

# Critical theory and Christianity: Are they compatible?

Dr. Neil Shenvi  
Cary Christian School  
March 21, 2024

This talk is not about Trump



This talk is not about Trump



# This talk is not about Trump



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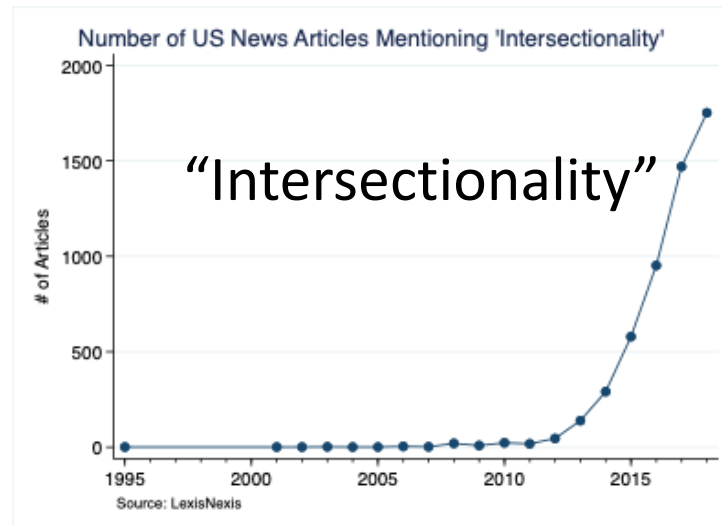
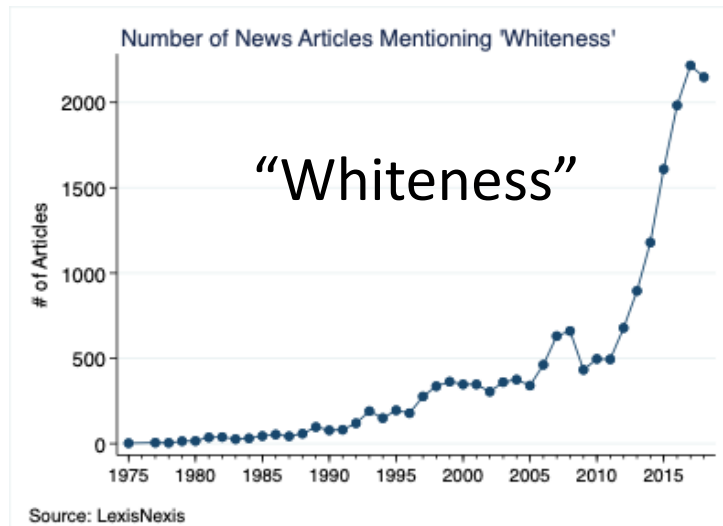
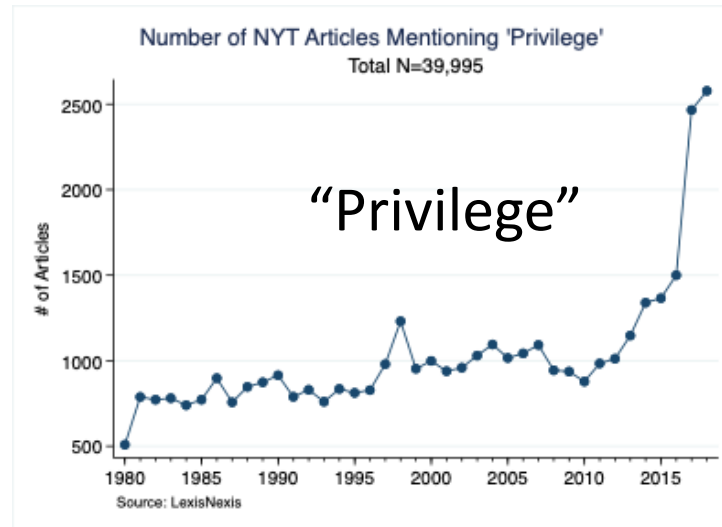
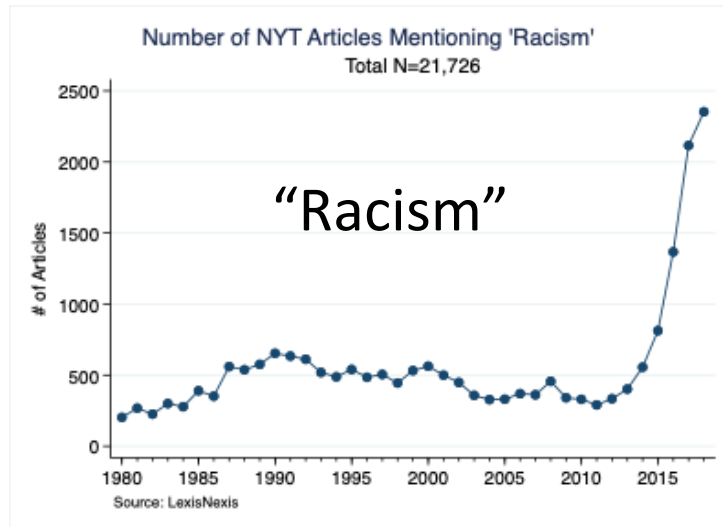
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# NYTimes word usage






# 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?
- The history of critical theory
- What is “contemporary critical theory”?
- What are the problems with contemporary critical theory?
- 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 🎤

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# Why should we care?

2015



2016

VIEWS

## Truth Be Told

Truth Be Told is a series on privilege, power, and how churches can be more attuned to both as they live out the gospel.



### Christena Cleveland

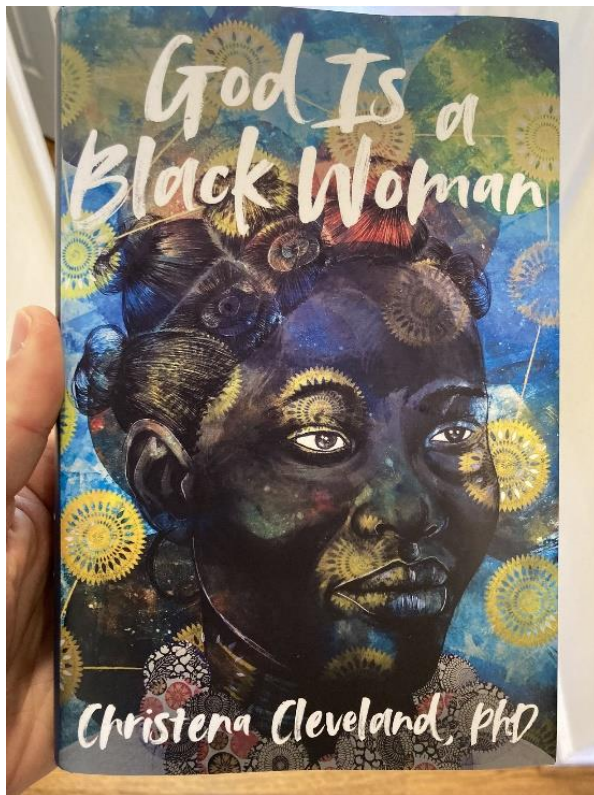
Christena Cleveland is associate professor of the practice of reconciliation at Duke University's Divinity School, where she also directs the Center for Reconciliation.

[Browse All Columnists](#)

“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)

# Why should we care?

2022



“As the godhead of the white patriarchy hierarchy, [whitemalegod] alone gets to decide what is good and what is evil...He alone determines what forms of gender and sexual identities are acceptable—cisgender and heterosexual.. **He gets to decide which interpretations of scripture are orthodox—the interpretations of cis-het white men**” - Cleveland, *God is a Black Woman*, p. 167

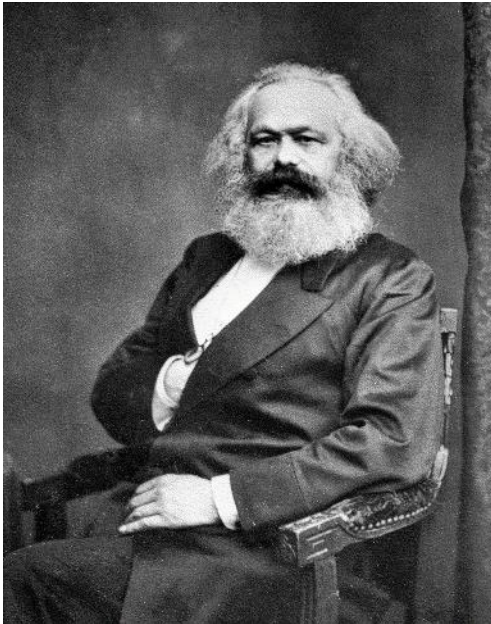
“The liberation of all Black women requires the **dismantling of all systems of oppression**—white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and more” - Cleveland, *God is a Black Woman*, p. 223

“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

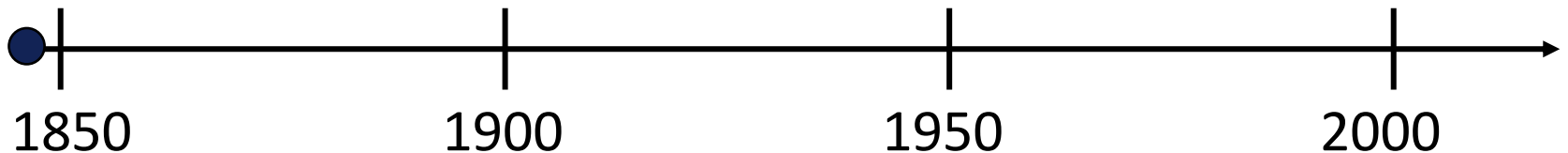
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# Karl Marx and critical theory

