



Critical theory and Christianity: Are they compatible?

Dr. Neil Shenvi

American Christian Tours

Jan. 12-13, 2023

This talk is not about Trump



This talk is not about Trump



This talk is not about Trump



This talk is not about Trump

This talk is not about Trump

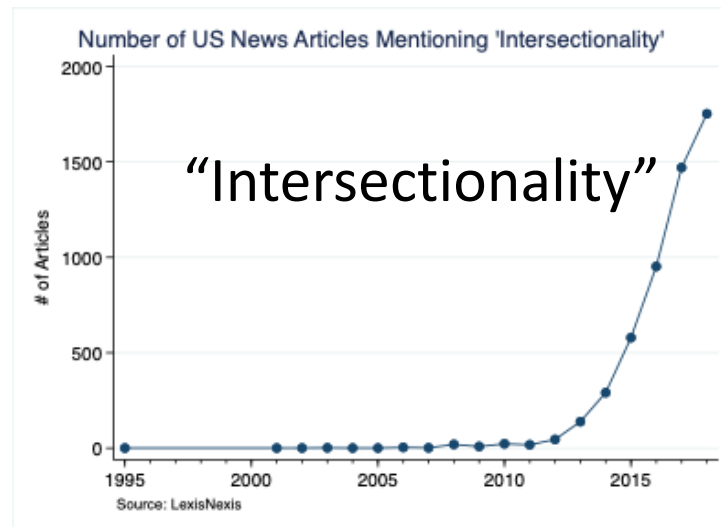
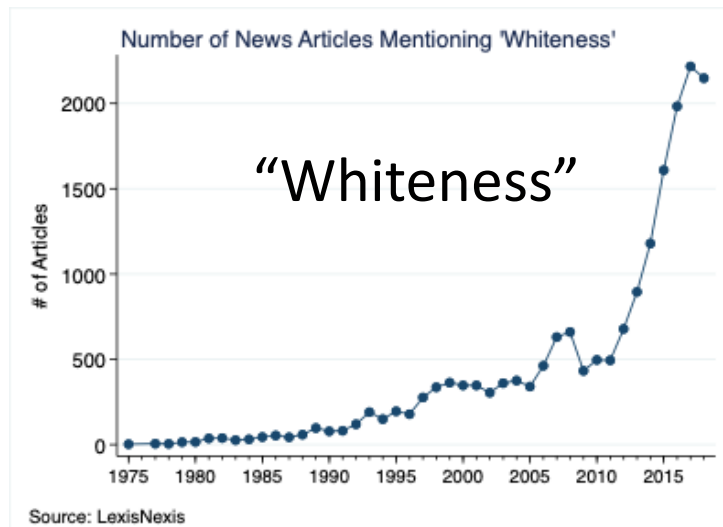
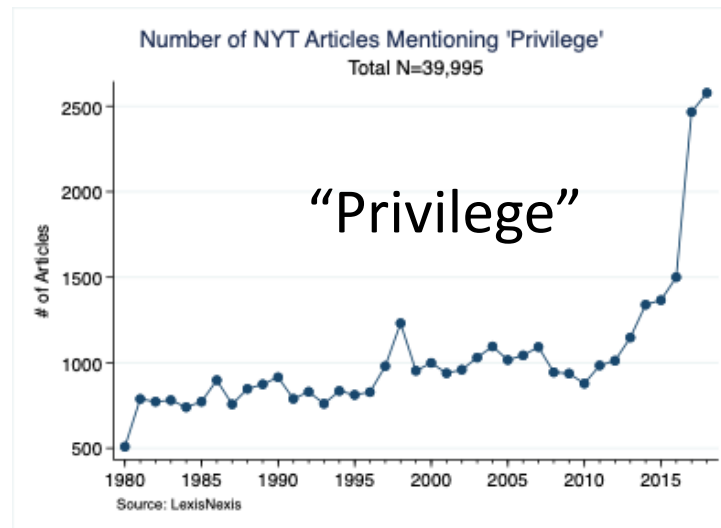
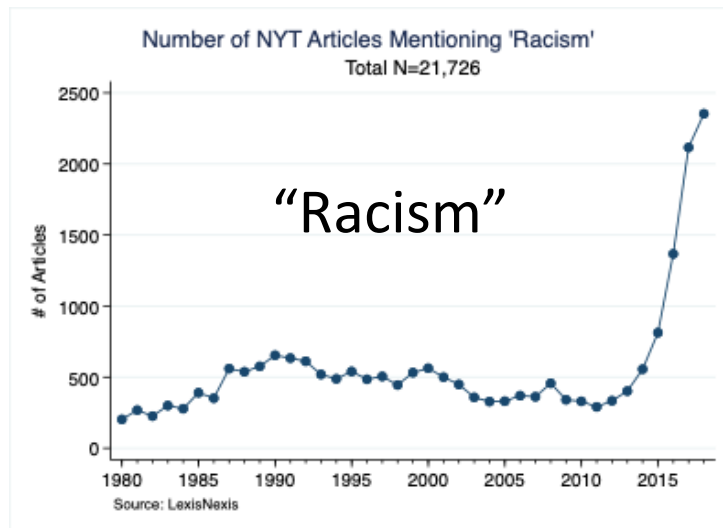
This talk is not about Trump

This talk is not about Trump

This talk is not about Trump

This talk is not about Trump

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

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



iFakeTextMessage.com



iFakeTextMessage.com

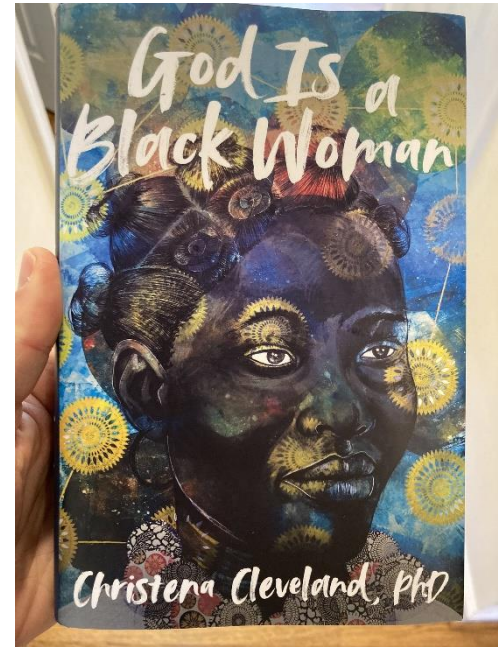


Why should we care?

