

Critical Theory and Christianity: Are They Compatible?

Dr. Neil Shenvi

Cary Christian School

Feb. 25, 2026

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

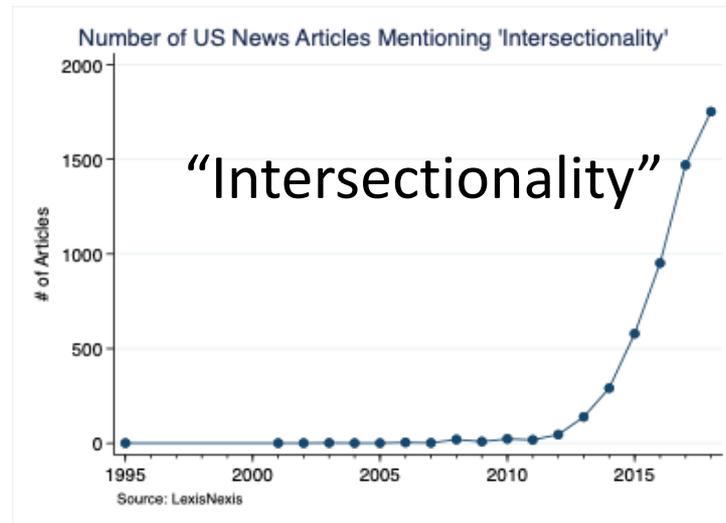
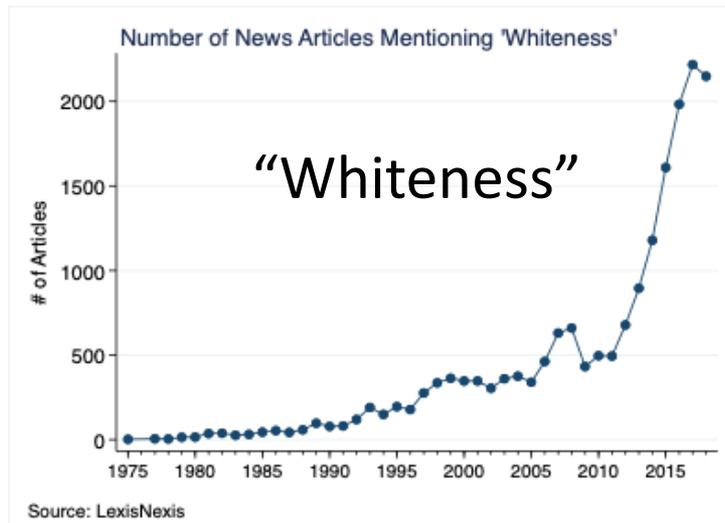
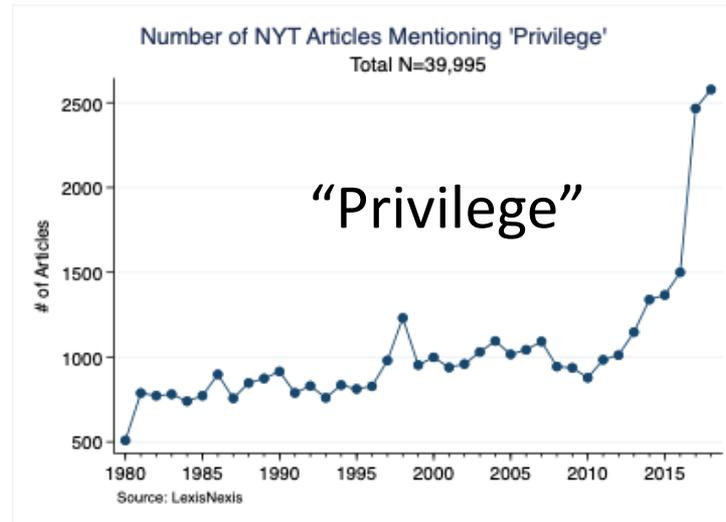
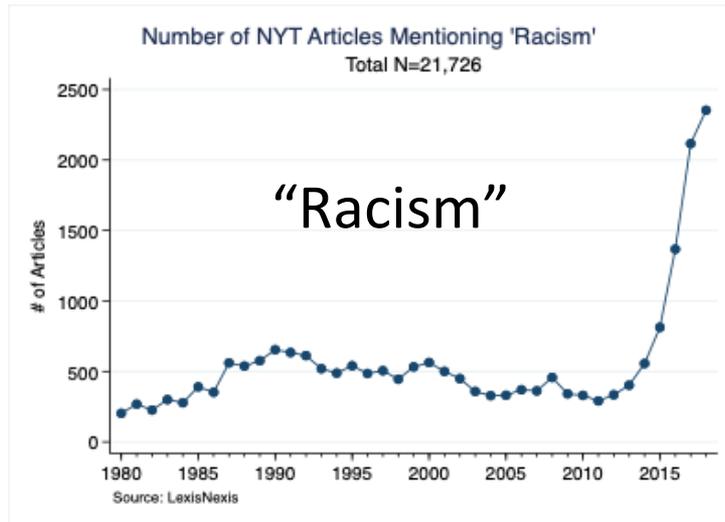
THIS TALK IS ABOUT TRUMP!!!



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).”



Is wokeness dead?



Wokeness is not dead



UN Women
@UN_Women

Today marks the start of Pride Month!

#Pride is more than a celebration—it's the story of LGBTQ+ communities coming together to protect, uplift and resist.

@UN_Women reaffirms #ThePowerOfCommunity and stands in solidarity with LGBTQ+ communities everywhere.

#PrideMonth



12:05 AM · Jun 1, 2025 · 2.1.6K Views



UN Women
@UN_Women

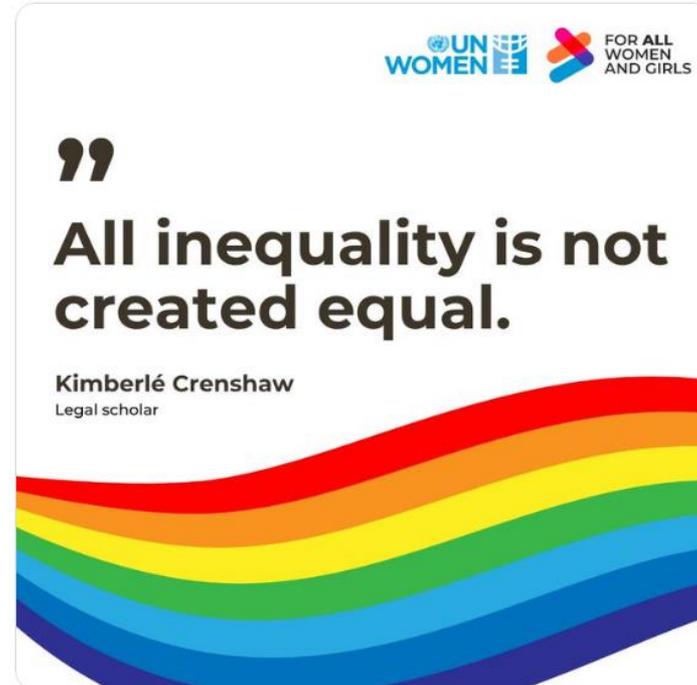


Intersectional feminism gives us a prism to see how our experiences overlap—and how our freedom depends on freedom for all 🌈

This #Pride, let's apply that lens to celebrate the #PowerOfCommunity.

🔗 See why intersectional feminism matters: unwo.men/fecF50WehzW

#PrideMonth



10:01 AM · Jun 21, 2025 · 13.2K Views

Wokeness is not dead

NANCY ARMOUR

Simone Biles

Add Topic +

Simone Biles shows her greatness again in standing up for transgender community | Opinion



[Nancy Armour](#)

USA TODAY

June 6, 2025, 9:28 p.m. ET



There is no scientific evidence that transgender women athletes have a physical advantage over cisgender women athletes, but that hasn't stopped Gaines from claiming they do. She insists they are "robbing" cisgender women of places on the podium, and she doesn't care if it's a 12- or 22-year-old that she's putting in harm's way in this overheated climate where ignorance and violence are celebrated equally.

Wokeness is not dead

nature

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COMMENT **08 August 2025**

Decolonize scientific institutions, don't just diversify them

Indigenous scholars set out eight steps to stop marginalization in academia and to enable a shared Indigenous agenda in science.

By [Tara G. McAllister](#) , [Leilani A. Walker](#) , [Niyokamigaabaw Deondre Smiles](#) , [Lydia Jennings](#), [Bradley Moggridge](#), [Sereana Naepi](#), [Brittany Kamai](#) & [Kat Milligan-McClellan](#)

“Dominant science (sometimes referred to as Western science) is rooted in colonization, racism and white supremacy...The scientific community must acknowledge the value of research that is led by Indigenous communities, as well as research that centres Indigenous Knowledge systems... universities must stop treating Indigenous Knowledge as supplementary to ‘real knowledge’; this perpetuates white supremacy in science.”