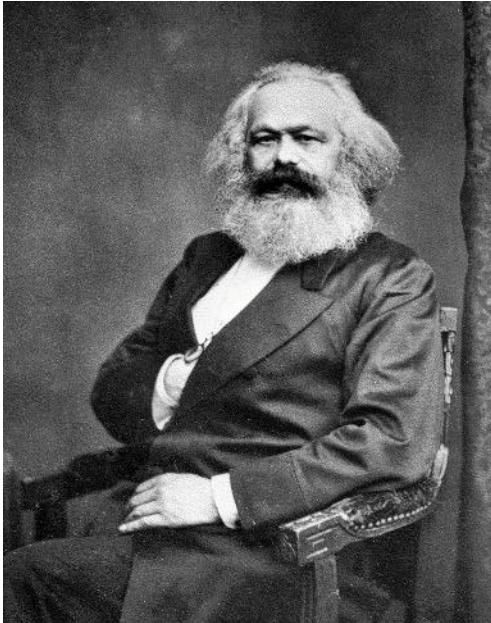


“Alone among these thinkers [i.e., Horkheimer, Bourdieu, Foucault, etc.], **Karl Marx invites consensus as a ‘true’ critical theorist. Indeed, for many, he alone inaugurates the critical tradition**” (Levinson et al, *Beyond Critique*, p. 25-26)

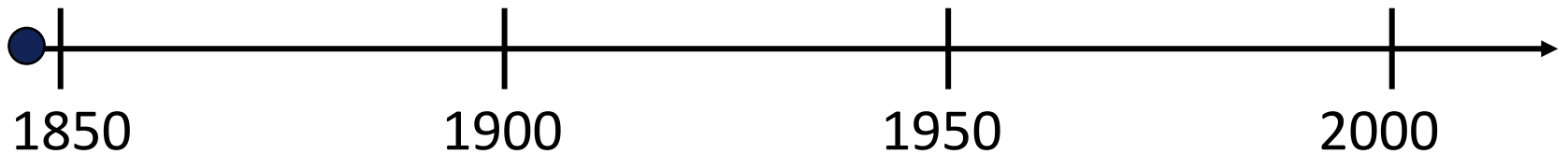




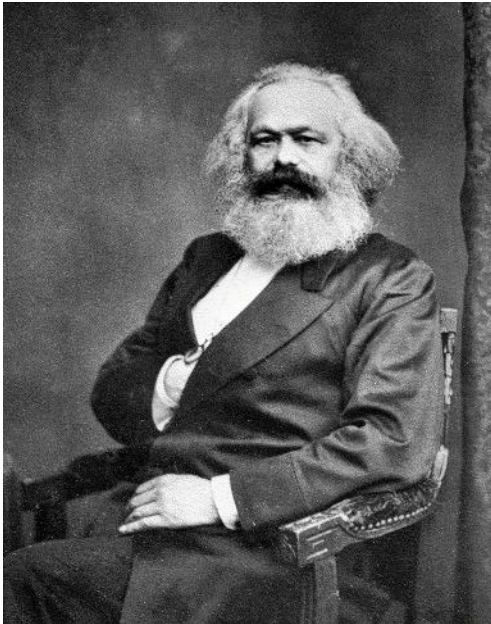
# Karl Marx and critical theory



- Class conflict
- Ideology
- False consciousness
- Liberatory praxis

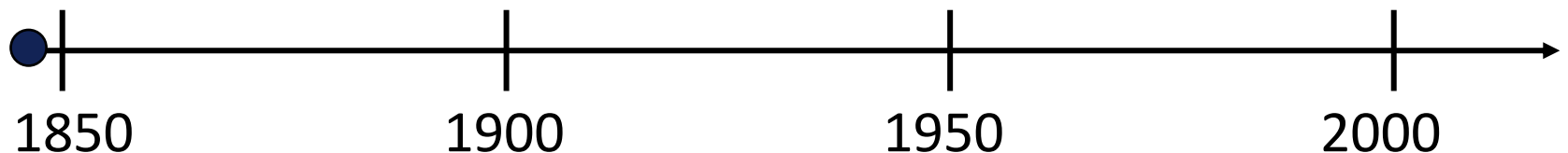


# Marx and class conflict

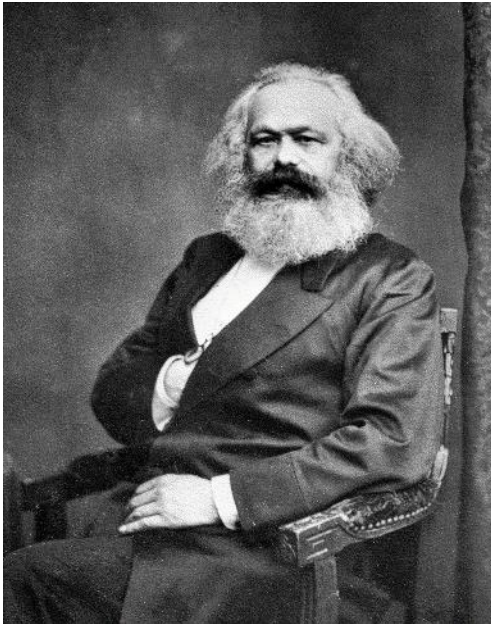


“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of **class struggles**.

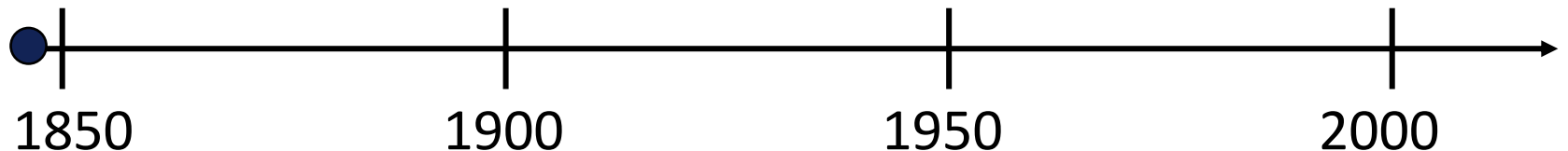
Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman, **in a word, oppressor and oppressed**, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, that each time ended, either in the revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.” – Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*



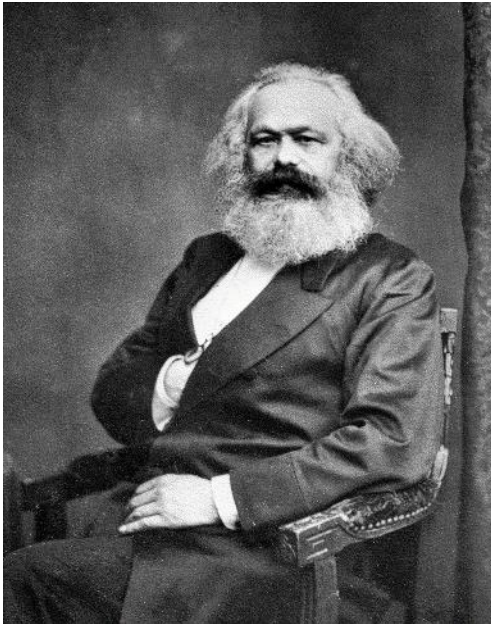
# Marx and ideology



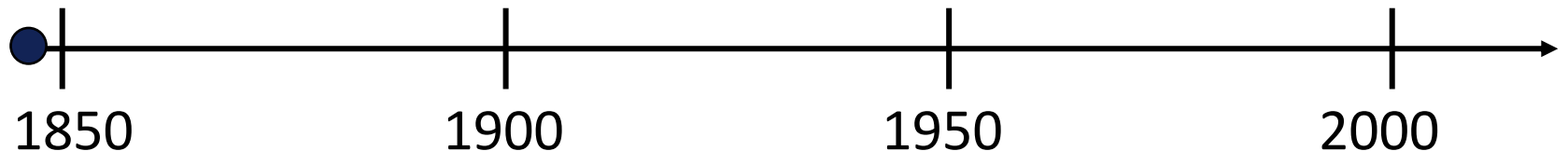
“The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force...**The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas.**” – Marx, *The German Ideology*



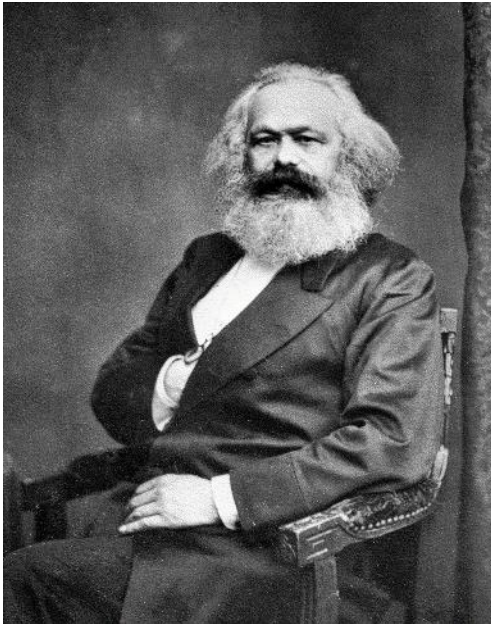
# Marx and false consciousness



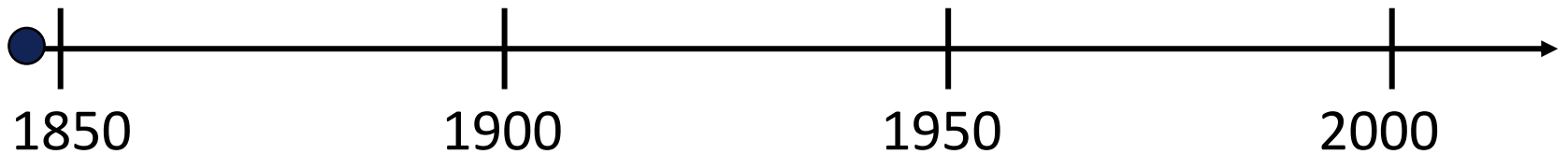
“Whilst in ordinary life every shopkeeper is very well able to distinguish between what somebody professes to be and what he really is, **our historians have not yet won even this trivial insight.** They take every epoch at its word and believe that everything it says and imagines about itself is true. This historical method which reigned in Germany, and especially the reason why, must be understood from its connection with **the illusion of ideologists in general, e.g. the illusions of the jurist, politicians** (of the practical statesmen among them, too), from the dogmatic dreamings and distortions of these fellows” - Marx, *The German Ideology*



