



Critical Theory and Christianity: Are They Compatible?

Dr. Neil Shenvi

August 20-21, 2021

This talk is not about Trump



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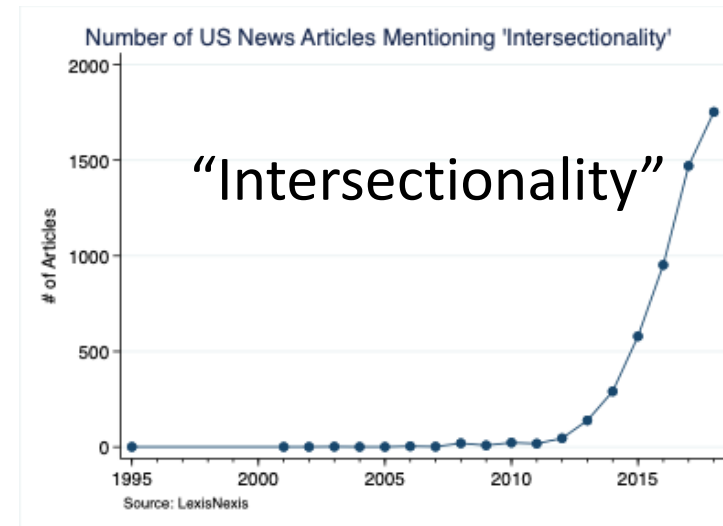
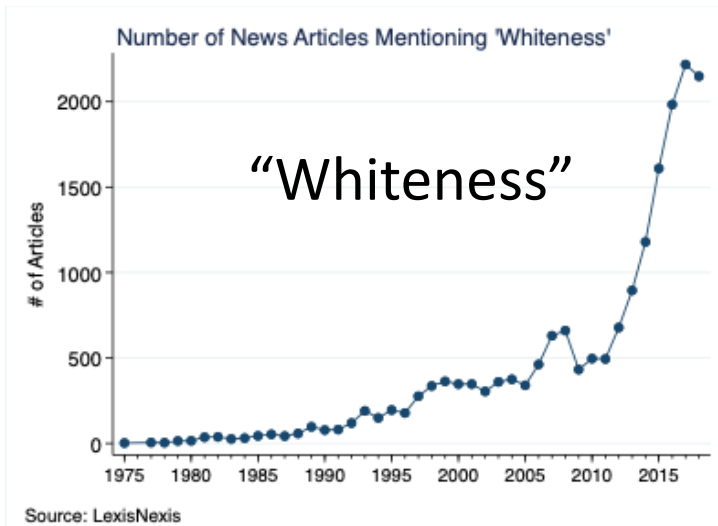
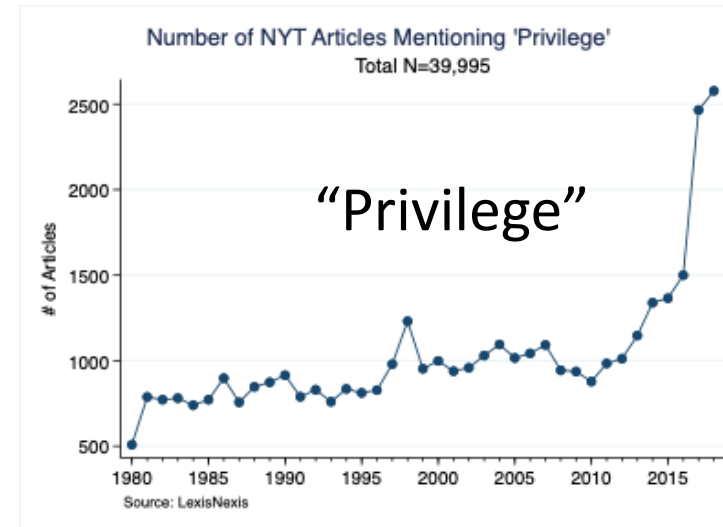
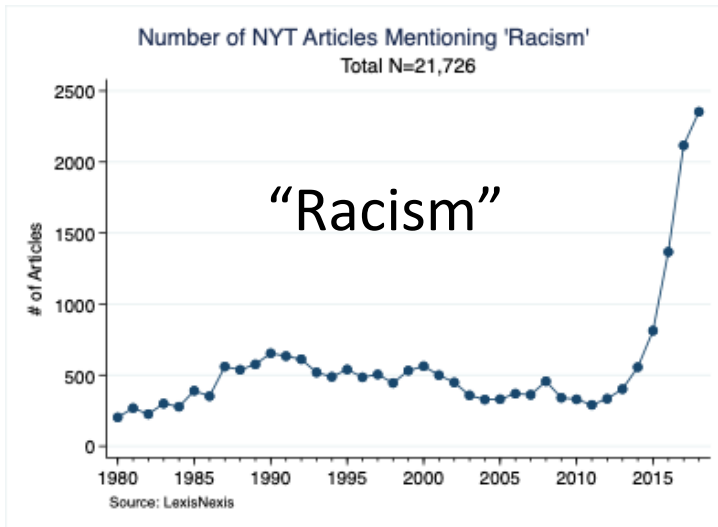
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NYTimes word usage




