



**WALNUT CREEK CHURCH<sup>®</sup>**

# Social Justice, Critical Theory, and Christianity: Are they Compatible?

Dr. Neil Shenvi

Sept. 17, 2021

This talk is not about Trump



This talk is not about Trump



# This talk is not about Trump



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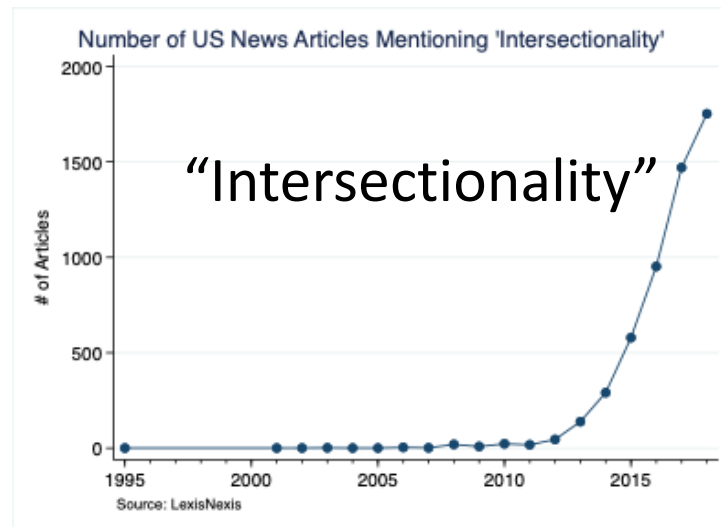
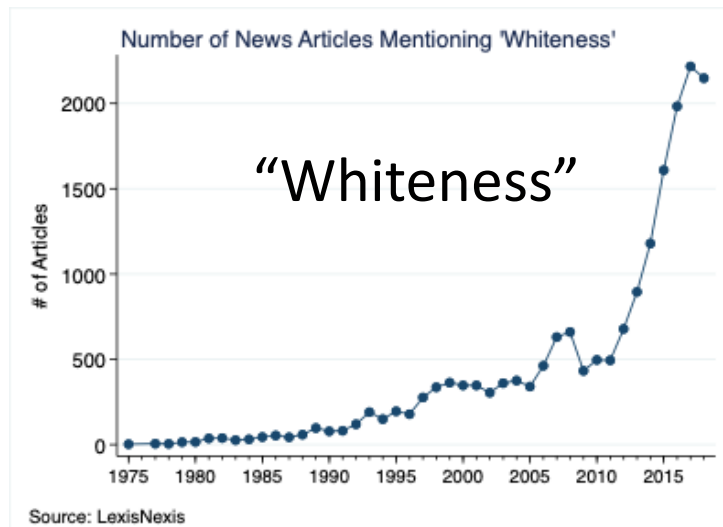
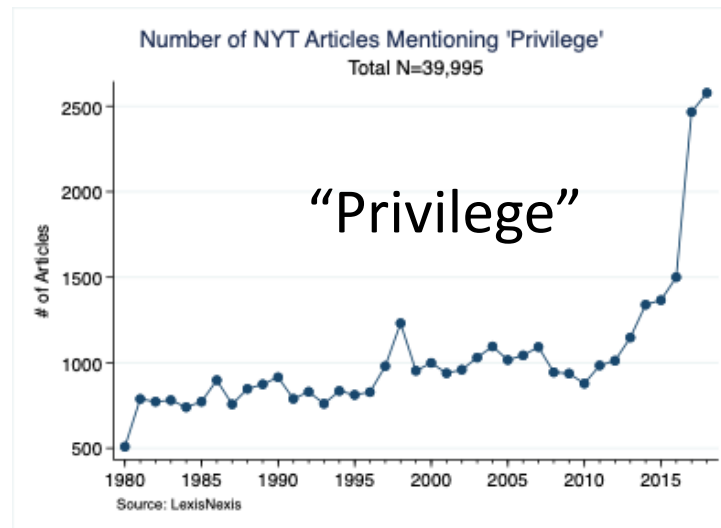
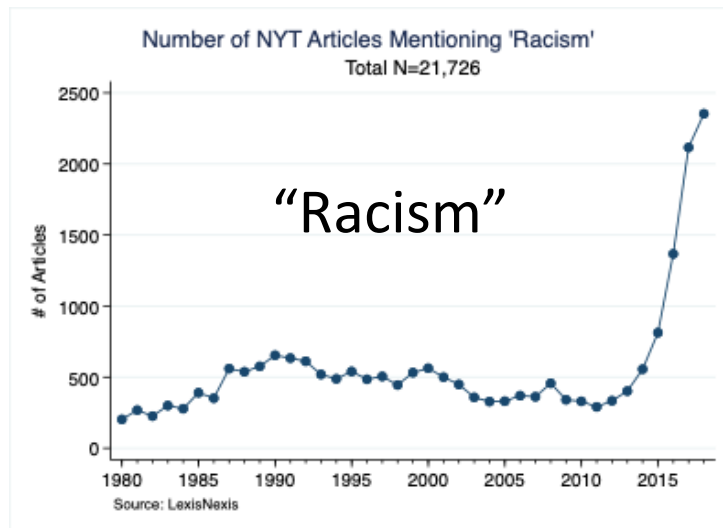
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# NYTimes word usage




# Smithsonian NMAAHC

*"Whiteness and white racialized identity refer to the way that white people, their customs, culture, and beliefs operate as the standard by which all other groups of are compared."*

TALKING ABOUT RACE | NMAAHC

## ASPECTS & ASSUMPTIONS OF WHITENESS & WHITE CULTURE IN THE UNITED STATES

White dominant culture, or **whiteness**, refers to the ways white people and their traditions, attitudes and ways of life have been normalized over time and are now considered standard practices in the United States. And since white people still hold most of the institutional power in America, we have all internalized some aspects of white culture — including people of color.




**Rugged Individualism**

- The individual is the primary unit
- Self-reliance
- Independence & autonomy highly valued + rewarded
- Individuals assumed to be in control of their environment, "You get what you deserve"

**Family Structure**

- The nuclear family: father, mother, 2.3 children is the ideal social unit
- Husband is breadwinner and head of household
- Wife is homemaker and subordinate to the husband
- Children should have own rooms, be independent



**Emphasis on Scientific Method**

- Objective, rational linear thinking
- Cause and effect relationships
- Quantitative emphasis

# Black Lives Matter

“We are self-reflexive and do the work required to dismantle cisgender privilege and uplift Black trans folk, especially Black trans women who continue to be disproportionately impacted by trans-antagonistic violence...

We foster a queer-affirming network. When we gather, we do so with the intention of freeing ourselves from the tight grip of heteronormative thinking, or rather, the belief that all in the world are heterosexual (unless s/he or they disclose otherwise).”



# Outline

- Why should we care?
- What is critical theory?
- What are the problems with critical theory?
- Logical implications
- Conclusions and book recommendations

# Why should we care?

●●●○○ Sprint LTE 9:11 AM 75%  
< Messages Pretend Texts Details

Christians should care about social justice!!!

Yeah, that seems reasonable

Beacuse the gospel is about caring for the poor

Wait, what do you mean

Does it really matter whether Jesus is God anyway?

...

●●●○○ Sprint LTE 8:57 AM 75%  
< Messages Pretend Texts Details

Sexism is a sin. Women are made in God's image

absolutely!

The church needs to stop oppressing women!

in what way?

SMASH THE PATRIARCHY! WICCA FOR ALL!