# Marx and liberatory praxis



“The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; **the point, however, is to change it.**” – Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*

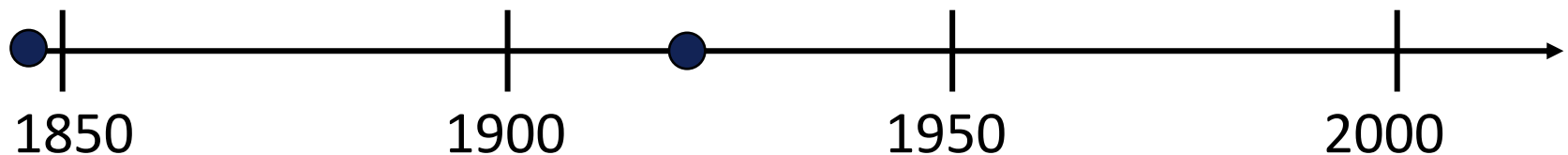




# Critical theory and the Frankfurt School

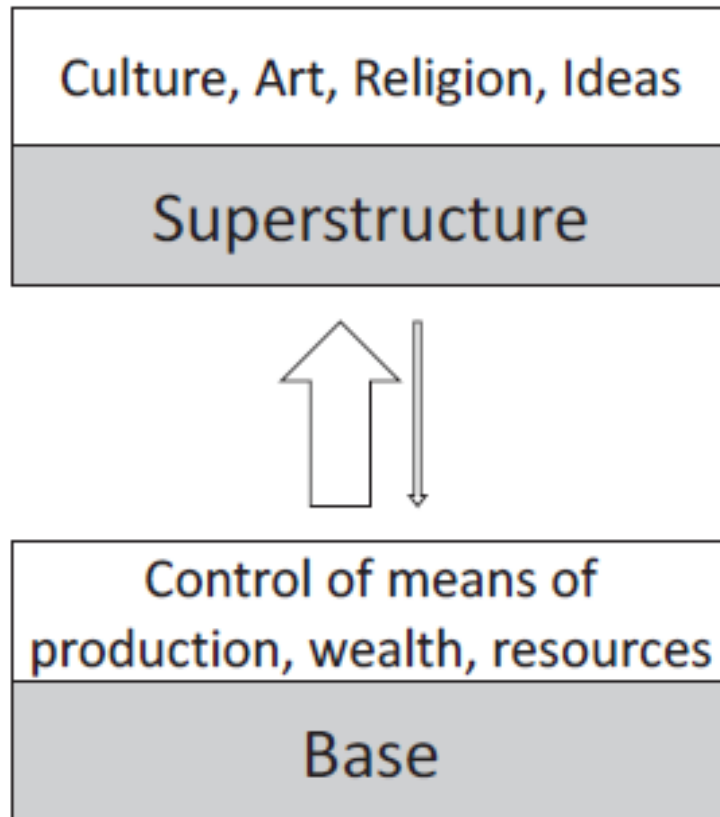


“Critical theory was conceived within the crucible of Marxism” “The Frankfurt School not only contested establishmentarianism view of history, but projected a radical alternative. European radicals applied its ideas to reconfiguring the family, sexuality, and education.” – Bronner, *Critical Theory: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

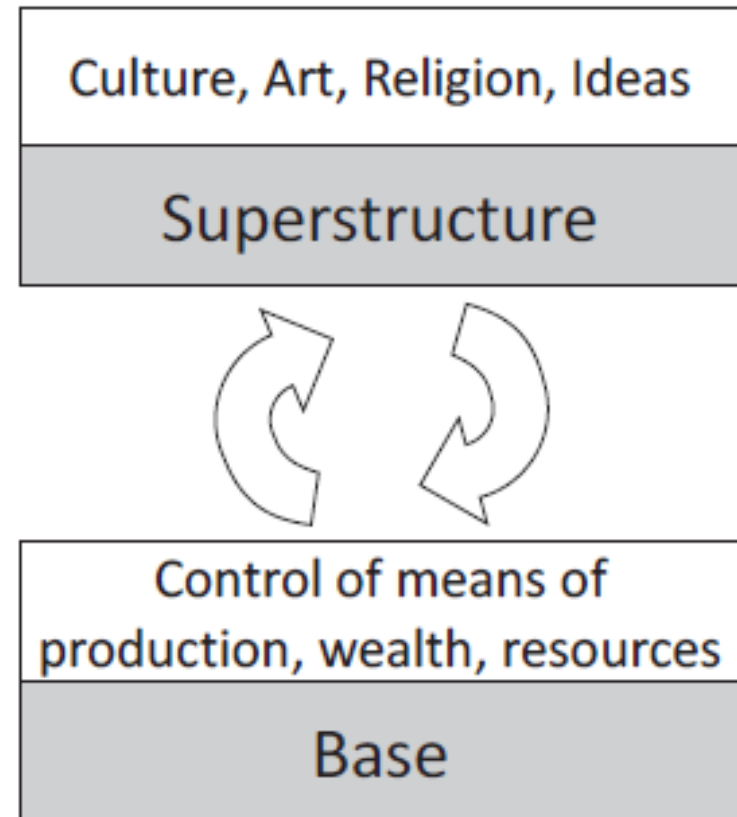




## Marxism



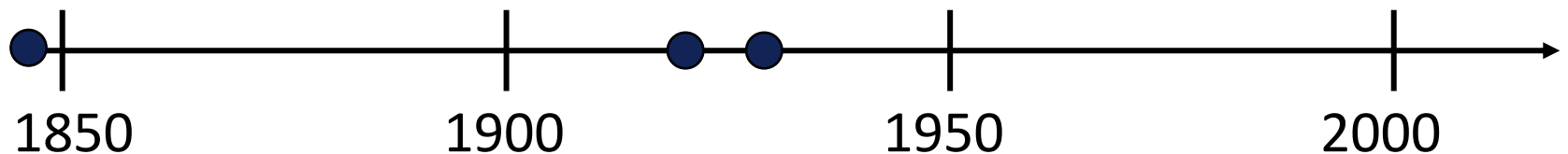
## Critical Theory



# Critical theory and Antonio Gramsci



“With his concept of hegemony, [Gramsci] showed that the reason the much-anticipated revolution of the proletariat had not yet occurred as because within **the realm of civil society the working class had come to identify their own best interests as being one and the same as the best interests of the bourgeoisie.**” – Buchanan, *Dictionary of Critical Theory*, p. 216