Smithsonian NMAAHC

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

TALKING ABOUT RACE | NMAAHC

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

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




Rugged Individualism

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

Family Structure

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



Emphasis on Scientific Method

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

Black Lives Matter

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

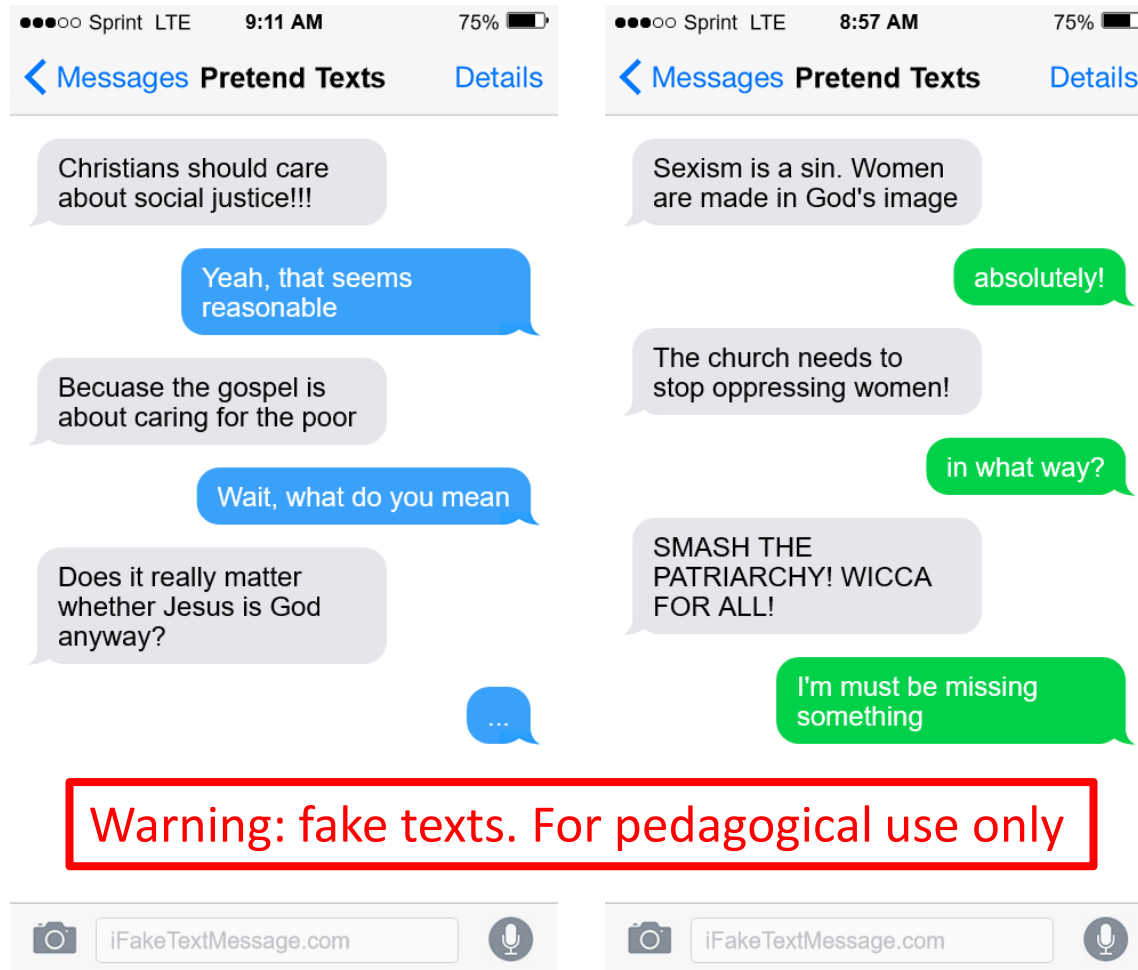
We foster a queer-affirming network. When we gather, we do so with the intention of freeing ourselves from the **tight grip of heteronormative thinking**, or rather, the belief that all in the world are heterosexual (unless s/he or they disclose otherwise).”



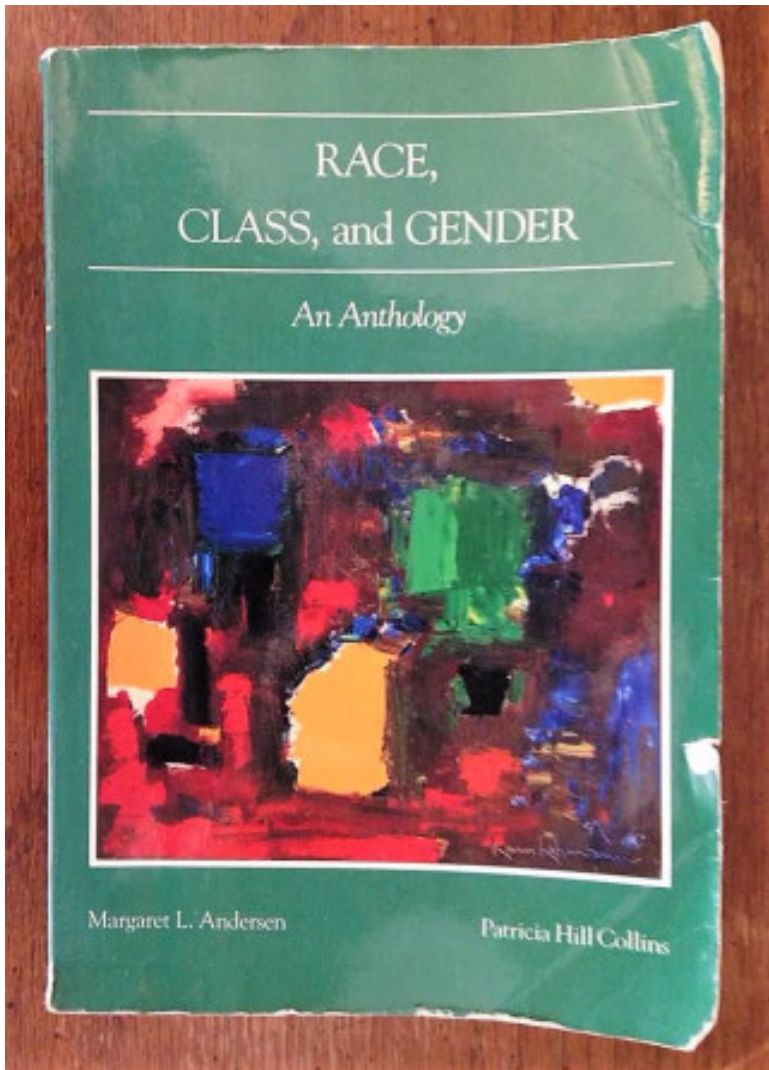
Outline

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

Why should we care?



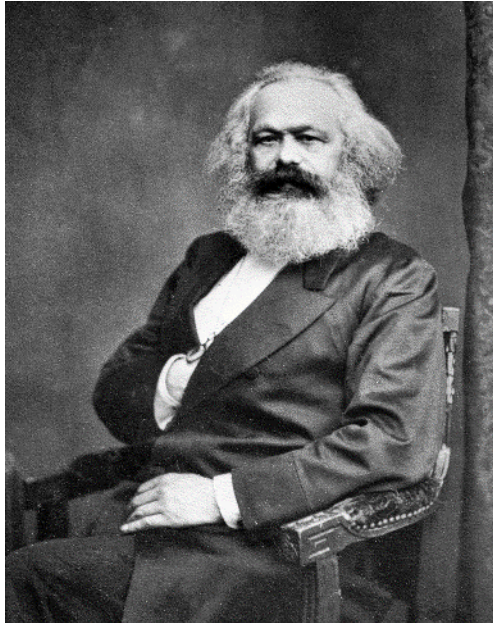
Why should we care?