Wokeness is not dead

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News Article ⓘ

'Woke Is Back': Liberals Celebrate Clean Sweep of Election Victories

PUBLISHED NOV 05, 2025 AT 05:14 AM EST UPDATED NOV 05, 2025 AT 07:12 AM EST

WE BELIEVE IN

Socialist **FEMINISM**

- STATEWIDE ABORTION ACCESS FUND
- CHILDCARE BENEFITS, WAGES FOR AT-HOME CARE
- CRACK DOWN ON WORKPLACE ABUSES
- DECRIMINALIZE SEX WORK & DEFUND NYPD

ZOHRAN
FOR STATE ASSEMBLY



Zohran Kwame Mamdani

June 8, 2020 · 🌐

Defunding the police is a feminist issue.

Women, especially trans women, are disproportionately impacted by police violence & the violence of incarceration.

We need to divest from these systems & invest in services that lift all of us up.

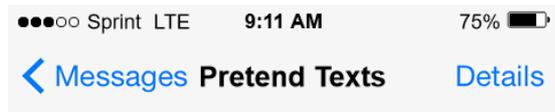
Read more: bit.ly/Z4ASocFem



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?



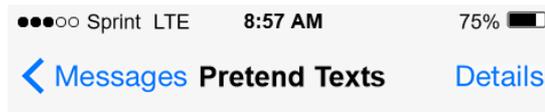
Christians should care about social justice!!!

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?



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

absolutely!

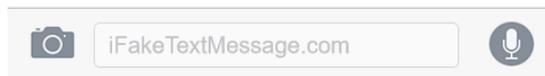
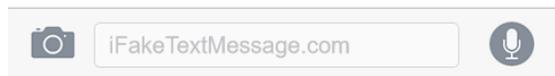
The church needs to stop oppressing women!

in what way?

SMASH THE PATRIARCHY! WICCA FOR ALL!

I'm must be missing something

Warning: fake texts. For pedagogical use only



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

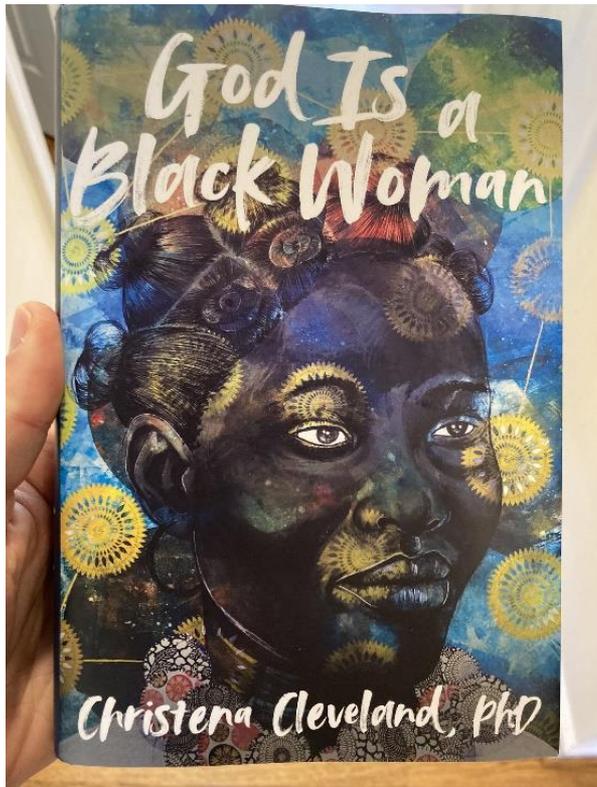
Christena Cleveland is associate professor of the practice of reconciliation at Duke University's Divinity School, where she also directs the Center for Reconciliation.

[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

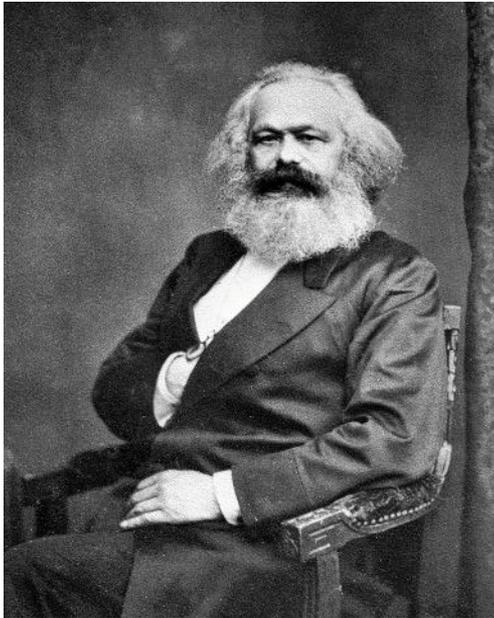
“The liberation of all Black women requires the **dismantling of all systems of oppression**—white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and more” - Cleveland, *God is a Black Woman*, p. 223

“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

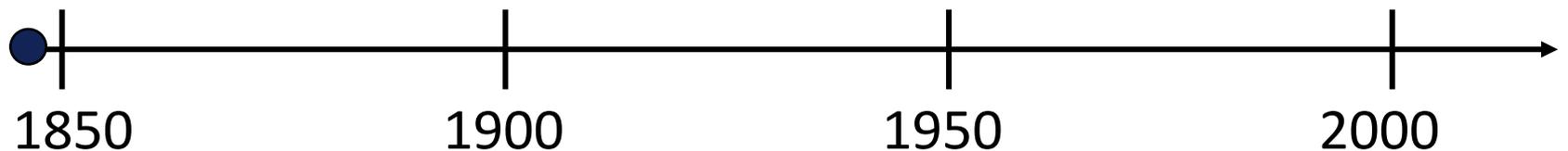
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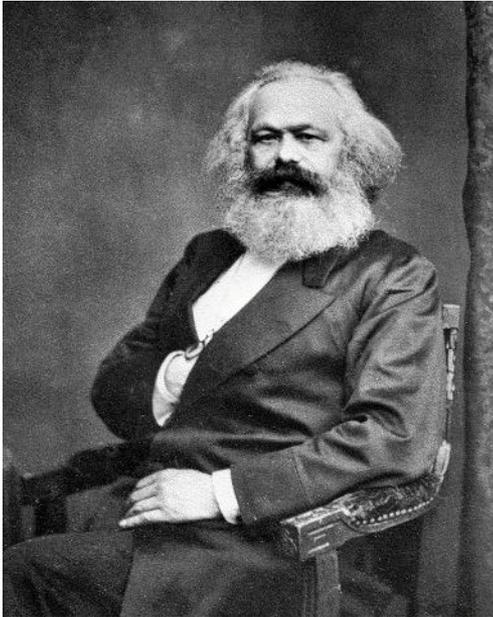
Karl Marx and critical theory



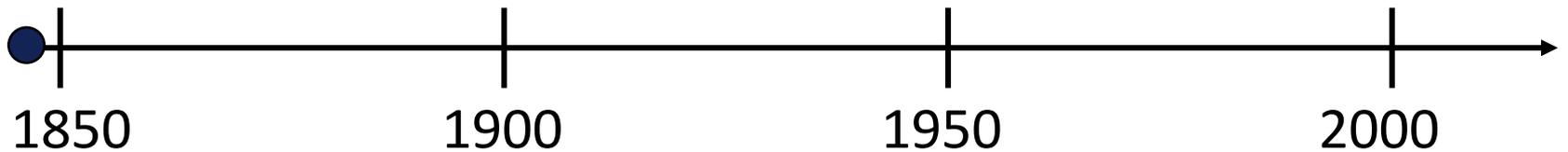
“Alone among these thinkers [i.e., Horkheimer, Bourdieu, Foucault, etc.], **Karl Marx invites consensus as a ‘true’ critical theorist. Indeed, for many, he alone inaugurates the critical tradition**” (Levinson et al, *Beyond Critique*, p. 25-26)