# Other critical social theorists

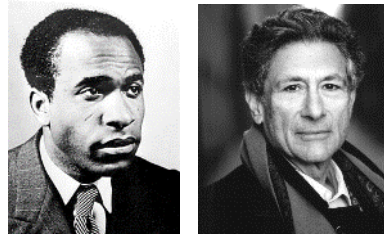
## Cultural Studies



Bourdieu

Hall

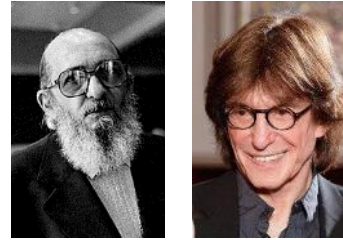
## Postcolonialism



Fanon

Said

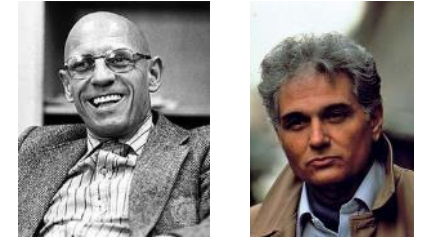
## Critical pedagogy



Freire

Giroux

## Postmodernism



Foucault

Derrida

## Feminism



de Beauvoir

Friedan

## Black feminism



hooks

Lorde

## Queer theory



Butler

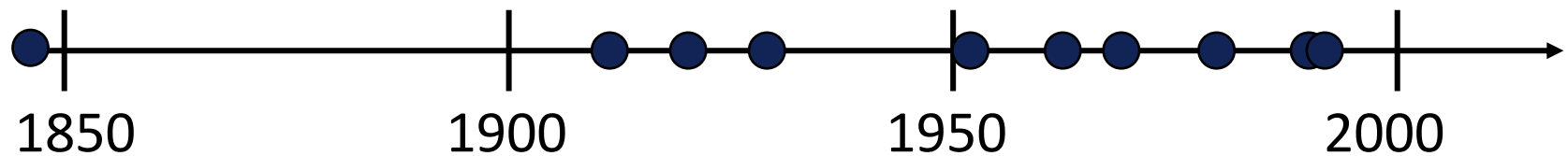
Rich

## Critical Race Theory



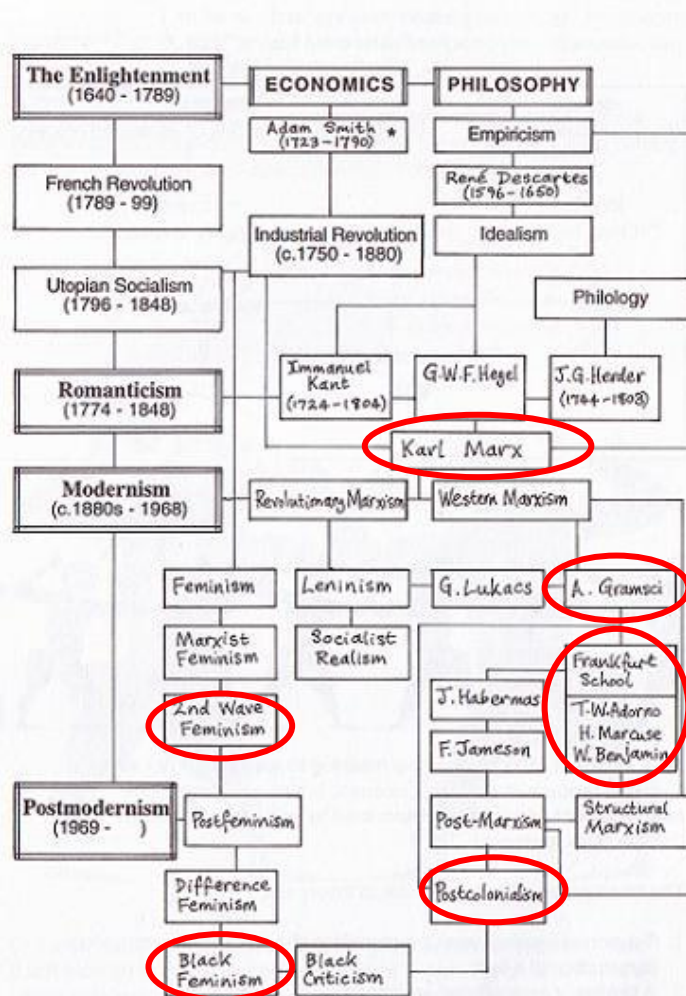
Bell

Crenshaw

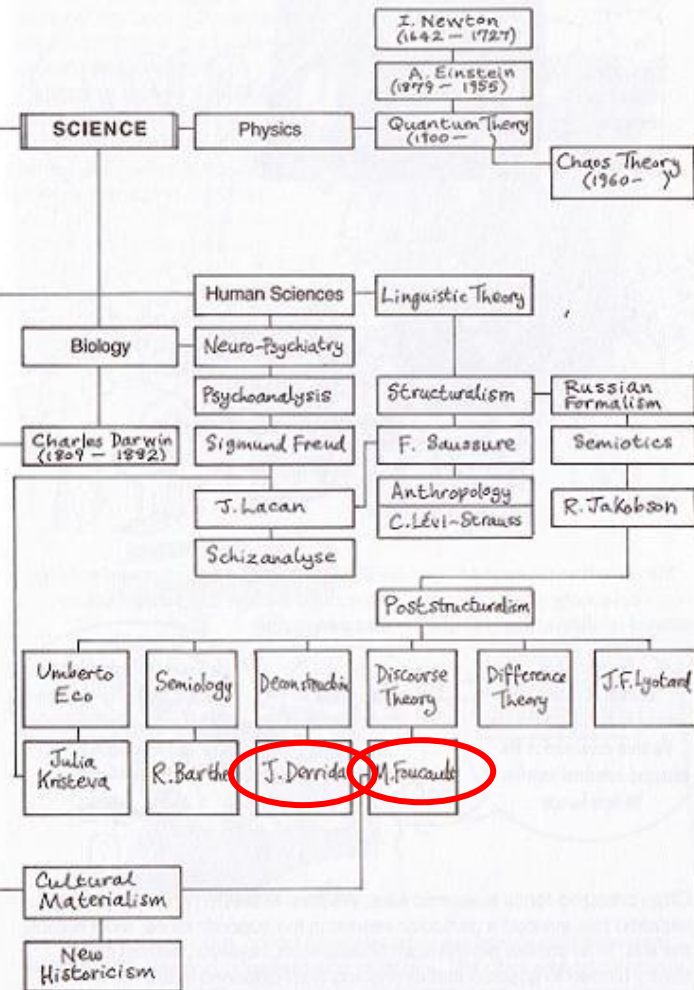


# The Taxonomy of Critical Theory

## Mapping the Origins of Critical Theory



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



# Outline

- Why should we care?
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- What is “contemporary critical theory”?
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# What is “contemporary critical theory”?

“intersectionality”

“White privilege”

“White fragility”

“colorblind racism”

“internalized oppression”

“lived experience”

“heteronormativity”

“gender performativity”

“epistemic injustice”

“cisheteropatriarchy”

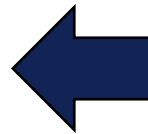
“compulsory heterosexuality”

“whiteness”



# What is “contemporary critical theory”?

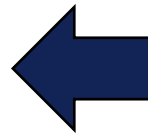
“intersectionality”  
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“lived experience”  
“heteronormativity”  
“gender performativity”  
“epistemic injustice”  
“cisheteropatriarchy”  
“compulsory heterosexuality”  
“whiteness”