2015



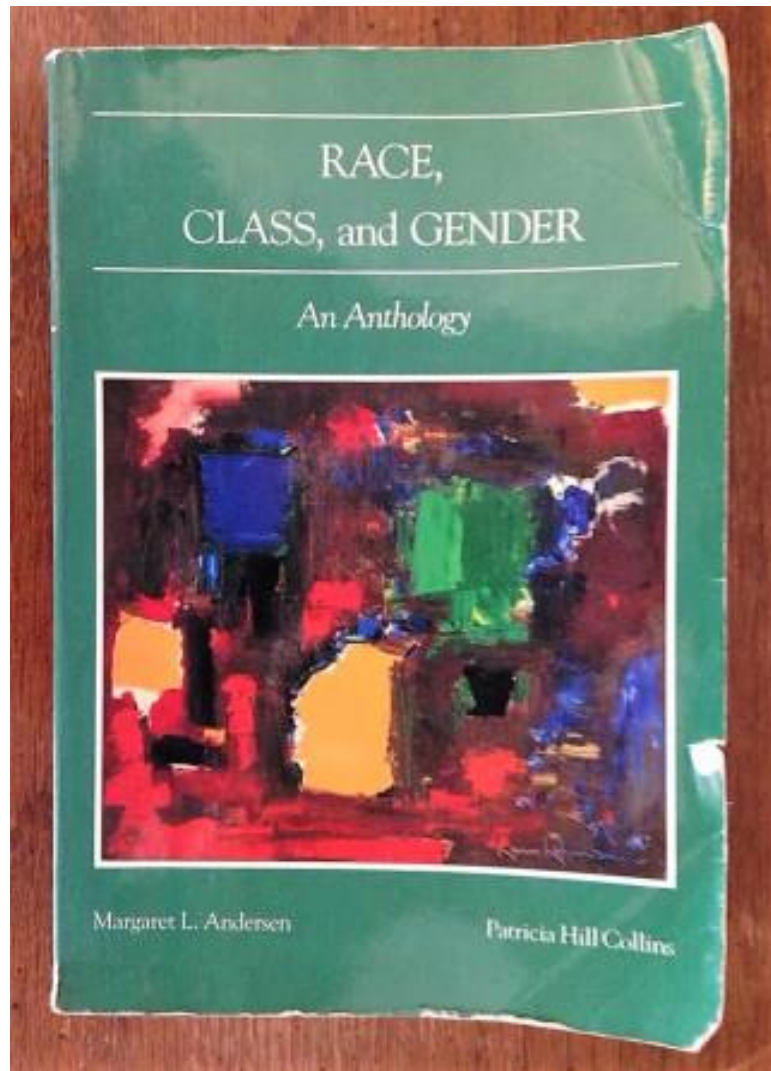
2022



"Paul, Peter, Luke, John, James, and the writer of Hebrews repeatedly and emphatically make the same point: the unified church is the vehicle through which the kingdom of God is powerfully communicated to the world" – Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, p. 37-38 (2013)

"More than anything, we must eradicate the transphobia within ourselves and our communities. For if God is a Black woman, then She's a Black trans woman. Obviously" - Cleveland, *God is a Black Woman*, p. 232 (2022)

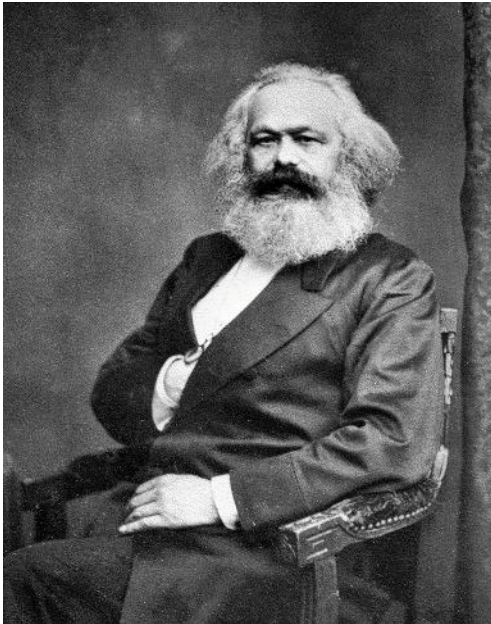
Why should we care?