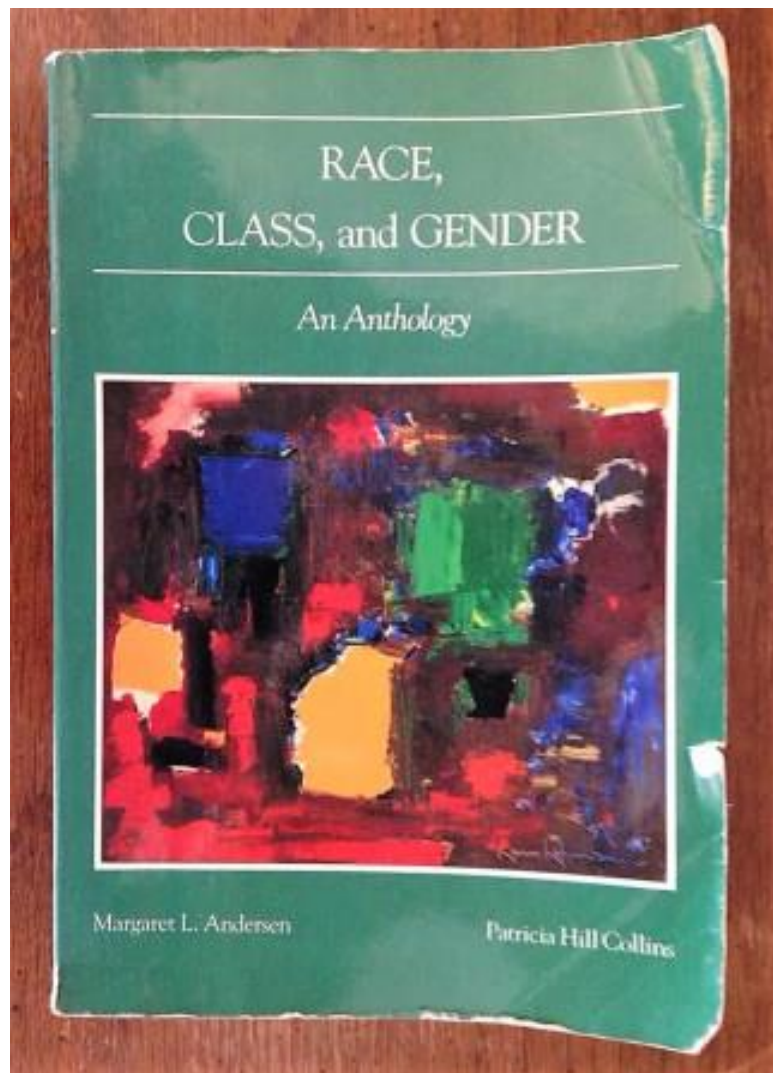
I'm must be missing something

Warning: fake texts. For pedagogical use only

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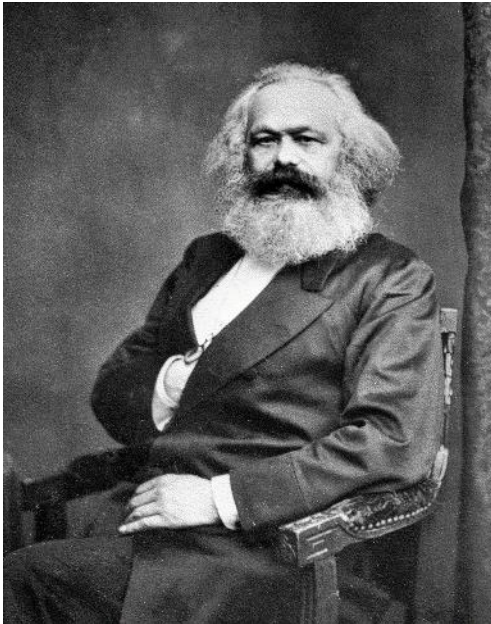
# Why should we care?



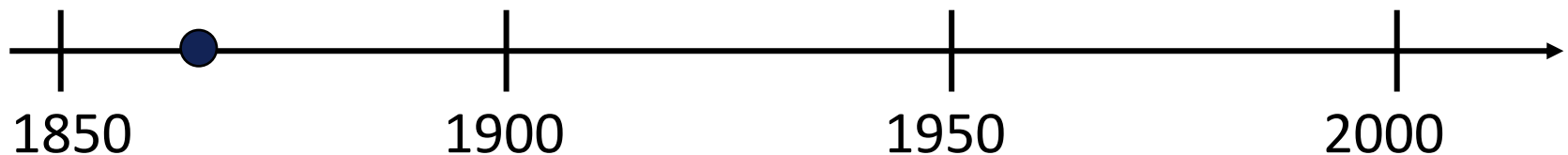
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# Critical theory and Karl Marx



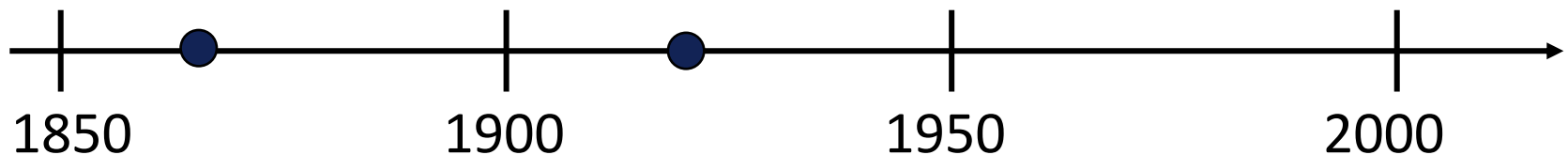
“Alone among these thinkers [i.e., Horkheimer, Bourdieu, Foucault, etc.], **Karl Marx invites consensus as a ‘true’ critical theorist. Indeed, for many, he alone inaugurates the critical tradition**” (Levinson et al, *Beyond Critique*, p. 25-26)



# Critical theory and the Frankfurt School



“Critical theory was conceived within the crucible of Marxism” “The Frankfurt School not only contested establishmentarianism view of history, but projected a radical alternative. European radicals applied its ideas to reconfiguring the family, sexuality, and education.” – Bronner, *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 2, 7