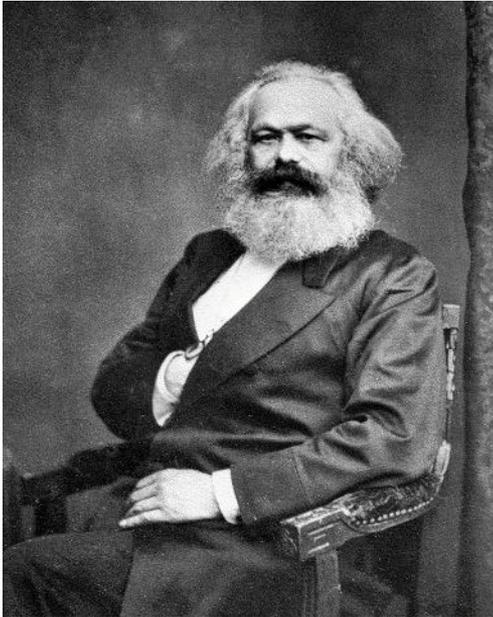
Karl Marx and critical theory



- Class conflict
- Ideology
- False consciousness
- Liberatory praxis

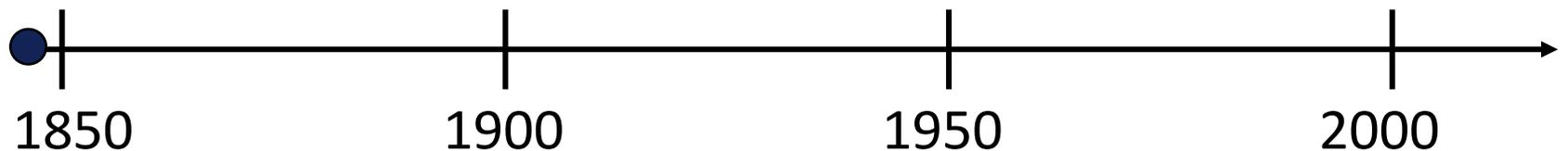


Marx and class conflict

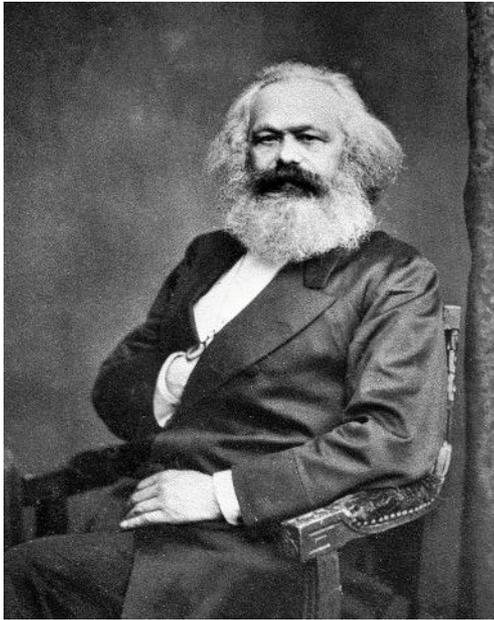


“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of **class struggles**.

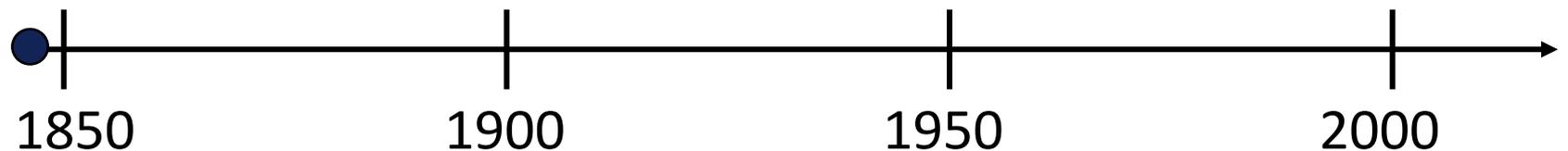
Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman, **in a word, oppressor and oppressed**, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, that each time ended, either in the revolutionary reconstitution of society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



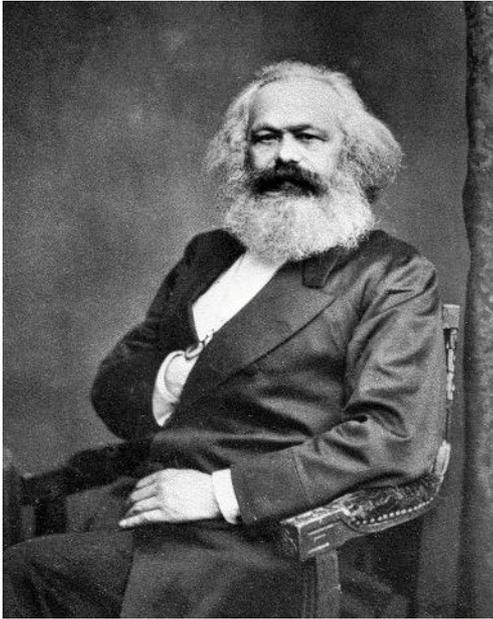
Marx and ideology



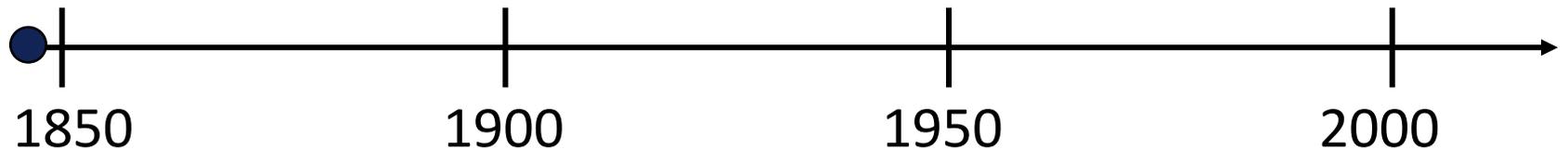
“The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force...**The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material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



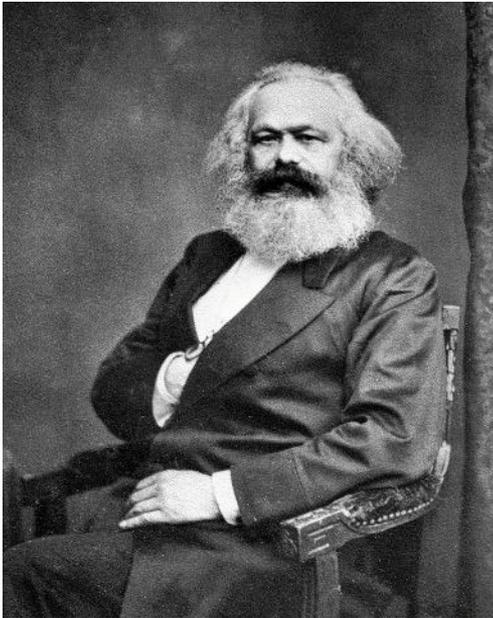
Marx and false consciousness



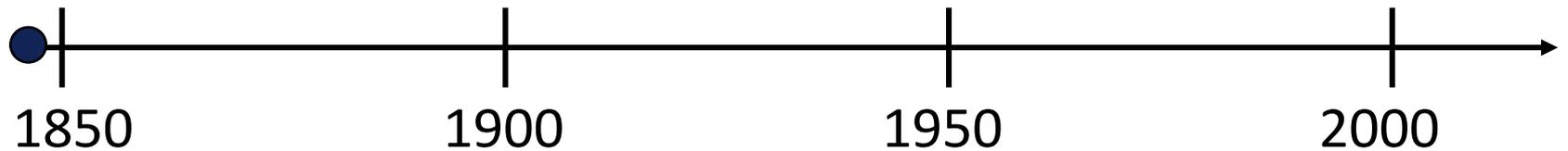
“Whilst in ordinary life every shopkeeper is very well able to distinguish between what somebody professes to be and what he really is, **our historians have not yet won even this trivial insight.** They take every epoch at its word and believe that everything it says and imagines about itself is true. 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



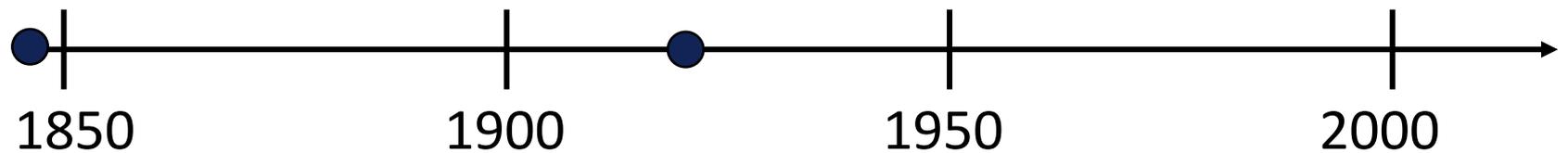
“The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; **the point, however, is to change it.**” – Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*



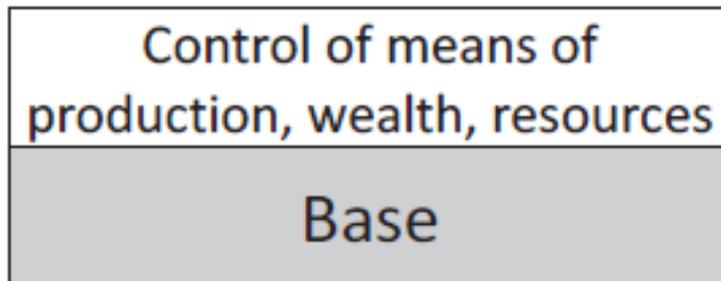
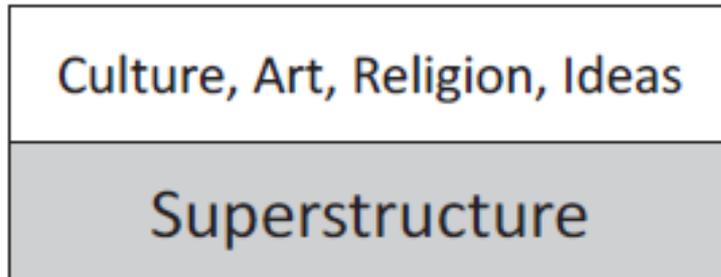
Critical theory and the Frankfurt School



