

What is Critical Social Justice? An Anatomy of an Ideology

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In recent decades, a new ideology has emerged which radically distorts received notions of justice which have their roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition. This new understanding of 'social justice' has made its way into what theologian David Tracy has described as the three 'publics' – academia, society and the church (or religious community).¹ It has so distorted Western society's understanding of human sociality and public order that behaviours that have been conventionally viewed as anarchist and destructive are now valorised. For example, in 2019, Vicky Osterweil published a book-length study and defence of looting in which she emphatically asserts that

Looting attacks some of the core beliefs and structures of cisheteropatriarchal racial capitalist society ... Looting rejects the legitimacy of ownership rights and property, the moral injunction to work for a living, and the 'justice' of law and order. Looting reveals all these for what they are: not natural facts, but social constructs benefiting a few at the expense of the many, upheld by ideology, economy, and state violence.²

For Osterweil, looting is an act of social justice because it exposes and challenges the 'injustices' of the dominant capitalist order. The recent spate of the statues of celebrated historic figures such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Christopher Columbus, Andrew Jackson, etc., being promiscuously destroyed, disfigured or vandalised because the people whose likeness they bear are deemed to be less than morally perfect, or because of their complicity in the slave trade is another glaring instance of the outworking of this new ideology.³ Then there is the endeavour by Coca-Cola to train its 80,000 employees to be 'less white', noting that to be 'less white' means to be 'less arrogant, less certain, less defensive, less ignorant, and more humble.'

¹ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 3-5.

² Vicky Osterweil, *In Defense of Looting: A Riotous History of Uncivil Action* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2020), 3.

³ Gilbert C. Correa, 'Protests, Social Justice, and Monuments,' World Heritage USA, <https://worldheritageusa.org/protests-social-justice-and-monuments/>. See also Roland Chia, 'A New Iconoclasm?' July 6, 2020, <https://ethosinstitute.sg/a-new-iconoclasm/>

The company vigorously defended this discriminatory and racist content of its training programme as an effort to enhance ‘inclusion.’⁴

Unfortunately, some evangelical Christians and churches in America have embraced this new ideology, seemingly unaware of its dangerous distortions. Many assume that because social justice advocates use vocabulary and ideas that find some echoes in the Bible – such as ‘justice’, ‘equality’ and ‘anti-racism’ – that these concepts carry the same meaning. A good example of the ideology’s influence among evangelicals is the now famous speech by Michelle Higgins at the 2015 Urbana Missions Conference sponsored by Inter-Varsity Press, where she introduced her audience of sixteen thousand to ‘woke Christianity’ in language that is awash with social justice rhetoric:

Do you see that racism of the age-old idol in our closet that we can’t manage to tear down? Do you see it in our houses of worship, my brothers and sisters, right beside the little sexism idol and the classism idol and the cool-car idol and the good-job idol and the college-degree idol? Do you see it? Tear it down and admit, with torn shirt, ash in our hair, on our hands and knees, ‘Oh, God, we have committed adultery with white supremacy!’ The evangelical church has taken the dominance and power of Eurocentrism and made it its sidepiece, or part-time lover.⁵

Another example is Daniel Hill, the founding pastor of River City Community in Chicago, Illinois. In his 2017 book, *White Awake*, published by Inter-Varsity Press, Hill wrote about his need to repent of his sin and those of his community – again, with vocabulary supplied by social justice and critical race theory;

I repent all the time because I believe I’m surrounded by the sickness of racism. I see the sickness in the ideology of white supremacy and have no doubt that it has infected me ... I see the sickness of systemic racism and have no doubt that I contribute to it in ways I’m not aware of. I’m surrounded by sickness, and I am sick.⁶

Before proceeding further, an important clarification must be made. The term ‘social justice’ has a myriad of different meanings. Its origins, however, can be traced to the Jesuit theologian and scholar Luigi Taparelli d’Azeglio (1793-1862), who coined the term in relation to his treatise on the natural law

⁴ Christian Zhao, ‘Coca-Cola, Facing Backlash, Says “Less White” Learning Plan Was About Workplace Inclusion,’ Newsweek.com, February 21, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/coca-cola-facing-backlash-says-less-white-learning-plan-was-about-workplace-inclusion-1570875>

⁵ Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship USA, ‘Michelle Higgins – Urbana 15’, YouTube, January 26, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XVGDskxxXco>

⁶ Daniel Hill, *White Awake: An Honest Look at What It Means to Be White* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2017), 139.

theory of social order. Subsequently, the term is used in Catholic social doctrine to emphasise the importance of societal responsibility alongside the responsibility of the individual. In his 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth), Pope Benedict XVI states that ‘the social doctrine of the Church has unceasingly highlighted the importance of distributive justice and social justice for the market economy ...’⁷ In 1973, theologians and leaders from primarily mainline Protestant denominations in the United States – including evangelicals – issued the *Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern*.⁸ The Declaration acknowledges the failure of Christians to demonstrate ‘the love of God to those suffering social abuses.’ It speaks of the American church’s complicity in a racist ‘economic system’ and ‘institutional structures’, as well as the ‘imbalance and injustice of international trade and development.’ The signers of this document, which included John Alexander, Sharon Gallagher, Richard Mouw, Wes Granberg-Michaelson, Jim Wallis and Carl Henry, expressly disavowed any affinity with Marxism. One signer, Samuel Escobar, states that ‘the paramount Chicago concern’ is to focus ‘on the divine demand for social and political justice’ which transcends any endorsement of either ‘capitalism’ or ‘socialism’.⁹

The ideology which this essay aims to interrogate is radically different from the traditional understandings of social justice which are grounded in the teachings of the Bible and the Church. We shall call this new ideology ‘Critical Social Justice’ (CSJ).¹⁰ The best definition of CSJ arguably comes from the pen of its most prominent advocates, Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo, who in their book, *Is Everyone Really Equal?* write:

... let’s begin with the concept *social justice*. While some scholars and activists prefer to use the term social justice in order to reclaim its true commitments, in this book we prefer the term *critical social justice*. We do so in order to distinguish our standpoint on social justice from mainstream standpoints. A critical approach to social justice refers to specific theoretical perspectives that recognise society is *stratified* (i.e., divided and unequal) in significant and far-reaching ways along social group lines that include race, class, gender, sexuality and ability. Critical social justice recognises inequality as deeply embedded in the fabric of society (i.e., as structural), and actively seeks to change this.¹¹

⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, Para 35, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html

⁸ Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern (1973), <https://canvas.dartmouth.edu> > files > download. See also Evangelicals for Social Action, November 2, 2012. <https://www.evangelicalsforsocialaction.org/about-esa-2/history/chicago-declaration-evangelical-social-concern>.

⁹ Ronald Sider, *The Chicago Declaration* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), 121.

¹⁰ Other commentators have referred to it as ‘Contemporary Social Justice’ and ‘Ideological Social Justice.’

¹¹ Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2017), 20.

This essay, which seeks to examine what it is that differentiates CSJ from 'mainstream standpoints', falls into two parts. The first part examines the influences that have shaped CSJ, and the second discusses its main doctrines and ideas. It is hoped that this exposition and analysis will clearly show that CSJ is an ideology whose concepts of justice and vision of society are not only inimical to the Christian faith, but are detrimental to social cohesion and societal peace.

ROOTS AND SHOOTS

Roots: Classical Marxism

The CSJ movement is firmly rooted in and inspired by the philosophy and social theory of Karl Marx (1818-1883). Take the Black Lives Matter Movement, for example. In his recent book *BLM: The Making of a New Marxist Revolution*, Mike Gonzalez argues persuasively that the Black Lives Matter movement is fuelled by the Marxist agenda.¹² In fact, the three main founders of the movement – Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi – are quite candid about their Marxism. In 2015, Garza told *SF Weekly* that 'social movements all over the world have used Marx and Lenin as a foundation to interrupt these systems that are really negatively impacting the majority of people.'¹³ In the same year, she told a gathering of world communists, Left Forum, that it is 'not possible for a world to emerge where black lives matter if it's under capitalism, and it's not possible to abolish capitalism without a struggle against national oppression.'¹⁴ And in an interview in June 2020 with the *New York Post*, Cullors (referring to Garza and herself) said quite categorically that 'We are trained Marxists. We are super-versed on, sort of, ideological theories.'¹⁵

Atheistic Materialism (Historical Materialism)

In essence, the CSJ movement is grounded in Marxian ontology, which can be best described as atheistic materialism. In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), which Marx co-authored with Friedrich Engels, the atheism and materialism of the communist movement are evident in statements such as 'Communism abolishes eternal truth', and, '[Communism] abolishes all religion, and all

¹² Mike Gonzalez, *BLM: The Making of a New Marxist Revolution* (New York: Encounter Books, 2021).

¹³ 'The Bay Area Roots of Black Lives Matter', Nov 11, 2015, https://www.sfweekly.com/archives/the-bay-area-roots-of-black-lives-matter/article_59c2bc82-80c4-5b2b-9600-28c62c8b29fb.html.

¹⁴ <https://othervoicesotherchoices.blogspot.com/search/label/Alicia%20Garza>.

¹⁵ Yaron Steinbuch, 'Black Lives Matter co-founder describes herself as "trained Marxist"', *New York Post*, June 25, 2020, <https://nypost.com/2020/06/25/blm-co-founder-describes-herself-as-trained-marxist/>.

morality, instead of constituting them on a new basis.¹⁶ As these statements make clear, the Marxist agenda has to do not just with the rejection of the idea of God but the abolition of religion (which it famously dubbed as ‘the opiate of the masses’) altogether. Consistent with their atheism and materialism, Marx and his followers embrace an empiricist epistemology which postulates that all knowledge begins with and is limited to experience. This epistemology in turn serves as the basis for Marx’s ‘scientific positivism’, which according to Bertrand Russell, the noted atheist philosopher, is a view which says that ‘Whatever knowledge is attainable must be attained by scientific methods; and what science cannot discover, mankind cannot know.’¹⁷ Marxists claim that their vision of society – and indeed of reality itself – is informed by science, a claim which simply cannot stand up to scrutiny.

The materialistic worldview of the classical Marxists informs their understanding of human beings and human sociality, even as it shapes their moral vision. For Marx and his followers, human beings are materialistic animals or machines that are born innocent (*tabula rasa*), but are susceptible to the influences of their culture and environment. Here Marx follows Jean-Jacques Rousseau who famously asserted that ‘Man is born free, and yet is universally enslaved.’¹⁸ This materialistic philosophical anthropology allows very little room for free will. Consequently, for Marx, human behaviour is the result of physical factors, but also – and perhaps more importantly – of external social and historical realities and influences. Jeffrey Johnson clearly summarises Marx’s arguments thus:

Man’s own moral problems, if they are not reducible to a mental illness, are the result of poor parenting, poor education, and poorly organised societies. Don’t blame the criminal; blame his parents or society. Criminals are just the victims of a dysfunctional society.¹⁹

If the causes of the ills of society are structural, institutional and systemic, ‘to fix man’s behaviour,’ Johnson explains, ‘we must fix these external institutions of power.’²⁰ That is why Marxism or communism has as its goal the deconstruction of all social and civil institutions, including the family, and the establishment of a totally new social and political order.

¹⁶ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: International Publishers, 2020), 22.

¹⁷ Bertrand Russell, *Religion and Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 227.

¹⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Treatise on the Social Compact, or, The Principles of Political Law* (T. Becket and P.A. De Hondt, 1764), 2.