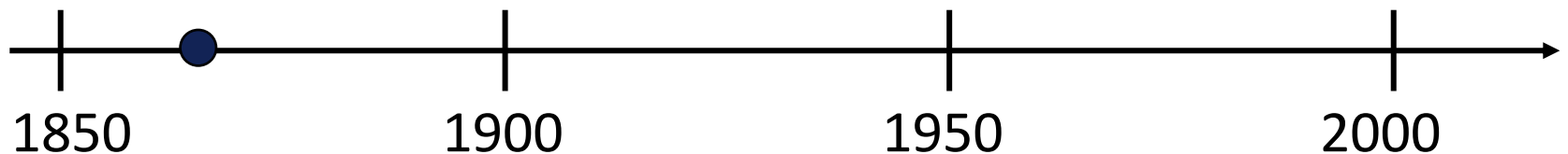
Outline

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

Critical theory and Karl Marx



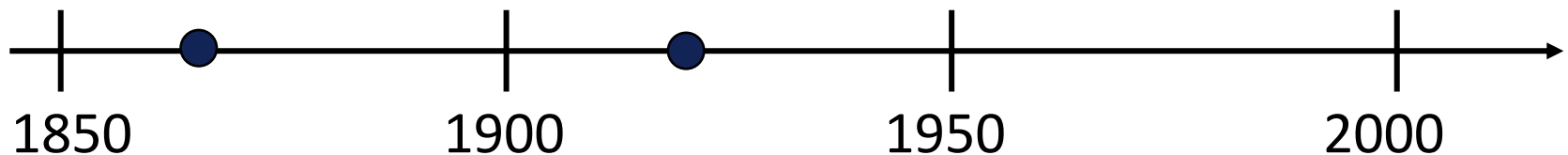
“Alone among these thinkers [i.e., Horkheimer, Bourdieu, Foucault, etc.], **Karl Marx invites consensus as a ‘true’ critical theorist. Indeed, for many, he alone inaugurates the critical tradition**” (Levinson et al, *Beyond Critique*, p. 25-26)