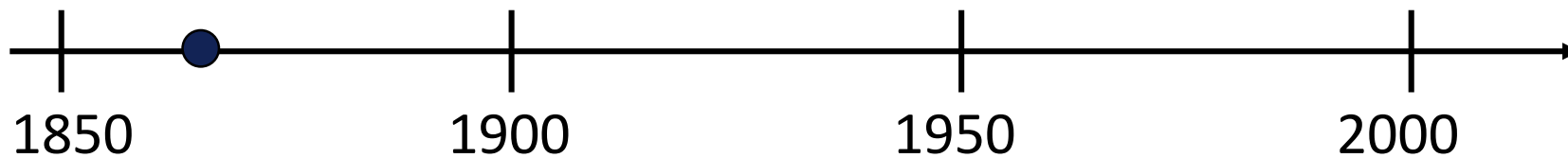
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Critical theory and Karl Marx



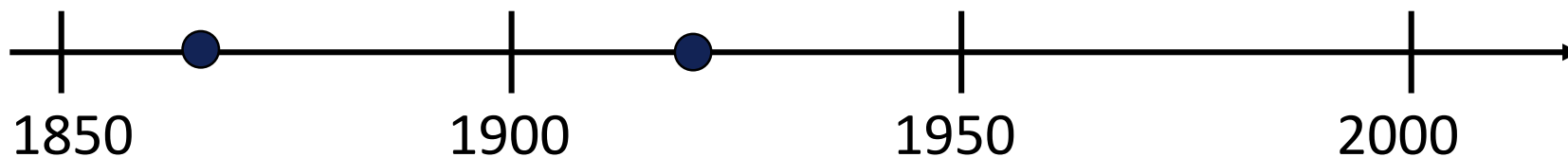
“Alone among these thinkers [i.e., Horkheimer, Bourdieu, Foucault, etc.], **Karl Marx invites consensus as a ‘true’ critical theorist. Indeed, for many, he alone inaugurates the critical tradition**” (Levinson et al, *Beyond Critique*, p. 25-26)