¹⁹ Jeffrey D. Johnson, *What Every Christian Should Know About Social Justice* (Conway, AR: Freeway Press, 2021), 32.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Marxian critique of capitalism

One of the main structures that needs to be 'fixed' is the economic and political system called Capitalism, whose genesis can be traced to the advent of the Industrial Revolution in the late 17th century. Although Marx's criticisms and categorical repudiation of capitalism is well known, it is important to note that Marx rejects its social arrangements instead of its material accomplishments. On the surface, capitalist economies are based on 'supply and demand', 'buying and selling.' To Marx, however, it is much more than that, for capitalism is not just an economic system but a social order. Richard Miller explains that for Marx, a society is capitalist

if the production of material goods is dominated by the use of wage labour, that is, the use of labour power sold, to make a living, by people controlling no significant means of production and bought by other people who do not have significant control over the means of production and mostly gain their income from profits on the sale of the results of combining bought labour power with those productive means.²¹

To Marx, then, beneath this deceptively innocuous system of exchange lies a social relation that can be characterized as alienating, exploitative and enslaving. In his monumental work, *Capital* (1867), Marx describes capitalism as:

a coercive relation, which compels the working class to do more work than the narrow round of its own life-wants prescribes. As a producer of the activity of others, as a pumper-out of surplus-labour and exploiter of labour-power, it surpasses in energy, disregard of bounds, recklessness and efficiency, all earlier systems of production based on directly compulsory labour.²²

For Marx, the capitalist economic system, which classical economists regard as natural and even inevitable, is an alienated form of human life. This is because of the vicious cycle of oppression that the system subjects the worker to. For under capitalism, workers are forced to sell their labour to the capitalists. The latter uses this labour, which Marx regards as the very essence of human life, to enrich themselves, thereby giving them even more power over the workers. The dehumanising aspect of capitalism is evident in the way in which this system commodifies the human being, leaving, as Marx

²¹ Richard Miller, 'Social and Political Theory: Class, State, Revolution', in Terrell Carver (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 55.

²² Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 2016), 216.

puts it, 'no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous "cash payment"'.²³

According to Marx, the greatest problem that the capitalist system presents has to do with the unequal and unjust distribution of wealth and power. In his view, for one person to work for another person and to be under his authority is already a form of slavery or oppression. For him, it is unjustified for the owner of a business to make more money than the worker who does all the work. The proletariat is the group of people who live under the oppressive dictates of capitalism. In *The Communist Manifesto*, this group is described as 'a class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital.'²⁴ The bourgeoisie, on the other hand, are those whose income, wealth and influence are derived from the sale of commodities produced with bought labour power.

The whole capitalist system and infrastructure is for Marx inherently unjust and oppressive because it allows for great discrepancies of wealth and wages. He describes the injustice of the capitalist system as he sees it in this way:

Not only are they [the proletariat] slaves of the bourgeois class, and of the bourgeois state; they are daily and hourly enslaved by the machine, by the overlooker, and, above all, by the individual bourgeois manufacturer himself.²⁵

This culture of inequality, exploitation and oppression is endemic in every mature capitalist society. Its various institutions – including universities – are governed by the economically dominant class. In *The German Ideology*, Marx asserts 'The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production.'²⁶ Under capitalism, even the state becomes the instrument of the bourgeoisie. Marx describes the state pejoratively as 'a committee for managing the common affairs of the bourgeoisie.'²⁷

Marx refuses to accept simple solutions such as higher wages, for this would only produce 'better slave-salary'. The solution cannot be piecemeal adjustments but a radical overhaul: the abolition of wages, alienated labour, and private property. The true and enduring solution is Communism. Thus, Marx triumphantly declares:

²³ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1970), 34.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁶ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* 1845,

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works.1845/german-ideology/ch01b.htm>.

²⁷ Karl Marx, *Political Writings*, Volume 1. The Revolution of 1848. David Fernbach (Ed.) Marx Library (New York: Random House/Vintage Books, 1976), 69.

Communism ... is the genuine resolution of the antagonism between man and nature and between man and man; it is the true resolution of the conflict between existence and essence, objectification and self-affirmation, freedom and necessity, individual and species. It is the riddle of history solved and knows itself as this solution.²⁸

The salvific nature of communism for Marx stems from the idea that once society is rid of private property and private means of production, people will no longer be preoccupied with self-interest. Greed, egoism and envy (which Marx believes are not innate in human nature, but its corruption due to capitalism) will be eradicated, as everyone in society will now work for the good of all. With communism, Marx claims, society will be rid of what he calls 'false consciousness', that is, the failure to see things as they really are. Communism will cure society's astigmatism allowing its members to see human sociality as it really should be. This is the Marxist utopia, its secular eschatology, in all its grandeur and naivety!

Dismantling Institutions

As I have alluded to above, for Marx, capitalism is not just an economic arrangement but a social system. For communism to replace capitalism, it is not just the economic structures that must be dismantled. All other societal structures and institutions must be deconstructed, including the family and civil authorities. This is because all delegated institutions of power under the capitalist system must be brought under a centralised global power in communism. Only when that happens can wealth be evenly distributed in society where class distinctions have been totally eliminated.

Since, for Marx, every social institution is adversely affected by capitalism, the family must also be similarly affected. And since all the institutions shaped by capitalism will bear the characteristics of being exploitative and oppressive, so will the family. The solution is therefore to abolish the family as it is governed by the dictates of capitalist principles. In *The Communist Manifesto*, we find a clear articulation of this agenda:

Abolition of the family! Even the most radical flare up to this infamous proposal of the Communists. On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain. In its completely developed form, this family exists only among the bourgeoisie. But this state of things finds its complement in the practical absence of the family among the proletarians, and in public prostitution. The bourgeois family will vanish as a matter of course when its complement vanishes, and both will vanish with the vanishing

²⁸ Karl Marx, *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 43. [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Economic-Philosophic-Manuscripts-1844.pdf](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Economic-Philosophic-Manuscripts-1844.pdf).

capital. Do you charge us with wanting to stop the exploitation of children by their parents? To this crime we plead guilty.²⁹

The dismantling of the traditional family is further spelt out in *The Principles of Communism*, which proposes the privatisation of the relationship between men and women, the removal of familial hierarchy (especially patriarchy) and the state education of children. To the question it poses, 'What will be the influence of communist society on the family?', *The Principles of Communism* answers:

It will transform the relations between the sexes into a purely private matter which concerns only the persons involved into which society has no occasion to intervene. It can do this since it does away with private property and educates children on a communal basis, and in this way removes the two bases of traditional marriage – the dependence rooted in private property, of women on the man, and of the children on the parents.³⁰

The Marxist vision of the centralisation of power and a new world order that is without borders, national sovereignties and class meant the dismantling of civil authorities set up by capitalism. But it also requires communism to be a global phenomenon. To the question 'Will it be possible for this revolution to take place in one country alone?', Engels, echoing Marx, answers:

No. Creating the world market, big industry has already brought all the peoples of the Earth, and especially the civilised peoples, into such close relation with one another that none is independent of what happens to the others. Further, it has coordinated the social development of the civilised countries to such an extent that, in all of them, bourgeoisie and proletariat have become the decisive classes, and the struggle between them the great struggle of the day. It follows that the communist revolution will not merely be a national phenomenon but must take place simultaneously in all civilised countries.³¹

Shoots: Critical Theory (The Frankfurt School)

The Frankfurt School

As a Hegelian of sorts, Marx was an optimist. He genuinely believed that communism will one day be embraced globally, a new era will dawn, and the oppression and segregation of the capitalist system will be a thing of the past. However, by the early 1900s, his heirs, all committed Marxists, became

²⁹ Marx and Engels, *Manifesto*, 26-27.

³⁰ Friedrich Engels, *The Principles of Communism* (N.P.: Pattern Books, 2020), 37.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

uncertain if the new world order that Marx had envisioned will ever be realised. Communism was clearly not taking root in Europe, and it was evident that the Marxism that seemed to enjoy success in the Soviet Union in the 1920s was rejected elsewhere in the world. The disciples of Marx soon became disillusioned with classical Marxism. They believed that if Marxism were to gain acceptance, a new strategy was needed, one which requires nothing less than the reimagining of Marxism itself.

Two important figures led the way which would eventually result in the establishment of the Frankfurt School which would, in turn, take the analysis of society in a new direction while remaining fundamentally faithful to Marx. The first of these figures is Georg Lukács, who was an active member of the Hungarian Marxist Party. And the second is Karl Kosch, who was a member of the German Marxist Party. Together they developed a new appropriation and application of Marxist ideals dubbed 'Western' (or 'social' or 'cultural') Marxism. This version of Marxism became the philosophy and ideology that undergirded and energised the Frankfurt School, a research centre dedicated to teaching and implementing Marxist ideas into every discipline – philosophy, sociology, history, laws and psychology.³² Other notable scholars associated with the Frankfurt School include Theodor Adorno (1903-1969), Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), Erich Fromm (1900-1980), and Max Horkheimer (1895-1973).

One of the main areas where social Marxism diverge from the classical version is epistemology, chiefly its rejection of the positivism and scientism embraced by Marx. Both Lukács and Korsch were convinced that the practice of science and the interpretation of its findings can never be devoid of cultural biases. The social Marxists also saw in positivism – which requires that society be analysed strictly according to the criteria of science – as unhelpful and distorting because it treats society and science itself in a-historical terms and neglects the important place of subjectivity. As Robin DiAngelo, an influential voice in the social justice movement puts it:

Critical theory developed in part as a response to this presumed superiority and infallibility of scientific method, and raised questions about whose rationality and whose presumed objectivity underlies scientific methods.³³

Furthermore, positivism assumes that there is a reality out there that can be objectively assessed and investigated – an assumption which the scholars of the Frankfurt School reject. Lukács gave eloquent voice to this view when he declares baldly that "There is no reality which social theorists can passively

³² Jeffrey Johnson, *What Every Christian Needs to Know About Social Justice* (Conway, AR: Free Grace Press, 2021), 44.

³³ Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?*, 4.

reflect upon ...'³⁴ The rejection of positivism and objective reality steers the new Marxists towards the choppy waters of relativism. But they are unconcerned about this. Thus, while Marx may have trifled with relativism due to his commandeering of Hegelian dialectics, the scholars of the Frankfurt School embraced it wholeheartedly. As the prominent social Marxist and activist, Saul Alinsky, puts it:

Men have always yearned for and sought direction by setting up religions, inventing political philosophies, creating scientific systems like Newton's, or formulating ideologies of various kinds. This is what is behind the common cliché, 'getting it all together' – despite the realisation that all values and actors are relative, fluid, and changing, and that it will be possible to 'get it all together' only relatively.³⁵

These significant departures from classical Marxism, and the fact that the Frankfurt School is heavily influenced by thinkers such as Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche, does not mean that the Frankfurt School has abandoned their revered teacher. While rejecting Marx's scientism, these social Marxists retained and developed his basic atheistic and materialistic ontology. As Johnson explains: 'Like classical Marxism, social Marxism is founded on atheism. This did not change. Social Marxism is just as godless as classical Marxism, if not more so.'³⁶ But even more significantly, while attempting to correct Marx's alleged a-historicism, the scholars of the Frankfurt School continue to view reality through the lenses he supplies. But instead of dividing society strictly into the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, their binary vision is couched in broader terms, namely, the Oppressors and the Oppressed. And instead of being obsessed – as Marx was – with capitalism, they focus more broadly on the culture that nurtures capitalism (and all its attendant evils). Jon Harris summarises it this way:

Instead of the bourgeoisie oppressing the proletariat, it was producers and advertisers enslaving consumers by using their desires against their own self-interest. Increasingly, the problem with society was not capitalism, in and of itself, but a culture that tolerated and propagated capitalism. The Frankfurt School thus analysed and uncovered the totalitarianism baked into various aspects of culture – including commerce, education, religion, entertainment, and sexuality – in order to raise awareness and inspire social liberation.³⁷

³⁴ Quoted in David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 21.

³⁵ Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1972), xv.

³⁶ Johnson, *What Every Christian Should Know About Social Justice*, 44.

³⁷ Jon Harris, *Christianity and Social Justice: Religions in Conflict* (Ann Arbor, MI: Reformation Zion Publishing, 2021), 12.