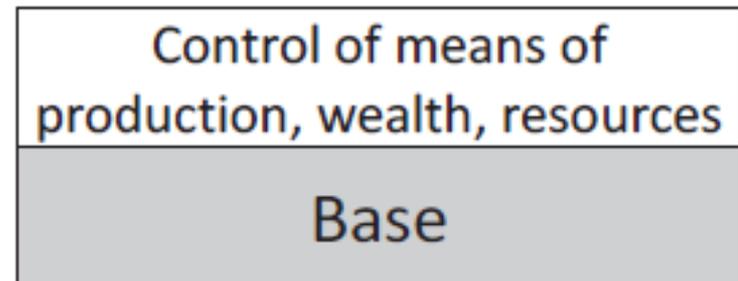
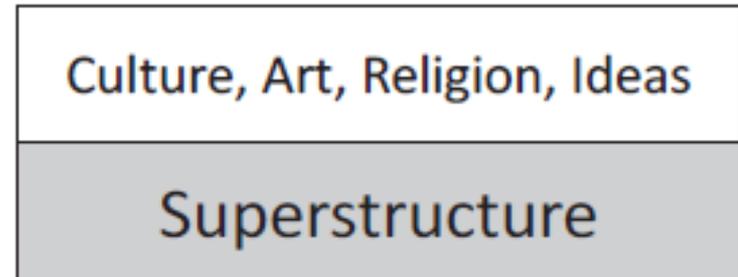
“Critical theory was conceived within the crucible of Marxism” “The Frankfurt School not only contested establishmentarianism view of history, but projected a radical alternative. European radicals applied its ideas to reconfiguring the family, sexuality, and education.” – Bronner, *Critical Theory: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



Marxism



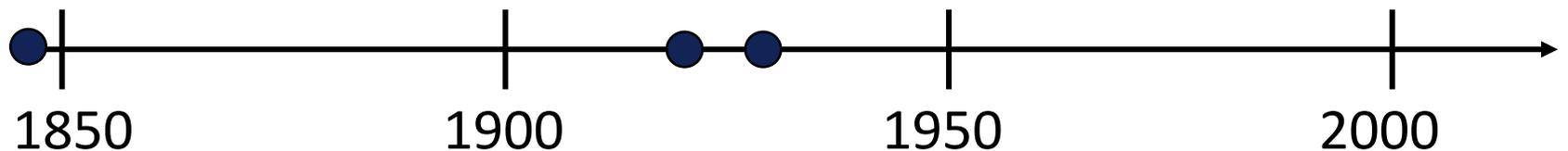
Critical Theory



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

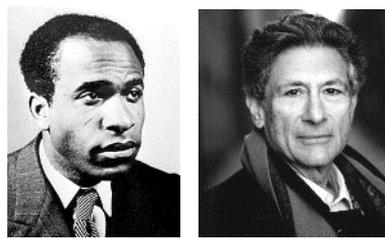
Cultural Studies



Bourdieu

Hall

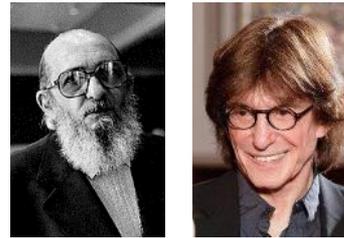
Postcolonialism



Fanon

Said

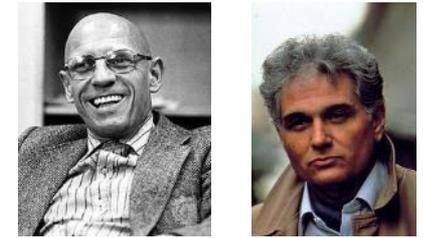
Critical pedagogy



Freire

Giroux

Postmodernism



Foucault

Derrida

Feminism



de Beauvoir

Friedan

Black feminism



hooks

Lorde

Queer theory



Butler

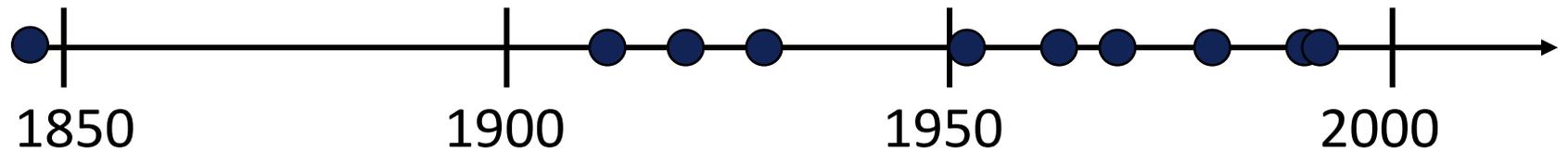
Rich

Critical Race Theory

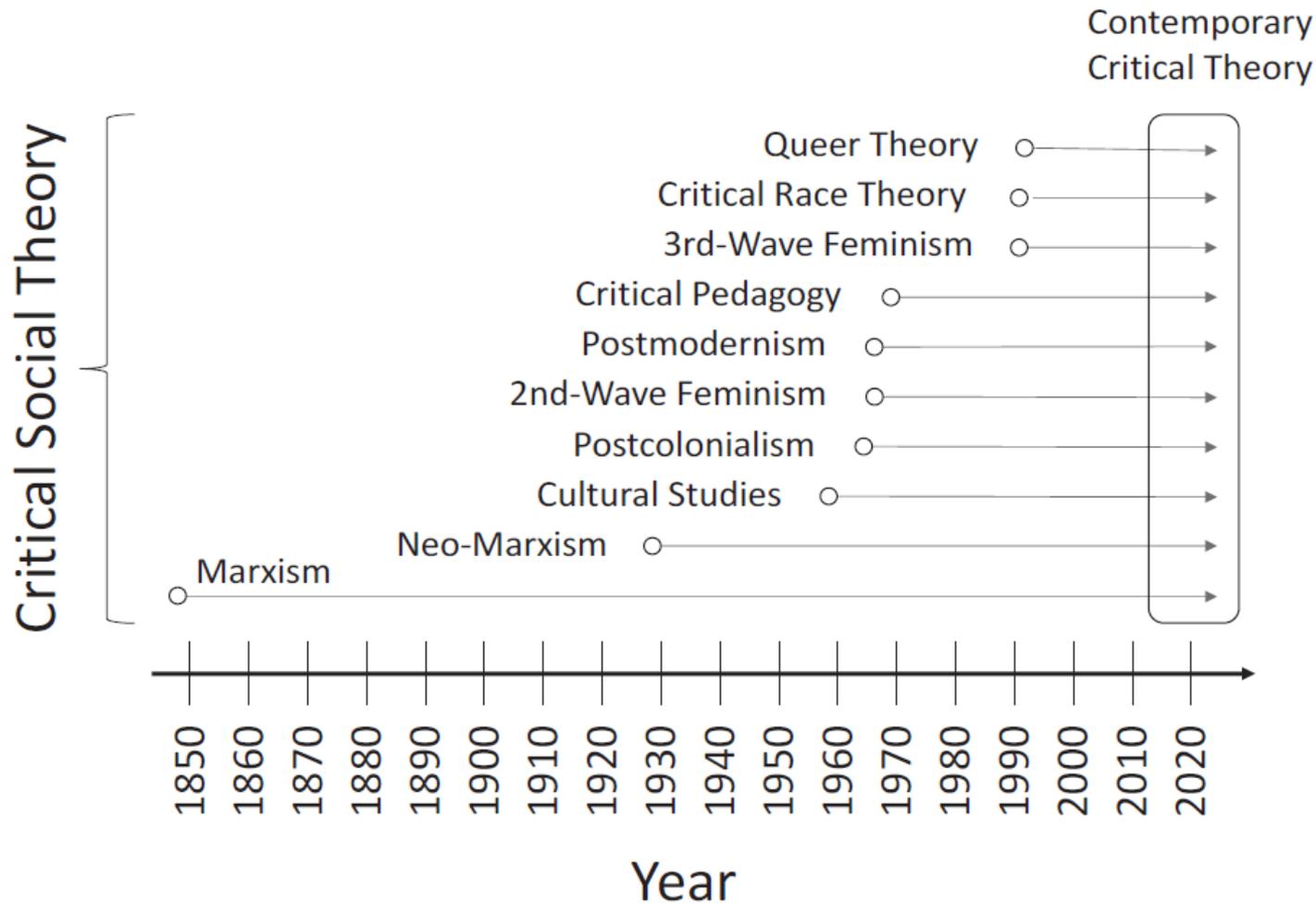


Bell

Crenshaw



The evolution of critical social theory



Outline

- Why should we care?
- The history of critical theory
- What is “contemporary 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 contemporary critical theory?
- Conclusions