# Other critical social theorists

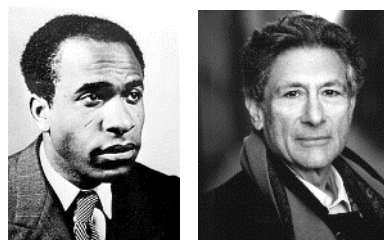
## Cultural Studies



Bourdieu

Hall

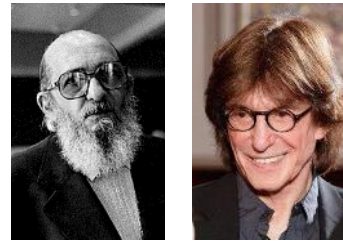
## Postcolonialism



Fanon

Said

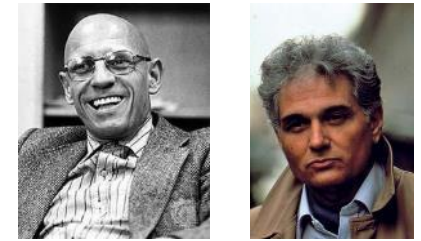
## Critical pedagogy



Freire

Giroux

## Postmodernism



Foucault

Derrida

## Feminism



de Beauvoir

Friedan

## Black feminism



hooks

Lorde

## Queer theory



Butler

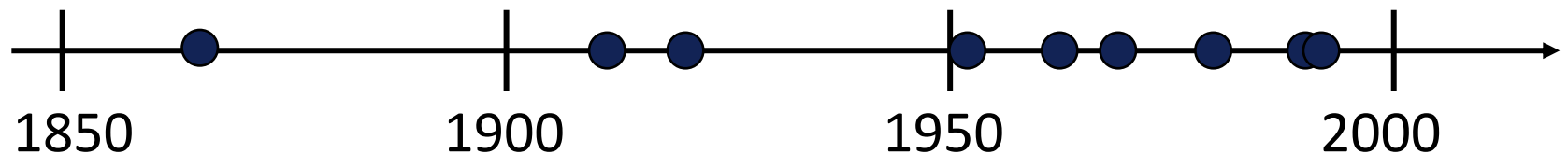
Rich

## Critical Race Theory



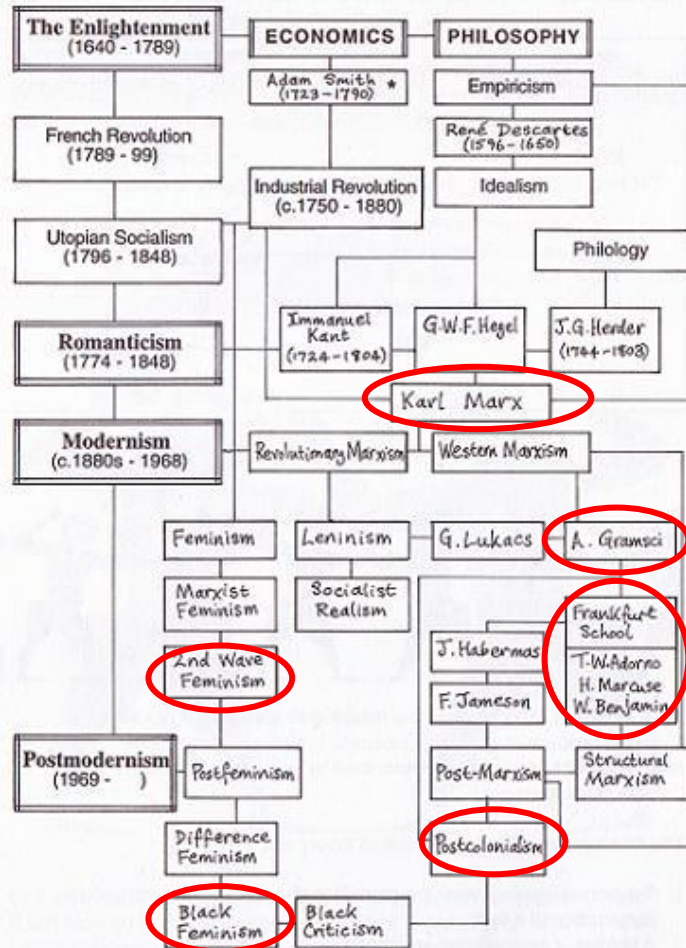
Bell

Crenshaw

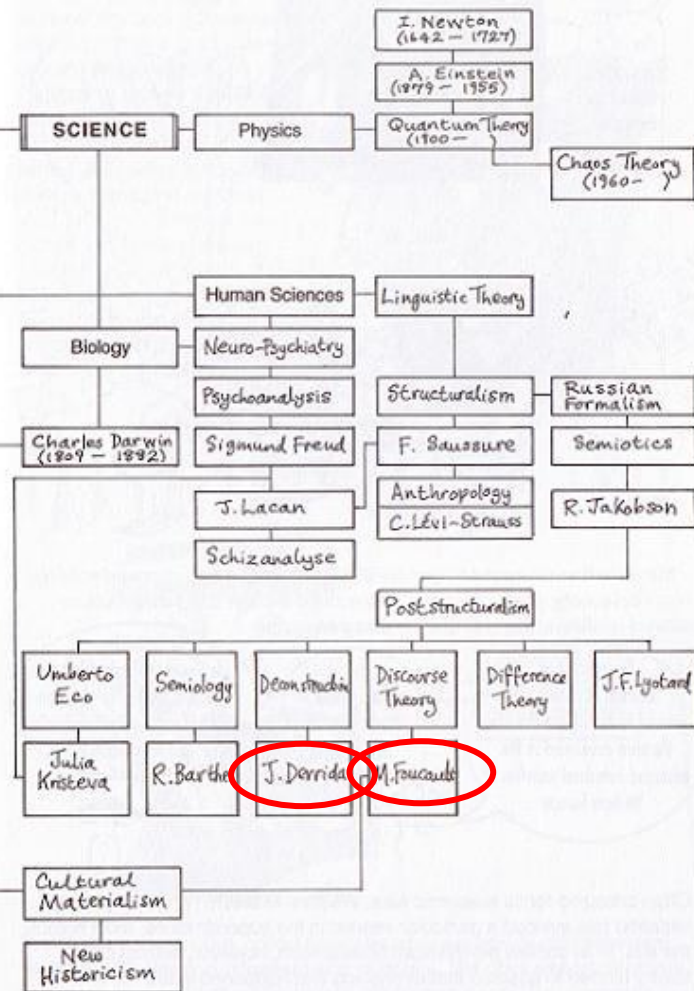


# The Taxonomy of Critical Theory

## Mapping the Origins of Critical Theory



\* Single names given in the table are 'representative figures'



# The Taxonomy of Critical Theory

“critical theory” = critical social theories

**Neo-Marxism**

**CULTURAL  
STUDIES**

**Queer  
Theory**

**CRITICAL  
PEDAGOGY**

“Critical Theory”  
= Frankfurt School



**feminism**

**GENDER  
STUDIES**

**intro to  
critical  
race  
theory**

Critical theory resists essentialism (it is hard to define!)

# What is critical theory?

“intersectionality”

“White privilege”

“White fragility”

“colorblind racism”

“internalized oppression”

“lived experience”

“heteronormativity”

“gender performativity”

“epistemic injustice”

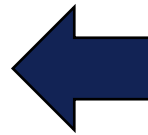
“cisheteropatriarchy”

“compulsory heterosexuality”

“whiteness”

# What is critical theory?

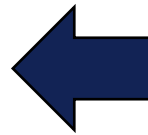
“intersectionality”  
“White privilege”  
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“lived experience”  
“heteronormativity”  
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“epistemic injustice”  
“cisheteropatriarchy”  
“compulsory heterosexuality”  
“whiteness”



Kimberlé Crenshaw  
Peggy McIntosh  
Robin DiAngelo  
Eduardo Bonilla-Silva  
Patricia Hill Collins  
Maurianne Adams  
Richard Delgado  
Beverly Tatum  
etc...

# What's in a name?

“intersectionality”  
“White privilege”  
“White fragility”  
“colorblind racism”  
“internalized oppression”  
“lived experience”  
“heteronormativity”  
“gender performativity”  
“epistemic injustice”  
“cisheteropatriarchy”  
“compulsory heterosexuality”  
“whiteness”



~~Cultural Marxism~~

~~Identity Politics~~

~~Critical Race Theory~~

~~Neo Marxism~~

~~Intersectionality~~

~~Grievance Studies~~

~~Applied postmodernism~~

~~Critical Social Justice~~

**“Contemporary critical theory”**

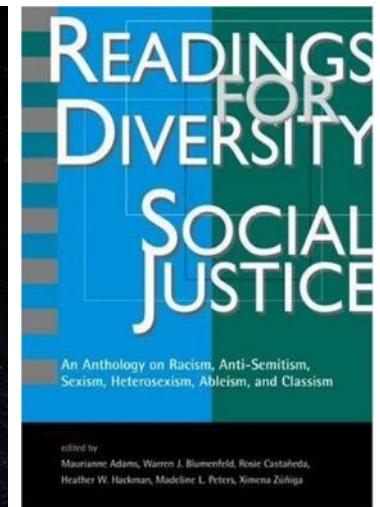
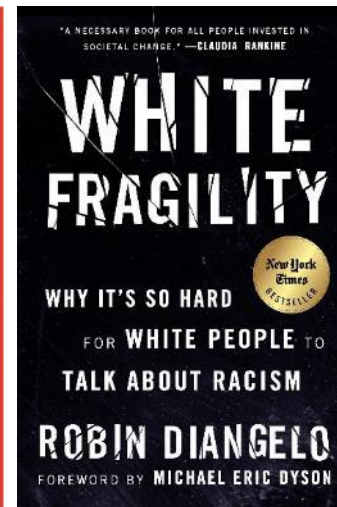
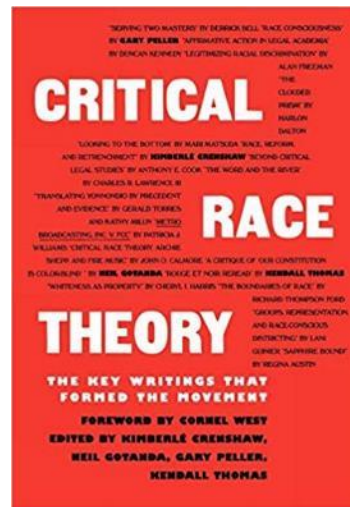
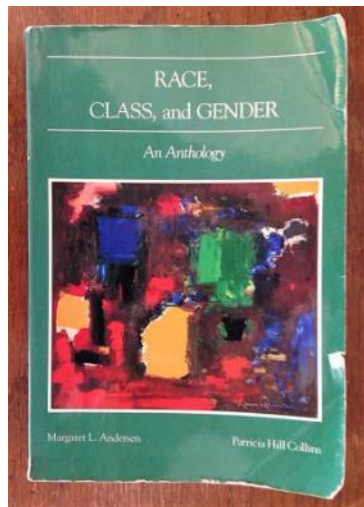
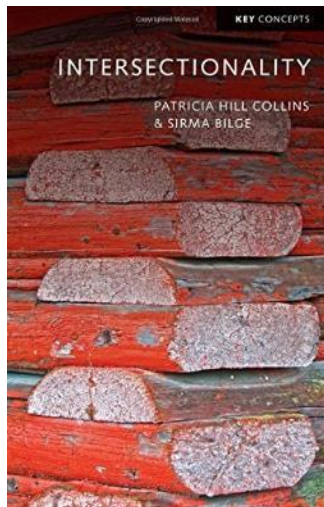
# The central premises of contemporary critical theory?