Critical Theory

The Frankfurt School is famously associated with a method of social critique called Critical Theory, and it is to this complex and multi-faceted approach to social analysis that we must now turn our attention. It is not an easy task to discuss Critical Theory in a few paragraphs because under this descriptor lies a family of theories which aim at the analysis and critique of society – its conflicts, contradictions and tendencies – as well as its transformation. In his book on *Critical Theory*, David Held explains the burdens of the early critical theorists of the Frankfurt School thus:

Political events and revolutionary practice had not coincided with the expectations derived from the Marxist theory of the day. The following questions became urgent: How could the relationship between theory and practice now be conceived? Could theory preserve hope for the future? In changing historical circumstances how could the revolutionary ideal be justified?³⁸

The various scholars of the Frankfurt School, including Max Horkheimer who first coined and defined Critical Theory in his seminal 1937 essay, 'Traditional and Critical Theory',³⁹ have answered these questions in different ways. For our purposes, perhaps the best way to proceed would be to take the cue from Horkheimer and delineate the differences between traditional and critical theory. Traditional theory has as its main concern the description and analysis of a social problem or phenomenon. Critical Theory, on the other hand, seeks not only to analyse the phenomenon but also provide a normative evaluation of what made it problematic by synthesising 'facts' and 'values.' In addition, Critical Theory aims to also identify the agents responsible for its transformation.

Horkheimer refuses to ground Critical Theory, which, as alluded to above, seeks not only to grasp social realities but also diagnose its pathologies, outside of the historical process. He explains:

Critical thinking is the function neither of the isolated individual nor of a sum-total of individuals. Its subject is rather a definite individual in his real relation to other individuals and groups, in his conflict with a particular class, and, finally, in the resultant web of relationships with the social totality and with nature.⁴⁰

³⁸ David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

³⁹ Max Horkheimer, 'Traditional and Critical Theory' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1972), 188-243.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 210.

Critical Theory seeks to address the issues which traditional theory appears to have glossed over or taken for granted.⁴¹ Most significantly, it is concerned about the breach between ideas and reality. It sought, through a procedure called 'immanent criticism', to breach this gap. According to Horkheimer, immanent criticism confronts 'the existent, in its historical context, with the claim of its conceptual principles, in order to criticise the relation between the two and thus transcend them.'⁴²

Horkheimer and his colleagues insist that there are no *a priori* principles, no general criteria for critical theory because its practice is dependent on particular historical contexts and conditions. 'There are no general criteria for critical theory as a whole,' writes Horkheimer emphatically, 'for such criteria always depends on a repetition of events and this on a self-reproducing totality ...'⁴³ Furthermore, as theory is inextricably intertwined with history, there can be no objective reality as such that social theorists can passively reflect on. Far from being an objective observer 'distantiated' (i.e., physically, psychologically, socially, intellectually, etc., removed) from the reality he is analysing in the Enlightenment sense of being 'objective', the social theorist is at every moment a part of the societal process he is attempting to analyse. Finally, Critical Theory emphasises the central role of praxis, in an attempt to embody the famous words of Marx: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it'⁴⁴ (these words were inscribed on his grave).

Michael J. Thompson has helpfully summarised the motivations of Critical Theory thus:

A critical theory of society is therefore set with the task of uncovering the social conditions under which knowledge about itself is articulated, since the way we comprehend the objective world is related to the ways we conceive of ourselves. At the same time, it was a form of thinking that is designed not only to comprehend, but also to *transform*: its purpose is to change not only our knowledge of the objective world – of society, of institutions, of culture, and so on – but simultaneously the nature of the subject in a *practical sense*.⁴⁵

⁴¹ 'Traditional theory may take a number of things for granted: its positive role in a functioning society, an admittedly indirect and obscure relation to the satisfaction of general needs, and participation in the self-renewing life process. But all these exigencies about which science need not trouble itself because their fulfilment is rewarded and confirmed by the social position of the scientist, are called to question in critical thought', *Ibid.*, 216.

⁴² Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 182.

⁴³ Horkheimer, 'Traditional and Critical Theory', 242.

⁴⁴ Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, Thesis XI,

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>.

⁴⁵ Michael J. Thompson, 'Introduction: What is Critical Theory?' in Michael J. Thompson (Ed), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Theory* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 2 (italics in original).

Despite its disdain over abstract theorising and *a priori* assumptions, Critical Theory, it must be pointed out, is not a neutral, presupposition-free and value-free approach to social analysis. It scrutinises the social context through the lenses supplied mainly but not exclusively by Marxism, and it pursues a certain agenda which is also framed very much in Marxist terms. For example, in its critical evaluation of society, it attempts to unearth *alienation* and *reification*, concepts that feature prominently in Marxist theory. And its ultimate aim is liberation, the *emancipation* of society from the causes of its ills. According to Robin Celikates and Jeffrey Flynn, *alienation* refers to ‘the idea of humans being separated, estranged, or distanced from something crucial to their freedom and capacity to flourish.’ ‘One is alienated’, they add, ‘when one has a distorted or deficient relation to oneself or to the natural or social world.’⁴⁶ *Reification* is closely related to alienation in that it attempts to describe the form of distortion caused by alienation. Chiefly, it refers to the dehumanising objectification of the human being, the ‘thingification’ of man. Celikates and Flynn explain: ‘In the broadest sense, reification is a term used to critique cases in which some entity that should not be viewed as an object – oneself, other people, or some segment of the social or natural world – is treated as a thing-like object.’⁴⁷ *Emancipation* refers to the cure to alienation, the liberation of the victims of reification, accomplished through radical social transformation. As Horkheimer puts it, the purpose of Critical Theory is ‘to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them.’⁴⁸ All of this sit within the framework – again very Marxian – which divides society between the oppressors and the oppressed, the haves and the have nots.

An important aspect of the critical approach of the Frankfurt School which guides its method is its epistemology. Knowledge, the social theorists assert, is inextricably embedded in language, and language is socially constructed by the ever-changing moral judgements and pontifications of those in power. This means that language is a most powerful weapon, the tool used by those in power as a means of oppression. The knowledge that language constructs is also a means of power and oppression. This is clearly articulated by Wilhelm Reich, the psychoanalyst who succeeded Sigmund Freud, thus:

Marx found social life to be governed by the conditions of economic production and by the class conflict that resulted from these conditions at a definite point of history. It is only seldom that brute force is resorted to in the domination of the oppressed classes by the owners of the social means of production; its main weapon is its ideological

⁴⁶ Robin Celikates and Jeffrey Flynn, ‘Critical Theory (Frankfurt School)’, Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/critical-theory/>.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Horkheimer, ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’, 244.

power over the oppressed, for it is this ideology that is the mainstay of the state apparatus.⁴⁹

The objective of the Frankfurt School is therefore to deconstruct 'objective meaning' as determined by those in power and so free the oppressed from the unjust subjugation.

The critical theorists of the Frankfurt School are therefore very suspicious of institutions and authority. Here, the influence of Sigmund Freud on Critical Theory is clearly evident. Freud had proposed that human behaviour is shaped by three levels of consciousness: (1) the id (the unconscious mind, the seat of the individual's desires and impulses), (2) the ego (the conscious mind, influenced by society), and (3) the superego (the ego seeking to suppress the id). Commandeering this Freudian theory, Marx held that when the id is conflicted with the ego (which is shaped by society), frustration, oppression and guilt result. Just as Marx embraces Freud's diagnosis (and applies it to society), he also subscribes to the Freudian cure. Johnson explains:

... the cure to man's internal conflict and false guilt is found only in the dismantling of the cultural constructs that bring about the false sense of guilt. The external norms that suppress the id from coming out of the closet must be removed. Not until all social norms of the past are dismantled will the id be fully free to express itself without conflict or shame.⁵⁰

Critical Theory therefore seeks to deconstruct received narratives and dismantle existing social institutions because of the hegemonic power they allegedly exert on the masses, which results in oppression and slavery. And following Marx before them, the critical theorists sought to deconstruct the traditional 'patriarchal' family. This is because they deem the traditional family to be restricting and oppressive. Horkheimer explains:

The family has a very special place among the relationships which through conscious or unconscious mechanisms influence the psychic character of the vast majority of men ... The family, as one of the most important formative agencies, sees to it that the kind of human character emerges which social life requires, and gives this human being in great measure the indispensable adaptability for a specific authority-oriented conduct on which the existence of the bourgeois order largely depends.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Wilhelm Reich, 'Social Function of Sexual Oppression,' in Wolfgang Schirmacher and Sven Nebelung (Eds), *German Essays on Psychology* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 153.

⁵⁰ Johnson, *What Every Christian Should Know About Social Justice*, 46.

⁵¹ Max Horkheimer, 'Authority and the Family', *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 2002), 98.

The family, Horkheimer goes on to argue, perpetuates generational authoritarianism:

[The son] may think what he will of his father, but if he is to avoid conflicts and costly refusals he must submit to his father and satisfy him. The father is ... always right where his son is concerned. The father represents power and success, and the only way the son can preserve in his own mind a harmony between effective action and the ideal, a harmony often shattered in the years before puberty's end, is to endow his father, the strong and powerful one, with all the other qualities the son considers estimable ... Childhood in a limited family becomes an habituation to an authority which in an obscure way unites a necessary social function with power over men.⁵²

Critical Theory, which began with the scholars associated with the Frankfurt School, has morphed over the years, even as it has made inroads into many disciplines and fields. Its development is aided by the contributions of a number of influential French philosophers such as Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. As Dino Franco Felluga points out, critical theory has become

a general term for theoretical analysis of culture at large, thus bringing under its umbrella a tradition of thinking that extends from the structuralists of the modern period to the deconstructionists and postmodern theorists of the last 50 years. In this sort of critical theory, the aim is not so narrowly specific social change through the analysis of class antagonism than it is the examination of the larger linguistic and ideological structures by which we make sense of, while thus ideologically constructing, the world around us.⁵³

The presence and influence of Critical Theory is evident in legal studies, and in many other areas where it is used to analyse how identities are constructed, maintained and hierarchized by structures such as feminism, queer theory, post colonialism. Its influence is evidently found in 'critical race theory' and 'critical disability theory'.

CSJ: TENETS AND IDEAS

CSJ adopted and adapted many aspects of the ideology in which Critical Theory is grounded, whose origins and inspiration can be traced to classical Marxism, which has metamorphosised into its present 'cultural' or 'Western'

⁵² Ibid., 107-8.

⁵³ Dino Franco Felluga, *Critical Theory: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2015), xxiv.

expression. The Marxian social binary, namely, the bourgeoisie / proletariat has been replaced by oppressor / oppressed. Marx's scientism and positivism have given way to contextualism and subjectivism, which has consequently engendered a relativistic outlook. A constructivist approach to social 'realities', such as race, has been adopted. And the emphasis is now on the group (or group-identity), leading, as some have noted, to the disappearance of the individual. But CSJ continues in the campaign – begun by the classical Marxists and pursued by their 'Western' heirs – of deconstructing and dismantling institutions and their metanarratives about what civilised society ought to look like and how it must be ordered. Ideas such as alienation, reification and emancipation, so central to the Marxist ideology, continue to be prominent even though they are not always explicitly mentioned.

Added to this mix is the philosophy, movement, sensibility that is gaining remarkable traction in many Western societies and culture, namely, postmodernism, many of whose distinctives are already present, albeit in embryonic form, in Critical Theory. The origins and development of postmodernism and the cultural sensibilities it spawns need not detain us. What is of moment are the philosophical and political ideas associated with this new 'ism' and the ethos it nurtures. Postmodernism may be characterised as the rejection of what François Lyotard has famously called 'metanarratives', that totalising account of the nature and meaning of reality.⁵⁴ Terry Eagleton summarises the essence of the postmodern sensibility with his usual eloquence and brilliance:

Post-modernism signals the death of such 'metanarratives' whose secretly *terroristic* function is to ground and legitimate the *illusion* of a 'universal' human history. We are now in the process of awakening from the nightmare of modernity, with its manipulative reason and fetish of the totality, into the laid-back pluralism of the post-modern, that heterogeneous range of life-styles and language games which has renounced the nostalgic urge to *totalise* and *legitimate* itself ... Science and philosophy must jettison their grandiose metaphysical claims and view themselves more modestly as just another set of narratives (Italics mine).⁵⁵

The advent of postmodernism has resulted in the eclipse of objective truth and the dominance of the constructivist notion of knowledge. So comprehensive is its critique of modernity that Lyotard could unabashedly declare that postmodernism has forever changed the game rules for science,

⁵⁴ 'Simplifying to the extreme,' writes, Lyotard, 'I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarrative.' Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report On Knowledge*, Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, in *Theory and History of Literature*, Vol 120 (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984), iv.

