

Critical race theory fears are based in lazy, racist thinking

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Fads come and go in the trenches of the culture wars, but the obsession among Republicans with “critical race theory” lingers on. Though the madness has declined since the peaks this summer, when every other segment on Fox News was barraging viewers with yet another GOP operative masquerading as just another concerned parent who was sure little Braeden was gonna get a complex from learning that white people did bad things in the past.

This week's version of that freakout involves a "Florida mom," Quesha King, calling for a "mass exodus from the public school system" over CRT and other alleged liberal overreaches. (That King is also a spokeswoman for the group Moms for Liberty is apparently incidental.)

More than the fact that the GOP is so certain this is a winning issue for them, I can't get over how deeply and embarrassingly lazy the fearmongering efforts are. At every turn, the feeble attempts to criticize, let alone counter, the idea that structural racism exists have fallen flat.

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And the latest effort from the Mississippi Center for Public Policy is a real doozy. A conservative think tank actually grappling with how Mississippi, which has the highest percentage of Black residents of any state, should teach the history of slavery and its aftermaths could be interesting. It instead uses white fears as a vehicle to talk about generic Republican policies — lower taxes, less government regulation and reduced welfare spending — and why students need to be taught that these things are unequivocally good.

The 20-page report, released last Wednesday, is titled “Combating Critical Race Theory in Mississippi.” And right there on page one is the center square in the game of “I’m-not-a-racist-but...” Bingo: A picture of Martin Luther King Jr., with the only quote of King's that Republicans ever acknowledge: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”

Conservatives seem to think 1963's March on Washington was an event that featured King speaking that line and that line only from the podium. MSNBC columnist Kevin Kruse has already done a great job laying out how narrow a view of King it requires to claim that he'd be anti-CRT:

[W]hile King looked ahead to that day, his vision remained firmly fixed on the realities of racism and discrimination in his own time; he devoted the bulk of his address to identifying and articulating them. King chronicled the ways African Americans faced systemic patterns of discrimination and inequality, from “the unspeakable horrors of police brutality” to the discriminatory public and private policies that put African Americans on “a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.”

“We’ve come here today,” King patiently explained again, “to dramatize a shameful condition.”

The report itself isn’t any more intellectually challenging than its cover. “Critical race theory is best thought of as a form of Marxism,” the authors declare, presumably having never read Karl Marx. “Old-school Marxists divided the world by class — capitalist oppressor versus oppressed workers. Critical race theory is a new variant of Marxism that divides the world instead by race — race oppressors versus oppressed races.” So, if there’s a binary in the world where power is unequal, and people want to change that? According to this report, that’s Marxism at work.

Students being taught that racism in America is systemic, that white people are privileged and that meritocracy is a myth are cited in the report as evidence that teachers may already be spreading “critical race theory.”

“If we do not challenge critical race theory, young Mississippians will grow up indoctrinated to believe that America’s material achievements have been gained through exploitation,” the paper warns, doing absolutely no work to counter the idea that America’s material achievements have been gained through exploitation.

Worse, the paper continues, those children “grow up believing that Mississippi’s relative poverty is attributable to a lack of government intervention rather than a consequence of federal programs and a lack of liberty.” These kinds of claims are littered throughout the document, stating as fact claims that they fail to back up with data and, ironically enough, are tinged with racism. In stigmatizing federal programs, which conservatives have demonized as handouts to minorities, they are perpetuating decades of propaganda that in addition to hurting the state’s large Black population has also hurt poor white Americans in the process.

I will give the report some credit for instead of claiming that CRT is an explicit part of primary school curriculums, saying only that “there is evidence that suggests critical race theory and the ideas behind it are being taught” in K-12 schools — most hysteria on this front implies that third graders are being forced to read speeches from Huey Newton of the Black Panthers in class. That credit is heavily outweighed, though, once you subtract points for its insistence that Mississippi public universities should be punished for faculty believing that systemic racism is real.

Despite the inherent laziness at their core, these apologies for white supremacy in American history are finding success in their real goal: making white voters feel less bad about the racism built into the structures around them.

The Mississippi Center for Public Policy's pushback against CRT broadly is even weaker than the Trump administration's "1776 Project" and its attempt to rebut The New York Times Magazine's "1619 Project." But academic rigor was never the purpose of either. And that's why it's so disappointing that despite the inherent laziness at their core, these apologies for white supremacy in American history are finding success in their real goal: making white voters feel less bad about the racism built into the structures around them.

The truth is we've seen this backlash against students learning the uglier truths about our country go back to the 1960s, as Talia Lavin wrote in June. The current freak-out is just as poorly thought out as it was then, but this one comes mixed in with other moral panics: including transgender students playing sports and students wearing masks to prevent the spread of Covid-19. All these things have come together into a heady, toxic brew that Republican politicians are passing out like shots at a kegger.

I'm less convinced than others that this focus on CRT is going to translate directly into success at the polls for Republicans in places like Virginia. But I'm not surprised that opportunists are willing to use CRT as a boogeyman to con white parents into voting for the GOP. If it takes fewer taxes on the rich and less help for the poor to defend their children against the shocking idea that Black kids might start off life with fewer advantages? So be it.