



Darrick Hamilton opens CSU Democracy Summit with call for economic justice

Chloe Waskey, Staff Reporter

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Collegian | Ali Mashburn

Colorado State University's Democracy Summit 2025, hosted by the College of Liberal Arts, kicked off Wednesday with a keynote talk from Darrick Hamilton, highlighting the summit's theme of democratic innovation with a lecture on democracy, race and economic inclusion.

Hamilton is the founding director of the Institute on Race, Power and Political Economy at The New School in New York City and is the chief economist for the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations. His work, which has influenced legislation in [several states](#), examines how racial and generational conditions influence economic disparities.

CSU graduate student Kemal Perdana said Hamilton had been a prominent figure in his studies.

"As graduate students in the (economics) department, a lot of what we do is very theoretical, and we don't really get to see the fruits of that theory," Perdana said. "Being able to learn from someone who's taken that theory (and) applied it to the real world in a meaningful way with the aim of making the world more equitable (and) more just, it's really inspiring."

The event was the [first of many](#) to take place over the three-day-long Democracy Summit, which began last year as a part of CSU's thematic year of democracy. Now the summit is back to continue to facilitate conversations on democracy, this year with a focus on democratic innovation.

"We understand that democracy is always something we're making together," said Greg Dickinson, director of the Joe Blake Center for Engaged Humanities. "It's never finished. It's never finalized. So we always need to talk about democracy."

Hamilton's talk centered on creating a "human rights economy" — an economic model that seeks to promote human flourishing and civic engagement. The model is based on A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin's "[A 'Freedom Budget' for All Americans](#)" as well as Martin Luther King Jr.'s [Poor People's Campaign](#).

"Our growth and obscene concentration of wealth and power is wreaking havoc on our democracy as well as our capacity to collectively envision, establish and implement a just and inclusive society," Hamilton said.

Hamilton attributed the current wealth disparities in the U.S. to an economic system rooted in slavery that has yet to overcome racist precedent that has been reinforced throughout history.

"To achieve racial justice, we need an honest and sobering confession about historical sins," Hamilton said. "Reparations provide a retrospective, direct and parsimonious approach to redress the black (and) white wealth gap. Moreover, it requires public responsibility and atonement for that long history of racial injustice."

"Whether activism will lead to a positive outcome, maybe, maybe not. But whether inaction won't lead to a positive outcome, I can absolutely say that's going to happen." -Darrick Hamilton, AFL-CIO chief economist

A human rights economy would seek to correct existing racial and class imbalances through an understanding of the economy driven by civil rights. Hamilton said the modern framing of poverty as a choice needs to be challenged with historical context that suggests economic disparity is intentional and systemic.

"The racial wealth gap, income inequality, wage stagnation and the persistence of poverty that characterize the American economy, they're not natural nor are they accidental," Hamilton said. "They are the direct and deliberate result of laws, practice and policy, both past and present, designed to serve specific interests."



Professor Darrick Hamilton answers questions from Associate Dean for Research and Graduate Programs Elissa Braunstein during the Q&A after his keynote speech at Colorado State University's Democracy Summit 2025 March 5. (Collegian | Ali Mashburn)

Given these systemic inequities, Hamilton said the American people need to fight for meaningful policy interventions that address poverty at its root.

"The solution to poverty is to abolish it directly by a now well-discussed measure: guaranteed income," Hamilton said. "King's call for a federal job guarantee, guaranteed income and even reparations reflected his belief — broadly speaking — that poverty is a moral failing of the nation, and for people to truly be free, it requires resources."

For example, he proposed that the government implement a publicly funded trust account, known as baby bonds, which would provide all Americans with financial resources upon turning 18. Baby bonds function like social security, in which taxes are collected and redistributed to each person at a certain age.

"Baby bonds is a guaranteed birthright to capital," Hamilton explained. "It ensures that the benefit of wealth building will not be reserved exclusively for those that have wealth and opens the door for many people to have that wealth."

Hamilton acknowledged that many people — young people in particular — may doubt their ability to create change. However, he said students should remember that inaction will never be effective.

"There's an active politicization that might be trying to fuel a pessimism and inaction, a cynicism that, you know, we should be attuned to," Hamilton said. "Whether activism will lead to a positive outcome, maybe, maybe not. But whether inaction won't lead to a positive outcome, I can absolutely say that's going to happen."