Critical theory and the Frankfurt School



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



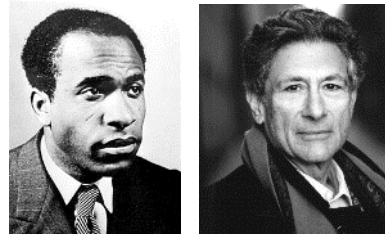
Other critical social theorists

Cultural Studies



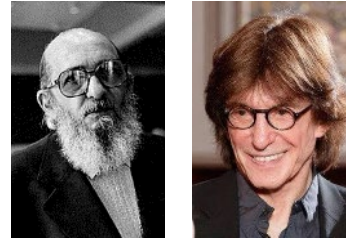
Bourdieu Hall

Postcolonialism



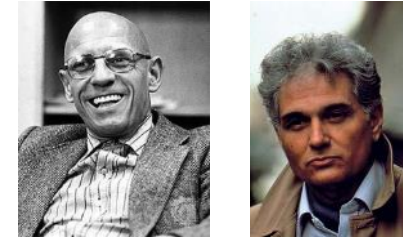
Fanon Said

Critical pedagogy



Freire Giroux

Postmodernism



Foucault Derrida

Feminism



de Beauvoir Friedan

Black feminism



hooks Lourde

Queer theory

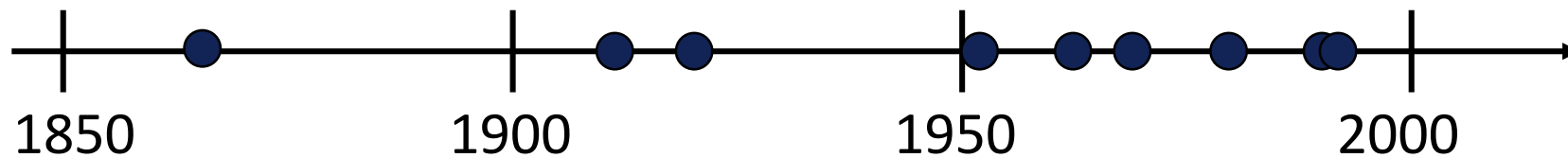


Butler Rich

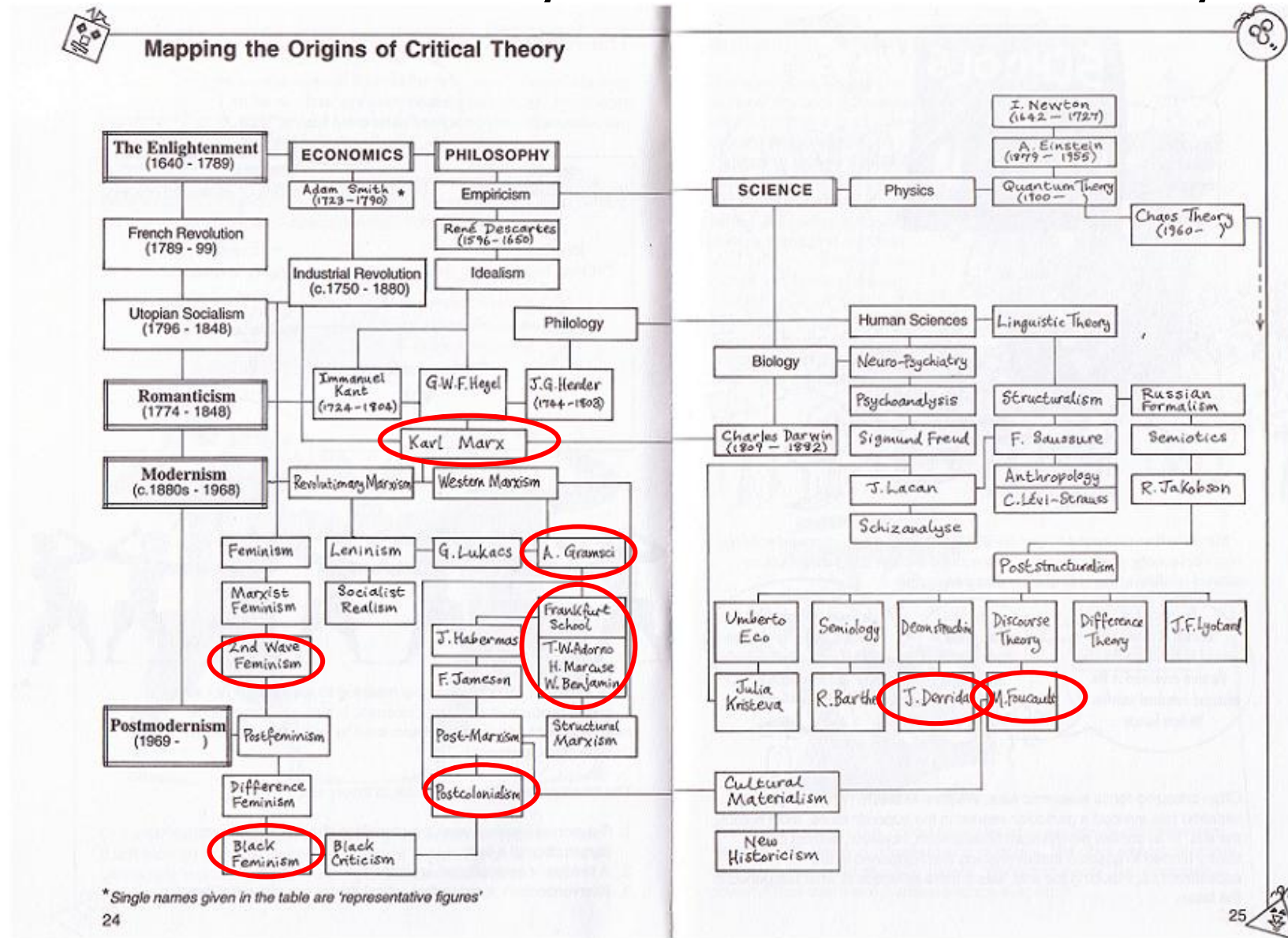
Critical Race Theory



Bell Crenshaw



The Taxonomy of Critical Theory



The Taxonomy of Critical Theory

“critical theory” = critical social theories

Neo-Marxism

**CULTURAL
STUDIES**

Queer
Theory

CRITICAL
PEDAGOGY

“Critical Theory”
= Frankfurt School



**GENDER
STUDIES**

feminism

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”

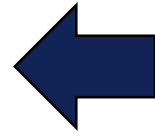
“cisheteropatriarchy”

“compulsory heterosexuality”

“whiteness”

What is critical theory?

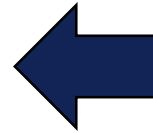
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“whiteness”



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”

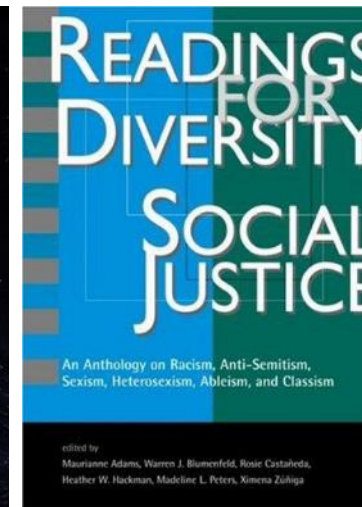
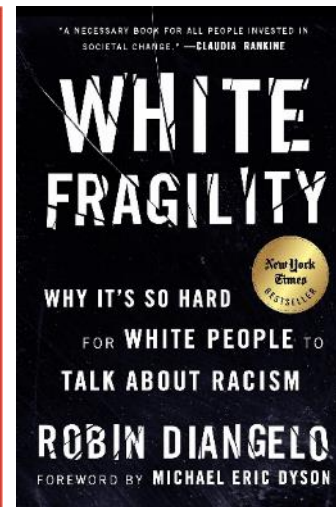
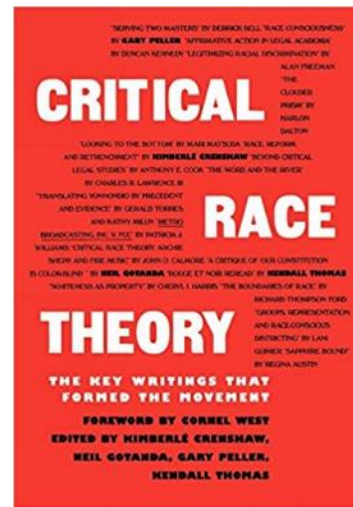
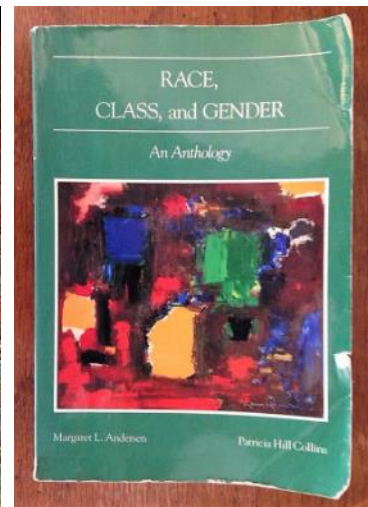
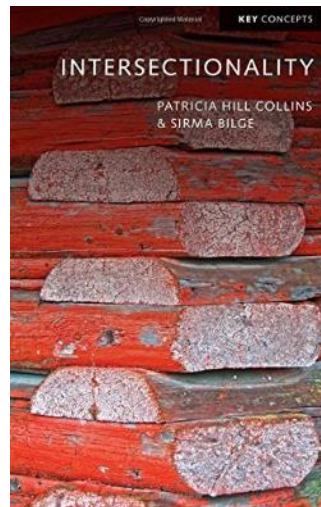
The central premises of contemporary critical theory?

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 and book recommendations

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- tian 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