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

# What is “contemporary critical theory”?

“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~~

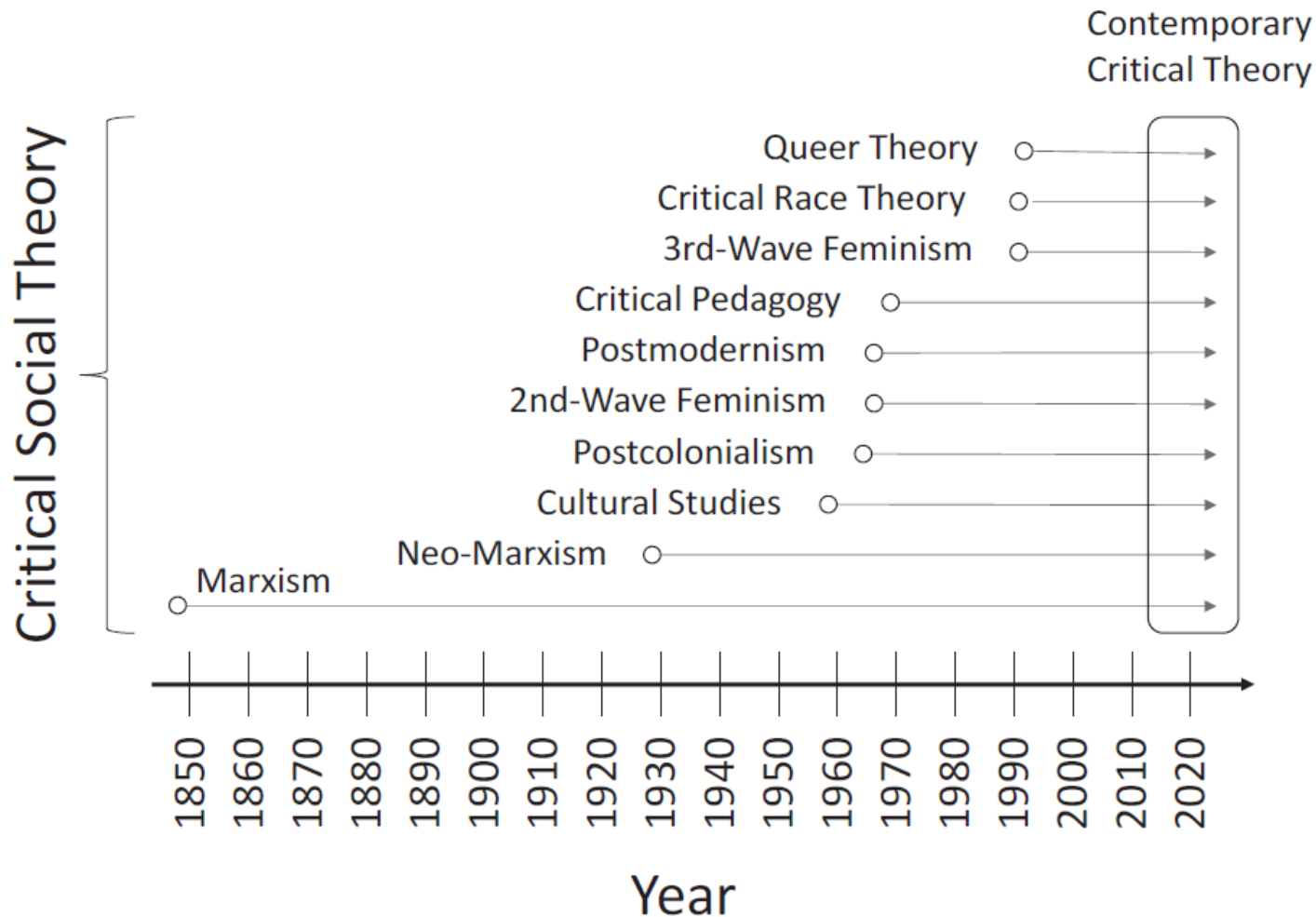
~~Grievance Studies~~

~~Applied postmodernism~~

~~Critical Social Justice~~

**“Contemporary critical theory”**

# The central premises of contemporary critical theory



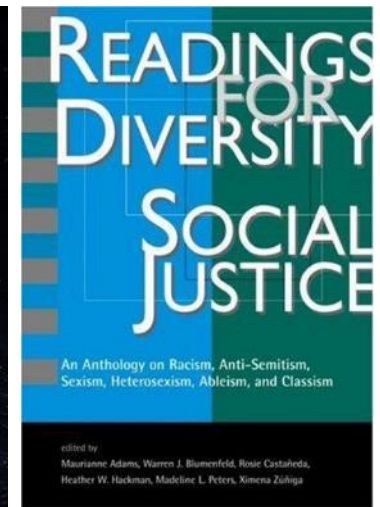
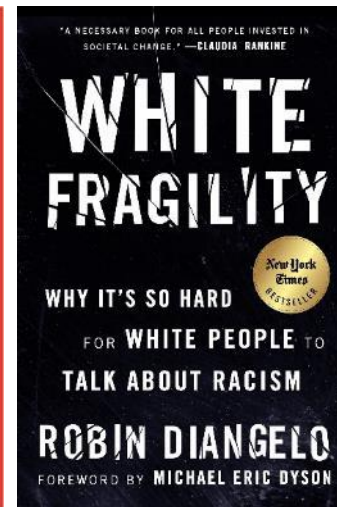
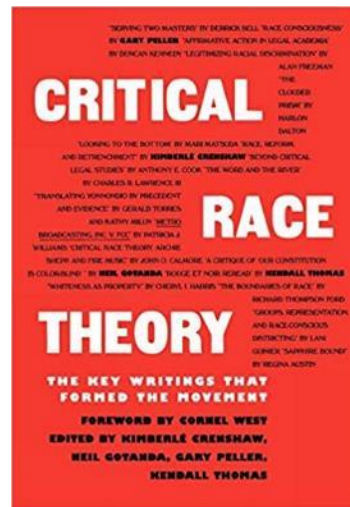
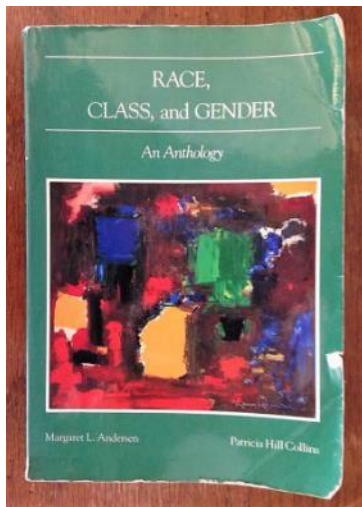
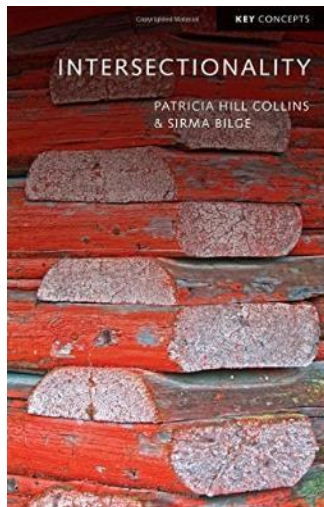
# The central premises of contemporary critical theory

Premise I: Social binary

Premise II: Oppression through ideology

Premise III: Lived experience

Premise IV: Social justice



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  - 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 contemporary critical theory?
- 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

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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

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# Premise #2: Oppression occurs through hegemonic power

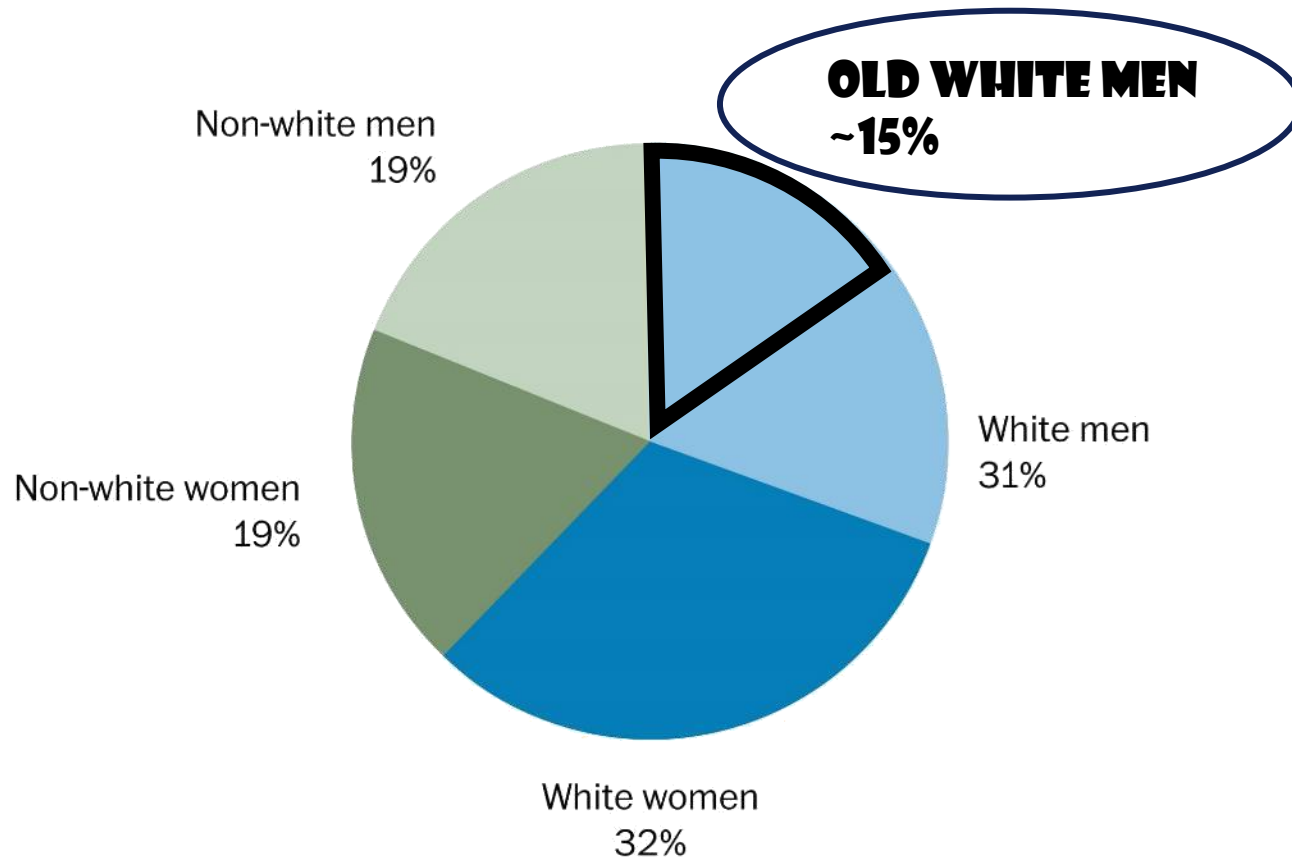
“oppression also traditionally carries a strong connotation of conquest and colonial domination... New left social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, however, shifted the meaning of the concept of oppression. **In its new usage, oppression designates the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not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



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# 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

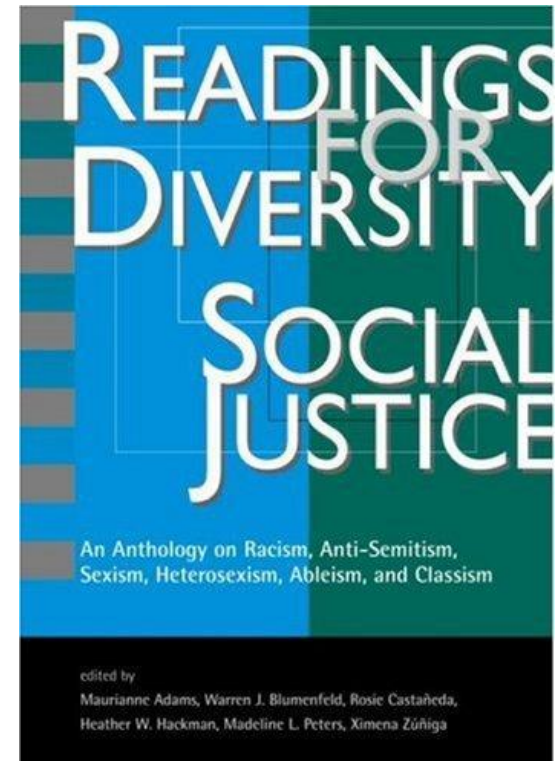
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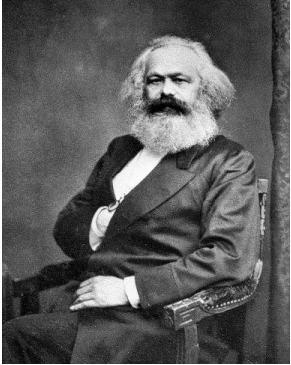
# Premise #4: Social justice demands the liberation of oppressed groups

## 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



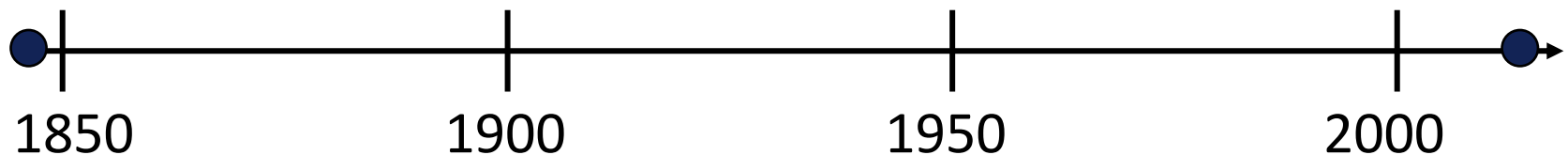
# From Karl Marx to contemporary critical theory