The question "What makes you hopeful about democracy?" is posed to attendees of Colorado State University's Democracy Summit 2025 March 5. One participant wrote, "Our CSU students make me hopeful for democracy." (Collegian | Ali Mashburn)

For many attendees, the keynote speech and the Democracy Summit as a whole served as a catalyst for deeper reflection on democracy and civic engagement.

"It was a good introduction to having me think more deeply about the content of our world and how things kind of correlate in terms of politics," CSU student Aubrey Francis said after the speech.

Hamilton said today's younger generation has shown that they are willing to fight for change, and that gives him faith in an equitable future.

"Frankly, my hope is in y'all," Hamilton said. "Keep that fire. It's your economy. It's your government. So absolutely seize it."

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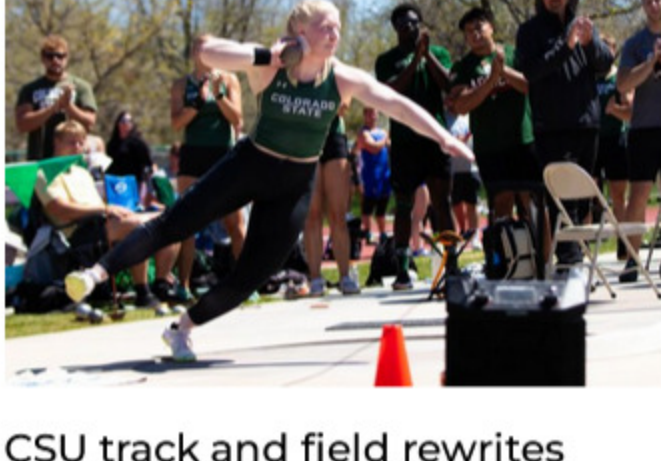


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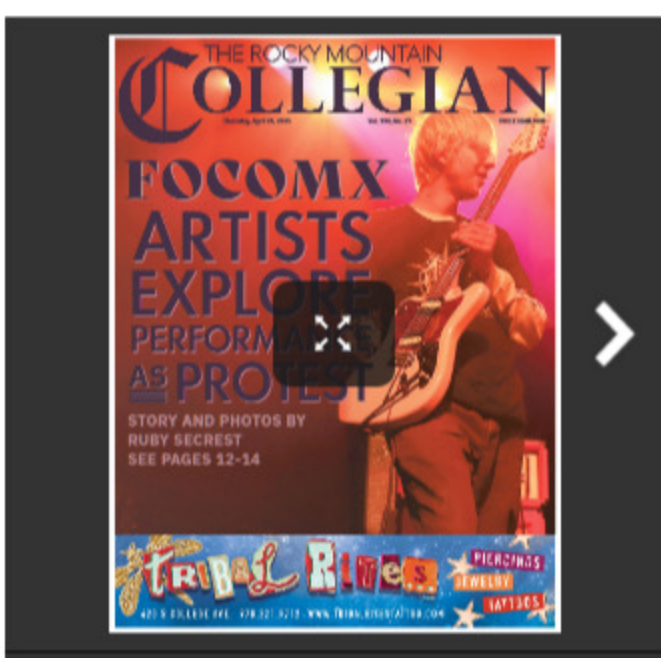
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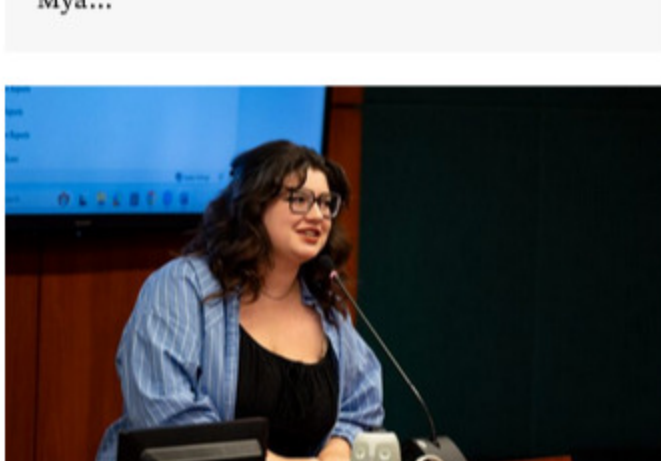
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