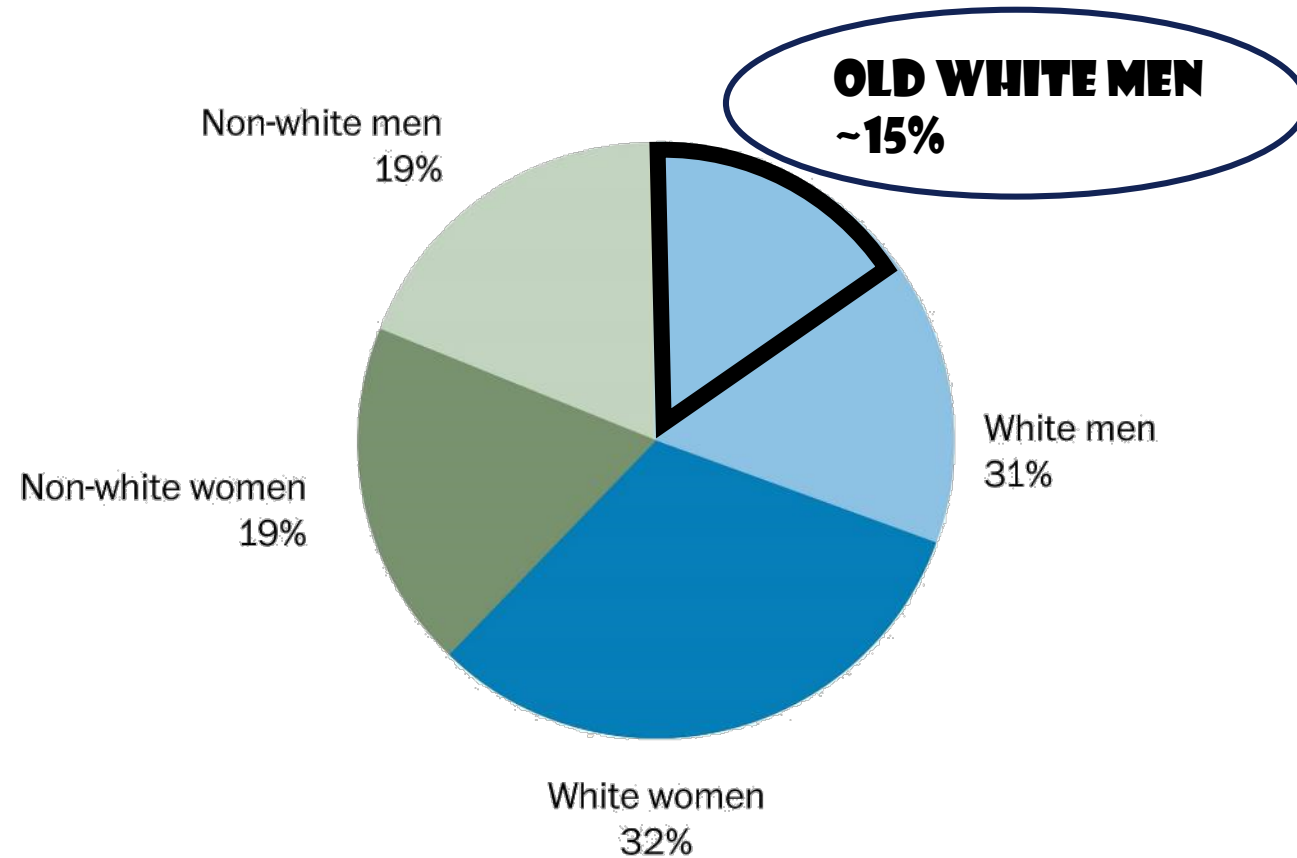
“oppression also traditionally carries a strong connotation of conquest and colonial domination... New left social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, however, shifted the meaning of the concept of oppression. **In its new usage, oppression designates the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not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

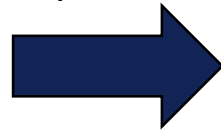


Privilege



Internalized oppression

Lived
experience



Liberatory consciousness

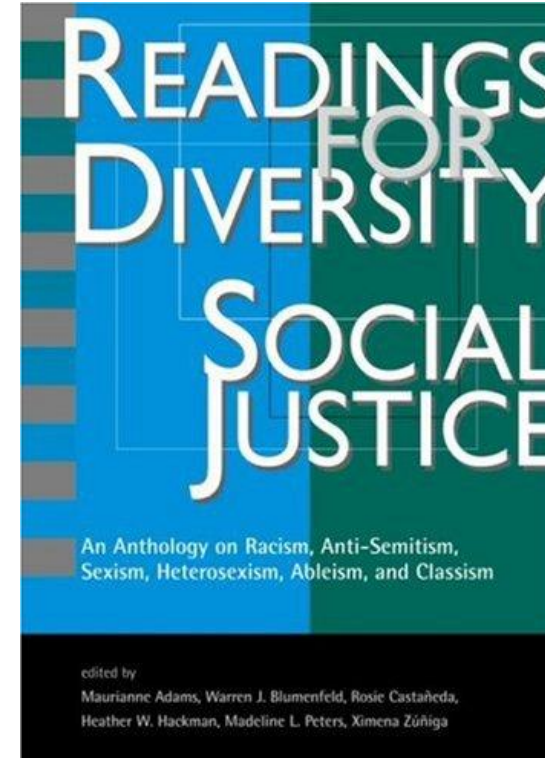
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Premise #4: Social justice demands the liberation of oppressed groups

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



Unifying themes of critical theory

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



Outline

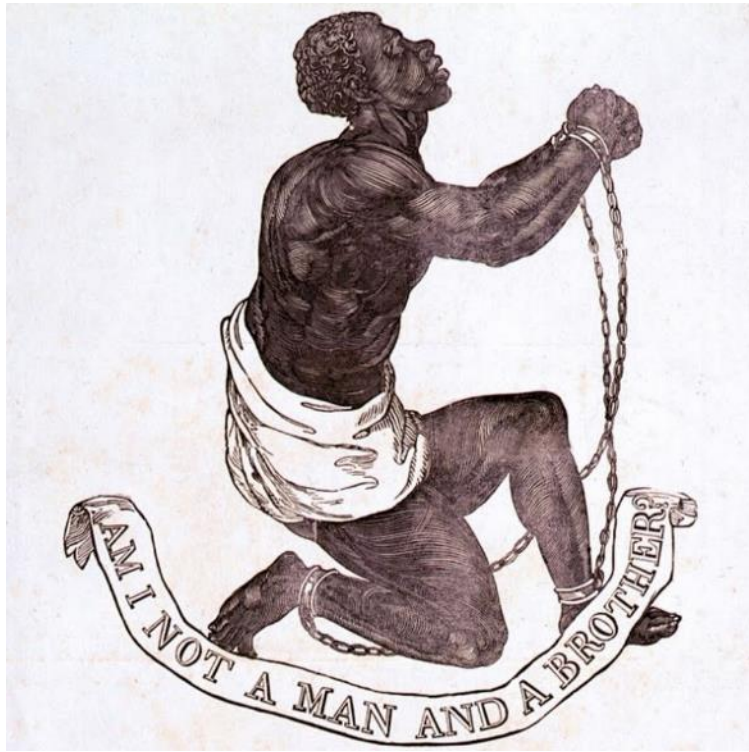
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Strength #1. Emphasis on the sinfulness of oppression

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



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



Strength #3: Recognition of hegemonic power



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 - Worldview
 - Epistemology
 - Adversarial identities
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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