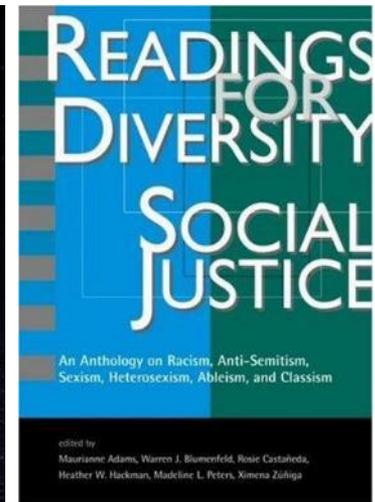
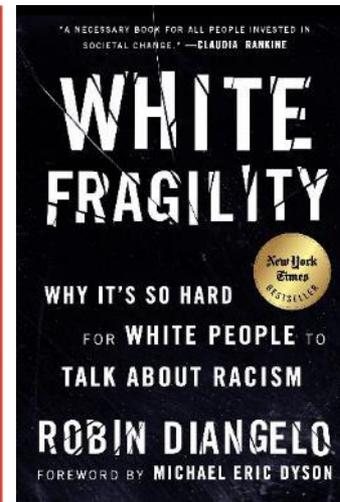
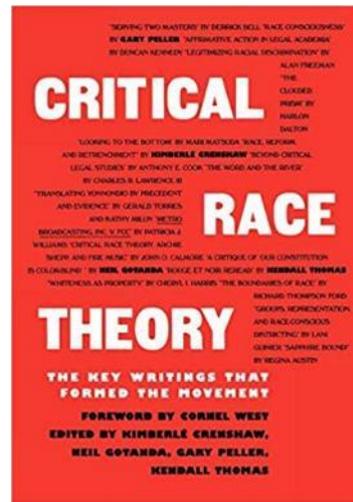
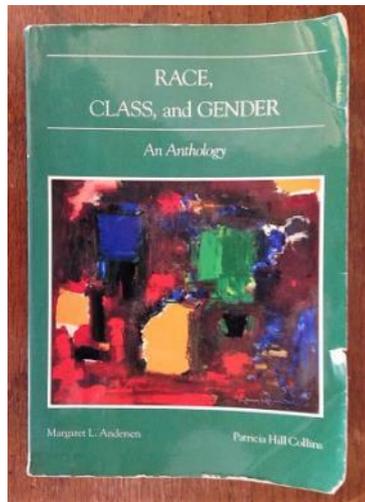
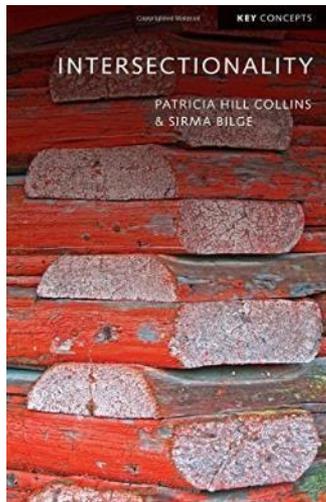
The central premises of contemporary critical theory

Premise I: Social binary

Premise II: Oppression through ideology

Premise III: Lived experience

Premise IV: Social justice



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

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Premise #2: Oppression occurs through hegemonic power

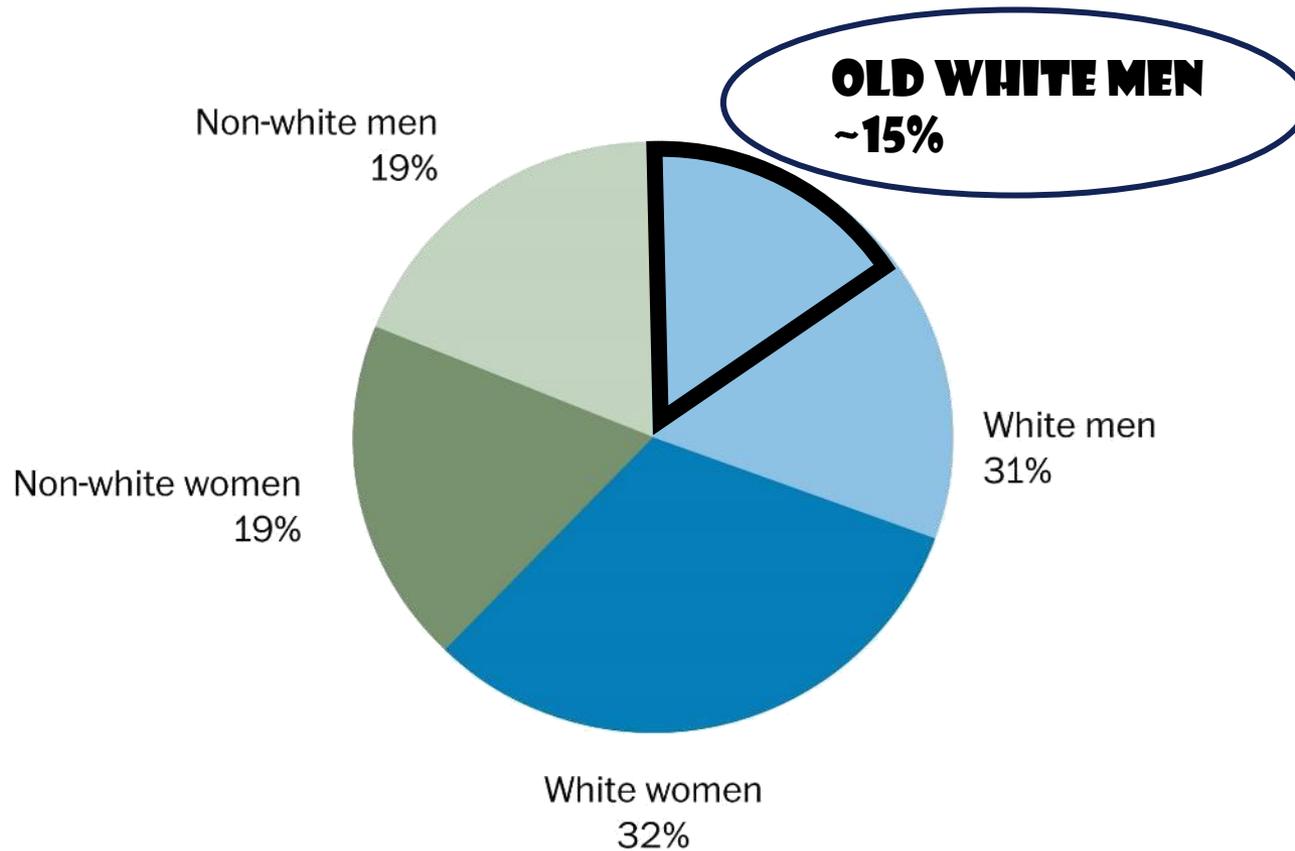
“oppression also traditionally carries a strong connotation of conquest and colonial domination... New left social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, however, shifted the meaning of the concept of oppression. **In its new usage, oppression designates the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not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

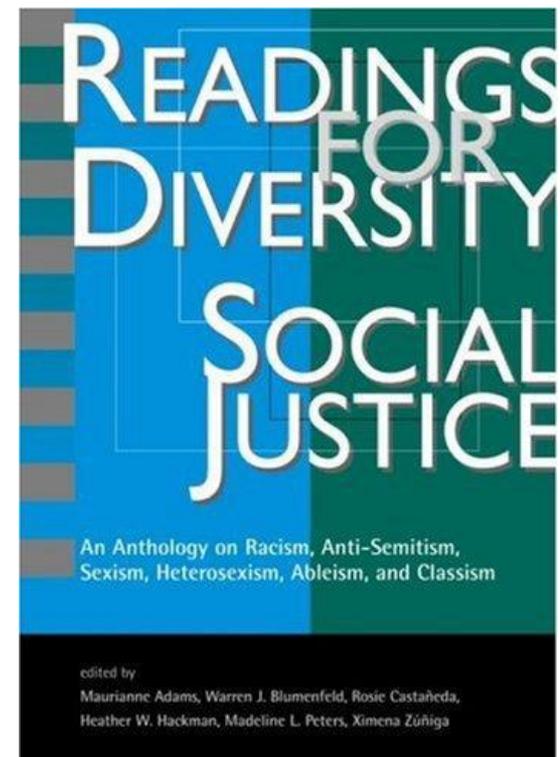
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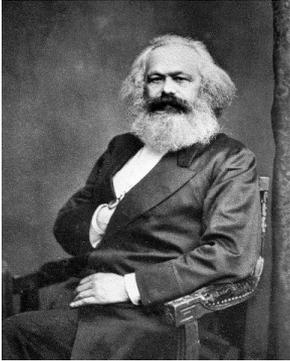
Premise #4: Social justice demands the liberation of oppressed groups