⁵⁵ Terry Eagleton, 'Awakening from Modernity,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 February 1987, 194.

literature, the arts, etc.⁵⁶ It is not difficult to see how postmodernism reinforces the Marxian inspired ideology of CSJ: if all truth-claims and knowledge are socially constructed, then all claims about reality are really just assertions of power, advanced and controlled by the dominant group (namely, capitalists, whites, men, cisgendered, etc.).

This is surely the reason why, among the many postmodern philosophers, Michel Foucault stands out as one of the most influential in CSJ. The French philosopher has famously argued that ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’ are social inventions which are profoundly and inextricably related to power. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault writes: ‘Power produces knowledge ... Power and knowledge directly imply one another ... There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.’⁵⁷ Foucault therefore concludes that ‘truth’ is in reality a fiction or fabrication, ‘a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements,’⁵⁸ which stands in relation to the institutions and centres of power that produce and sustain it. Shenvi and Sawyer summarise Foucault’s theory thus: ‘Each society’s assumptions produce its own “regime of truth”. Each specific society has those in power who determine what counts as true, produce discourse considered to be true, and offer mechanisms people are to use to distinguish what is true and what is false.’⁵⁹ Consequently, Foucault could declare that ‘the truth does not set one free; rather, it subsumes one under the rules of a particular game of truth.’⁶⁰

Another postmodern philosopher who has considerable influence in CSJ is Jacques Derrida, who is hailed as the father of deconstructionism. Deconstructionism, however, is a term that is notoriously difficult to define – partly because Derrida has deliberately and repeatedly put obstacles along the way! Broadly speaking, deconstruction has to do with the use of certain philosophical and philological assumptions to challenge the view that there is a reality beyond the text to which appeal can be made to authenticate (or falsify) what was written. Hence, Derrida’s famous dictum that ‘there is nothing outside the text.’⁶¹ Language, then, for Derrida, is that confluence of symbols whose relationship with each other is orchestrated by the arbitrary

⁵⁶ Ibid, 6.

⁵⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 27.

⁵⁸ Michel Foucault, ‘Truth and Power’, in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham and Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon books, 1980), 133.

⁵⁹ Shenvi and Sawyer, *Critical Dilemma*, 82.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Ibid., 83.

⁶¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, MD: JHU Press, 2013), 163.

'norms and rules' of 'institutional structures.'⁶² As Jon Harris explains, for Derrida, 'meaning was not found in what was said, but rather, by what was meant in accordance with the hegemony of language.'⁶³ Language, in other words, is a political tool employed for the exercise of hegemonic power. Derrida himself admitted that deconstruction was 'a radicalisation ... of a certain Marxism', whose purpose is primarily political.⁶⁴ Derrida's approach is therefore in concert with critical theory and its fundamental claim that as a social construct, language is used as a means of oppression by those in power. Thus, language itself must be deconstructed.

CSJ brings together the proposals of Foucault and Derrida to establish the connection between language, knowledge and power, and their relationship with oppression. Johnson explains this succinctly thus: 'Because knowledge is the construction of language, and because language is the construction of socially constructed definitions written by those in power, knowledge becomes a means of power and oppression.'⁶⁵ Thus, it is by advancing a certain narrative as 'objective truth' that the dominant group (i.e., the oppressors) exercises hegemonic power over the rest (i.e., the oppressed), thereby perpetuating injustices. Robin DiAngelo's view that the writing of history is ideology-laden is illustrative of this.

Understanding knowledge as socially constructed uncovers the role of ideology in the construction of history: for example, the idea that progress is the result of a rational, objective, and value-neutral process, one that is removed from any political agenda; a product of reason alone. This picture of progress supports the belief that there is an objective truth, that it belongs to the West, and that this truth can be applied universally. This notion of objectivity was central to rationalising the colonisation and exploitation of other lands and peoples that began in the 15th century.⁶⁶

Thus, the battle is over who controls the narrative that is disseminated to the masses. As Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay explain:

If knowledge is a construct of power, which functions through ways of talking about things, knowledge can be changed and power structures toppled by changing the way we talk about things. Thus, applied postmodernism focuses on controlling discourses, especially by problematising language and imagery it deems theoretically harmful. This means that it looks for then highlights ways in which the

⁶² Jacques Derrida, *Points ...: Interviews, 1974-1994* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 28.

⁶³ Harris, *Christianity and Social Justice*, 14.

⁶⁴ Derrida, *Points*, 28.

⁶⁵ Johnson, *What Every Christian Should Know About Social Justice*, 896.

⁶⁶ Sensoy and DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Equal?* 3.

oppressive problems they assume exist in society manifest themselves, sometimes quite subtly, in order to ‘make oppression visible.’⁶⁷

With this background in mind, we turn now to examine briefly how this confluence of cultural Marxism, Critical Theory and postmodernism plays out in the various tenets and ideas associated with CSJ.

‘Justice’ in CSJ

We begin with the concept of justice in CSJ. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, justice has to do with ‘fairness in the way people are dealt with.’⁶⁸ The Oxford English Dictionary provides a more expansive definition of the word by stating that it concerns the ‘maintenance of what is just or right by the exercise of authority or power; assignment of deserved reward or punishment; giving due deserts.’⁶⁹ Most accounts of justice would identify at least three types of justice: retributive, distributive and restorative. Briefly, retributive justice is about the administration of proportionate punishment to those who have committed certain kinds of wrongful act (‘due deserts’). Distributive justice concerns the fair allocation of resources to members of the community. And restorative justice ‘seeks to examine the harmful impact of a crime and then determines what can be done to repair that harm while holding the person who caused it accountable for his or her actions.’⁷⁰ This basic understanding of justice, whose inspiration can be traced to the Judeo-Christian worldview and tradition, has a long history in Western jurisprudence and legal system.⁷¹

Among the three types of justice, CSJ has not only privileged distributive justice, but it has also given it a particular shade of meaning.⁷² While distributive justice is traditionally understood as the fair distribution of goods among members of society, in CSJ it is redefined as the *re*-distribution of *privileges*, based on the narrative or lived experience of the underprivileged or the oppressed. And while distributive justice traditionally understood is concerned with *equality of opportunity*, CSJ understands it in terms of *equality of outcome*. CSJ has introduced a distinction between equality and equity, and has given the latter its own peculiar definition. Traditionally the two terms

⁶⁷ Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender and Identity – and Why This Harms Everybody* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone, 2020), 61-2.

⁶⁸ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/justice>

⁶⁹ https://www.oed.com/dictionary/justice_n.

⁷⁰ ‘About Restorative Justice’, Law School, University of Wisconsin-Madison, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/justice_n.

⁷¹ For the influence of Christianity in the western legal tradition and the concepts of justice, see H. J. Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983).

⁷² Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2012), 28.

are used interchangeably, but according to CSJ the latter must be distinguished from the former because it refers specifically to the *equality of outcome*. Due to systemic oppression, groups that are unequally placed in society must be treated differently so that a fair outcome can be achieved. Although there are some differences in the way in which equity is understood among CSJ advocates, there is a basic agreement that different groups must be *unequally* treated in order for *equity of outcome* to be realised.

Based on these ideas, advocates of CSJ maintain that the law in most cases have hitherto supported inequity, and therefore must be dismantled and re-envisioned. As Scott David Allen explains, according to CSJ, justice has to do with the ‘tearing down of traditional structures and systems deemed to be oppressive, and the redistribution of power and resources from oppressors to victims in pursuit of equality of outcome.’⁷³ Using the analogy of basketball, Johnson explains that CSJ is not about making sure that every player gets to play by the same rules and is treated equally. Rather, the objective of CSJ ‘is to make sure every player has equal playing time and equal points and that no team loses the game. With no losers, everyone gets the trophy.’⁷⁴ ‘This understanding of justice,’ Johnson writes, ‘has nothing to do with law and order and everything to do with equal outcome, equal wages, and equal distribution.’⁷⁵ According to CSJ, the law needs to be radically reformulated so that it no longer serves as a tool of retributive justice which renders to individuals what they deserve, but as a tool of *re-distributive* justice, reapportioning privileges to those without it, based on cultural considerations. Societies whose political and legal systems are unable to deliver this outcome are deemed to be oppressive.

Consequently, the advocates of CSJ are therefore profoundly suspicious of institutions because they see them as formidable instruments used by the dominant group to exercise hegemonic power and control. Robin DiAngelo expresses this perspective clearly and straightforwardly when she writes:

Oppression involves institutional control, ideological domination, and the imposition of the dominant group’s culture on the minoritized group. No individual member of the dominant group has to do anything specific to oppress a member of the minoritized group; the prejudice and discrimination is built into the society as a whole and becomes normalised and taken for granted.⁷⁶

Note the expression ‘minoritized group’. We do not have here a simple empirically objective description, but a social construct devised by the

⁷³ Scott David Allen, *Why Social Justice is not Biblical Justice: An Urgent Appeal to Fellow Christians in a Time of Social Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Credo House Publishers, 2020), 43.

⁷⁴ Johnson, *What Every Christian Needs to Know About Social Justice*, 54.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Sensoy and DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?*, 39.

dominant group to serve its own political ends. Be that as it may, DiAngelo is not content to simply assert that institutions are vehicles of systemic oppression. For her, they also function as a means for white men to protect their power and wealth:

Government is only one institution that men dominate. Men also dominate all other major institutions in society (military, medicine, media, criminal justice, policing, finance, industry, higher education, religion and science). These institutions are interconnected and function together to uphold male domination across the whole of society.⁷⁷

CSJ associates injustice not only with individuals and groups, but also with structures. Thus, even if perchance only black women were appointed to government and run the institutions of society, the prevailing injustices will still persist. 'If tomorrow only women were appointed to government,' DiAngelo writes, 'they could not govern outside the rules that men had established. To reshape the institution and its norms and practices would take generations of effort.'⁷⁸

In placing its focus almost exclusively on groups, CSJ also signals the disappearance of the individual. According to the CSJ dogma, the identity of an individual is wholly determined by the groups with which they are affiliated, especially those that are based on race, sex, and so-called gender-identities (i.e., LGBTQ+). Nancy Pearcey explains the philosophical anthropology of CSJ (a form of reductionist communitarianism) thus:

Everyone's ideas are ... merely social constructions stitched together by cultural forces. Individuals are little more than mouthpieces for communities based on race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexual identity.⁷⁹

Furthermore, CSJ maintains that these various groups are in perpetual conflict with one another in a kind of Hobbesian, zero-sum contestation for power. The 'identity politics' that is promoted by CSJ's distorted notion of justice and its privileging of the group has generated a toxic culture of aggression, conflict and incivility. Reflecting on American society today in an article in *The Wall Street Journal*, Peggy Noonan writes:

... the air is full of accusation and humiliation. We have seen this spirit most famously on the campuses, where students protest harshly, sometimes violently, views they wish to suppress. Social media is full of swarming political and ideological mobs. In an interesting departure

⁷⁷ Ibid., 45.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Nancy Pearcey, *Finding Truth* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2015), 118.

from democratic tradition, [social justice revolutionaries] don't try to win the other side over. They only condemn and attempt to silence.⁸⁰

According to CSJ, in this great struggle for power, one group has emerged victor and attained supremacy: white, heteronormative males. This group, so the narrative goes, has accomplished this over the centuries by establishing an intricate web of societal structures, institutions and norms, all of which are purposed to give them the advantage and edge, but at the expense of every other group, especially ethnic minorities ('people of colour') and sexual minorities (LGBTQ+). The influential essayist Ta-Nehisi Coates, gives voice to this view when he bluntly asserts that 'whiteness' is 'an existential danger to the country and the world.' He believes that 'whites' have brought humanity to the edge of the precipice because of their insatiable thirst for power. 'The power of domination and exclusion is central to being white,' he writes, 'and without it, "white people" would cease to exist for want of reasons.'⁸¹

This perspective of the evils associated with this dominant group has led advocates of CSJ to advance a particular understanding of reparation which insists that the present generation is somewhat complicit in the sins committed by their ancestors. CSJ advocates begin with the general idea that all whites are complicit in the perpetuation of systemic injustices. This is clearly expressed by Barbara Applebaum in her book *Being White, Being Good*:

... *all* white people are complicit in sustaining systemic injustice ... not because they have particular intentions or bad attitudes against those who are not white, but by virtue of being a member of a social group that benefits from such systemic injustices.⁸²

The basic idea is then expanded to the notion of White ancestral guilt. Latasha Morrison spells out the logic of this concept eloquently in her book *Be the Bridge*, where she writes:

Our Western society is highly individualised, and our measure of morality is based on individual guilt or innocence. We've all heard of the justification: Why should I repent of racism? I never owned slaves. But in the Bible, guilt and shame aren't described in such a narrow

⁸⁰ Peggy Noonan, 'Get Ready for the Struggle Session,' *The Wall Street Journal*, March 7, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/get-ready-for-the-struggle-session-11552003346>.

