

QUESTING FOR
CERTAINTY IN AMERICA'S
FOREVER CULTURE WAR

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In *The Quest for Certainty* (1929), John Dewey interprets the history of traditional philosophy as a series of attempts to attain security in “a world of hazards” by cordoning off a higher realm of Being where truth and values are eternally secure, a realm impervious to the contingencies of existence and accessible through Knowledge. This realm is alluring because human *action* aimed at attaining security – through the development of arts, technologies, and the state – is, like the world such action aims to remake, riddled with hazards. Proposed solutions fail or, if they are successful, merely help set the stage for yet new hazards that demand new solutions. Given the apparent futility of attaining security through action, traditional philosophy sought security through knowledge of a higher realm.

The resulting dichotomy between action and knowledge, with its relocation of values from the world of experience to a realm of Being, might seem the height of wisdom given the precariousness of the former – yet Dewey eloquently uncovers its poignant irony:

The thing which concerns all of us as human beings is precisely the greatest attainable security of values in concrete existence. The thought that the values which are unstable and wavering in the world in which we live are eternally secure in a higher realm (which reason demonstrates but which we cannot experience), that all the goods which are defeated here are triumphant there, may give consolation to the depressed. *But it does not change the existential situation in the least.* The separation that has been instituted between theory and practice, with its consequent substitution of cognitive quest for absolute assurance for practical endeavor to make the existence of good more secure in experience, has had the effect of distracting attention and diverting energy from a task whose performance would yield definite results.

Dewey is deeply sympathetic to the human need for certainty in the face of existential insecurity. Far from being dismissive of this predicament, it is Dewey's recognition of

it that fuels his disdain for traditional philosophy's dichotomy between theory and practice with its resulting pie-in-the-sky dogmatism that gives the appearance of security while actually failing to secure anything of human interest. Not only has the quest for certainty provided false security, it has historically undercut the only means of improvement in the real world: constructive human action.

Dewey's insights on the irony of the quest for certainty are helpful for thinking about the current "history wars" in the United States – the newest front in America's forever culture war whose signal is the name of a once obscure legal academic field, Critical Race Theory (CRT). Before considering Dewey's insights, it is worth first asking: What is CRT? While self-identified CRT scholars do not subscribe to a "canonical set of doctrines or methodologies," they generally "[challenge] the ways in which race and racial power are constructed and represented in American legal culture and, more generally, in American society as a whole" by first understanding how a legal regime of white supremacy has been historically created and maintained in America and then striving to change that legal regime. But,

describing CRT as a scholarly field dating from the 1970s does not capture what it has come to mean in current controversies. For despite CRT's lack of doctrinal or methodological uniformity, and despite its complexity, it has become for its critics a "catchall target for opposition to equity efforts, affirmative action and 'wokeness' in general." Additionally, for its critics CRT means hostility "to white people" and America – hence, being anti-CRT means being patriotic. As Florida Governor Ron DeSantis put it, "Teaching kids to hate their country and to hate each other is not worth one red cent of taxpayer money." The widespread view that CRT teaches race essentialism or that its purpose is to instill hatred of white people and anti-Americanism is based on disinformation and distortion, spread in part by the fulminations of politicians like DeSantis. Indeed, CRT has come to be defined by its opponents. This is an issue about which Dewey, in *The Public and its Problems*, also has insight – as when he talks about a handful of political bosses who "know what they are about" shaping the views and activities of the uninformed public the way they desire.

So much for CRT as an academic discipline and as a political catchphrase. In what follows, it is the latter meaning I have in mind, as weaponized in the current controversy. Now for the Deweyan insights, which will come to light by considering a recent *Washington Post* profile of the Loudon County, Virginia school district, where a bitter dispute over teaching CRT – erupting in a raucous June 2021 schoolboard meeting – presents a helpful microcosm of the national controversy. Among those interviewed was Emily Curtis, “a White Loudoun resident and a longtime Democrat.” Curtis, 52 years old, “disputed the idea that the people upset about critical race theory are all conservative,” pointing to her own reservations. It is important to note that, in fact, CRT is not taught in Loudon’s schools, nor has it been proposed to introduce CRT to the curriculum – as the set of anti-American dogmas alleged by the anti-CRT Loudon protestors, nor even as a viewpoint in discussions of race in America. Acknowledging this fact, Curtis nevertheless said that “she finds it deeply worrying that the school system is using ‘overlapping vocabulary’ — including terms such as white

supremacy and systemic racism — which she believes is shaping the learning environment.” Curtis’s fear is that “these ideas will trickle through to the classroom, dividing children into racial groups and teaching them that their race decides their fate.” Curtis expressed her core concern with CRT in a rhetorical question: “To get a worldview for little kids that the world is built of these giant, systemic, impossible-to-overcome barriers based on the color of your skin? Kids should be learning to dream without barriers.”

Curtis’s view of CRT, according to which it dogmatically propounds race determinism, is in line with the propagandized interpretation of CRT explained above. What Curtis adds is the idea that schools ought to be teaching children to “dream without barriers.” Of course, one might have thought that confronting America’s history of racist barriers, including how others have fought them, is important for inspiring students to pursue a better society. But Curtis, buying into reactionary views of CRT, establishes a dichotomy between addressing this history and imagining a hopeful future. Through this dichotomy, Curtis evokes an idealized version of the American Dream,

according to which America is a land of boundless opportunity. Kids should not be challenged with views that might complicate this ideal. Instead, they should be led to believe that the stage is already set for their success if they will but pursue it. There is something admirable in Curtis's proposal: the vision of an equal, open America where all kids have the opportunity and wherewithal to achieve their dreams. The problem lurks in the implication that this ideal country already exists antecedently, rather than being something that is only achieved and maintained through human endeavor.

In a Deweyan framework, the American Dream envisioned here is an example of an ideal that, by being separated from the world of experience in order to better secure it, is actually undermined. The reality of the American Dream might be pleasing to imagine, but will the kind of democratic society worthy of patriotism be achieved by rhetorically positing an ideal America – or, for example, by implementing progressive policies? The upshot of Dewey's interpretation of traditional philosophy as a quest for certainty is that the dichotomy between knowing and

doing must be dropped so that human values, such as the American Dream, can actually be secured through collective, intelligent action. Importantly, part of directing action by intelligence in social policy would include understanding the role of racism in American law and politics so as to overcome them – making these topics worthy of consideration in patriotic American schools. The alternative of believing that the American Dream is secure or *real* because it can be accessed through contemplative knowledge – or dreams – is a false security.

As noted, in Loudoun, the school board's efforts have not been to indoctrinate students with CRT, but to reverse policies that demonstrably imperiled Black and Hispanic students' progress, while enacting other policies that would help these students. By Deweyan lights, this is the right sort of initiative – for kids to dream without barriers, it is better to take practical actions to eliminate those barriers than to complacently encourage youngsters to think big and dream away their adverse situation. Once efforts are focused on improving existing circumstances, deliberation is needed to ensure the best course of action is taken. To actually secure

the values we cherish, to make them a reality, including the “American Dream,” Dewey advises that we drop the dichotomy between ideal and action, theory and practice, since only through the action we take together can our values be secured.