Premise I: Social binary

Premise II: Oppression through ideology

Premise III: Lived experience

Premise IV: Social justice



# Outline

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  - Premise 1: Social binary
  - Premise 2: Oppression through ideology
  - Premise 3: Lived experience
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# Premise #1: Society is divided into oppressed and oppressor groups

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Is Everyone Really Equal?

**Figure 5.1. Group Identities Across Relations of Power**

| Minoritized/Target Group   | Oppression                               | Dominant/<br>Agent Group |
|--|--|--------------------------|
| Peoples of Color   | Racism                                   | White                    |
| Poor<br>Working Class  | Classism                                 | Owning Class             |
| Middle Class   |  |                          |
| Women; Transgender;<br>Genderqueer                                       | Sexism                                   | (cis)Men                 |
| Gays; Lesbians; Bisexuals;<br>Two Spirit                                 | Heterosexism                             | Heterosexuals            |
| Muslims; Buddhists; Jews;<br>Hindus; and other non-Christ-<br>ian groups | Religious<br>Oppression<br>Anti-Semitism | Christians               |
| People with Disabilities   | Ableism                                  | Able-bodied              |
| Immigrants (perceived)   | Nationalism                              | Citizens (perceived)     |
| Indigenous Peoples   | Colonialism                              | White Settlers           |

# Premise #1: Society is divided into oppressed and oppressor groups



Matrix of Oppression

| Social Identity Categories | Privileged Social Groups            | Border Social Groups<br>↔                       | Targeted Social Groups                    | Ism                    |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|---|------------------------|
| Race                       | White People                        | Biracial People<br>(White/Latino, Black, Asian) | Asian, Black, Latino, Native People       | Racism                 |
| Sex                        | Bio Men                             | Transsexual, Intersex People                    | Bio Women                                 | Sexism                 |
| Gender                     | Gender Conforming Bio Men And Women | Gender Ambiguous Bio Men and Women              | Transgender, Genderqueer, Intersex People | Transgender Oppression |
| Sexual Orientation         | Heterosexual People                 | Bisexual People                                 | Lesbians, Gay Men                         | Heterosexism           |
| Class                      | Rich, Upper Class People            | Middle Class People                             | Working Class, Poor People                | Classism               |
| Ability/Disability         | Temporarily Abled-Bodied People     | People with Temporary Disabilities              | People with Disabilities                  | Ableism                |
| Religion                   | Protestants                         | Roman Catholic (historically)                   | Jews, Muslims, Hindus                     | Religious Oppression   |
| Age                        | Adults                              | Young Adults                                    | Elders, Young People                      | Ageism/Adultism        |

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# Premise #2: Oppression occurs through hegemonic power

“oppression also traditionally carries a strong connotation of conquest and colonial domination... New left social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, however, shifted the meaning of the concept of oppression. **In its new usage, oppression designates the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not because a tyrannical power coerces them, but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society...** Oppression in this sense is structural, rather than the result of a few people’s choices or policies. Its causes are embedded in **unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols.**” – Iris Young, “Five Faces of Oppression,” *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, p. 36



“**Marcuse’s notions of ‘one dimensional thought’...complements the critical theory tradition to better understand how hegemony, as cultural domination, normalizes and sustains the political/economic power of particular historic blocs** – the ruling coalition of economic, political and cultural elites” – Lauren Langman, “From Domination to Liberation: Marcuse, Gramsci, and a Critical Theory of Social Mobilization”, p.14, *Conference Papers – American Sociological Association*.



# Premise #2: Oppression occurs through hegemonic power

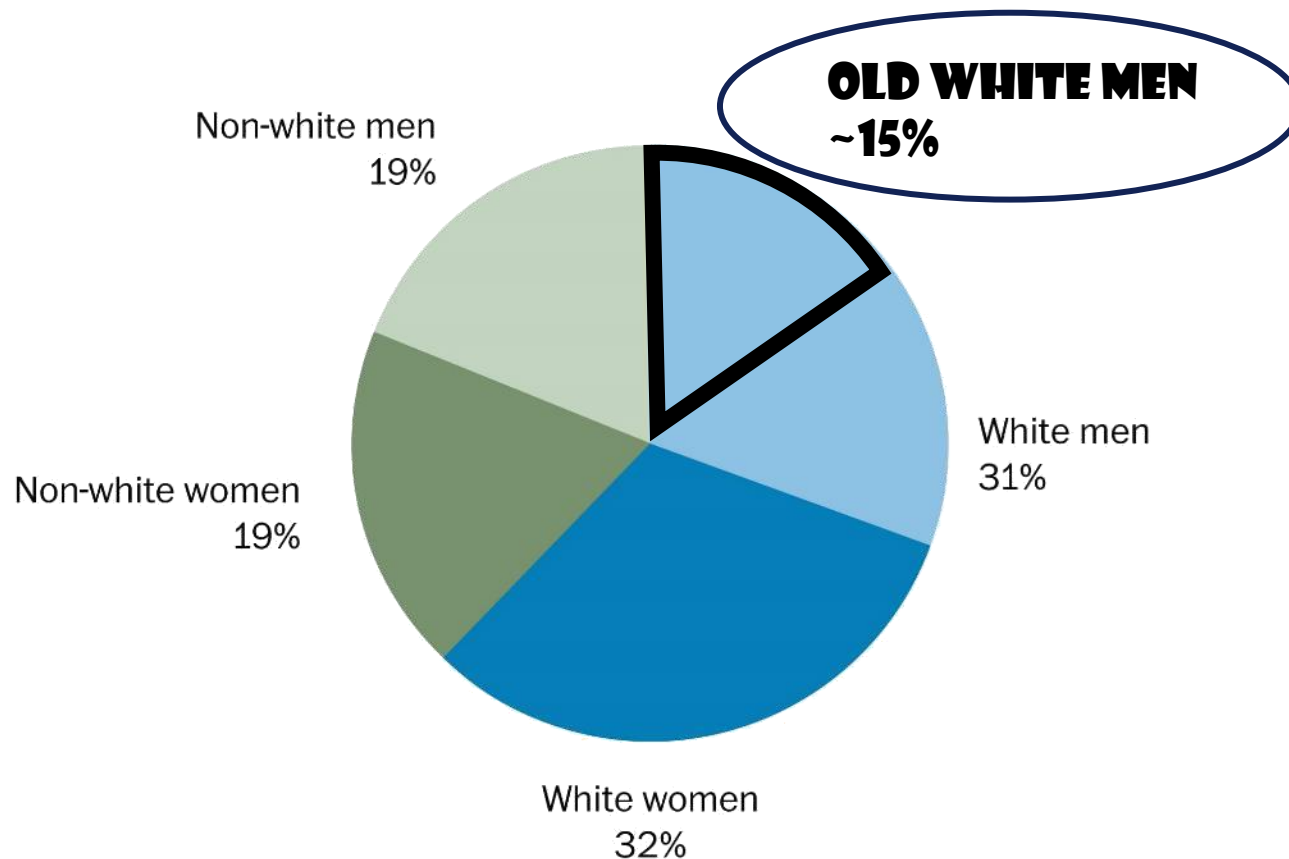
“Ideology – the received wisdom – makes current social arrangements seem fair and natural. **Those in power sleep well at night; their conduct does not seem to them like oppression**” – Richard Delgado, “Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others”; in *Critical Race Theory*, pp 71-72



