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## Critical race theory has Nazi roots

by Bruce Gilley

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The Los Angeles County Museum of Art last year held an exhibit of works by German artists from the interwar period. Among them was the modernist painter Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, who drew inspiration from the cultural artifacts that came to Germany during its short-lived colonial era in Africa and the Pacific, which was terminated by the Allied powers after World War I.

Reflecting a core tenet of critical race theory, the curators scolded Kirchner for his “colonial” interests. He “encountered looted art in ethnographic museums that presented such work out of their cultural contexts,” an exhibit catalog complained. Curators used the same tone at Berlin’s Brücke Museum this year in an exhibit of works by Kirchner and others who “appropriated” colonial images for their own art. One curator accused the artists of creating an “idealized colonial world, charged with eroticism, sensuality, and in connection with nature.”

Funnily enough, charges of inappropriate cultural mixing and moral degeneracy were levied against Kirchner and others by the Nazis as well. They put 25 of his works on display in their “Degenerate Art” exhibition in 1937. Kirchner committed suicide the following year. For the Nazis, as for today’s critical race theorists, the idea of a liberal society that rejects cultural and racial categories and mixes freely was an abomination.

Today’s race-based doctrines that dominate the Left have borrowed as often from the totalitarian Right as from the totalitarian Left. Adolf Hitler was a fierce critic of Germany’s colonial era, which he called “criminally stupid” for its cosmopolitan free-trading ethos. He particularly abhorred the prominent role that German Jews played in overseas colonialism, which only reinforced its impurity.

After the German loss of colonies at Versailles in 1919 and the collapse of the Weimar Republic in 1933, Hitler competed with Joseph Stalin for the affection of the emerging nationalists in the colonies. While Stalin offered class-based revolution, Hitler offered

something sweeter: ethnic chauvinism and a race war against perceived oppressors. Any leader who could convince the people that all their problems were a result of the devious schemes of other races was sure to gain the upper hand, he thought.

Throughout World War II, Hitler entertained a steady stream of Third World nationalists who came to Berlin for tips on how to drive out the oppressors, mostly meaning British and French white rulers. Gandhi wrote kind letters to Hitler and sent top Congress Party leaders to Germany to work with the Nazis on ending British rule through racial appeals. Palestinian clerics, Egyptian generals, and Indonesian communalists all sought lessons from the führer on how to end the relatively liberal rule of colonialism and replace it with native despotism, just as Hitler claimed to have freed Germany from the “colonialism” of the Treaty of Versailles.

The fascist government created by the Japanese in Burma adopted the Nazi-esque slogan: “One Blood, one voice, one leader.” The Nazis told nationalists that they should advocate “national homelands” in which each race would be protected from competition and mixing with others — forerunners to today’s racial “safe spaces” and affinity groups.

After the war, the formative movements and texts of what would become critical race theory continued their explicit borrowing from the Nazis. A former Arab organizer for the Nazis, Johann von Leers, took a position as adviser to Gamal Nasser’s bombastic and racist government in Cairo in 1955. Von Leers was one of 2,000 former Nazis who lived in Egypt and worked for Nasser after the war. In the words of scholar Joel Fishman, Von Leers “saw an opportunity in the ‘wars of liberation’ of the time and positioned his anti-Semitism within the context of Third-Worldism.”

Echoes of Nazism could also be heard in a book that would become a key text of critical race theory, *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon, a black psychiatrist from French Martinique. Fanon was a supporter of the insurgency in Algeria against French rule that erupted in 1954 with the backing of Nasser and his Nazi friends. The conflict claimed 350,000 lives. The German scholar Egon Flaig calls *The Wretched of the Earth* a “counter-enlightenment manifesto” based on “fascist anti-colonialism” because of its race-based hatred and attacks on modernity. In his book, Fanon praises the Nazis for resolving Germany’s border issues by force and urges a similar revolution in Algeria. As happened in Germany, he wrote, “the colonized peoples, these slaves of modern times, have run out of patience.”

Riffing on an apocryphal saying attributed to Nazi leader Hermann Goring — “When I hear the word ‘culture’, I unholster my Browning” — Fanon wrote, “When the colonized hears a speech about Western culture, he pulls out his machete.”

Fanon’s glorification of the “curative” or “therapeutic” role of violence in bringing about racial liberation was straight out of Nazi doctrine. “Why, one might ask, do Fanon’s sentences read like Nazi ideology?” Flaig asks. The reason is obvious: The cultural critique of Western society and of classical liberal values that are the heart of critical race theory grew in part on the Nazi manure heap. Taking his cue from Fanon, black nationalist Idi Amin, dictator of Uganda, expelled all Israelis and Asians in 1972, believing that phantom “structural racism” would end with the purging of successful economic groups.

Fast forward to today, and the woke museum curators of Los Angeles and Berlin continue to march under the banner of racial purification and illiberal state guidance of society, core tenets of critical race theory that have an ugly past.

*Bruce Gilley is a professor of political science at Portland State University. His new book *In Defense of German Colonialism: And How its Critics Empowered Nazis, Communists and the Enemies of the West* was released on Aug. 2.*