- Class conflict
- Ideology
- False consciousness
- Liberatory praxis



- Social binary
- Oppression through ideology
- Lived experience
- Social justice



# Outline

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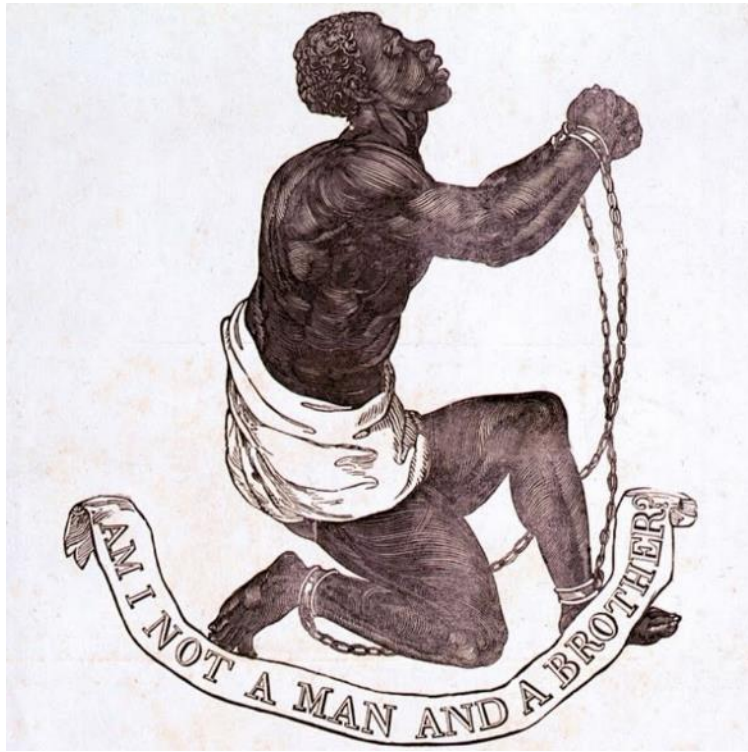
# Strength #1. Emphasis on the sinfulness of oppression

- “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?
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- What is “contemporary critical theory”?
- What are the problems with contemporary critical theory?
  - Worldview
  - Epistemology
  - Adversarial identities
  - Hegemonic power
- 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 contemporary critical theory are competing worldviews

Christianity			
<b>Creation</b> 	<b>The Fall</b> 	<b>Redemption</b> 	<b>Restoration</b> 
Contemporary Critical Theory			
--	Racism Ableism OPPRESSION Heterosexism Cisgenderism	Protest Resistance ACTIVISM Education Awareness	Equality Power reversal LIBERATION Justice Diversity

# 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



# 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**”

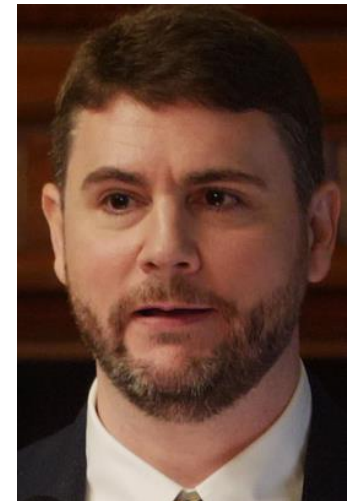


# Critical theory as worldview

**“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.**



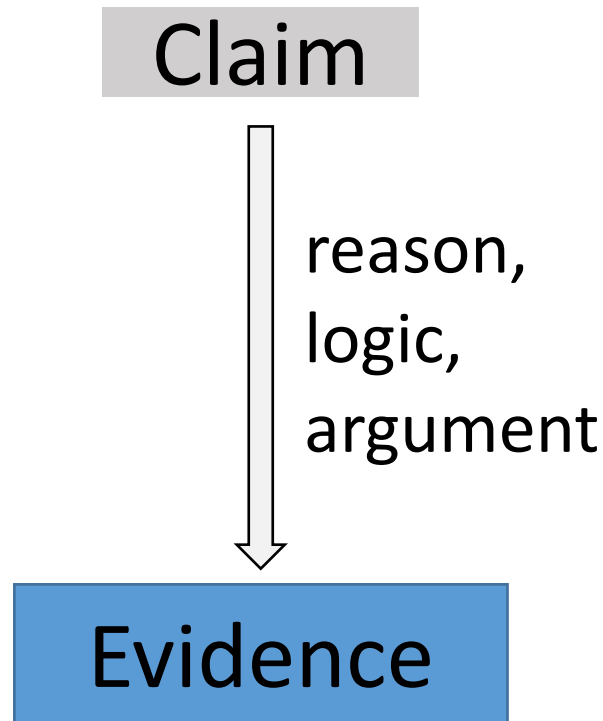
**Does this sound like a metanarrative? That's because it is.** Social Justice scholarship and its educators and activists see these principles and conclusions as *The Truth* According to Social Justice--and they treat it as though they have discovered the analogue of the germ theory of disease, but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



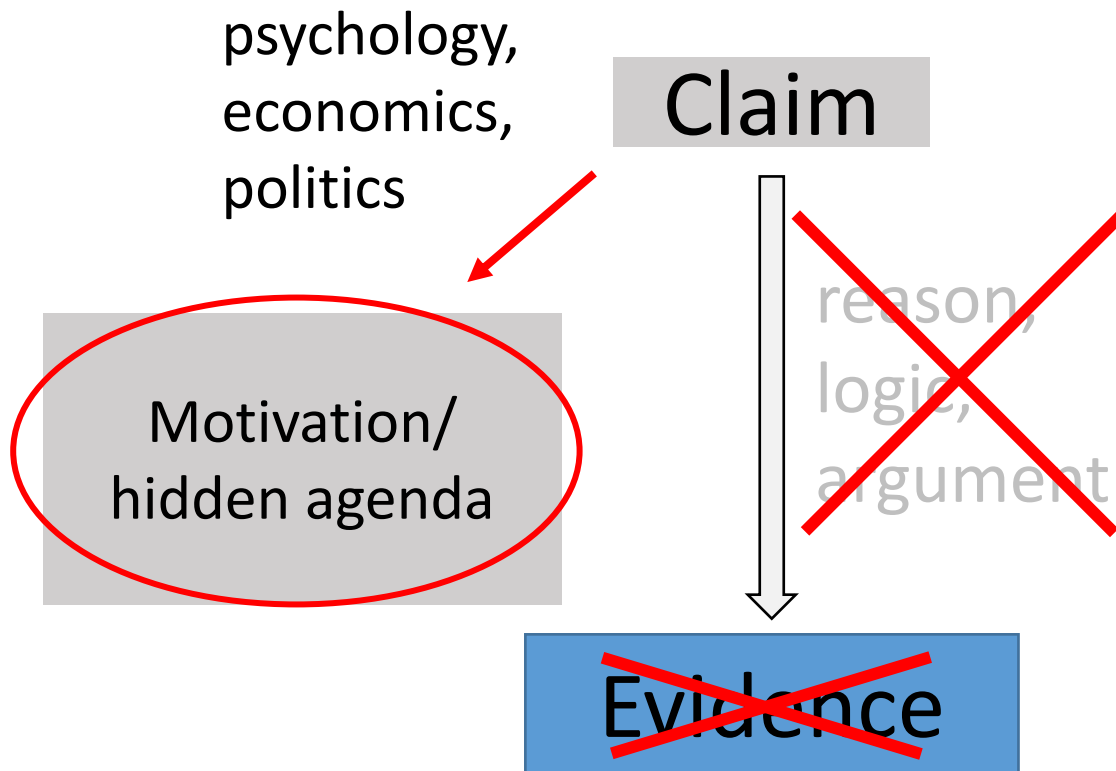
# Outline

- Why should we care?
- The history of critical theory
- What is “contemporary critical theory”?
- What are the problems with contemporary critical theory?
  - Worldview
  - Epistemology
  - Adversarial identities
  - Hegemonic power
- Conclusions