⁸¹ Ta-Nehisi Coates, 'The First White President', *The Atlantic*, October 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/the-first-white-president-ta-nehisi-coates/537909/>. The article is subtitled, 'The foundation of Donald Trump's presidency is the negation of Barack Obama's legacy.'

⁸² Barbara Applebaum, *Being White, Being Good* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011), 120.

individualistic sense [but] are often communal and point to the need for corporate repentance.⁸³

Repentance, however, also requires reparation, according to Morrison. 'If repentance requires turning and walking away from the sins of our past, doesn't it require walking toward something more reparative?', she asks. Reparation, she stresses, is not punitive. Rather it is about 'repaying or returning those things [e.g., opportunities, possessions, property, wealth, and safety] so as to restore equity.'⁸⁴ Once again, the end goal is equity. The most recent example of such reparative gestures is the fund set up by the Church of England to address its links to the slave trade.⁸⁵

It is not difficult to see why Christians can be easily swayed by the CSJ doctrine of reparation. Morrison is a Christian who served on staff at a multi-ethnic evangelical megachurch before starting her national organisation called Be the Bridge. Passages such as Deuteronomy 5:9-10 ('I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me ...') are sometimes used to support the CSJ doctrine of reparation. However, the passage is erroneously interpreted and applied if it is seen in this light, because it only speaks of the *long-term effect* of sin. It does not suggest that succeeding generations must bear the *judicial guilt* of the sins of their forefathers.⁸⁶ In fact, the Bible teaches quite the opposite – that sons are not guilty of the sins of their fathers (Ezekiel 18:14-20).⁸⁷ Some Christians have appealed to the story (and example) of Zacchaeus, the tax collector (Luke 19:1-10) in support of the CSJ

⁸³ Latasha Morrison, *Be the Bridge: Pursuing God's Heart for Racial Reconciliation* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2019), 67-68.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁸⁵ Mujiva M, 'Church of England urged to expand fund to address slavery links', Reuters, March 4, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/church-england-expand-target-address-slavery-links-1-blm-pounds-2024-03-04/>. The Church of England is also called to apologise for its alleged mistreatment of Black Africans: 'We call the Church of England to apologise publicly for denying that Black Africans are made in the image of God and for seeking to destroy diverse African traditional religious belief systems. This act of repair should intentionally facilitate ongoing and new sociological, historical and theological research into spiritual traditions in Africa and the diaspora, thereby enabling a fresh dialogue between African traditional belief systems and the Gospel. This work should reach beyond theological institutions and be presented in the enslaved to discover the varied belief systems and spiritual practices of their forebears and their efficacy. We recommend the Commissioners work with all faith-based communities to which descendants of African chattel enslavement belong.' <https://hrifund.org/recommendations/>.

⁸⁶ Strachan, *Christianity and Wokeness*, 94.

⁸⁷ 'But if this man begets a son who sees all the sins which his father has done, and fears, and does not do likewise, who does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbour's wife, does not wrong any one, exacts no pledge, commits no robbery, but gives his bread to the to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, withholds his hand from iniquity, takes no interest or increase, observes my ordinances, and walks in my statutes; he shall not die for his father's iniquity; he shall surely live. As for his father, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother, and did what is not good among the people, behold, he shall die for his iniquity ... The soul that sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son ... (Ezekiel 18:14-20).

theory of reparation. After his encounter with Jesus, the repentant tax-collector pledged to give half his possession to the poor and pay back four times the amount he had cheated. However, it should be pointed out that in this story Zacchaeus only made *restitution* for the crimes he has committed, and not *reparation* for the sins of his ancestors or that of other tax collectors. Far from ensuring that justice is served, the CSJ doctrine of reparation has actually perpetuated a form of injustice. As Owen Strachan explains:

Proposals for reparations ... yield no justice at all in the end, for the people who suffered in past days see no satisfaction from them, and people living today must chip in to pay for crimes they did not commit. Here we see that much of what is called 'justice' today is actually injustice and does not do anything to make wrongs right.⁸⁸

The best 'reparation' that the present generation can make in light of the atrocities committed by their forebears is to create a better, more humanising and humane culture, and to inculcate those values and practices that contribute to justice and human flourishing.

Racism

America's Original Sin

A major feature of the CSJ movement is its rhetoric and ideas about racism. Christians and non-Christians alike recognise that racism is an evil which must be exposed and opposed. For the Christian, discrimination, mistreatment and oppression on account of race or ethnicity is a violation and assault on the dignity of the human being that is created in the image of their Creator (Genesis 1:26-27). However, Christians must be wary of the particular conception and framing of racism that is associated with the CSJ movement, for what constitutes racism and racial discrimination has been significantly distorted by CSJ ideology.

In a 2016 video of a training session, the speaker by the name of Ashleigh Shackelford provides a clear articulation of what CSJ regards as racism. In her speech to a room of mostly white women, Shackelford told them that 'all white people are racists'. Furthermore, she said that there is no hope at all that this is about to change. 'No,' she adds, 'you're always going to be racist, actually. Even when you're on the path to be a better human being.' If this is not shocking enough, Shackelford states quite baldly that she believes that 'all white people are born into not being human' and that white people grow up 'to be demons.'⁸⁹ CSJ has much to say about 'white supremacy' or 'white privilege', concepts to which I shall return later. But what is of note is that for

⁸⁸ Strachan, *Christianity and Wokeness*, 99.

⁸⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAMofeTjpRk>.

the advocates of CSJ, ordinary white folks who go about their daily business without any intention of being racist are the most dangerous and threatening. As Ibram X. Kendi, the celebrated professor at Boston University, has asserted: ordinary white people constitute the ‘most threatening racist movement.’⁹⁰

To understand how this concept of racism came to be, we must examine how American history is told by its advocates. America is established and ordered in such a way – so the story goes – that hegemonic power will belong to only ‘white’ people. ‘Black people’ are subjugated by them in many different ways throughout history, as slavery in the 18th and 19th centuries, and Jim Crow in the twentieth testify. This is grounded in the notion of ‘white supremacy’ – the belief that white people are superior to people of other races and therefore should have control over them – which has become part of the nation’s fabric.⁹¹ This has resulted in ‘structural racism’ or ‘systemic racism’, where the whole civilisational and social order – not just individuals – have been infected with racism. It has led to the notion that racism is America’s original sin. As Strachan describes it, white supremacy and racism are individually and systemically promoted ‘through campaigns of violence by police, disproportionate incarceration of minorities, unfair housing decisions, unequal distribution of public resources for schooling and other causes, limited access to health and nutrition, and much more.’⁹²

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

The idea of racism espoused by CSJ cannot be properly understood without grasping the central tenets of Critical Race Theory, which its proponents describe as nothing less than ‘a movement’ whose advocates are activists and scholars who believe that racism is permanent and systemic in that it is that fundamental property of the current social order. As such, racism is that which organises all of society. The clearest and most comprehensive definition of CRT is arguably found in Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic’s seminal book, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*:

What is Critical Race Theory? The critical race theory (CRT) movement is a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power. The movement considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up, but places them in a

⁹⁰ Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 20.

⁹¹ Alongside white supremacy, there is also the notion of white fragility. This idea is discussed in Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility: Why it is so Hard to Talk to White People about Race* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2018) – a *The New York Times* best-seller. She writes: ‘White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviours such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation’, 105.

⁹² Strachan, *Christianity and Wokeness*, 9.

broader perspective that includes economics, history, context, group- and self-interest, and even feelings and the unconscious. Unlike traditional civil rights, which embraces incrementalism and step-by-step progress, critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law.⁹³

Another clear and equally comprehensive account of what CRT stands for is the following statement by the UCLA School of Public Affairs:

CRT recognises that racism is engrained in the fabric and system of American society. The individual racist need not exist to note that institutional racism is pervasive in the dominant culture. This is the analytic lens that CRT uses in examining existing power structures. CRT identifies that these power structures are based on white privilege and white supremacy, which perpetuate the marginalisation of people of colour. CRT also rejects traditions of liberalism and meritocracy. Legal discourses say that the law is neutral and colorblind, however, CRT challenges this legal ‘truth’ by examining liberalism and meritocracy as a vehicle of self-interest, power, and privilege. CRT also recognises that liberalism and meritocracy are often stories heard from those with wealth, power, and privilege. These stories paint a false picture of meritocracy; everyone who works hard can attain wealth, power, and privilege while ignoring the systemic inequalities that institutional racism provides.⁹⁴

It is not too difficult to discern from both accounts that the Frankfurt School style social criticism with its predilection for deconstruction and dismantling is behind CRT. It is also not too difficult to perceive the long shadow of Marxist ideology (suitably tempered with postmodern sensibilities and ideology), especially with regard to its goal of transforming the relationship among race, racism and power. Unlike classical Marxism, however, CRT distinguishes itself by its focus (fixation?) on race. Thus, according to Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate IV, CRT takes the view that race should be regarded as ‘the central construct for understanding inequality.’⁹⁵ This has led James Lindsay to describe CRT quite appropriately as *race Marxism*.⁹⁶ CRT is therefore a re-imagining of the Marxian theory which makes race as the fundamental basis for understanding equality. Just as classical Marxism

⁹³ Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: NYU Press, 2001), 2.

⁹⁴ ‘What is Critical Race Theory?’ UCLA School of Public Affairs, <https://spacrs.wordpress.com/what-is-critical-race-theory>.

⁹⁵ Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate IV, ‘Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education’, *Teachers College Record* 97(1), 1995, 49.

⁹⁶ James Lindsay, *Race Marxism: The Truth about Critical Race Theory and Praxis* (Orlando, Florida: New Discourses, 2022).

scapegoats the bourgeoisie, CRT scapegoats whiteness and all ‘racists’ who seek to uphold whiteness.

One of the chief tenets of CRT – often labelled as the Social Construction Thesis – has to do with the rejection of race essentialism. According to its proponents, racial categories – white, black, Asian, Latino, etc., – are not real but are in fact social constructs. They regard all claims that the different races reflect underlying biological realities as coarse social fictions. Without this basic recognition, they insist, it would be impossible to understand the true nature of racism. As DiAngelo and Sensoy explain:

In order to understand racism, we first need to address our ideas about race itself. Many of us believe that race is biological; in other words, that there are distinct genetic differences between races that account for differences in traits such as sexuality, athleticism, or mathematical ability. The idea of *race as biology* makes it easy to believe that many of the divisions we see in society are natural. But race, like gender and disability, is socially constructed (Italics in original).⁹⁷

However, even though race is not a biological fact but a social construct, it has nonetheless impacted society in many different ways. ‘This impact’, write Sensoy and DiAngelo, ‘includes where we are most likely to live, which schools we will attend, who our friends and partners will be, what careers we will have, and even how long we can expect to live.’⁹⁸ Furthermore, these socially constructed racial categories are given social significance in their relationship with power to which some (namely, whites) have access while others do not. Not content to stop there, Critical Race Theorists go on to assert that these racial categories are invented by whites so that they can be used as instruments of white dominance and the oppression of non-whites.