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

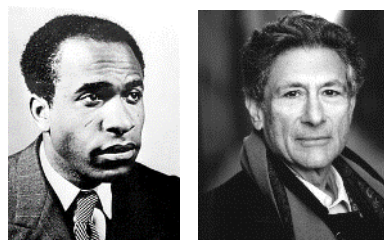
Cultural Studies



Bourdieu

Hall

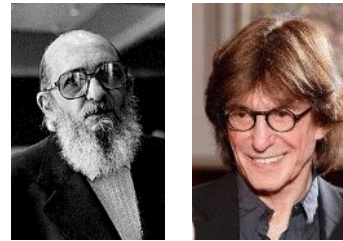
Postcolonialism



Fanon

Said

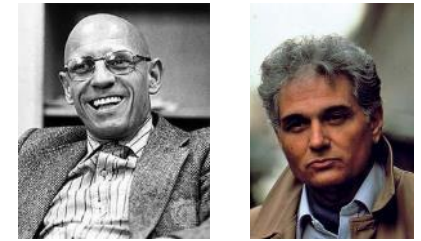
Critical pedagogy



Freire

Giroux

Postmodernism



Foucault

Derrida

Feminism



de Beauvoir

Friedan

Black feminism



hooks

Lorde

Queer theory



Butler

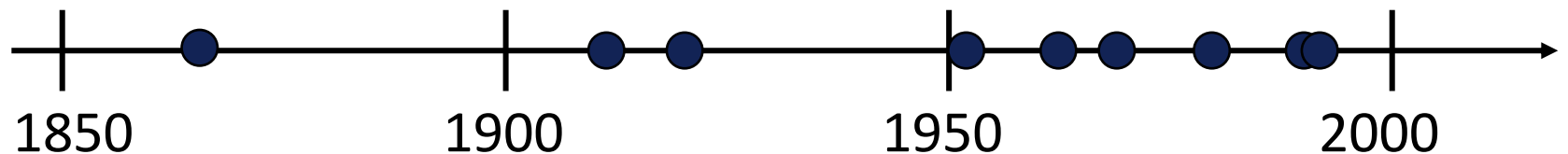
Rich

Critical Race Theory



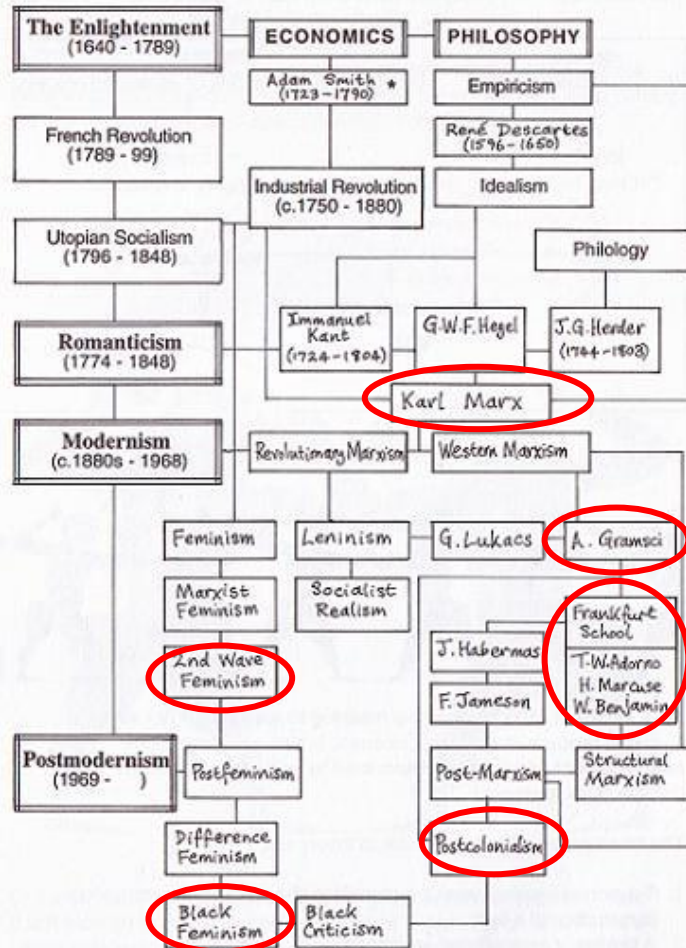
Bell

Crenshaw

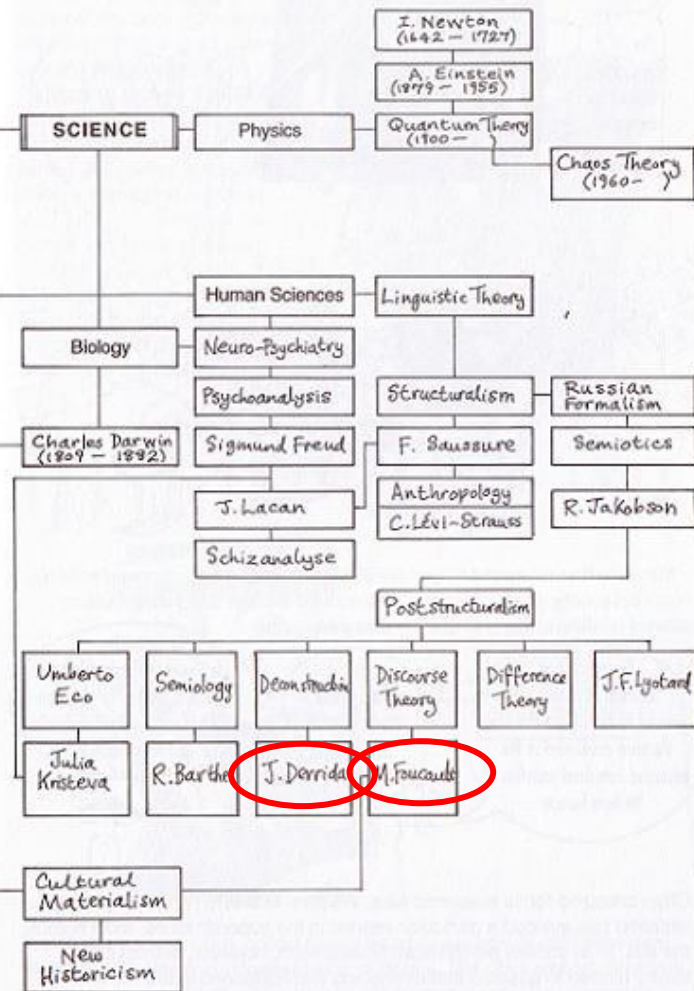


The Taxonomy of Critical Theory

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”

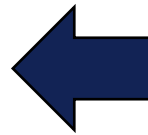
“cisheteropatriarchy”

“compulsory heterosexuality”

“whiteness”

What is critical theory?

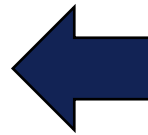
“intersectionality”
“White privilege”
“White fragility”
“colorblind racism”
“internalized oppression”
“lived experience”
“heteronormativity”
“gender performativity”
“epistemic injustice”
“cisheteropatriarchy”
“compulsory heterosexuality”
“whiteness”



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”

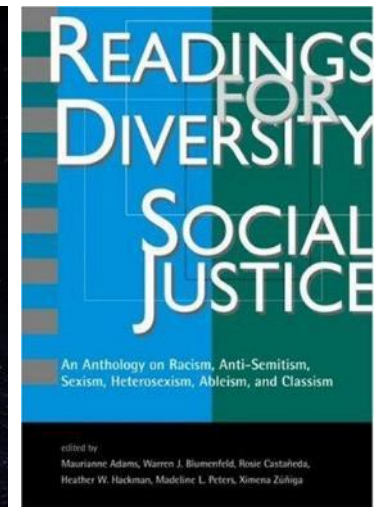
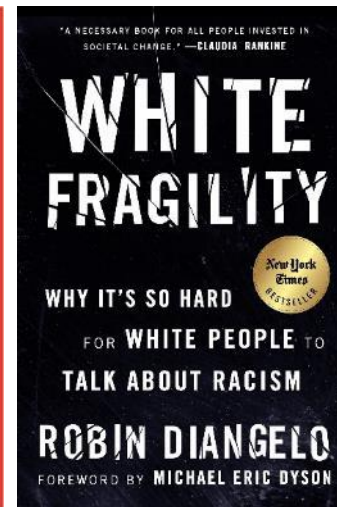
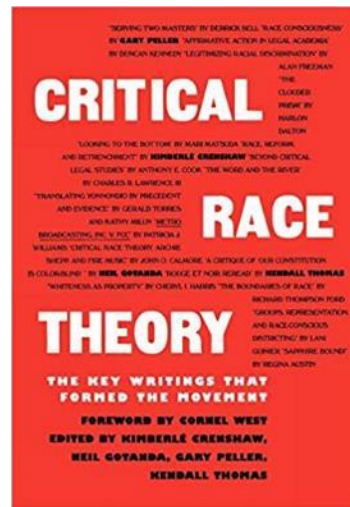
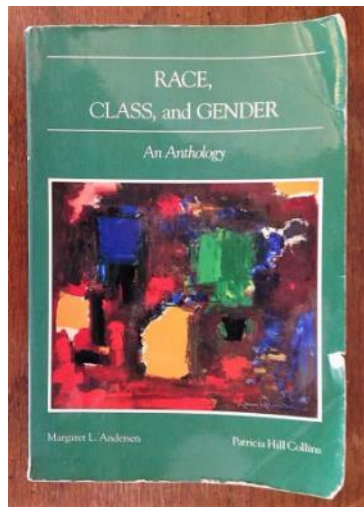
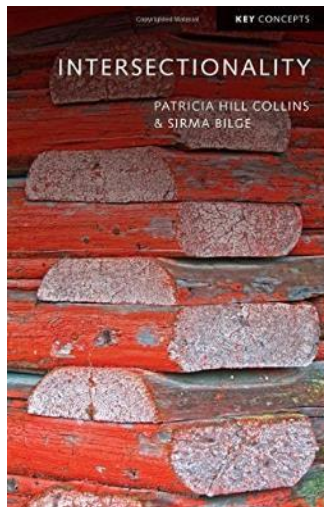
The central premises of contemporary critical theory?