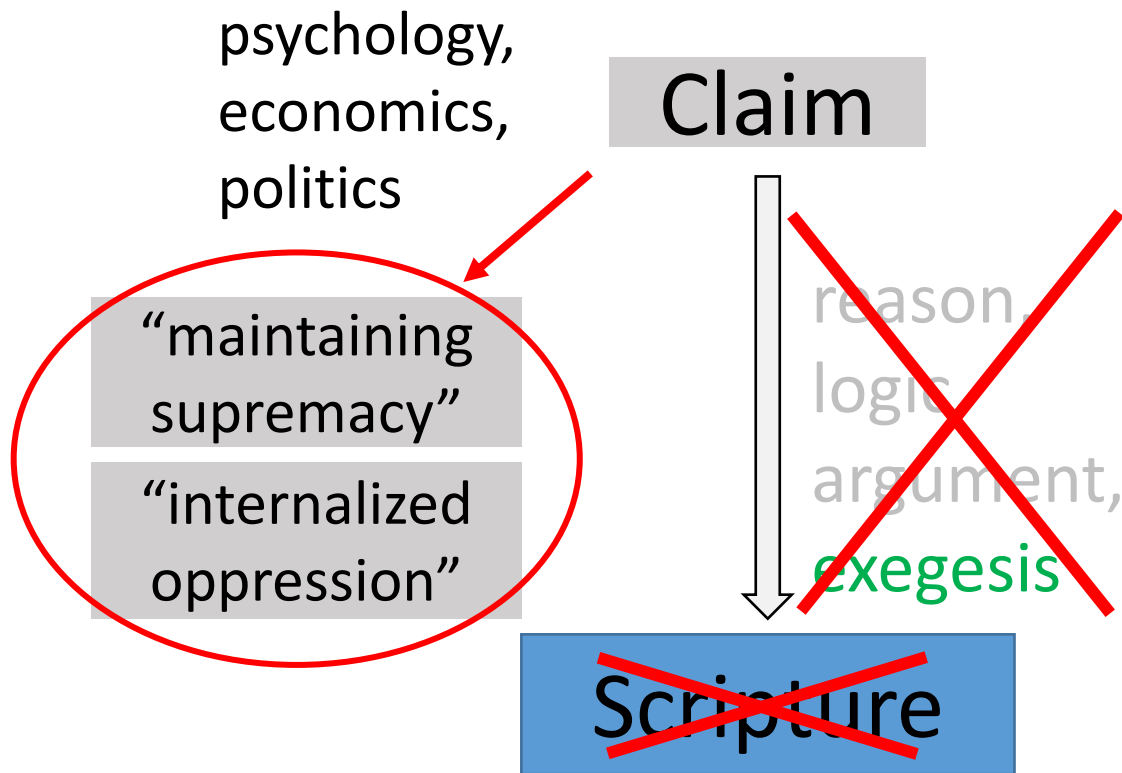
# Epistemology



# Bulverism



# Epistemology

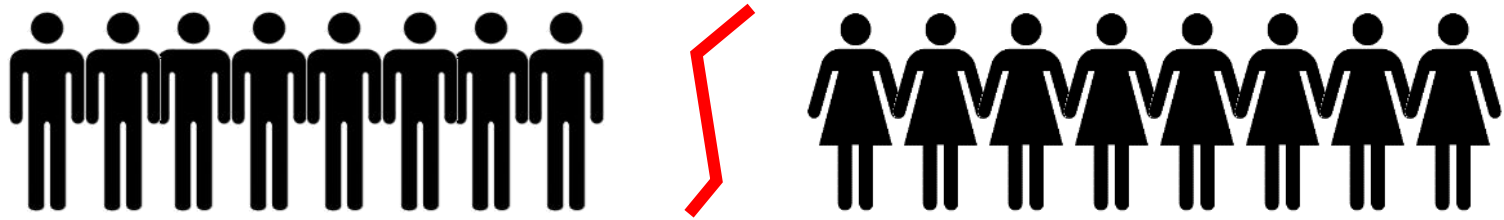




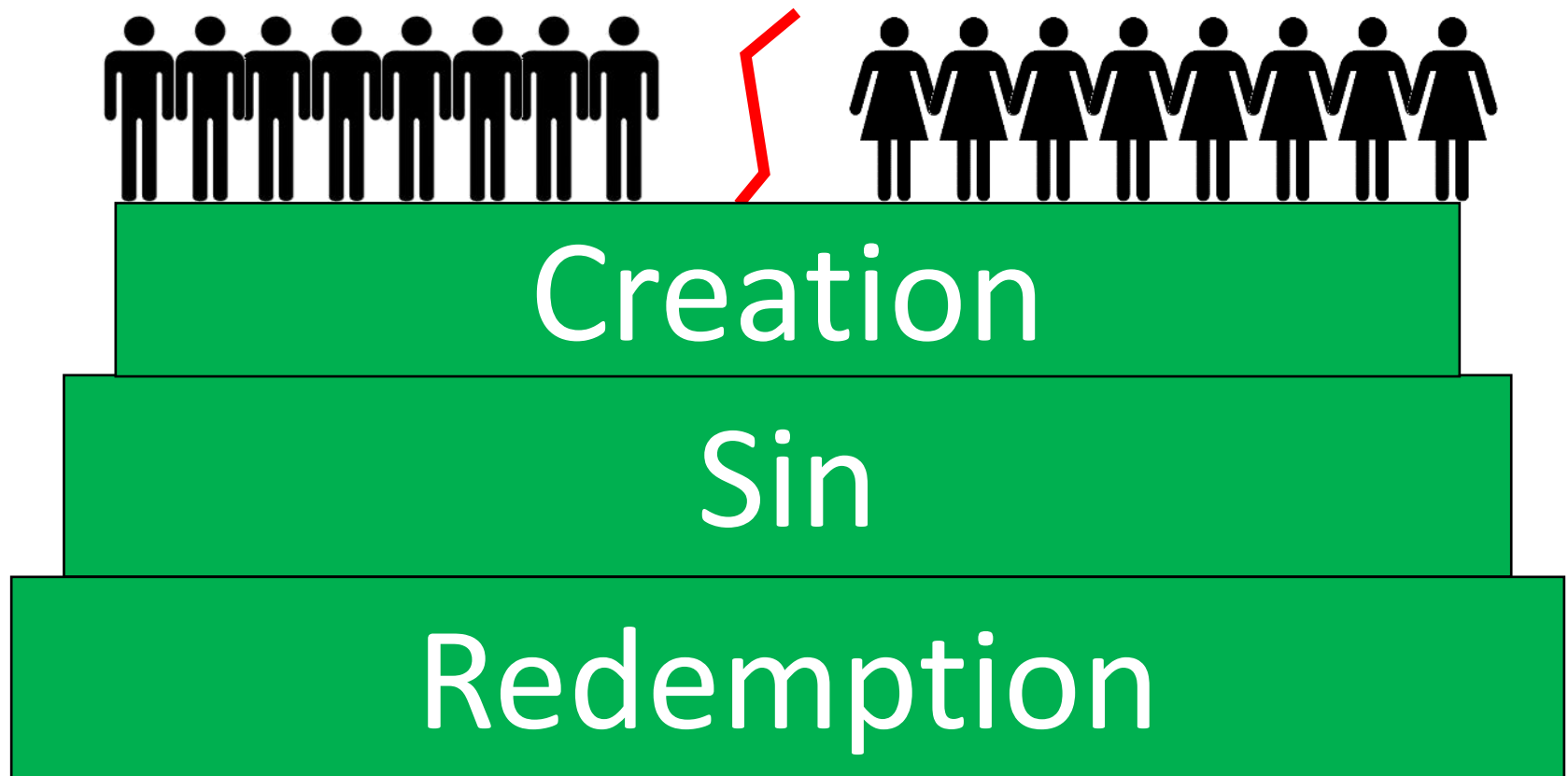
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# Identity and solidarity



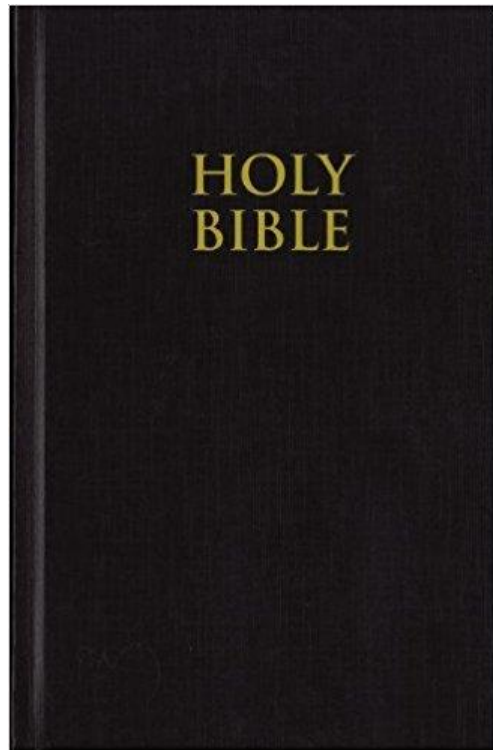
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# Outline

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# Christianity as hegemonic discourse



Religion

Morality

Sexuality





Gender

etc...

# Outline

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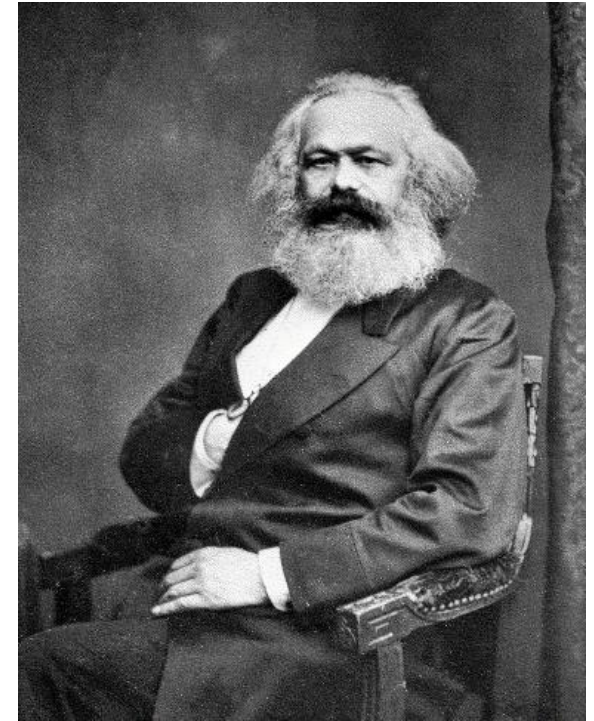
# Christianity and contemporary critical theory are competing worldviews

Christianity			
<b>Creation</b> 	<b>The Fall</b> 	<b>Redemption</b> 	<b>Restoration</b> 
Contemporary Critical Theory			
--	Racism Ableism OPPRESSION Heterosexism Cisgenderism	Protest Resistance ACTIVISM Education Awareness	Equality Power reversal LIBERATION Justice Diversity