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

Critical theory as worldview

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

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

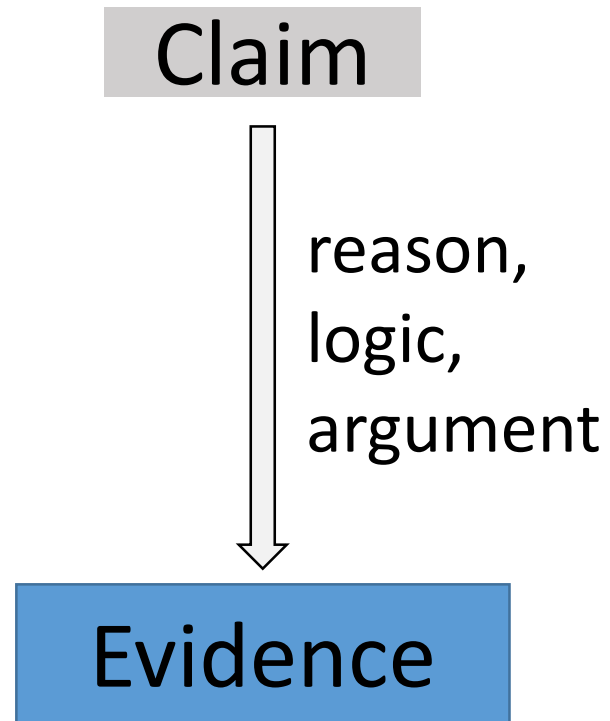
-Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, p. 182-183



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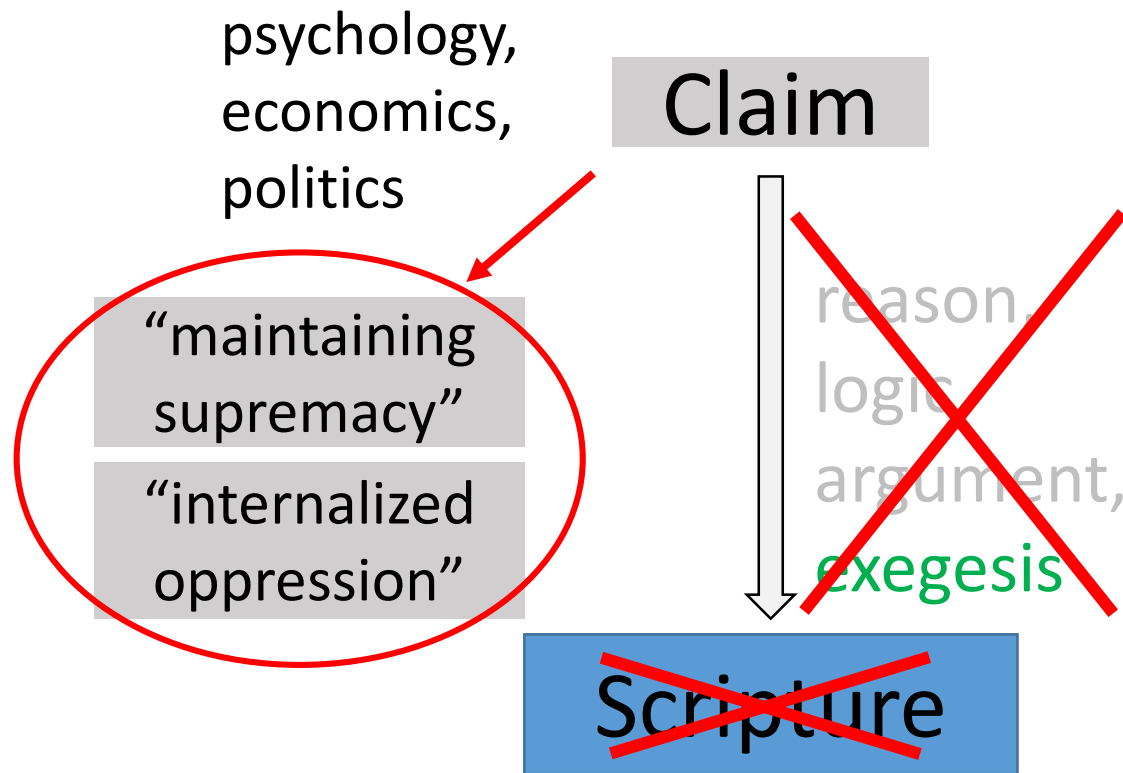
Epistemology