Premise I: Social binary

Premise II: Oppression through ideology

Premise III: Lived experience

Premise IV: Social justice



Outline

- Why should we care?
- What is critical theory?
 - Premise 1: Social binary
 - Premise 2: Oppression through ideology
 - Premise 3: Lived experience
 - Premise 4: Social justice
 - The strengths of critical theory
- What are the problems with critical theory?
- Logical implications
- Conclusions

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

“For every social group, there is an opposite group... the primary groups that we name here are: race, class, gender, sexuality, ability status/exceptionality, religion, and nationality”

*“Oppression describes a set of policies, practices, traditions, norm, definitions, and explanations (discourses), which function to systematically exploit one social group to the benefit of another social group. The group that benefits from this exploitation is termed the *dominant* (or agent) group, and the group that is exploited is termed the *minoritized* (or target) group.... **Sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and heterosexism are specific forms of oppression**”* – Sensoy and DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?* p. 44, 61



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

64

Is Everyone Really Equal?

Figure 5.1. Group Identities Across Relations of Power

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

Outline

- Why should we care?
- What is critical theory?
 - Premise 1: Social binary
 - Premise 2: Oppression through ideology
 - Premise 3: Lived experience
 - Premise 4: Social justice
 - The strengths of critical theory
- What are the problems with critical theory?
- Logical implications
- Conclusions

Premise #2: Oppression occurs through hegemonic power

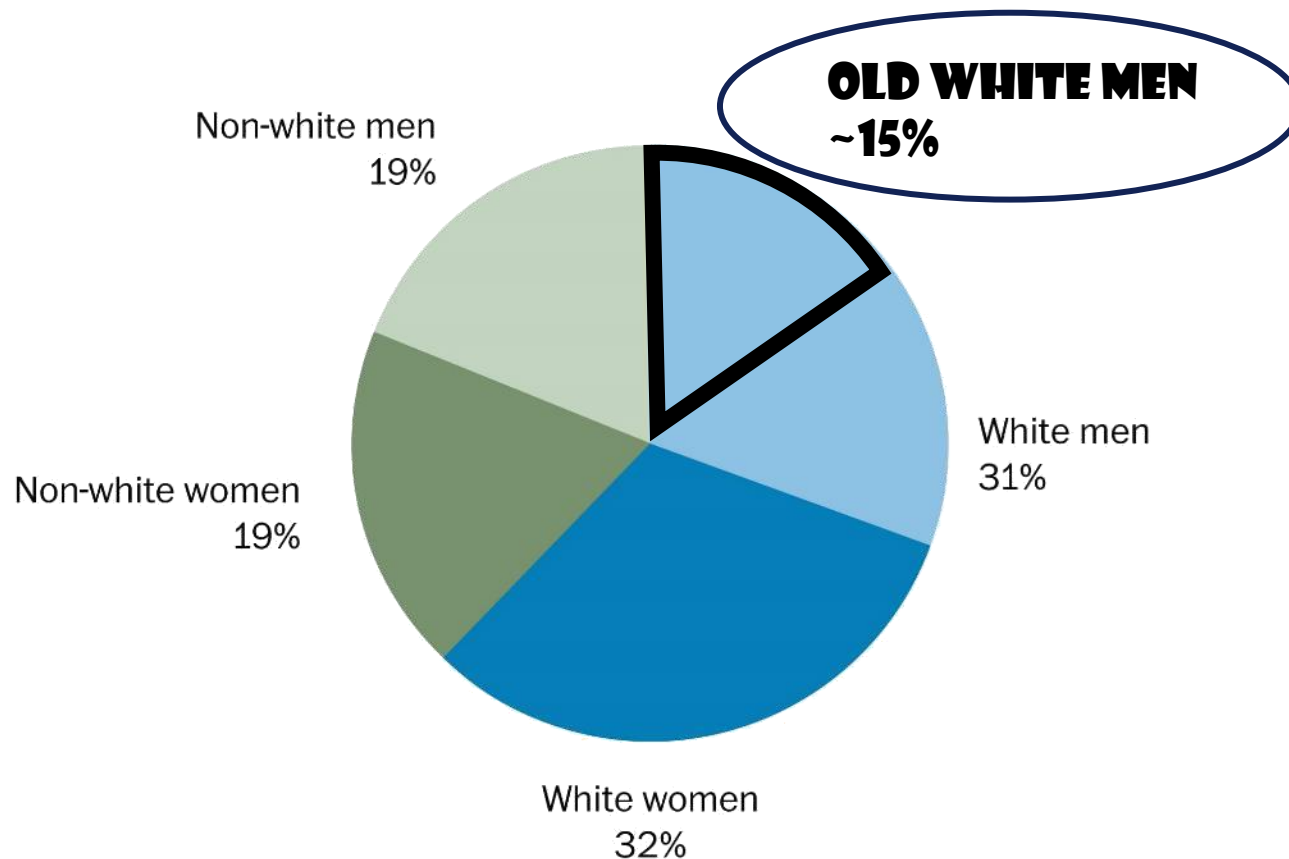
“oppression also traditionally carries a strong connotation of conquest and colonial domination... New left social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, however, shifted the meaning of the concept of oppression. **In its new usage, oppression designates the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not 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



Outline

- Why should we care?
- What is critical theory?
 - Premise 1: Social binary
 - Premise 2: Oppression through ideology
 - Premise 3: Lived experience
 - Premise 4: Social justice
 - The strengths of critical theory
- What are the problems with critical theory?
- Logical implications
- Conclusions

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:

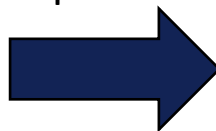


Privilege



Internalized oppression

Lived
experience



Liberatory consciousness

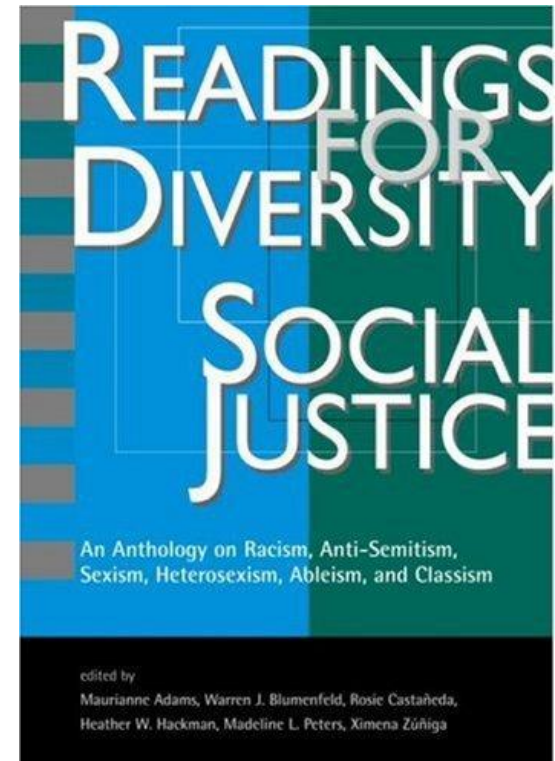
Outline

- Why should we care?
- What is critical theory?
 - Premise 1: Social binary
 - Premise 2: Oppression through ideology
 - Premise 3: Lived experience
 - Premise 4: Social justice
 - The strengths of critical theory
- What are the problems with critical theory?
- Logical implications
- Conclusions

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



Outline

- Why should we care?
- What is critical theory?
 - Premise 1: Social binary
 - Premise 2: Oppression through ideology
 - Premise 3: Lived experience
 - Premise 4: Social justice
 - The strengths of critical theory
- What are the problems with critical theory?
- Logical implications?
- Conclusions

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



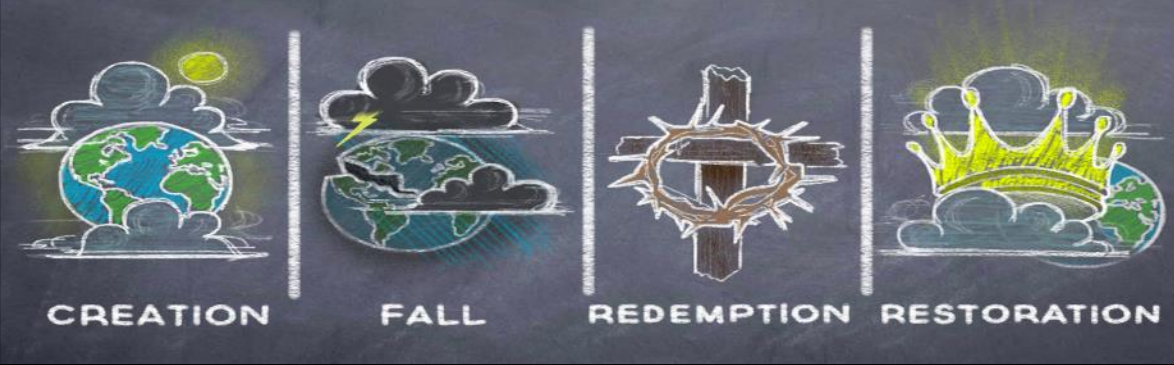
Outline

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

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

Worldview questions

| | Christianity | Critical theory |
|-----------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|
| 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 |

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

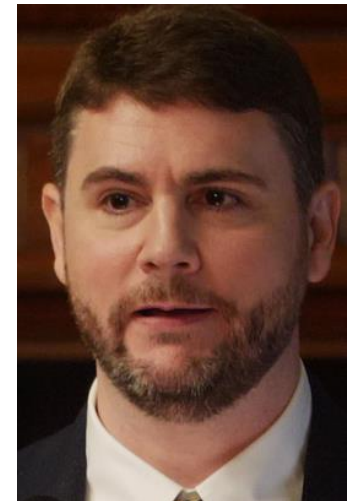


Critical theory as worldview

“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”