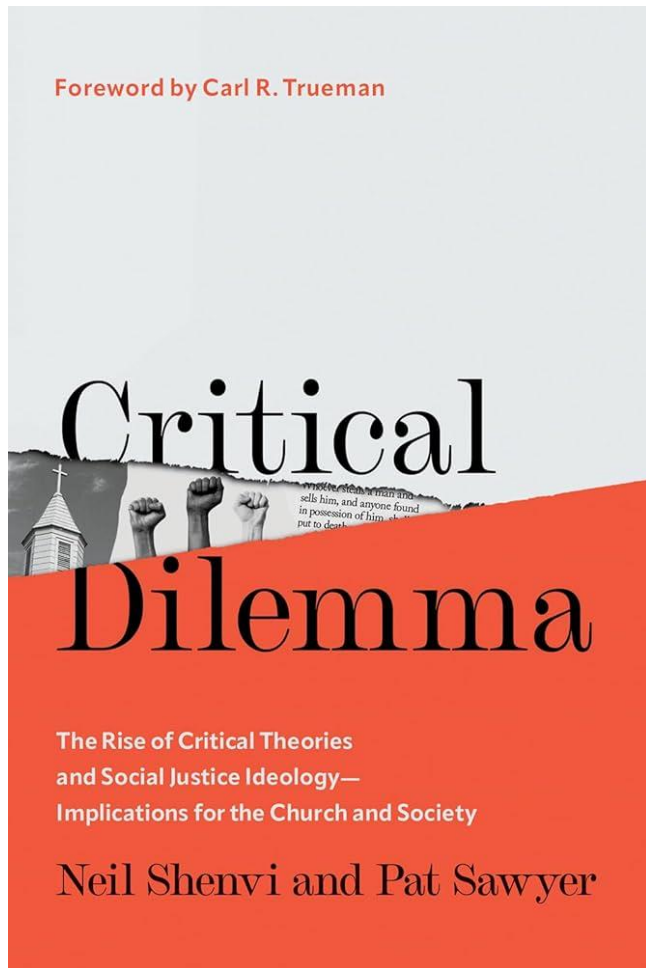


# The enduring importance of Marx

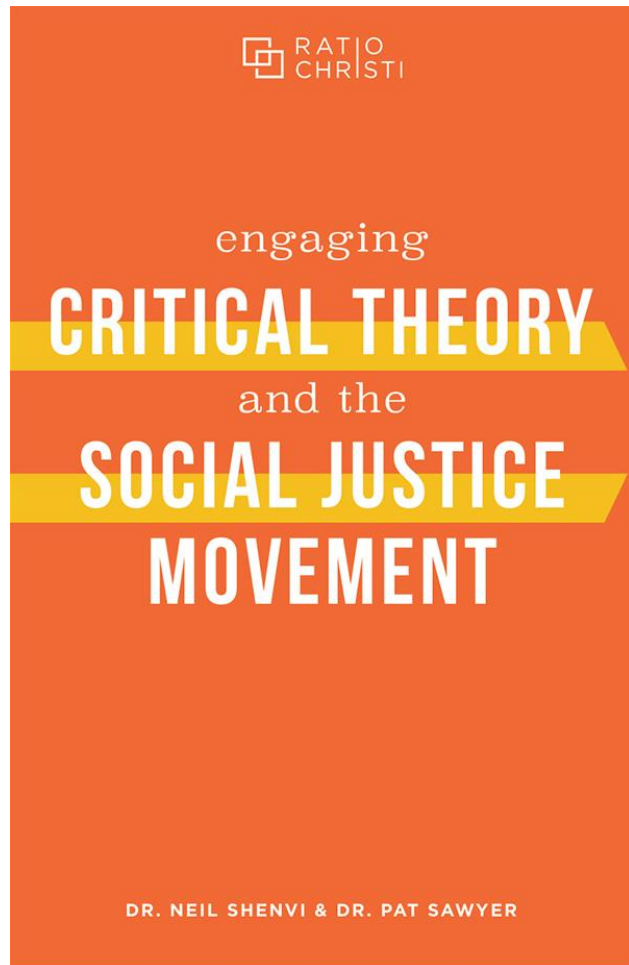
- ✗ Labor theory of value
- ✗ Alienation
- ✗ Dialectical materialism
- ✓ Class conflict
- ✓ Ideology
- ✓ False consciousness
- ✓ Liberatory praxis



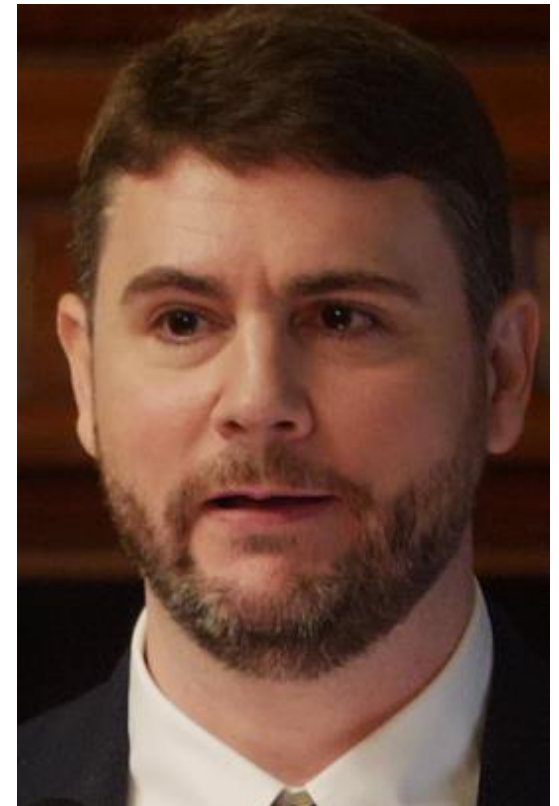
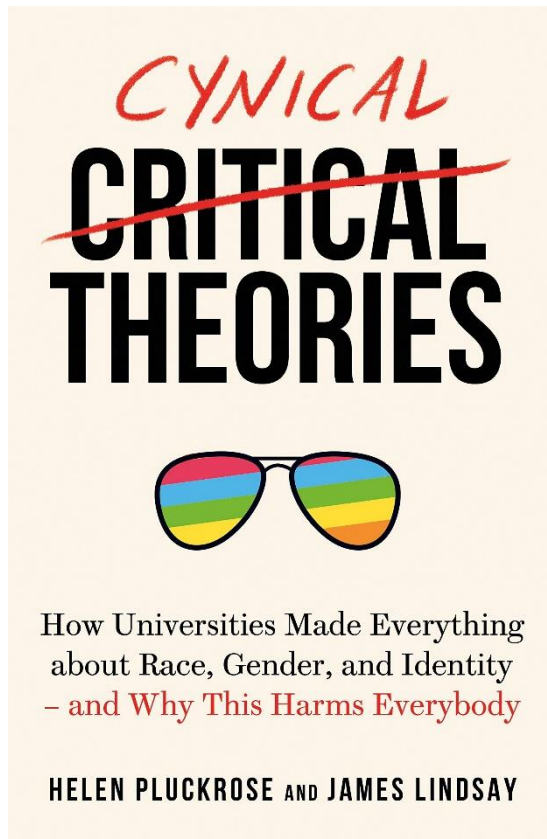
# Shenvi and Sawyer, *Critical Dilemma*



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

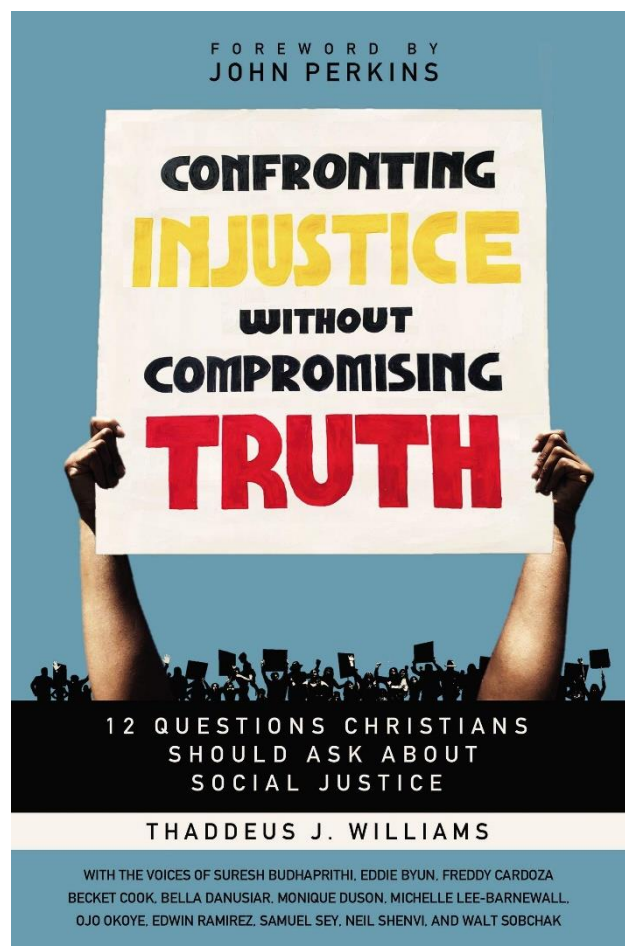


# Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*





# Williams, *Confronting Injustice Without Compromising Truth*



# Acknowledgements and additional resources

Dr. Christina Shenvi



Dr. Pat Sawyer



- [www.shenviapogetics.com/slides/](http://www.shenviapogetics.com/slides/)
- “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*
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