In his 1970 book *Race, Racism, and American Law*, the legal scholar Derrick Bell formulated the Interest-Convergence Thesis which simply and categorically states that whites do not take action to help other races – especially blacks – unless it is in their interest to do so.⁹⁹ This idea is taken up by other proponents of CRT, notably Kimberlé Crenshaw, Bell’s student. Delgado and Stefancic take this even further by advancing the idea that ‘Because racism advances the interests of both white elites (materially) and working-class people (psychically), large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it.’¹⁰⁰ Barbara Applebaum elaborates on this idea thus: ‘while the definition of whiteness is difficult to pin down, there is widespread agreement that whiteness is a socially constructed category that is

⁹⁷ Sensoy and DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?*, 141.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁹⁹ Derrick Bell, *Race, Racism, and American Law*, sixth edition (Austin, TX: Wolters Kluwer, 2008).

¹⁰⁰ Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 7.

normalised within a system of privilege so that it is taken for granted by people who benefit from it.’¹⁰¹ Consequently, she adds:

white practices are so familiar, white people are often unaware of the underlying attitude that motivates them. White practices are unconscious habits that contribute to and reinforce racist systems.¹⁰²

Three more ideas must be discussed before we turn to the ‘solution’ offered by Critical Race Theorists to the dire problem of racism. The first idea has been described as ‘positional standpoint epistemology’. This means that the ‘lived experiences’ of allegedly oppressed racial groups must be regarded as authentic and authoritative, and therefore cannot be called to question by those who do not belong to these groups. Thus, while CRT insists that race is a social construct, it essentialises the lived experience or lived realities of people who belong to a certain race in the context of a prevailing white-dominant or white-supremacist culture. This is the Voice-of-Colour Thesis. Delgado and Stefancic explain:

A final element concerns the notion of the unique voice of color. Co-existing in somewhat uneasy tension with anti-essentialism, the voice-of-colour thesis holds that because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, black, Indian, Asian, and Latino/a writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their white counterparts matters that the whites are unlikely to know. Minority status, in other words, brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism.¹⁰³

To question the authenticity or authority of the voice of colour is only to validate the racism and oppression that these minority groups face. In the voice of colour, the personal is the political (to borrow an adage from feminism). Its claims cannot be falsified.

The second idea is microaggression, a term coined in the 1970s by psychiatrist Chester Pierce. Derald Wing Sue has defined this idea clearly and succinctly thus:

Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalised group membership.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Barbara Applebaum, *Being White, Being Good*, 9.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁰³ *Critical Race Theory*, 9.

¹⁰⁴ Derald Wing Sue, ‘Microaggression: More Than Just Race’,

https://www.uua.org/files/pdf/m/microaggressions_by_derald_wing_sue_ph.d..pdf

It is the victim – that is, the member of the racial minority – not the aggressor that determines what qualifies as microaggression. Their assessment and response are not open for debate or discussion, for, as Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer point out, ‘even the questioning of what is legitimate is seen as a product of white supremacy and hegemonic oppression.’¹⁰⁵ Sue and his colleagues have provided a long list of racial microaggression,¹⁰⁶ and the concept has spread across high education, prompting numerous research by scholars, most of whom are influenced by CRT. However, as Althea Nagai has convincingly shown, research on microaggression is mostly flawed, and in so many ways.¹⁰⁷ Be that as it may, when microaggression is bolstered by the voice-of-colour dogma, we have a recipe for a toxic culture of endless suspicion and hostility.

In addition, according to CSJ ideology, reverse racism (or sexism) is impossible. This means that blacks can never be racist. Even though they may harbour some bias or prejudice they can never be racist in the way CSJ defines the term. Johnson explains:

Even though they may be biased and prejudiced in their hearts and show partiality in their actions towards white men, they can’t be oppressive because they don’t wield any institutional power. And even if a black woman heads up a major cooperation that refuses to hire white men, she still can’t be racist or sexist because she lives under the broader oppressive capitalist system.¹⁰⁸

What is CRT’s ‘solution’ to racism? Can society be cured of this scourge? Critical Race Theorists reject the proposal that colour-blindness is a solution to racism, and insist that it is in reality a form of racism. According to them, colour-blindness is a false claim by white people which gives the (false) impression that they do not regard others based on their skin colour or ethnicity. As Ibram X. Kendi puts it: The most threatening racist movement is not the alt-right’s unlikely drive for a White ethno-state, but the regular American’s drive for a “Race-neutral” one.¹⁰⁹ Colour-blindness, according to DiAngelo, is the way racism has morphed and adapted, and it is more

¹⁰⁵ Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer, *Critical Dilemma: The Rise of Critical Theories and Social Justice Ideology – Implications for the Church and Society* (Eugene Oregon: Harvest House Publishers (2023), 126.

¹⁰⁶ Here is a sampling: (1) when whites say they are colour-blind; (2) when whites support meritocracy; (3) when whites say America should be a melting pot; (4) when a white teacher does not call on non-white students; (5) when Asian Americans are asked where they are born; (6) when whites say ‘I don’t see race’ or ‘We are all human beings’; (7) when whites claim, ‘I have black friends.’

¹⁰⁷ Althea Nagai, ‘The Pseudo-Science of Microaggressions’, *Academic Questions* (2017), 30:47-57, https://www.nas.org/academic-questions/30/1/the_pseudo_science_of_microaggressions/pdf.

¹⁰⁸ Johnson, *What Every Christian Needs to Know About Social Justice*, 63.

¹⁰⁹ Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 20.

insidious than the racist laws of America's past. 'In some ways,' she writes, 'racism's adaptations over time are more sinister than concrete rules such as Jim Crow.'¹¹⁰

According to Critical Race Theorists, the way forward is antiracism, which Strachan has helpfully described as 'dedicated opposition to hidden, race-based injustices through social demonstration and political activism.' Antiracism is, in a sense, a white person's atoning act, for, as Strachan goes on to explain: 'a white person cannot ever completely escape internal racial bias but can perform outward actions that seek to dismantle white power.'¹¹¹ In the mind of Critical Race Theorists, therefore, there is only racism and antiracism. Colour-blindness is an enemy of antiracism – it is therefore racist. No one has articulated the salvific quality of antiracism more clearly and passionately than Ibram X. Kendi:

More white people are finally beginning to realise how white supremacy and how even whiteness itself is killing them ... It literally is posing an existential threat to humanity. It always has. And so fundamentally, antiracism is life. It literally is, it can save humanity.¹¹²

This ideology, which fuels BLM, is evidently antithetical to the ideals of the Civil Rights Movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. which seeks to introduce true justice and which asserts that people should never be judged by the colour of their skin (in other words, colour-blindness).

Woke Culture

According to CSJ, those who are aware of systemic racism and the oppression of the so-called 'minoritized' races are woke. In recent years, wokeism (also referred to as wokery or the woke culture) has emerged as a prominent social and political movement. According to Peter Phiri of the University of Southampton, United Kingdom, wokeism is a movement that is 'centred on issues of social justice and inequality and is characterised by its focus on intersectionality, the interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, gender and class as they apply to a given individual or group.'¹¹³ In intellectual terms, wokeism results from adopting the peculiar way of looking at the society that is framed by CRT.¹¹⁴ At the most fundamental level, wokery is a mindset and a posture. To be woke is to see the true nature of the world. As Strachan explains, 'this means one sees the comprehensive inequity of our

¹¹⁰ DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 59.

¹¹¹ Strachan, *Christianity and Wokeness*, 211.

¹¹² Judson Memorial Church, 'How to be Ant-Racist: Ibram X. Kendi in Conversation with Molly Crabapple,' YouTube filmed on August 15, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BhbbmjqcRvY>.

¹¹³ Peter Phiri, 'Wokeism: A Critical Analysis of Its Impact on Society and the Emergence of Woke Capitalism,' *Divers Equal Health Care*, 20:20, 2023, 20.

¹¹⁴ In the interest of space, I will not rehearse the basic ideas of CRT in this sub-section.

social order and strives to highlight power structures in society that stem from racial privilege.¹¹⁵ To translate this into Marxian terms, to be woke is to be liberated from the ‘false consciousness’ that is misaligned with reality.

Many who jump onto the bandwagon of wokeism do not fully understand its origins and the ideological undergirding of the movement. They may be not familiar enough with the ideology to discern the trap that they have unwittingly walked into. For according to woke ideology, if you are a white person, you are caught no matter where you turn, and no matter how strenuously you denounce racism. In an interesting article in *Persuasion*, John McWhorter lists a number of the conundrums (some scholars have described them as ironies) that woke ideology presents.¹¹⁶ There are too many to be reproduced here, but perhaps four examples would be enough to give an idea of the impossible demands of woke culture:

1. When black people say you have insulted them, apologise with profound sincerity and guilt. **But** don’t put black people in a position where you expect them to forgive you. They have dealt too much to be expected to.
2. You must strive eternally to understand the experience of black people. **But** you can never understand what it is to be black, and if you think you do you are a racist.
3. When whites move away from black neighbourhoods, it’s white flight. **But** when whites move into black neighbourhoods, it’s gentrification, even when they pay black residents generously for their houses.
4. Black people cannot be held accountable for everything every black person does. **But** all whites must acknowledge their personal complicity in the perfidy throughout the history of ‘whiteness’.

Just like CRT in which it is grounded, woke ideology deals with the problem of racism by forging racism in a different way. Or as Owen Strachan puts it, ‘wokeness actually foments the very sin it presumes to critique: “racism”.’¹¹⁷ In so doing, it creates a culture of suspicion, hostility and division even as it claims to champion inclusivity, tolerance, and unity. ‘Though wokeness promises compassion,’ writes Strachan, ‘it bounces its check.’ He adds: ‘Wokeness does not create peace; it creates division, terrible division. This is true in its strictly academic form; this is true in its adapted activist form.’¹¹⁸ It is important to note that wokeness is not just about race. Take BLM for example. According to BLM Los Angeles, the movement is trans-affirming¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Strachan, *Wokeness and Christianity*, 8.

¹¹⁶ John McWhorter, ‘John McWhorter: The Neoracists,’ *Persuasion*, February 8, 2021, <https://www.persuasioncommunity/p/john-mcwhorter-the-neoracists>

¹¹⁷ Strachan, *Christianity and Wokeness*, 65.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹¹⁹ Its website states: ‘We make space for transgender siblings to participate and lead. We are self-reflexive and do the work required to dismantle cisgender privilege and uplift Black trans

as well as queer affirming.¹²⁰ This has much to do with the CSJ doctrine of intersectionality, which we will discuss shortly.