“This new ideology [of color-blind racism] has become a formidable political tool for the maintenance of the racial order... **the beauty of this new ideology is that it aids in the maintenance of white privilege without fanfare, without naming those who it subjects and those who it rewards.**” Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, p. 3-4



# Premise #2: Oppression occurs through hegemonic power

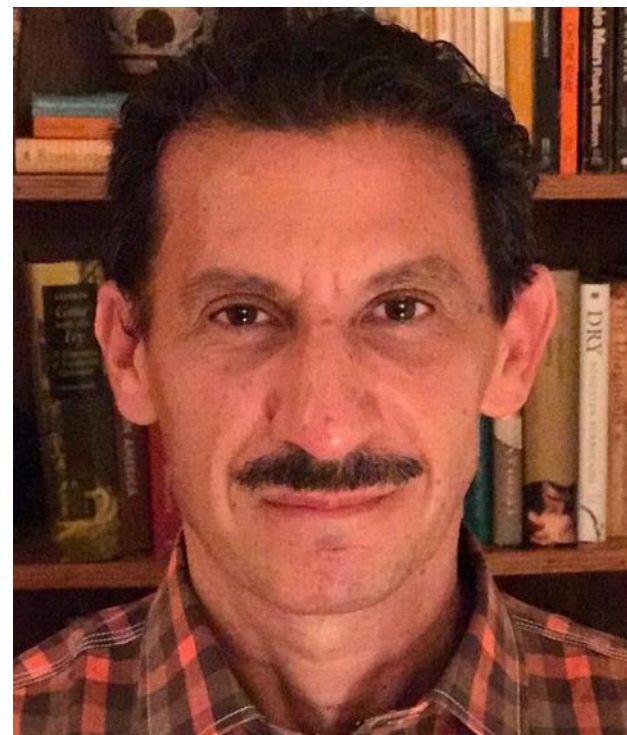


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# Premise #3: 'Lived experience' gives oppressed groups privileged access to truth

“oppressed groups do have a distinctive set of experiences and ... are better positioned and better equipped for a particular kind of epistemic subversion... As Mills puts it, ‘Hegemonic **[dominant] groups characteristically have experiences that foster illusory perceptions about society’s functioning, whereas subordinate groups characteristically have experiences that (at least potentially) give rise to more adequate conceptualizations’**” – Medina, *Epistemology of Resistance*, p. 46.



# Premise #3: 'Lived experience' gives oppressed groups privileged access to truth

**“[We] must learn to privilege [our] own perspectives and those of other outsiders,** understanding that the dominant legal discourse is premised upon the claim to knowledge of objective truths and the existence of neutral principles. We must free ourselves from the mystification produced by this ideology. **We must learn to trust our own senses, feelings, and experiences, and to give them authority, even (or especially) in the face of dominant accounts of social reality that claim universality.”** – Charles R. Lawrence III, “The Word and The River: Pedagogy as Scholarship as Struggle,” in Crenshaw’s *CRT*, p. 338



# Premise #3: 'Lived experience' gives oppressed groups privileged access to truth

“The idea that objectivity is best reached only through rational thought is a specifically **Western and masculine way of thinking** – one that we will challenge throughout this book.” – Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins, “Reconstructing Knowledge,” in Anderson and Collins, *Race, Class, and Gender*, p. 4-5



# Premise #3: 'Lived experience' gives oppressed groups privileged access to truth

## Oppression and epistemology:

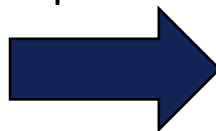


Privilege



Internalized oppression

Lived  
experience



Liberatory consciousness

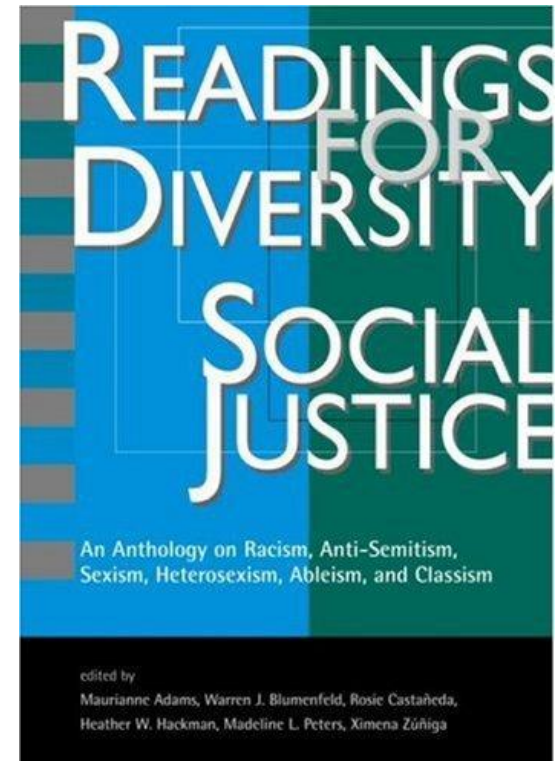
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# Premise #4: Social justice demands the liberation of oppressed groups

## Definition of social justice:

“Prior to celebrating diversity, we must first eliminate intolerance. No matter what form it takes or who does it, we must all take action to stop intolerance when it happens. Working towards a celebration of diversity implies working for **social justice – the elimination of all forms of social oppression...** Social injustice takes many forms. It can be injustice based on a **person’s gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, physical or mental ability, or economic class.**” – Mary McClintock, “How to Interrupt Oppressive Behavior,” *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, p. 483



# Unifying themes of critical theory

“the cluster of philosophical approaches to [issues of identity is] **known by the umbrella term critical theory**. Critical theory is today a diverse phenomenon that draws deeply and variously on strands of Marxist thought, psychoanalysis, feminist theory, postcolonialism, poststructuralism, queer theory, and deconstruction... at the core of the various approaches of critical theorists lies a relatively simple set of convictions: **the world is to be divided up between those who have power and those who do not; the dominant Western narrative of truth is really an ideological construct designed to preserve the power structure of the status quo; and the goal of critical theory is therefore to destabilize this power structure by destabilizing the dominant narratives that are used to justify –to ‘naturalize’– it**” - Trueman



# Outline

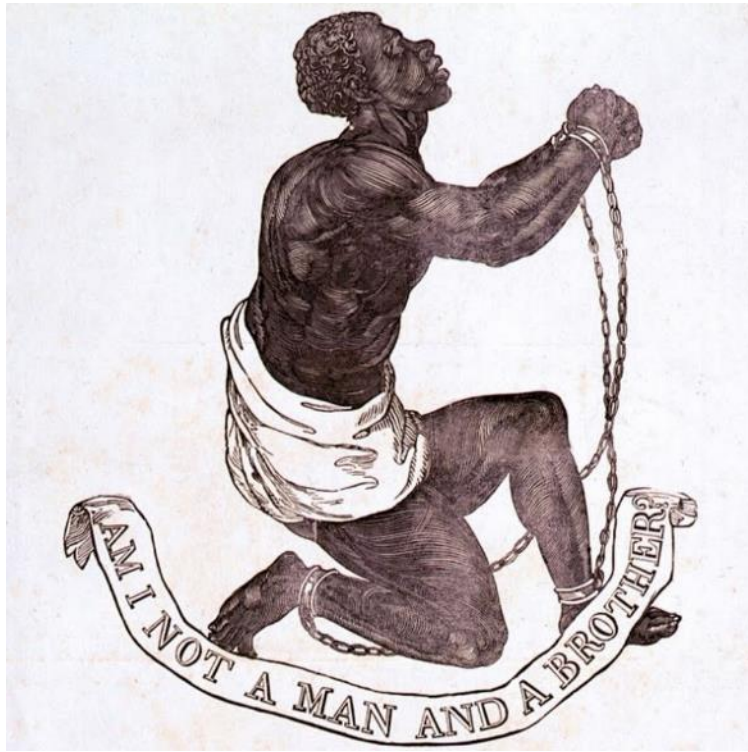
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# Strength #1. Emphasis on the sinfulness of oppression