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



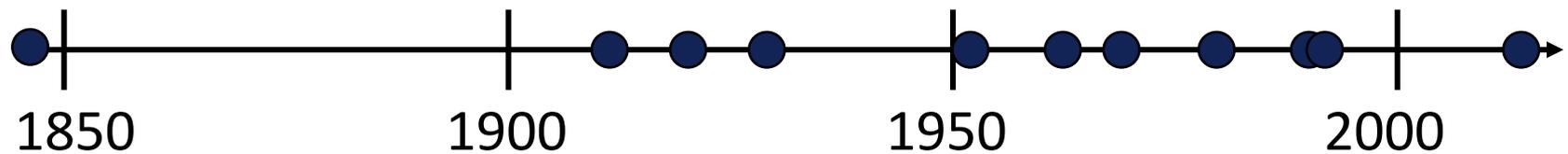
From Karl Marx to contemporary critical theory



- Class conflict
- Ideology
- False consciousness
- Liberatory praxis



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



Outline

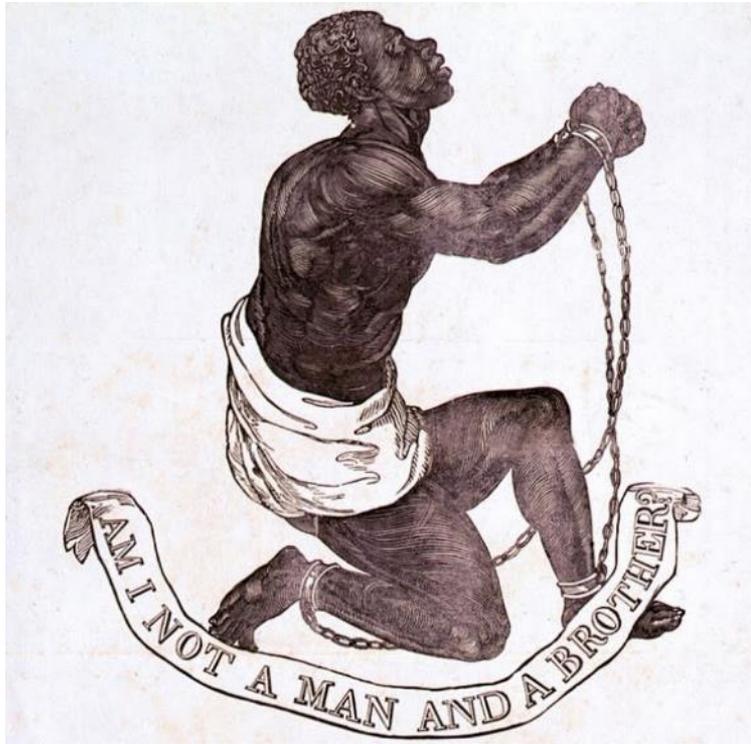
- Why should we care?
- The history of critical theory
- What is “contemporary critical theory”?
 - Premise 1: Social binary
 - Premise 2: Oppression through ideology
 - Premise 3: Lived experience
 - Premise 4: Social justice
 - The strengths of critical theory
- What are the problems with contemporary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

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

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”**



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.



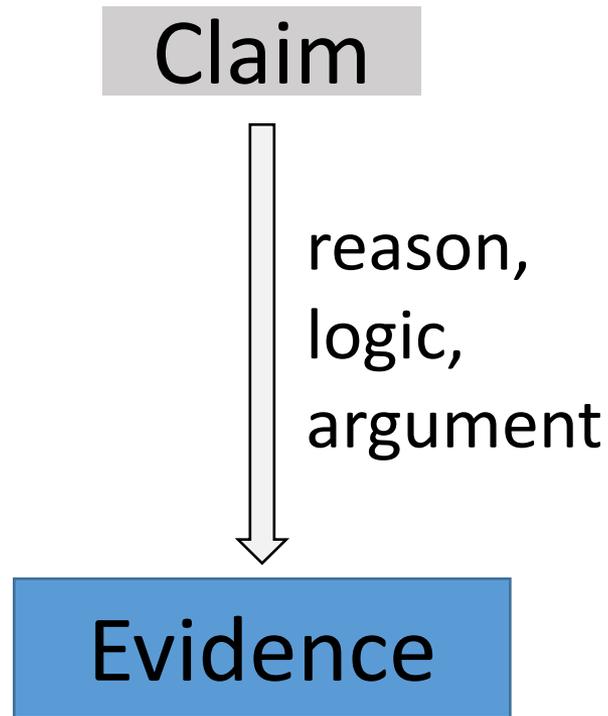
Does this sound like a metanarrative? That's because it is. Social Justice scholarship and its educators and activists see these principles and conclusions as *The Truth* According to Social Justice--and they treat it as though they have discovered the analogue of the germ theory of disease, but for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



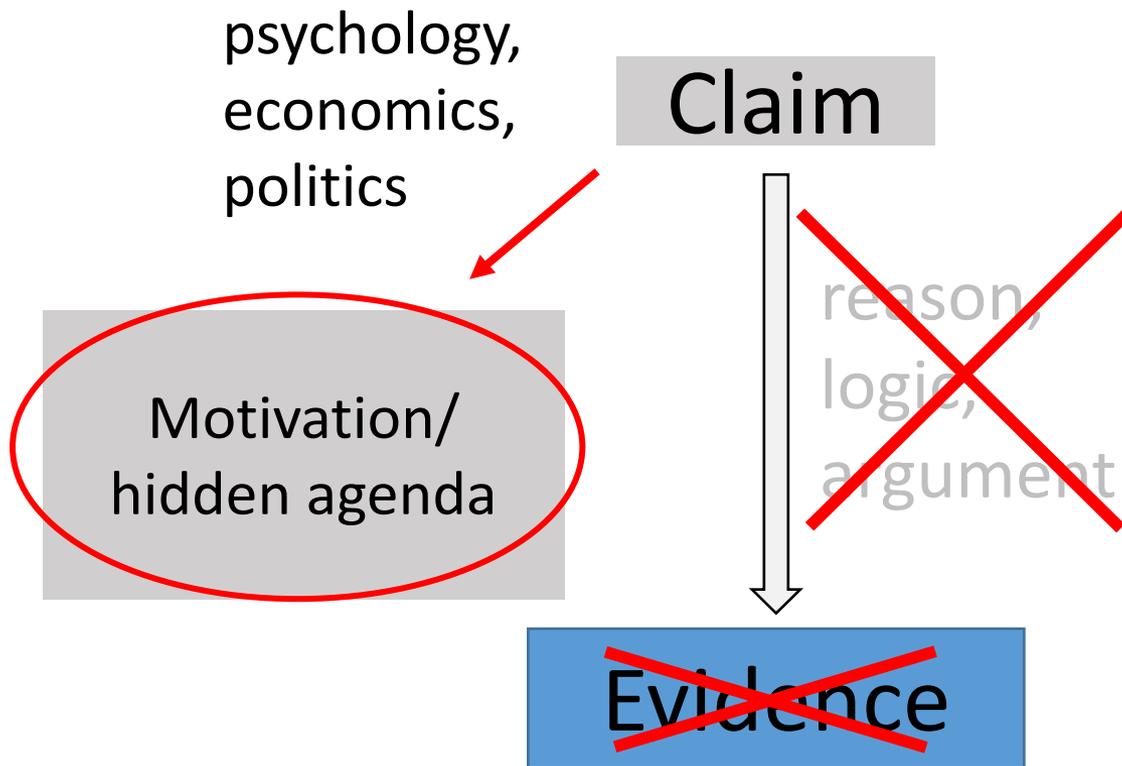
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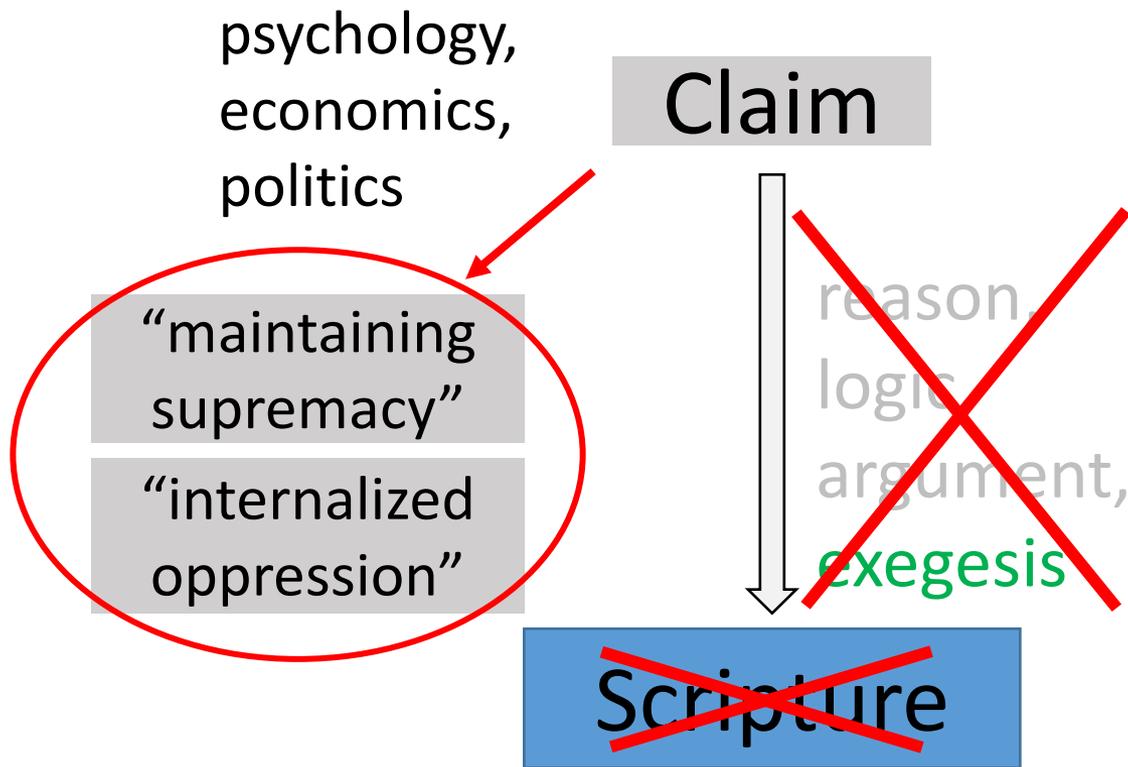
Epistemology