Woke culture is also governed by an approach which some commentators have described as ‘monocausality’ in that they tend to trace complex issues and problems in society to one simple factor or cause: namely, racism and social injustice. Common social issues that are endemic in all modern societies such as income and employment disparities and overall health status are automatically said to reflect racism. In reality, these statistics may indicate a reality that is far more complex and multi-factorial. Furthermore, just as blacks are more highly represented in certain sports such as football and basketball, blacks are also at higher risks for diseases such as stroke, cancer, asthma, pneumonia and diabetes than their white counterpart. Thus, the fact that more blacks die of stroke does not indicate racism – it is just a statistical fact.¹²¹ (Incidentally, in woke culture, to even state these statistical differences [as I’ve just done] is to already be guilty of racism.) There is also the tendency to bring isolated incidents – such as the shooting of a black man by a white law enforcement officer – into the broader narrative of racism, systemic injustice and police brutality. Reflecting on the George Floyd incident, American pastor and educator, Voddie Baucham, offers this sober criticism of this dangerous tendency: ‘The George Floyd case was indeed tragic. However, it was not unique. Nor does it represent clear evidence of a particular pattern of police brutality regarding black men.’¹²²

Unfortunately, woke culture, with its emphasis on antiracism and social justice, has attracted many evangelical ministers and churches in America. For example, pastor Eric Mason advances many of the ideas associated with woke culture in his 2018 book *Woke Church: An Urgent Call for Christians in America to Confront Racism and Injustice*.¹²³ Mason has evidently uncritically embraced the ideology of CRT, especially its emphasis on white supremacy and its binary view of society. As an African American, Mason worries that if black and white Christians were to worship in the same congregation, the whites would ‘find a way to subjugate blacks and make us dependent on them.’¹²⁴ Mason, who earned his Master of Theology from Dallas Theological Seminary and PhD from Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, applauded

folk, especially Black trans women who continue to be disproportionately impacted by trans-antagonistic violence.’ See <https://www.blmla.org/guiding-principles>.

¹²⁰ ‘We foster a queer-affirming network. When we gather, we do so with the intention of freeing ourselves from the grip of heteronormative thinking, or rather, the belief that all in the world are heterosexual (unless s/he or they disclose otherwise).’ Ibid.

¹²¹ See the brilliant work of the celebrated economist and social philosopher Thomas Sowell, *Social Justice Fallacies* (New York: Basic Books, 2023).

¹²² Voddie Baucham Jr., *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism’s Looming Catastrophe* (Washington, D.C.: Salem Books, 2021), 56.

¹²³ Eric Mason, *Woke Church: An Urgent Call for Christians in America to Confront Racism and Injustice* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2018).

¹²⁴ Ibid., 100.

the Black Lives Matter organisation as ‘a voice of black dignity’, and wished that his church had founded the organisation.¹²⁵ Another example of a Christian leader in America who has voiced support for woke ideology is Jarvis Williams, professor of New Testament interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, the flagship seminary for the Southern Baptist Convention. In an interview with Gospel Coalition, Williams said that he ‘wish[ed] that every Christian would read Richard Delgado’s *Critical Race Theory*’ because of how ‘behind’ evangelicals were ‘on critical race discussions.’¹²⁶

Woke culture, however, is manifestly antithetical to Christianity. It receives its inspiration from alien secular sources such as Marxism and rabid postmodernism. Although it claims to champion social justice, it perpetuates instead a subtle form of injustice. Beneath its rhetoric of inclusivism and equity, it in fact instigates suspicion, hate and divisiveness. In dealing with racism, it follows Ibram X. Kendi, who said that ‘The only remedy to racist discrimination is *antiracist* discrimination.’¹²⁷ This is a dangerous proposition. For it suggests that the only solution to the problem of racial prejudice is racial prejudice – but of a different kind! In his excellent book *Christianity and Wokeness*, theologian Owen Strachan issues this grave warning to those who are seduced by wokery (especially his fellow evangelicals):

We must sit up and take notice: This is not God’s Gospel. This is a worse gospel, infinitely worse. This is man’s gospel; legalism is what comes out of the heart of man, not divine grace. This is in truth an anti-gospel. It is anathema. This unbiblical system will not save you. Following wokeness all the way through means that you will be in eternal peril, trapped in your works even as you trust them to make you more ‘antiracist’, striving for salvation but never attaining it ... You will be trapped; in that hour, you will be what the Scripture says: *taken captive*.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Ibid., 107. Other influential woke books by evangelical scholars or pastors include Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downer Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2015), Daniel Hill, *White Awake: An Honest Look at What It Means to Be White* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2017), and Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church’s Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2019).

¹²⁶ Jarvis Williams, ‘On My Shelf: Life and Books with Jarvis Williams, interview by Matt Smethurst, February 28, 2017, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/on-my-shelf-life-and-books-with-jarvis-williams/>.

¹²⁷ Ibram X. Khan, *How to be Antiracist*, 19.

¹²⁸ Strachan, *Christianity and Wokeness*, 87.

Intersectionality

An important concept in CSJ is intersectionality. This idea was first introduced by one of the leading scholars of CRT and civil rights activists, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in her controversial law paper entitled 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.'¹²⁹ Crenshaw originally described the concept as a heuristic, but later referred to it as a practice. In 1991, Crenshaw further fleshed out this concept in another influential essay, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Colour.'¹³⁰ Pat Sawyer and Neil Shenvi have arguably provided the clearest definition of intersectionality in their 2019 article published in *Eikon*:

Intersectionality is the claim that different facets of our identity interact in distinct and complex ways based upon their particular intersection of social categories we occupy, yielding life and existence that can be characterized by either privilege, oppression, or both.'¹³¹

Alan Jacobs explains it this way: intersectionality occurs when 'someone who belongs to more than one oppressed or marginalized group – a black lesbian, for instance – experiences such oppression or marginalisation in a particularly intensified way thanks to the "intersection" of those social forces.'¹³² Robin DiAngelo explains the importance of intersectionality in the way in which we understand identity. 'Intersectionality,' she writes, 'is the idea that identity cannot be fully understood via a single lens such as gender, race, or class alone ...' Crenshaw calls this a 'single axis frame-work'. Rather, DiAngelo continues, 'our identities and the social meaning attributed to them must be understood in their interdependence on one another; identity is multidimensional.'¹³³ Ibram X. Kendi puts it this way:

All racial groups are a collection of intersectional identities differentiated by gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, skin colour, nationality, and culture, among a series of other identifiers ... Intersectional Black identities are subjected to what [Kimberlé]

¹²⁹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,' *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, Vol. 1989, Issue 1, Article 8.

<https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=ucf>.

¹³⁰ Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Colour,' *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 43, No. 6 (Jul 1991), pp. 1241-1299.

¹³¹ Pat Sawyer and Neil Shenvi, 'Gender, Intersectionality, and Critical Theory,' *Eikon*, Issue 2, Fall 2019, 76.

¹³² Quoted in Stephen Miller, 'Intersectionality for Dummies,' *Washington Examiner*, January 19, 2018, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/magazine/1697959/intersectionality-for-dummies/>

¹³³ DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Equal?* 193.

Crenshaw described as the intersection of racism and other forms of bigotry, such as ethnocentrism, colourism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia.¹³⁴

Put crudely – but not unfairly – according to intersectionality, the more victim boxes you check, the greater is your experience of oppression.

To be sure, intersectionality complicates the social binary which advocates of CSJ uphold. However, it does not in any way negate or invert it. For example, a white woman may be said to be privileged due to her race, but she is still oppressed because of her gender, and perhaps her class. Another example of the interplay of the social binary and intersectionality is to consider Oprah Winfrey in relation to a disabled, white homeless man. Despite her wealth, Oprah would still be considered oppressed because of her race and gender, and the disabled white man would still be privileged because of his race and gender. As Sawyer and Shenvi point out, ‘The fact that Oprah is a billionaire while the homeless man may be on the verge of starvation is irrelevant.’¹³⁵ This indicates that critical theorists believe that over and above the framework of social binary, there are ‘interlocking systems of oppression’ that include racism, classism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, and transphobia. While some people may face multiple forms of oppression, others may experience only one form of oppression. However, as the feminist and anti-racist organiser Suzanne Pharr explains, one must always understand oppression as systemic:

It is virtually impossible to view one oppression such as sexism or homophobia, in isolation because they are all connected: sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, ableism, anti-Semitism, ageism ... To eliminate one oppression successfully, a movement has to include work to eliminate them all or else success will always be limited and incomplete.¹³⁶

Intersectionality follows closely the Marxist and postmodernist understanding of the relationship between truth, identity and power. As we have seen, both Marxism and postmodernism in their own ways insist that truth is a cultural and social construct. This means that truth must be stripped of its claims to objectivity and understood relationally and positionally. This means that each group has its own truths, which are in fact their perspectives on power. Thus, under intersectionality, truth does not serve to bring different groups to establish common ground and understanding. Rather ‘truth’ is narrative-driven and becomes a contentious matter that is associated with identity and therefore becomes the fuel for

¹³⁴ Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 191-192.

¹³⁵ Sawyer and Shenvi, *Critical Dilemma*, 124.

¹³⁶ Suzanne Pharr, *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* (Berkeley: Chardon, 2002), 53.

identity politics. In this way, under intersectionality, truth becomes attestations of power and is therefore divisive and virulent.

Intersectionality is crucial for CSJ because it purportedly enables one to become aware of the injustices and oppression that pervades society at various levels and in ways that are overlapping. As Owen Strachan explains, ‘... when one becomes “woke”, one not only becomes an “antiracist”, but also an opposer of numerous evils and a liberator of many groups. One recognises the “intersectional” nature of injustice, meaning that one discovers that the causes of many underprivileged minority groups overlap.’¹³⁷ For scholars and activists like Crenshaw, it allows CRT to incorporate political activism thus fulfilling the demand for praxis in the Marxist sense.

Victimhood Culture

We turn, finally, to the tendency in CSJ to look for every chance to take offense and to capitalize on grievances, regardless of how insignificant the issue or how long ago an alleged incident had occurred. In 2018, Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning provide an excellent account of this phenomenon in their book *The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and the New Culture Wars*.¹³⁸ According to Campbell and Manning, there are different modes of social conflict resolution in different times. Two approaches were singled out which the authors maintain characterise how this has been done in the past. The first is honour culture, which dominated Western civilisation for hundreds of years and which is still prevalent in some non-Western cultures. This culture holds that it is important that no one should be allowed to dominate an individual or group. Honour culture has made people sensitive to insults and engender the tendency to respond to disrespect by aggression and even violence. The second is the dignity culture, which encourages people to ignore slights, and to resolve conflicts through legal means instead of by violence. However, in recent years, another way of responding to social conflicts has arisen, namely, the victimhood culture, which exploits the status of the victim. Victimhood culture, they write, ‘shares with honour culture the imperative to react strongly to certain kinds of minor offenses, and with dignity culture an approval of appeals of authorities.’¹³⁹ In other words, victimhood culture draws from the sensitivity and combativeness of honour culture and combines them with dignity culture’s willingness to invoke the law.

In CSJ, victimhood has been given centre-stage. As Jon Harris has perceptively pointed out, in the hands of CSJ, social justice has gone from ‘lamenting

¹³⁷ Strachan, *Christianity and Wokeness*, 16.

¹³⁸ Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, *The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and the New Culture Wars* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

victimhood to promoting victimhood ...'¹⁴⁰ The first step in giving exceptional focus on victimhood, is to accord it 'a kind of moral status', just like honour and dignity. Within a victim culture, write Campbell and Manning, 'victimhood [conveys] a kind of moral status based on suffering and neediness', implying that 'if victimhood is a virtue, privilege is a vice.'¹⁴¹ This leads to the valorisation of victimhood, regarding it as a trophy of sorts, or, as some would have it, a commodity. Whichever metaphor one chooses to commandeer, the victimhood culture works on a simple formula: the more victimhood points you possess, the more power and affirmation you command. This culture therefore establishes the link between victimhood, authority, and power. The greater the claims of victimhood one can make – aided by the concept of intersectionality – the more moral authority and power one possesses. This has led to what some have called a 'victimhood Olympics', where people are constantly searching for opportunities to claim victimisation, looking for more and more insignificant forms of 'microaggressions' as the bases of offence. As Jonathan Haidt, professor of ethical leadership at New York University observes, this is a tactic used by students who 'respond to even the slightest unintentional offense, even going to far as to falsify offenses.'¹⁴²

The culture of victimhood is supported by its own epistemology, which is expressed in two related ideas. The first is the notion of *lived experiences*, which simply asserts that the subjective experiences of the victim of discrimination and oppression are real, must be believed and cannot be questioned. For example, a black woman describes her lived experience of sexual harassment and racism at work, but offers no concrete evidence that this is the case. If her white, male supervisor attempts to counter her claim by producing evidence of fair treatment, his arguments will be dismissed as an attempt to justify his white, male power and privilege. The notion of lived experiences, which is sometimes treated synonymously with identity-based experiences, is found in the vast body of identity-based studies and disciplines. It has spawned multiple 'epistemologies' such as feminist epistemology, critical race epistemology, postcolonial epistemology, and queer epistemology. In addition, it has also given rise to concepts such as 'epistemic justice', 'epistemic oppression', 'epistemic exploitation', and 'epistemic violence.' Closely related to the first notion is *standpoint epistemology*, which is drawn from standpoint theory of postmodernism. CRT, for example, is thoroughly committed to standpoint theory which prioritised and valorises minority voices.