- “Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.” – Is. 1:17
- “Do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.” – Zech. 7:20
- “Love your neighbor as yourself.” – Mark 12:30
- “Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts” – James 5:4



# Strength #2. Focus on structures, systems, and norms



# Strength #3: Recognition of hegemonic power




# Outline

- Why should we care?
- What is critical theory?
- What are the problems with critical theory?
  - Worldview
  - Epistemology
  - Adversarial identities
  - Hegemonic power
- Logical implications
- Conclusions and book recommendations

# Worldview questions

- Who are we?
- What is our fundamental problem as human beings?
- What is the solution to our problem?
- What is our primary moral duty?
- What is our purpose in life?

# Christianity and critical theory are competing worldviews

|                 |   |  |   |  |
|-----------------|---|--|---|--|
| Christianity    |  <div>CREATION</div> <div>FALL</div> <div>REDEMPTION</div> <div>RESTORATION</div> |  |   |  |
| Critical theory | -----   | <p>Patriarchy<br/>White supremacy<br/>Heteronormativity<br/>Toxic masculinity</p> <p><b>OPPRESSION</b></p> <p>Classism<br/>Ageism<br/>Ableism<br/>Cisgenderism</p> | <p>Protest<br/>Resistance</p> <p><b>ACTIVISM</b></p> <p>Education<br/>Awareness</p> | <p>Equity<br/>Power reversal</p> <p><b>LIBERATION</b></p> <p>Justice<br/>Diversity</p> |

# Worldview questions

|                       | <b>Christianity</b> | <b>Critical theory</b>    |
|-----------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|
| Who are we?           | God's creatures     | Members of various groups |
| What is our problem?  | Sin                 | Oppression                |
| What is the solution? | Jesus               | Liberation                |
| What is our duty?     | Loving God          | Liberating the oppressed  |
| What is our purpose?  | Glorifying God      | Working for liberation    |

# Critical theory as worldview

“we now have Social Justice texts--forming a kind of Gospel of Social Justice--that express, with absolute certainty, that all white people are racist, all men are sexist, racism and sexism are systems that can exist and oppress absent even a single person with racist or sexist intentions or beliefs..., sex is not biological and exists on a spectrum, language can be literal violence, denial of gender identity is killing people, the wish to remedy disability and obesity is hateful, and everything needs to be decolonized.



Does this sound like a metanarrative? That's because it is. Social Justice scholarship and its educators and activists see these principles and conclusions as *The Truth* According to Social Justice--and they treat it as though they have discovered the analogue of the germ theory of disease, but for bigotry and oppression”

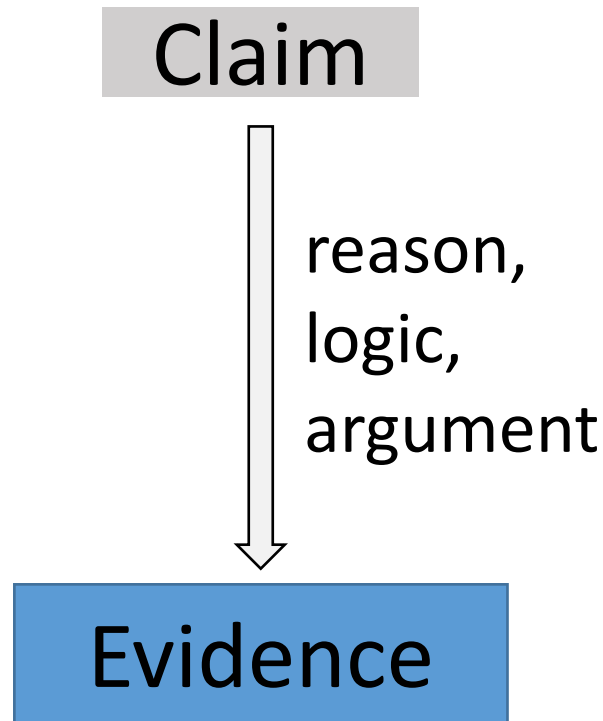


-Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, p. 182-183

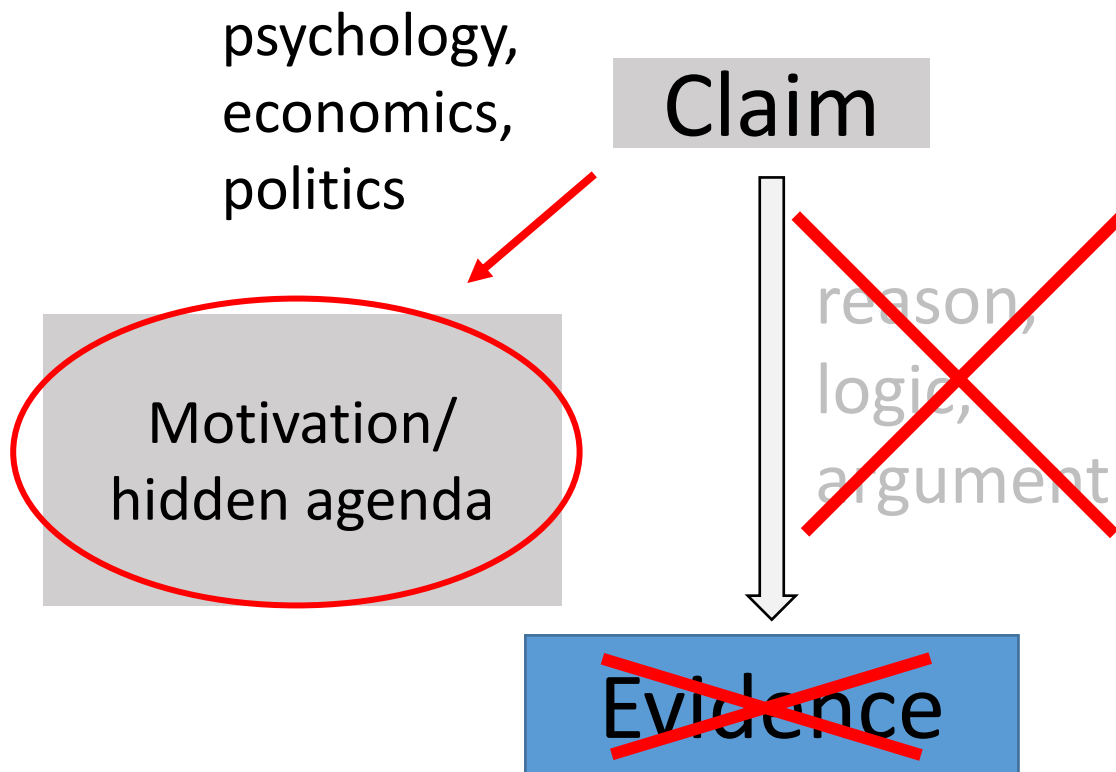
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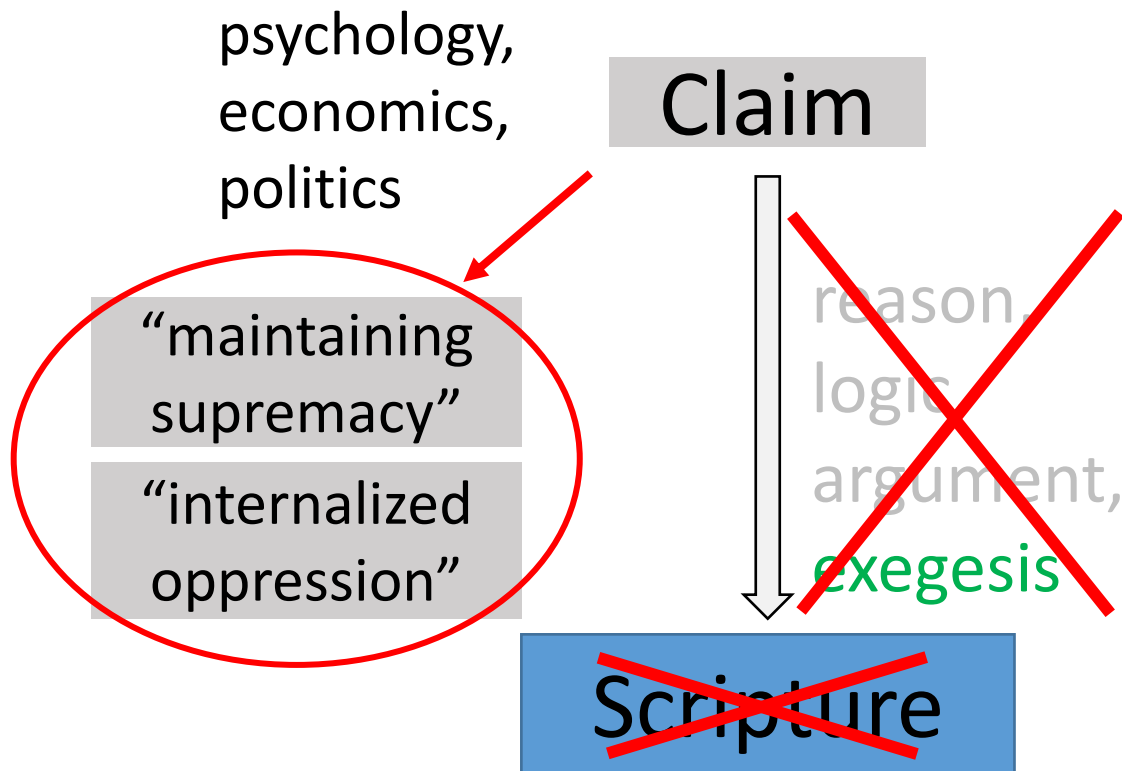
# Epistemology