Bulverism



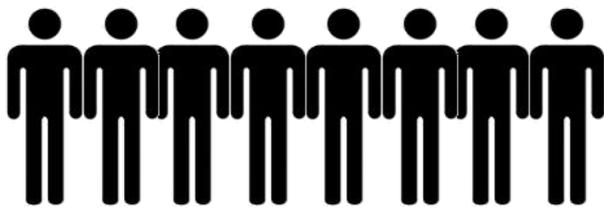
Epistemology



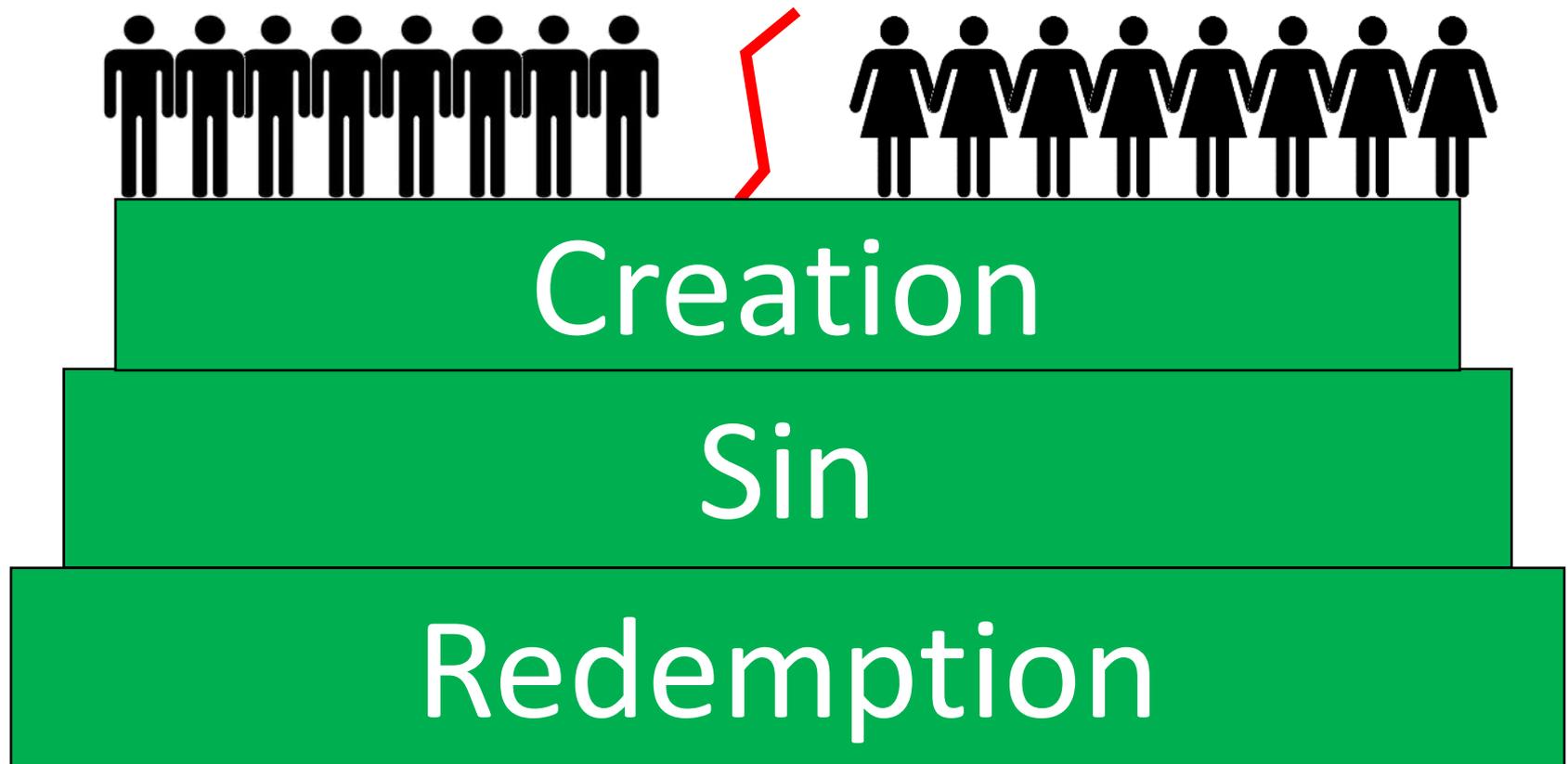
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Identity and solidarity



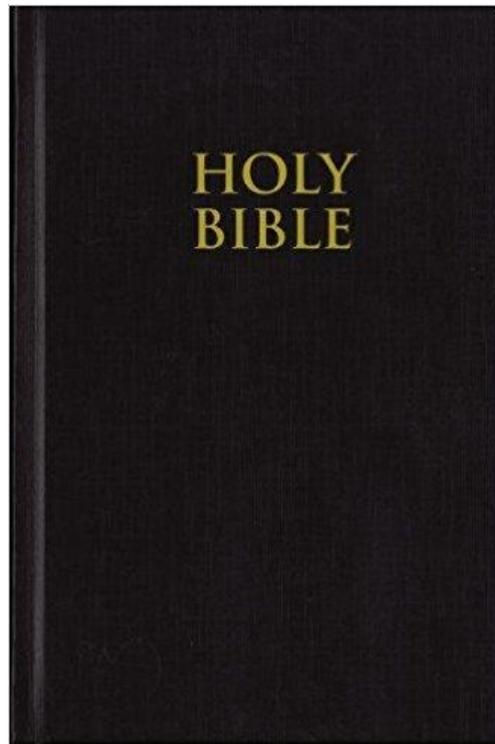
Identity and solidarity



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Christianity as hegemonic discourse



Religion



Morality



Sexuality



Gender



etc...



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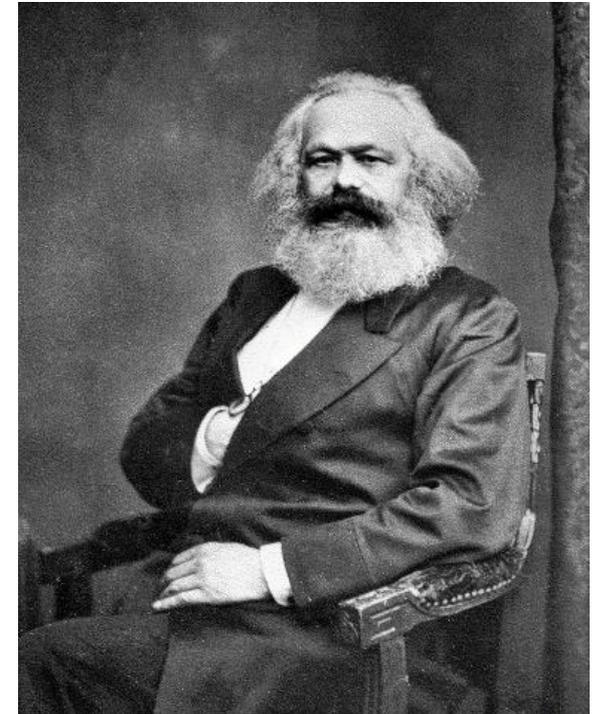
Christianity and contemporary critical theory are competing worldviews

