



The origin of critical race theory

Where did critical race theory (CRT) come from? How long has it been around?

- The idea of critical race theory was formed in 1989 as an offshoot of [critical legal studies](#) (CLS), which is a movement that challenges accepted practices and norms in the legal system.
- [Derrick Bell](#), the first black tenured professor at the Harvard Law School, took a two-year leave of absence in protest of Harvard's hiring practices toward women of color. In his absence, his students protested the lack of education around race and law and formed their own alternative class using his book [Race, Racism and American Law](#) (1973). They invited law professors [Richard Delgado](#) and [Neil Gotanda](#) to lecture.
- One student leader was legal scholar [Kimberlé Crenshaw](#), who coined the terms "**critical race theory**" and "**intersectionality**" in the late 80s and early 90s. She organized a conference in 1989 called "New Developments in Critical Race Theory," [creating academic scholarship on CRT for the first time](#). Professor Derrick Bell and many students from the race and law class were present and contributed material.
 - Crenshaw used the phrase "critical race theory" to describe scholarly critiques on the social construction of race and institutionalized racism (especially relating to American law), and how those ideas perpetuate a system that keeps people of color at the bottom. For example, the Jim Crow laws she grew up with determined who was counted as Black and also kept Black citizens from succeeding.
 - Crenshaw also maintains that critical race theory will continue to evolve over time as society changes and [cannot be confined to one definition or practice](#)—something that has kept CRT relevant but also made it challenging to discuss.
 - [Intersectionality](#) refers to how types of life experiences can overlap in the struggle for equality. Crenshaw argued that if organizations and movements for change are [only addressing the societal challenges of one single experience, they will never be effective](#). For example, the experiences of women of color and LGBT women may not be addressed by feminist organizations, thus limiting their impact to a much smaller subset of women.
- Following the 1989 conference, [Patricia J. Williams](#) published [The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor](#), highlighting the problems of a legal system that fails to protect people of color.
- In 1991, Derrick Bell wrote [Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism](#), focusing on how disadvantaged whites must join together with people of color to stop oppression by the privileged. Bell discusses the book in a [Booknotes interview for C-Span](#), which aired in November 1992. Both of Bell's books were bestsellers. The other 24 scholars of color who attended the conference have continued publishing scholarly work around critical race theory.

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