# Bulverism



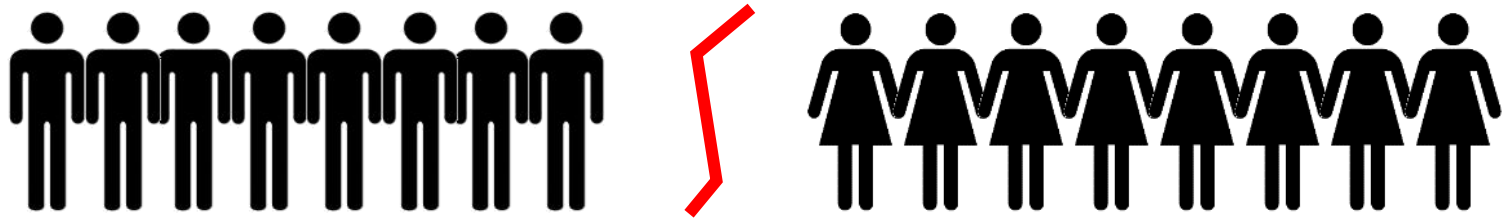
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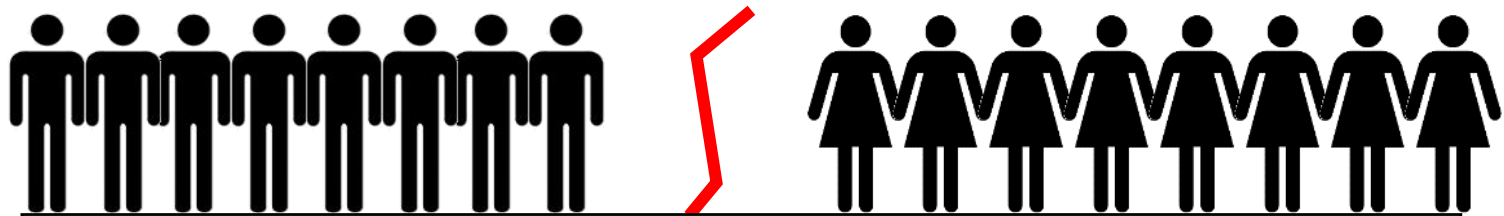
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# Identity and solidarity



# Identity and solidarity



Creation

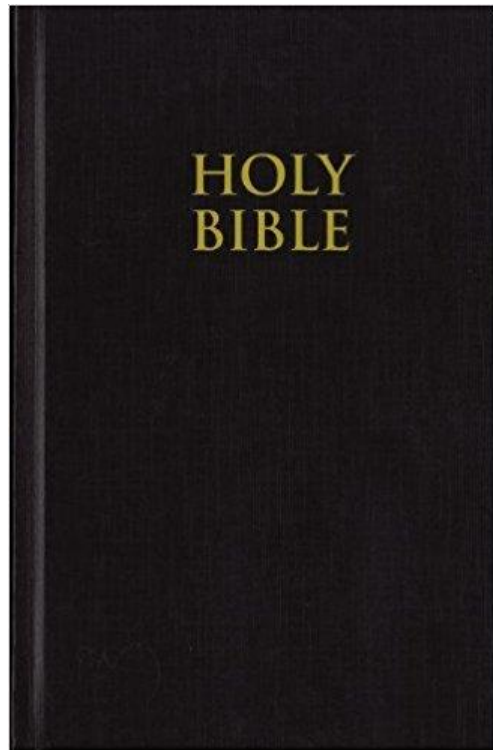
Sin

Redemption

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# Christianity as hegemonic discourse



Religion

Morality

Sexuality

Gender

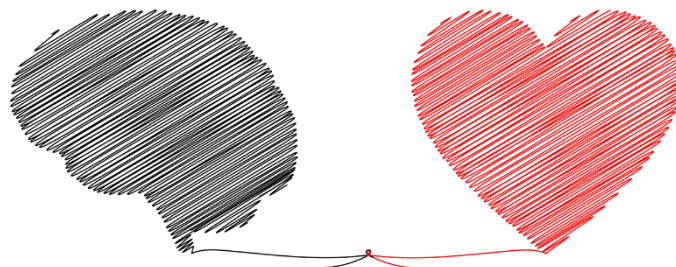
etc...

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# Claim #1: “We should never challenge ‘lived experience’”

- “As a woman, I know that our society is deeply sexist.”
- “As a black man, I know that our society is deeply racist.”
- “As a lesbian, I know that sexual orientation is fixed from birth.”
- “As a Sufi Muslim, I know that Islam is true.”
- “As a polyamorous man, I know that sex outside of marriage is okay.”
- “As a Hindu, I know that all paths lead to God.”



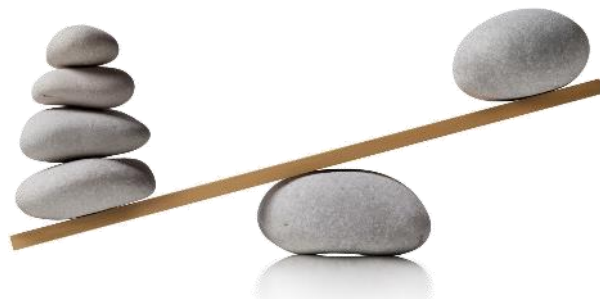
## Claim #2: “We need to liberate our theology from privileged groups”

- “We need to de-center ‘white theology’ and platform the theology of people of color.”
- “We need to de-center ‘Western theology’ and platform non-Western theology.”
- “We need to de-center male theology and platform feminist theology.”
- “We need to de-center the Eurocentric creeds of the Reformation, and platform liberation theology.”
- “We need to de-center the all-male books of the Bible and platform the extra-biblical books written by women.”