Bulverism



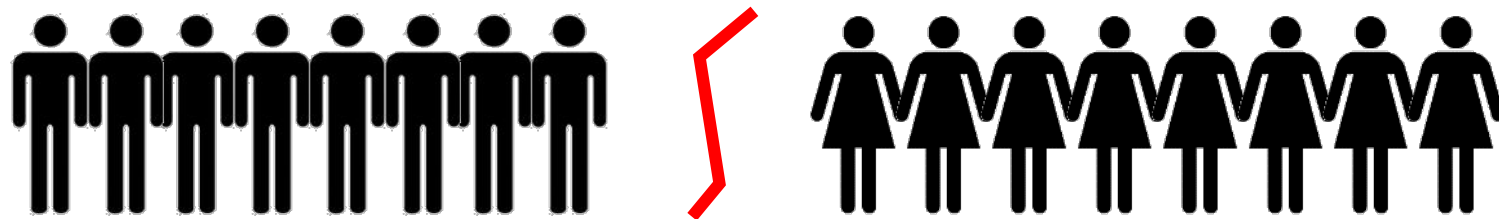
Epistemology



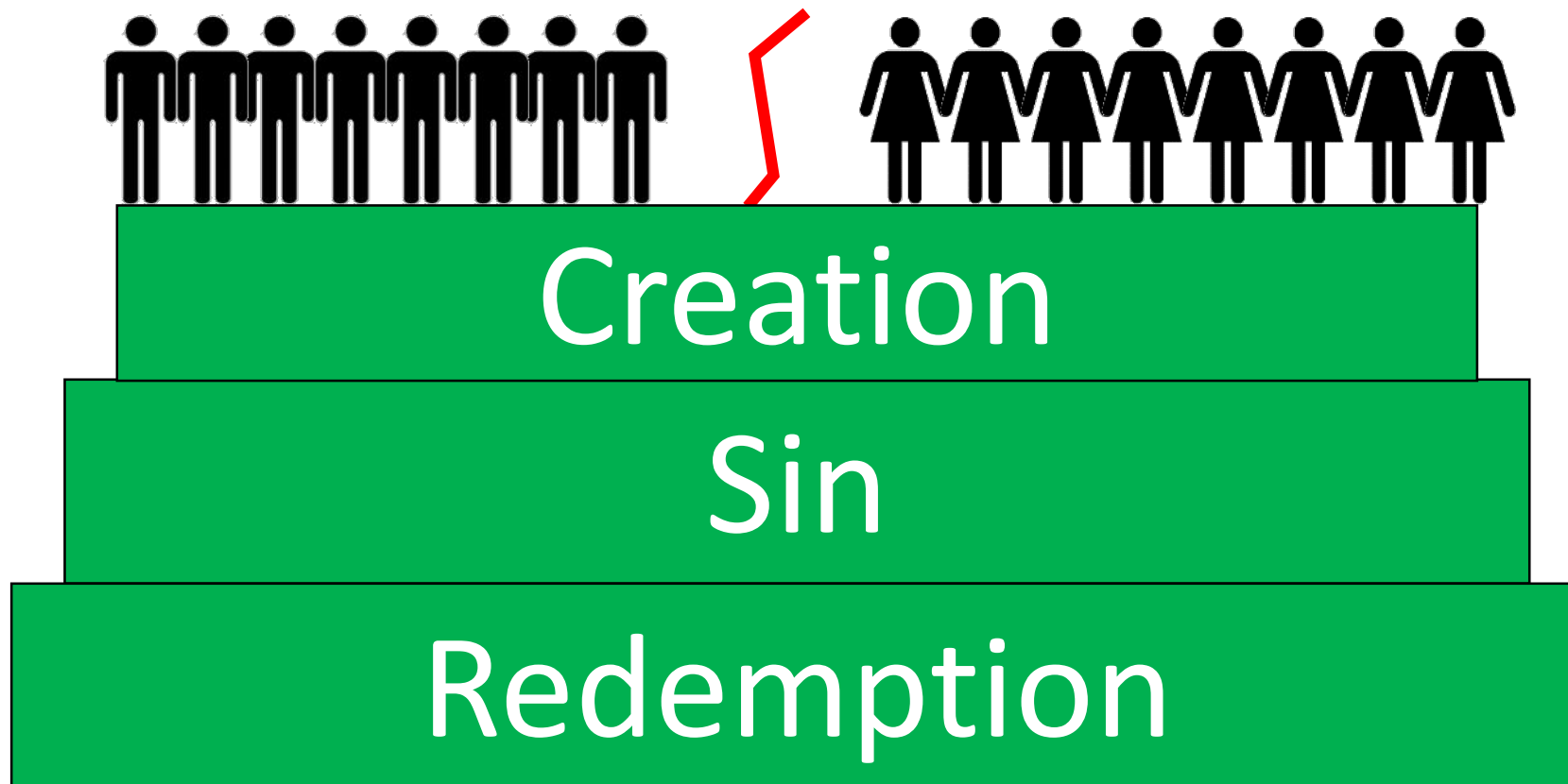
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Identity and solidarity



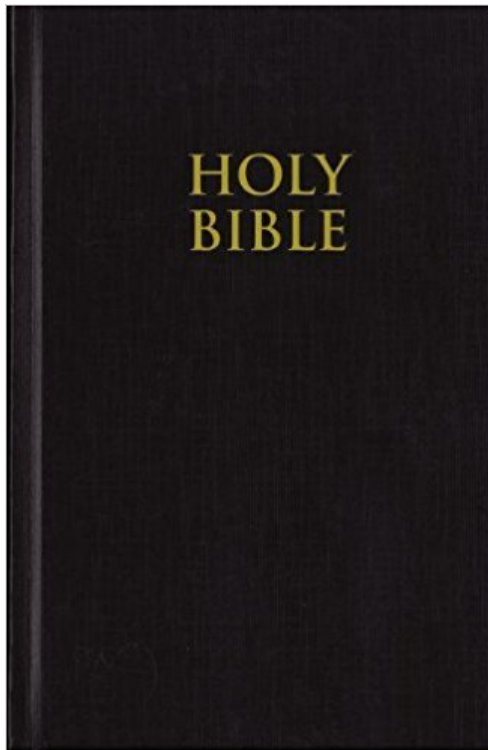
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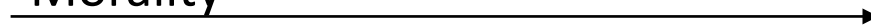
Christianity as hegemonic discourse



Religion



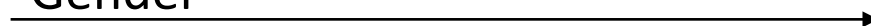
Morality



Sexuality



Gender



etc...

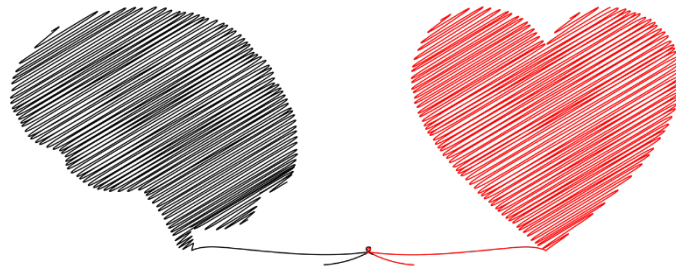


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Claim #1: “We should never challenge ‘lived experience’”

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



Positives and negatives

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

Positive: Lived experience can give us valuable insights

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

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

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

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

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

Positive: Power can be abused and misused

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

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

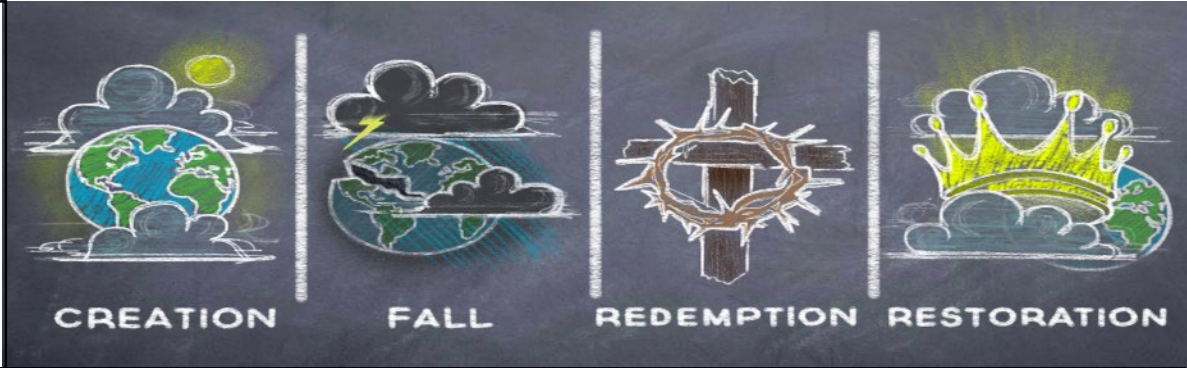
Positive: Some forms of diversity are elements of God’s good creation

