist are not fixed identities. We can be a racist one minute and an antiracist the next. What we say about race, what we do about race, in each moment, determines what–not who–we are" (Kendi, 2019, p. 10). Thus, when one seeks a theory that offers agency for all people, which is nothing less than the *conditio sine qua non* for political education, antiracism seems to be the answer, not CRT.

The point is not whether or not Fereidooni might be using the concepts in a questionable way or not. He could easily point to research that supports his terminology, and in fact, he does, referencing the work of Paul Mecheril. This research, I argue, can hardly serve to bridge the language gap between the German and the English discourses. The translation of the term "critical race theory" to the German *Rassismuskritik* is arguably as misleading as the translation of "antiracism" to the German *Antirassismus*. Although one might find it difficult to believe, the seemingly translated terms are almost contradictory, which explains the incompatibility of Fereidooni's account of CRT and antiracism with the seminal English texts on these issues. Kendi's antiracism clearly does not claim–as Fereidooni states– "that racism-free spaces can be created" (Fereidooni, 2022). On the contrary, Kendi argues "there is no such thing as a nonracist or race-neutral policy" (Kendi, 2019, p. 18), and that being antiracist does not imply an external position towards or a negation of racism. Instead, it encourages one to fight racism from within–from where else? And as already outlined, CRT sharply differs from *Rassismuskritik* with regard to the role White people can play. Overall, it makes more sense to equate *Rassismuskritik* with Kendi's Antiracism than with CRT–based on

CRT's seminal texts and leading proponents in the English discourse.

Ultimately, CRT faces some theoretical problems and challenges that must be dealt with, especially when it comes to education. The four lines of critique discussed above, along with others, cannot be easily brushed aside and could even promote further theoretical development in this field. Furthermore, the severe political and even juridical resistance to CRT in education demands attention. However, this is hardly the responsibility of the German *Rassismuskritik* which has been conflated with CRT, solely on the basis of questionable translations. Rather, its relationship with antiracism must be untangled. There are a number of key questions that emerge: Is *Rassismuskritik* a specifically *German* theory? Is it an eclectic mixture of different theories (e.g., of antiracism and CRT)? Is it more or less the same as Kendi's conception of antiracism? What are the theoretical problems with antiracism? And can theories that originated in an entirely different sociopolitical context such as the United States simply be transferred and applied to another context? Without an analysis of the structural elements of the theories in these fields, it is difficult to imagine any fruitful international discussions about the role of CRT and antiracism in political education.

References

Arrojas, M. (2022, April 15). *New state laws target CRT in higher ed*. BestColleges. https://www.bestcolleges.com/news/2022/04/15/state-laws-critical-race-theory-higher-education/

Bell, D. A. J. (1995a). Brown v. Board of Education and the interest convergence dilemma. In K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller, & K. Thomas (Eds.), *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement* (pp. 20–29). The New Press.

Bell, D. A. J. (1995b). Racial realism. In K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller, & K. Thomas (Eds.), *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement* (pp. 302–312). The New Press.

Busey, C. L., Duncan, K. E., & Dowie-Chin, T. (2022). Critical what what? A theoretical systematic review of 15 years of critical race theory research in social studies education, 2004–2019. *Review of Educational Research*, *93*(3), 412–453. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543221105551

Crenshaw, K., Gotanda, N., Peller, G., & Thomas, K. (1995). Introduction. In K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller, & K. Thomas (Eds.), *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement* (pp. xiii–xxxii). The New Press.

Crowder, P. A. (2014). Interest convergence as transaction? *University of Pittsburgh Law Review*, *75*, 693–709. https://doi.org/10.5195/lawreview.2014.365

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2012). *Critical race theory: An introduction (2nd ed.).* New York University Press. https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479851393.001.0001

Fereidooni, K. (2022). Critical race theory in political education. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, *5*(13).

https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2022.13.5

Gates, Z. (2022). The people v. critical race theory: Critical race theory on trial. In J. Keengwe (Ed.), *Handbook of research on social justice and equity in education* (pp. 138–159). IGI Global. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-9567-1.ch007

Gillborn, D. (2013). Interest-divergence and the colour of cutbacks: Race, recession and the undeclared war on Black children. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, *34*(4), 477–491. https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2013.822616

Gillborn, D., & Ladson-Billings, G. (2010). Education and critical race theory. In M. W. Apple, J. Ball, & L. A. Gandin (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook of the sociology of education* (pp. 37–47). Routledge.

Hansard (2020, October 20). Black History Month [Debate, vol. 682, col. 1012]. https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2020-10-20/debates/5B0E393E-8778-4973-B318-C17797DFBB22/BlackHistoryMonth

Kendi, I. X. (2019). *How to be an antiracist*. The Bodley Head.

Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. F. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record*, *97*(1), 47–68. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146819509700104

López, F., Molnar, A., Johnson, R., Patterson, A., Ward, L., & Kumashiro, K. (2021, September 23). Understanding the attacks on critical race theory. *NEPC*. https://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/crt

Mouffe, C. (2013). *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically*. Verso.

MSNBC (2021, June 24). Joy Reid schools critical race theory critic on legal scholarship [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QhLW1A70G8

Peller, G. (1995). Race-Consciousness. In K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller, & K. Thomas (Eds.), *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement* (pp. 127–158). The New Press.

Pollock, M., & Rogers, J. (2022). *The conflict campaign: Exploring local experiences of the campaign to ban "Critical Race Theory" in public K–12 education in the U.S., 2020–2021*. UCLA IDEA. https://idea.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/the-conflict-campaign/

Recommended Citation

Krönig, F. K. (2023). Reply: Critical Race Theory and Antiracism: Lost in Translation. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, *5*(13). https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2022.13.10

Do you want to comment on this article? Please send your reply to editors@oneducation.net. Replies will be processed like invited contributions. This means they will be assessed according to standard criteria of quality, relevance, and civility. Please make sure to follow editorial policies and formatting guidelines.

franz kasper krönig

Franz Kasper Krönig is professor of cultural pedagogy and didactics at the Cologne University of Applied Sciences (TH Köln). His research interests range from 'big questions' of the philosophy of education, the philosophy of science, and sociological theories of societal transformations to more practice-related questions concerning inclusive pedagogy and cultural education.

1. https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Tj5WQVBmB6SQg-zP_M8uZsQQGH09TxmBY73v23zpyr0/edit#gid=1951079116
2. A good example of this line of argument is the interview of the progressive MSNBC host Joy Reid with the conservative CRT critic Christopher Rufo. Supported with a quote by Ibram X. Kendi, Reid contends that CRT is only taught in law schools (MSNBC, 2021).