# Claim #3: “We should dismantle all structures which perpetuate privilege”

- “We should dismantle private property, because it perpetuates economic privilege.”
- “We should dismantle the institution of marriage, because it perpetuates heterosexual and monogamous privilege.”
- “We should dismantle the connection between sex and gender, because it perpetuates cis-privilege.”
- “We should dismantle all Christian moral norms, because they perpetuate Christian privilege.”



# Claim #4: “We should promote diversity within the church”

- “We should promote a diversity of ethnicities within the church.”
- “We should promote a diversity of cultures within the church.”
- “We should promote a diversity of racist, misogynistic, materialistic, idolatrous cultures within the church ”
- “We should promote a diversity of moral behaviors within the church.”
- “We should promote a diversity of theological beliefs within the church.”



# Positives and negatives

Claim #1: “We should never challenge ‘lived experience’”

Positive: Lived experience can give us valuable insights

Negative: ...but must still be subjected to the scrutiny of Scripture and evidence.

Claim #2: “We need to liberate our theology from privileged groups”

Positive: We should constantly reexamine our theology to recognize where our identity has biased our interpretation

Negative: ...but the truth or falsehood of a claim does not depend on the identity of the person making it.

Claim #3: “We should dismantle all structures which perpetuate privilege”

Positive: Power can be abused and misused

Negative: ...but power is not inherently evil and power imbalances are not necessarily unjust.

Claim #4: “We should promote diversity within the church”


Positive: Some forms of diversity are elements of God’s good creation

Negative: ...but others are the result of sin and must be rejected.

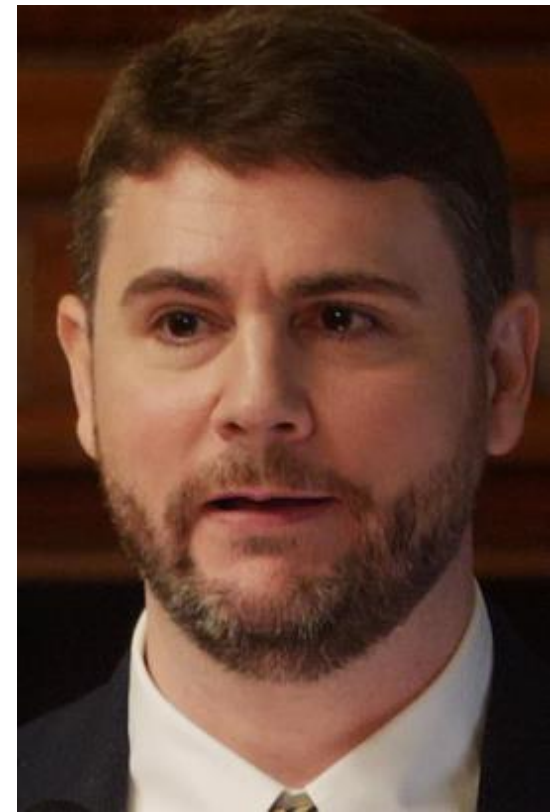
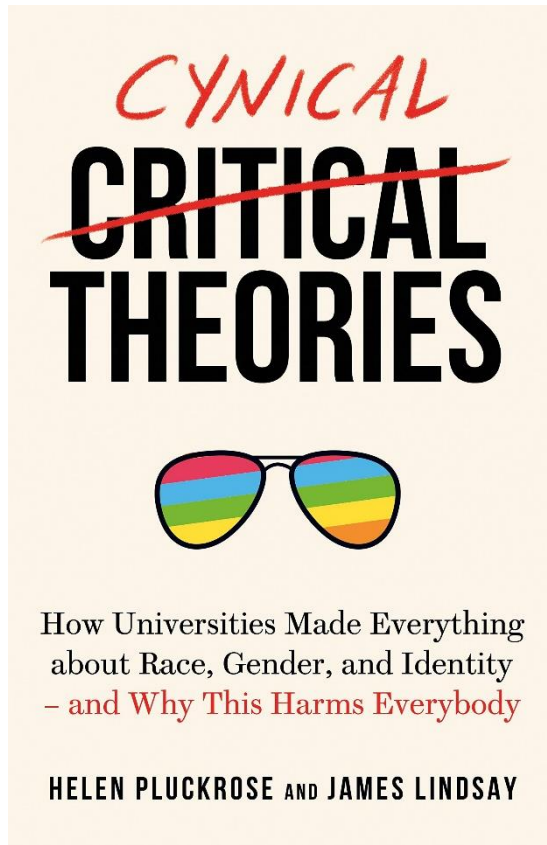
# Outline

- Why should we care?
- What is critical theory?
- What are the problems with critical theory?
- Logical implications
- Conclusions and book recommendations

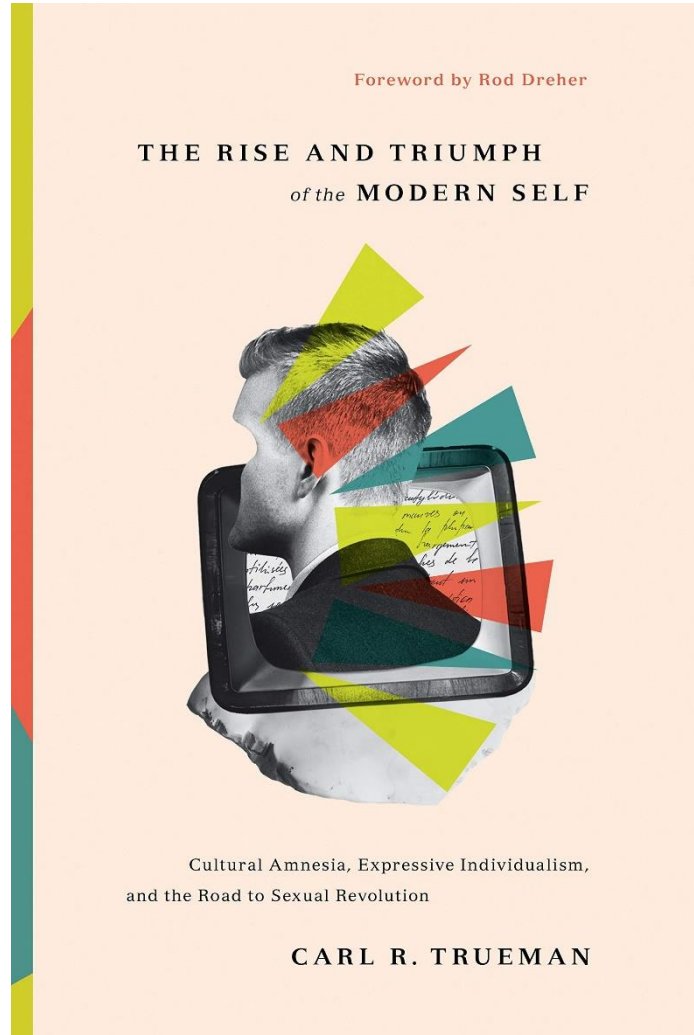
# Christianity and critical theory are competing worldviews

|                 |   |  |   |  |
|-----------------|---|--|---|--|
| Christianity    |  <div>CREATION</div> <div>FALL</div> <div>REDEMPTION</div> <div>RESTORATION</div> |  |   |  |
| Critical theory | -----   | <p>Patriarchy<br/>White supremacy<br/>Heteronormativity<br/>Toxic masculinity</p> <p><b>OPPRESSION</b></p> <p>Classism<br/>Ageism<br/>Ableism<br/>Cisgenderism</p> | <p>Protest<br/>Resistance</p> <p><b>ACTIVISM</b></p> <p>Education<br/>Awareness</p> | <p>Equality<br/>Power reversal</p> <p><b>LIBERATION</b></p> <p>Justice<br/>Diversity</p> |

# *Cynical Theories* by Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay



# *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* by Carl Trueman



# *Engaging Critical Theory and the Social Justice Movement* by Shenvi and Sawyer