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

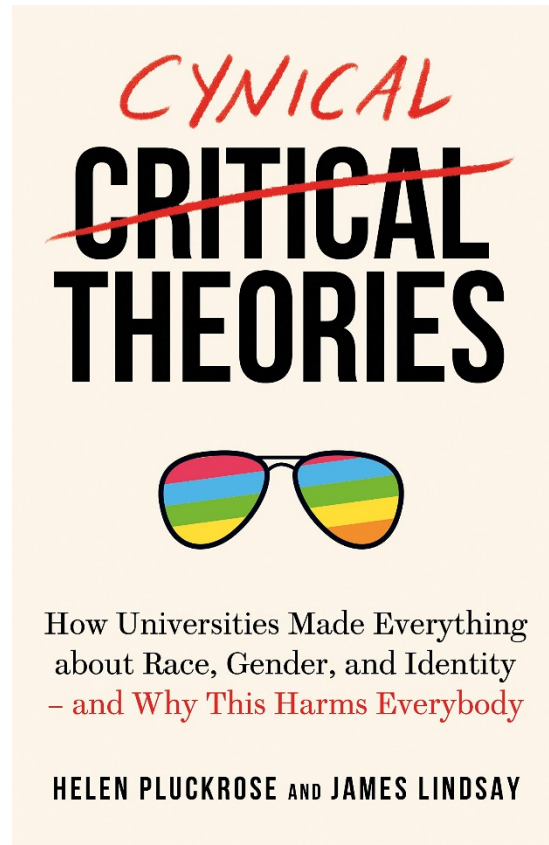
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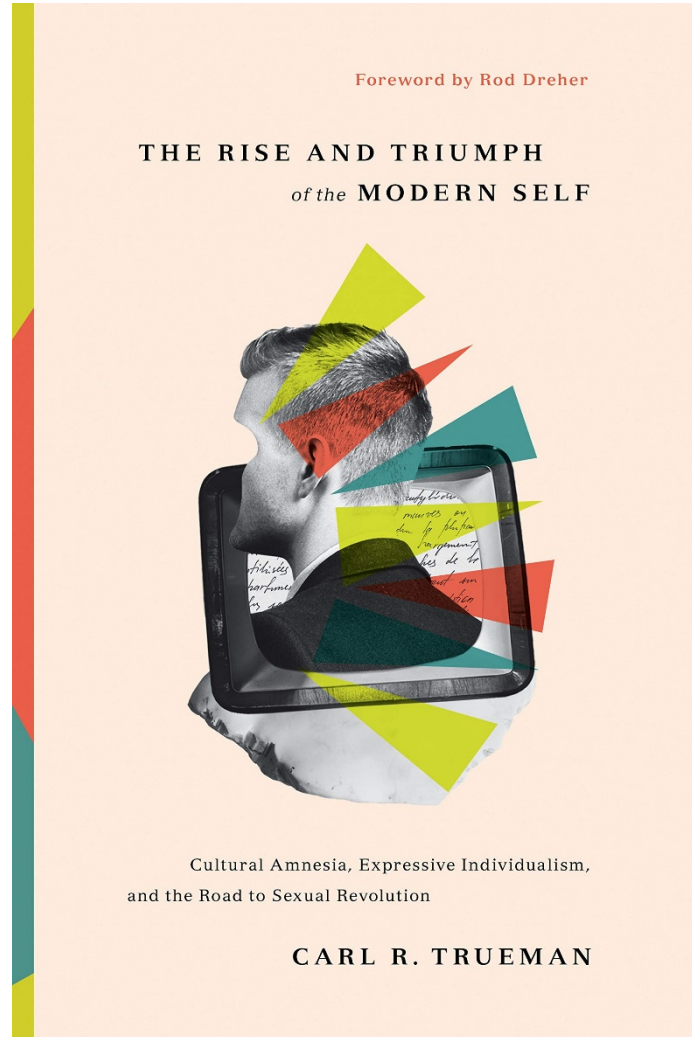
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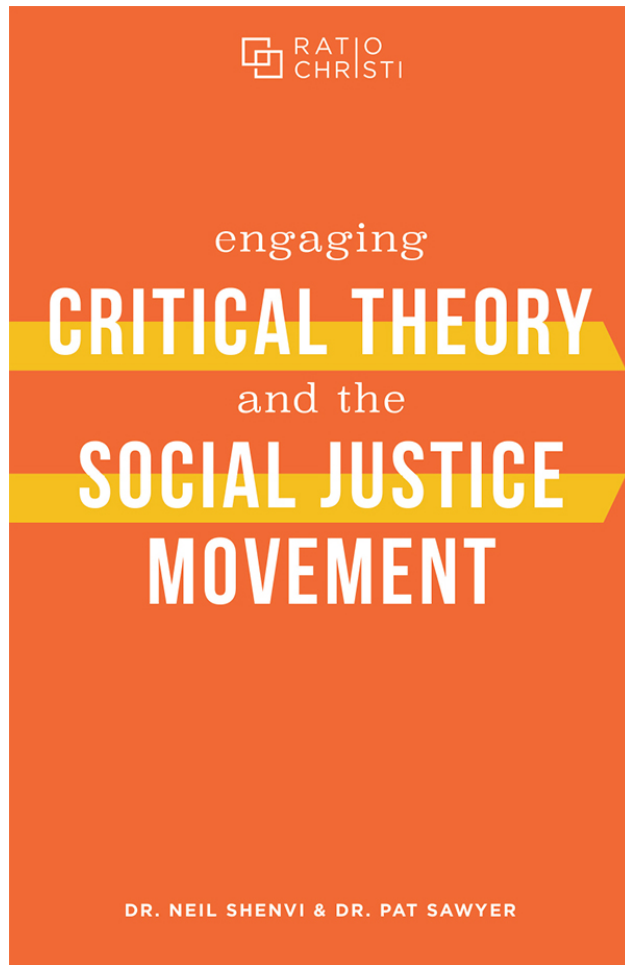
Cynical Theories by Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay



The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self by Carl Trueman



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



Acknowledgements and additional resources

Dr. Christina Shenvi



Dr. Pat Sawyer



- “The Incompatibility of Critical Theory and Christianity,” *The Gospel Coalition*
- “Book review: *Cynical Theories*,” *Themelios*
- “Gender, Intersectionality, and Critical Theory,” *Eikon*
- “Critical Theory and the Social Justice Movement” *Journal of Christian Legal Thought*
- shenviapologetics.com/
- Twitter @NeilShenvi, @RealPatSawyer