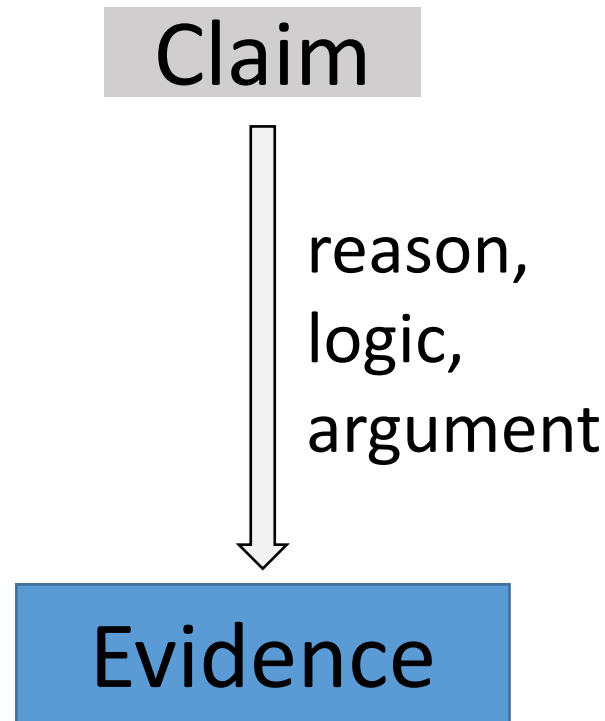


-Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, p. 182-183

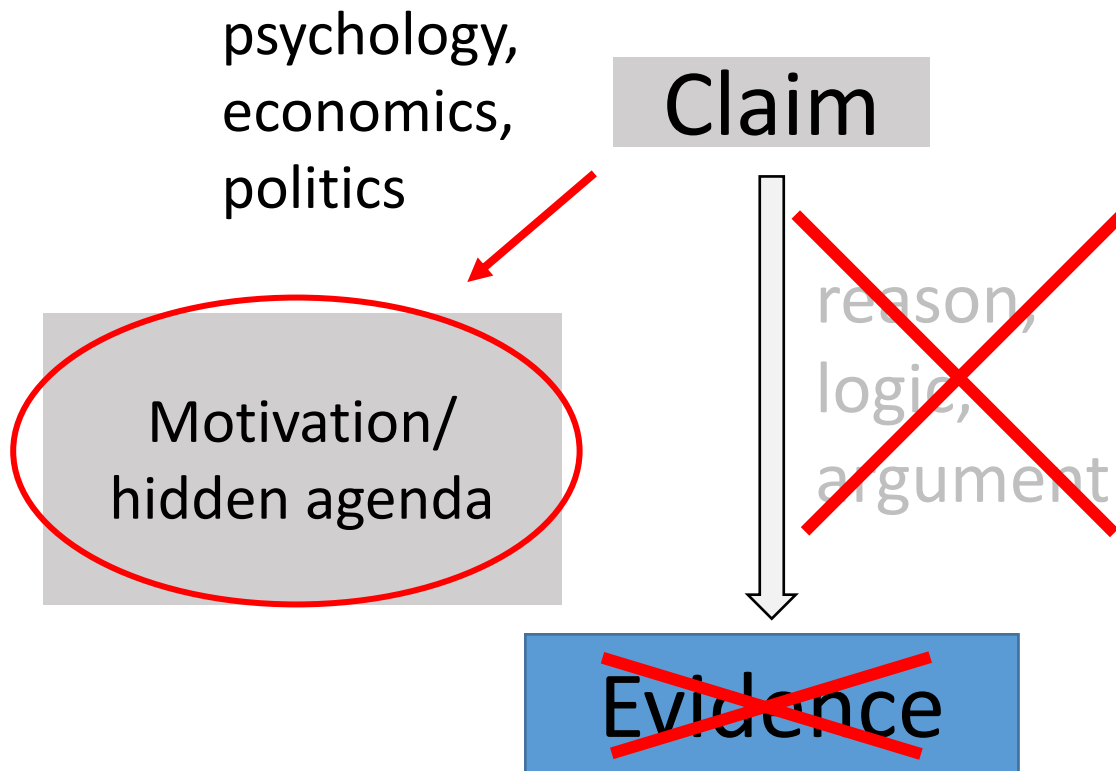
Outline

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

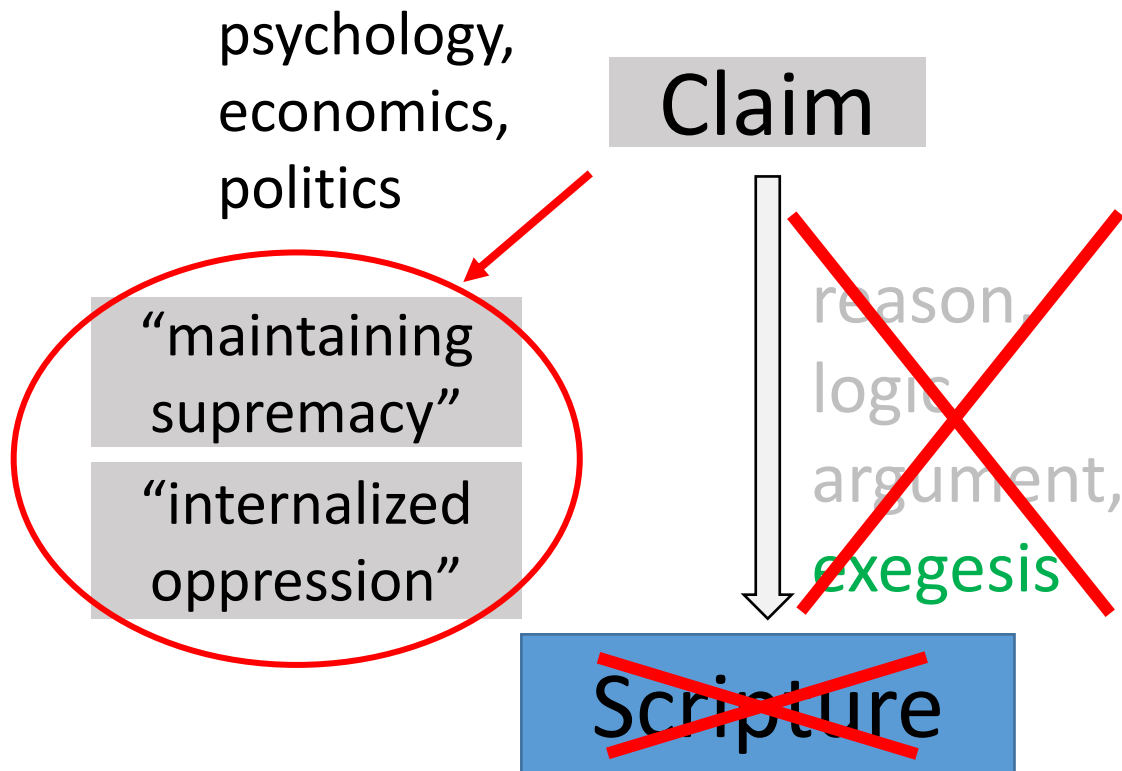
Epistemology



Bulverism



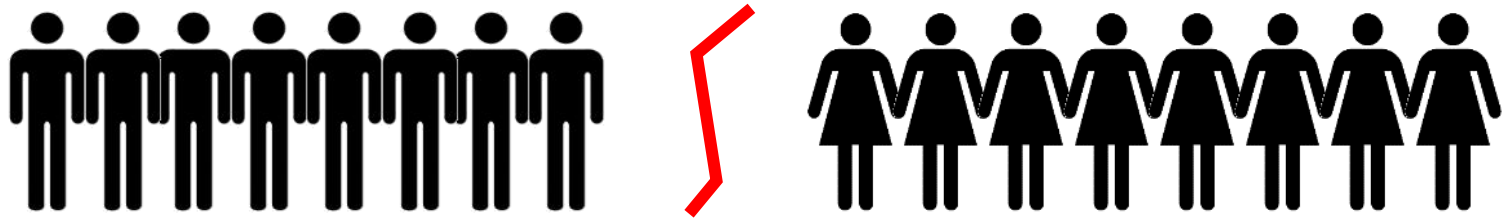
Epistemology



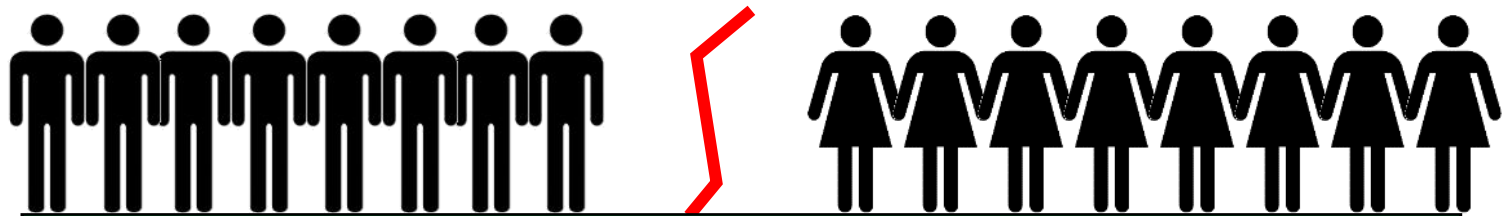
Outline

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

Identity and solidarity



Identity and solidarity



Creation

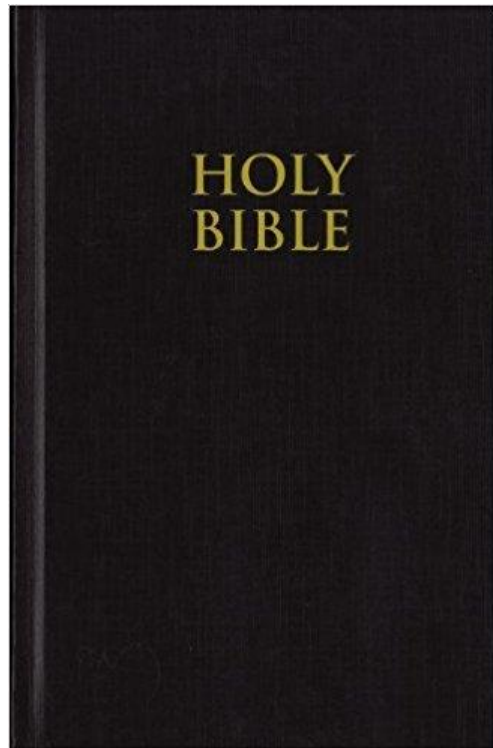
Sin

Redemption

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

Christianity as hegemonic discourse



Religion

Morality

Sexuality

Gender

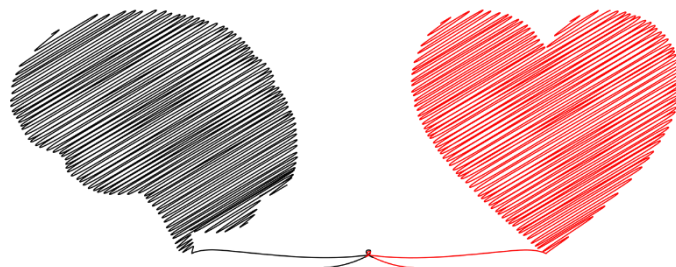
etc...

Outline

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

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.

Redefining oppression