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

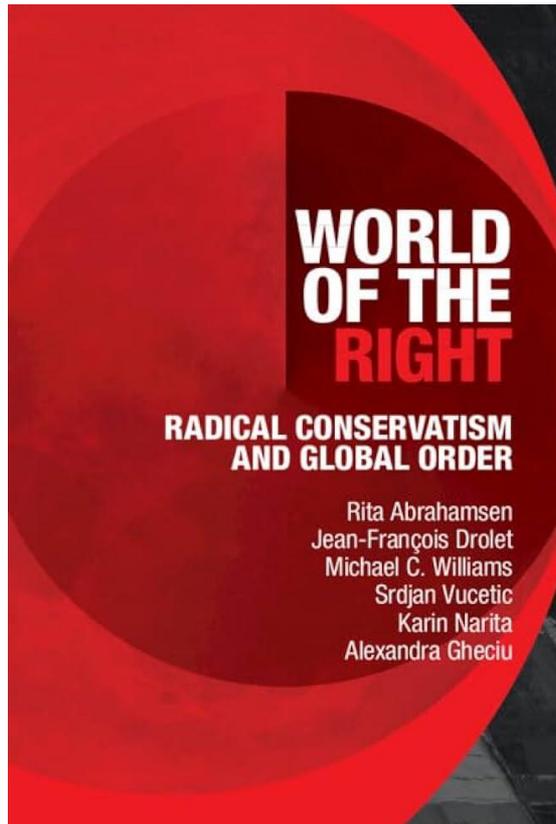
The enduring importance of Marx

- ✗ Labor theory of value
- ✗ Alienation
- ✗ Dialectical materialism

- ✓ Class conflict
- ✓ Ideology
- ✓ False consciousness
- ✓ Liberatory praxis



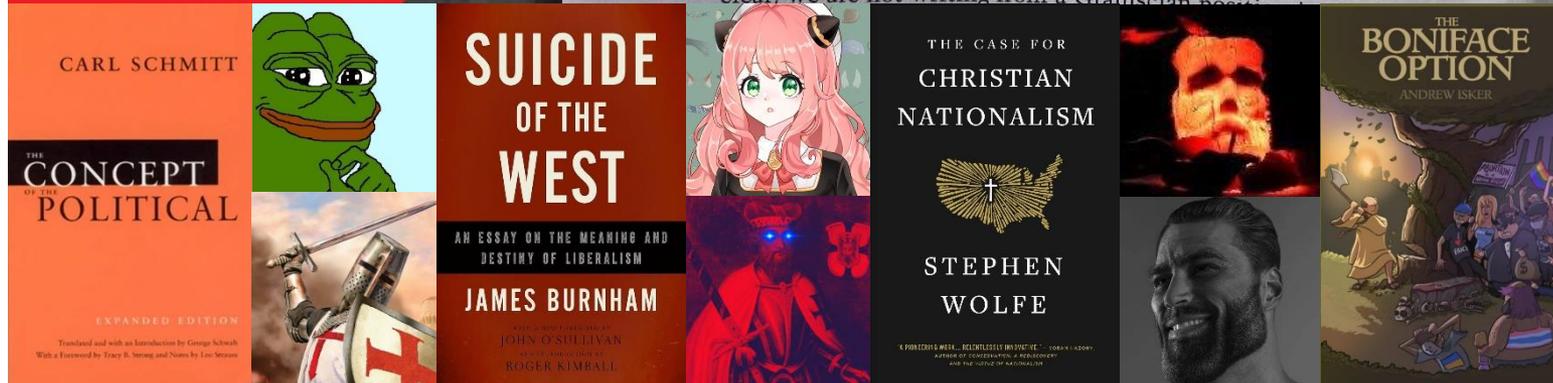
The Woke Right



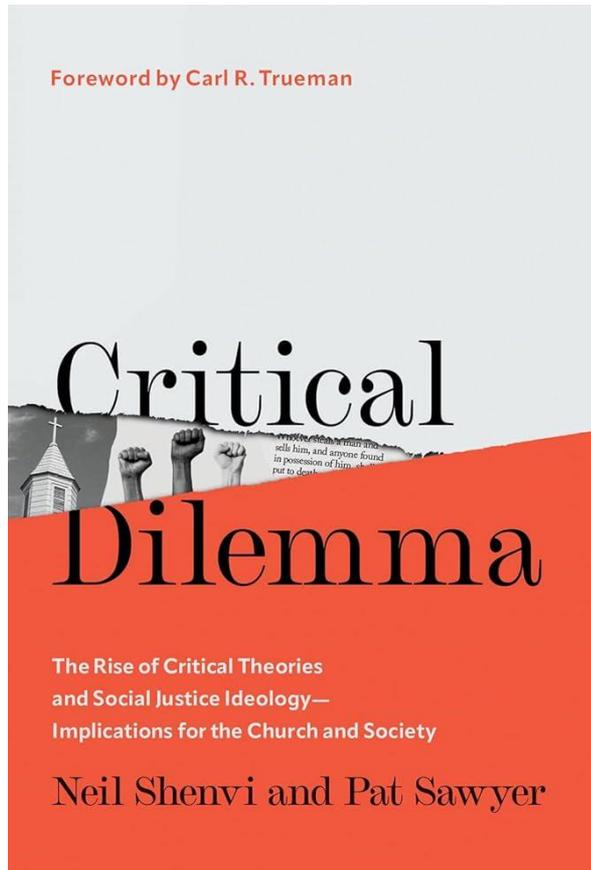
2 The Gramscian Right, or Turning Gramsci on His Head

Few figures seem less amenable to appropriation by the Right than Antonio Gramsci. An icon of the Left and a key inspiration for 'critical' sociological and political thought and IR theory, Gramsci's ideas about hegemony and political transformation have long been taken as the enemy of conservatism in all its forms. This chapter, by contrast, argues that Gramsci provides a powerful way to understand the globalisation of the Right in part because many of his core ideas, particularly those concerning cultural hegemony, historic blocs, and counter-hegemonic movements, have been self-consciously and strategically appropriated by the Right. The near worldwide rise of the Right is in many ways the product of this 'Gramscianism of the Right'. Just as Marx famously quipped that the goal of his historical materialism was to turn Hegelian Idealism 'on its head', so the Right has inverted Gramsci.

This chapter examines the evolution of this project. To be clear, we are not writing from a Gramscian position.



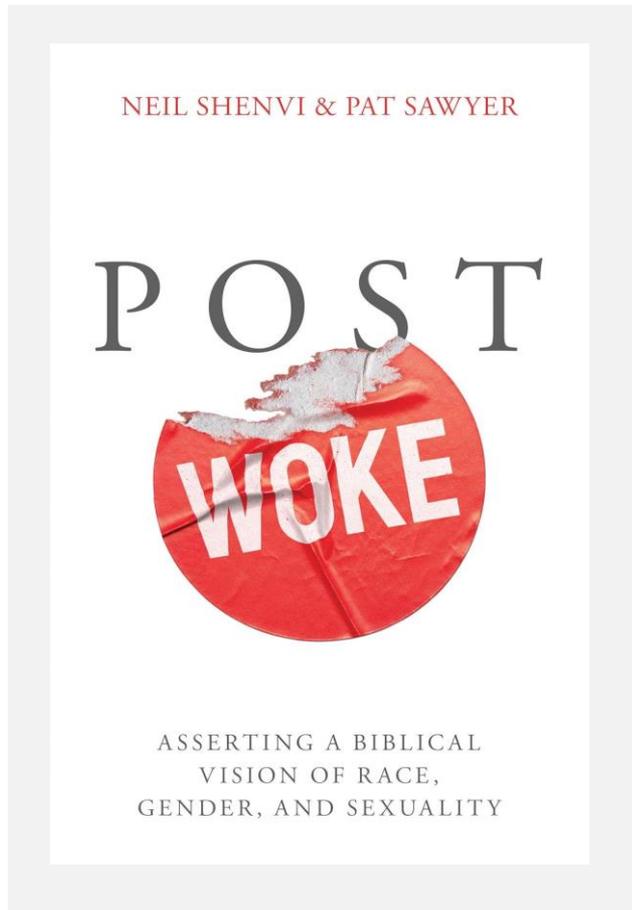
Critical Dilemma (2023)



Academic and comprehensive

- 500+ pages
- 770+ footnotes
- 200+ primary sources on critical theory
- Thousands of words of quotes from primary sources
- Endorsements from: Ligon Duncan, JD Greear, Nancy Pearcey, Thomas Chatterton Williams, Alisa Childers, Peter Boghossian, John Cooper, Natasha Crain, Thaddeus Williams, John Stonestreet

Post Woke (2026)



Accessible and practical

- 288 pages
- 250+ footnotes
- 200+ Scripture references
- Examples, illustrations, case studies, action plans
- Endorsements from: Kevin DeYoung, Christopher Yuan, Gavin Ortlund, Erwin Lutzer, Hillary Ferrer, Sean McDowell, Carl Trueman, Melissa Doherty

Acknowledgements and additional resources

Dr. Christina Shenvi



Dr. Pat Sawyer



- www.shenviapoletics.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*
- shenviapoletics.com/
- Twitter @NeilShenvi, @RealPatSawyer