Oppression = Unjust, tyrannical treatment



Oppression = Hegemonic norms



Whiteness = oppression



Gender roles = oppression



Heterosexism = oppression



Cisgenderism = oppression




Adultism = oppression



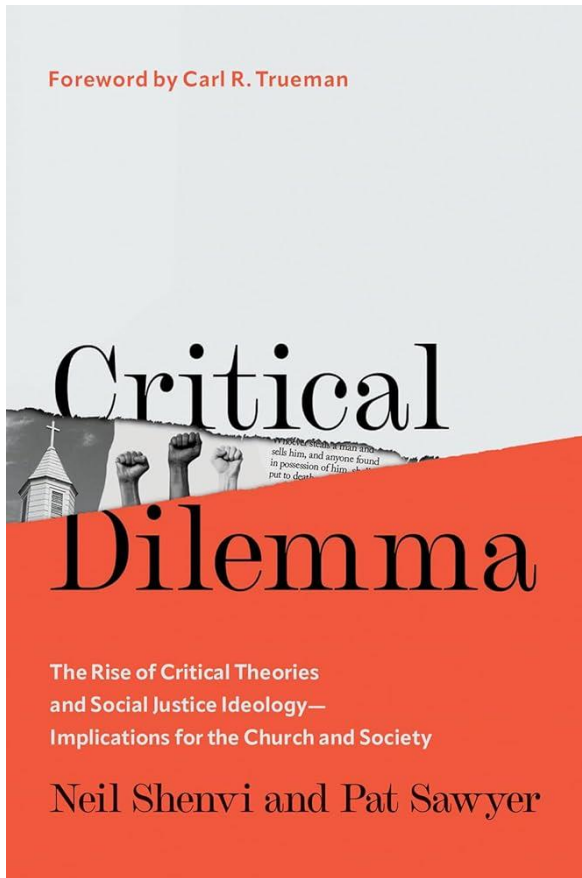
Outline

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

Christianity and critical theory are competing worldviews

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

Critical Dilemma



Acknowledgements and additional resources

Dr. Christina Shenvi



Dr. Pat Sawyer



- Shenvi and Sawyer, *Critical Dilemma* (2023)
- “The Incompatibility of Critical Theory and Christianity,” *The Gospel Coalition*
- “Gender, Intersectionality, and Critical Theory,” *Eikon*
- “Critical Theory and the Social Justice Movement” *Journal of Christian Legal Thought*
- shenviapologetics.com/
- Twitter @NeilShenvi, @RealPatSawyer