These concepts of *lived experiences* and *standpoint epistemology* are not new, as any student of liberation theology – for example – would know. What is

¹⁴⁰ John Harris, *Christianity and Social Justice*, 19.

¹⁴¹ Campbell and Manning, *The Rise of Victimhood Culture*, 22.

¹⁴² Jonathan Haidt, 'Coddle U vs. Strengthen U: What a Great University Should Be.' *The Righteous Mind*, October 6, 2017, <https://righteousmind.com/author/jonathan-haidt-2/page/3/>.

concerning is that these ideas have captured the imagination of evangelical scholars and pastors. For example, Danny Carroll, a Wheaton professor who teaches on the Bible and immigration, argues that Hispanics can ‘engage the text [of Scripture] at levels’¹⁴³ others cannot simply because of their immigration experiences. He adds that ‘the Bible takes a very different spin’ for Hispanics who learn to see themselves in the text of Scripture ‘in ways a majority culture person cannot understand.’¹⁴⁴ Evangelicals who are woke also embrace these concepts, together with CRT and intersectionality. As Owen Strachan notes: ‘Pastors in this group charge “white” people to repent for their sins. Leaders issue accusations against “white” Christians for being racist “white supremacists” due to their skin colour. Theologians in this group practise “standpoint epistemology”, compelling a racialised interpretative method rather than a theological one.’¹⁴⁵ These ideas, Strachan rightly argues, do not bring about unity, cohesion and social peace among the different groups in society. Instead, they sow seeds of suspicion, discord and hostility. He writes:

Wokeness ... gives us only diversity, for its dependence upon standpoint epistemology ends up collapsing the world into radical multiperspectivalism and a resulting contest for power. Instead of unity in diversity, we are consigned to diversity without unity, and out of the disunified mess will inevitably come estrangement and even hostility.¹⁴⁶

Cancel Culture

One of the social virtues that advocates of CSJ claim to champion is diversity (alongside equity and inclusion). In fact, this triad of virtues has become something of a mantra of the movement. Upon closer inspection, however, what CSJ calls ‘diversity’ is in fact a disguised uniformity and a veiled demand for conformity. As we have seen, CSJ privileges the group above the individual, which implies that the identity of the group should define that of the individual, and the aspirations and the goals of the group should govern the motivations and behaviour of its members. For example, if the individual is ‘black’, he or she is expected to act like a ‘black’ person – the same is the case for women, LGBTQ+ people, etc. This standpoint is expressly and provocatively underscored by Ayanna Pressley, a black, female US congresswoman from Michigan:

¹⁴³ Danny Carroll, ‘Migration in the Bible: Entering the Stories, Expanding Our Vision – Danny Carroll,’ YouTube Video, Dallas Theological Seminary, November 7, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkEoRLfIUSM>.

¹⁴⁴ Danny Carroll, ‘What the Bible Has to Say About Immigration; Dr Daniel Carroll,’ YouTube Video, Gordon-Conwell Charlotte, September 9, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFQ2m9BKWPM>.

¹⁴⁵ Strachan, *Christianity and Wokeness*, 49.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

We don't need more brown faces that don't want to be a brown voice. We don't need black faces that don't want to be a black voice. We don't need Muslims that don't want to be a Muslim voice. We don't need queers that don't want to be a queer voice.¹⁴⁷

What this means is that everyone who belong to a particular group must sing from the same score sheet. Those who dare to improvise or sing a different tune are summarily dealt with – they will be cancelled.

CSJ advocates are visible in social media actively searching for transgressors in order to punish them (through public shaming and cancellation). A number of celebrities have in recent years bore the brunt for comments they had made.

- The lesbian TV show host Ellen DeGeneres suffered backlash for accepting actor Kevin Hart's apology for old tweets containing gay slurs.¹⁴⁸
- Lesbian tennis superstar Martina Navratilova was attacked for arguing that it is not fair for trans women tennis players to compete against cis women.¹⁴⁹
- J.K. Rowling was condemned as a transphobe not just by much of social media but also by some of the main actors of the Harry Potter films for saying that women's biology defines their experience.¹⁵⁰
- The *New York Times* received considerable flak for its editorial published on March 18, 2022, which argued that Cancel Culture is real, and that it is a problem.¹⁵¹

What exactly is Cancel Culture? The most basic definition of this phenomenon can be attributed to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* which says that it is 'the practice or tendency of engaging in mass cancelling as a way of expressing disapproval or exerting social pressure.' While this simple definition does indeed capture much that is true of the phenomenon and practice, it needs supplementation. Aja Romano, writing for *Vox*, points out – correctly – that

¹⁴⁷ Rebecca Klar, 'Pressley: Democrats Don't Need "Any More Black Faces That Don't Want to Be a Black Voice,'" *The Hill*, July 14, 2019, <https://thehill.com/homenews/house/453007-pressley-democrats-need-any-more-black-voices-that-dont-want-to-be-a-black/>.

¹⁴⁸ Arid Rahman, 'Ellen DeGeneres Faces Backlash After Defending Kevin Hart During Interview,' *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 4, 2019, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/ellen-backlash-kevin-hart-interview-1173135/>.

¹⁴⁹ Frances Perraudin, 'Martina Navratilova Criticised Over "Cheating" Trans Women Comments,' *The Guardian*, February 17, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2019/feb/17/martina-navratilova-criticised-over-cheating-trans-women-comments>.

¹⁵⁰ 'JK Rowling criticised for "condescending" and "transphobic" Tweets,' *Sky News*, July 8, 2020, <https://news.sky.com/story/jk-rowling-criticised-for-condescending-and-transphobic-tweets-12022330>.

¹⁵¹ The *New York Times*, Editorial Board, 'America Has a Free Speech Problem,' *New York Times*, March 18, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/18/opinion/cancel-culture-free-speech-poll.html>.

Cancel Culture is ‘an extension of call-out culture: the natural escalation from pointing out a problem to calling for the head of the person who caused it.’¹⁵² Further expanding these descriptions and focusing especially on what it stands for, Benjamin Wallace-Wells describes Cancel Culture in an article in the *New Yorker* as:

a fear that even ordinary people who express ideas that are politically incorrect will be publicly shamed – that social media has enabled a universal speech surveillance, and that people and institutions are now self-policing, out of fear of it.¹⁵³

Each of these attempts to describe Cancel Culture captures something true about the phenomenon. Taken together, they give us a clearer idea of what we are contending with.

Although the term ‘Cancel Culture’ is of fairly recent vintage, the strategy behind it is not at all new. In America, its genesis can be traced to the Free Speech Movement and its opposition (i.e., the Anti Free Speech Movement) which began in the early 1960s. The trajectory further develops in the period starting from 2014 in which political correctness is championed and weaponised.¹⁵⁴ What needs to be emphasised here, however, is that this idea of aggressive censorship and silencing can be traced to one of the scholars of the Frankfurt School, the Brandeis Professor Herbert Marcuse, often celebrated as the ‘guru of the new left.’ Marcuse argues that in order for the ‘oppressed’ minority to be protected from the destructive narratives of the dominant group, the ideals of tolerance, free speech and power – which progressives hold dearly – must be modified and rejigged. He proposed that the left should practise ‘Regressive Tolerance,’ that is, intolerance towards the views of ‘the other side’, namely, the conservatives and political right. Thus, while free speech should be extended to progressives, conservatives and right-wingers should be fought with intolerance, censorship, indoctrination, and even violence. Marcuse explains:

[I]t is possible to define the direction in which prevailing institutions, policies, opinions would have to be changed in order to improve the chance of a peace which is not identical with cold war and a little hot war, and a satisfaction of needs which does not feed on poverty, oppression, and exploitation ... Consequently, it is also possible to identify policies, opinions, movements which would promote this

¹⁵² Aja Romano, ‘Why We Can’t Stop Fighting About Cancel Culture,’ *Vox*, August 25, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/12/30/20879720/what-is-cancel-culture-explained-history-debate>.

¹⁵³ Benjamin Wallace-Wells, ‘Cancel Culture Is Not a Movement,’ *New Yorker*, March 11, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/annals-of-populism/who-is-in-charge-of-cancel-culture>.

¹⁵⁴ Space does not allow us to trace the development of Cancel Culture. For an excellent account, see Greg Lukianoff and Rikki Schlott, *The Cancellings of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2023).

chance, and those which would do the opposite. Suppression of the regressive ones is a prerequisite for the strengthening of the progressive ones.¹⁵⁵

Cancel Culture in America has escalated to the point that people are forcibly and swiftly cancelled for something which is considered remotely offensive. Public opinion and response to the phenomenon is also mixed – some are of the view that it is punitive and has been used unjustly while others think that it is a thoughtful way of holding people accountable for their words and actions. But, as we have seen from the discussion above, Cancel Culture as it is currently practised by the advocates of CSJ has to do not just with holding people accountable. It is weaponised against those whose views are inimical to the ideals of CSJ and the ‘social imaginary’ it proposes.¹⁵⁶ In practice, Cancel Culture is a direct attack on the due process of the law because it cancels people – regardless of their actual guilt or lack thereof – without any semblance of a process of determining the truth. This is especially evident on university campuses and social media, where people are shamed or censured without due process, the presumption of innocence, the testimony of witnesses and credible evidence, but based mostly on identity.

Cancel Culture uses every ‘tool’ in the Marxist / Critical Theory arsenal – race, gender, Oppressor / Oppressed, microaggression, standpoint epistemology, lived experience, victimhood, intersectionality, etc – to implement ‘Regressive Tolerance’ (Marcuse). It has defined and identified the ‘vulnerable groups’, and expanded the idea of what is offensive to them so that anyone who is in the eyes of its proponents guilty of such offense should be swiftly and decisively silenced. With Cancel Culture, the New Left is advancing an illiberal liberalism in which no opinion and view different from their own will be tolerated. It has put a stranglehold on freedom –especially the freedom of speech. In academia, for example, there is a call for academic justice to replace academic freedom.¹⁵⁷ As Shenvi and Sawyer warn, all this signals a dangerous slide to totalitarianism:

If free speech, free inquiry, and cognitive liberty are effectively negated and nullified, the stage is set for totalitarianism. This is not hyperbole. It is presumptuous, arrogant and grossly misguided to think America

¹⁵⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *Repressive Tolerance* in Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington More, Jr., and Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (1969), <https://www.marcuse.org/herbert/publications/1960s/1965-repressive-tolerance-fulltext.html>

¹⁵⁶ The social imaginary is the network of values, institutions, laws, symbols and social practices through which people imagine human sociality. The idea is developed by the eminent Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor in *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2003).

¹⁵⁷ Sandra Y. L. Korn, ‘The Doctrine of Academic Freedom: Let’s Give Up on Academic Freedom in Favour of Justice,’ *The Crimson*, February 18, 2014.

could never slip into functional totalitarianism. The seeds of this are present in cancel culture.¹⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

There is a profound sense in which CSJ provides a powerful and compelling narrative that many have found appealing not only for sociological, psychological, experiential reasons, but also for moral and spiritual ones. It unearths some of the fault-lines in modern society which no one – especially Christians – must ignore. It puts under the spotlight the experiences of victims and their feelings of trauma and oppression. It brings to light some of the injustices that are endemic in our society. However, as we have seen, the ideological lens which its proponents have fashioned through which they view and assess society is itself profoundly defective, thereby distorting their vision. By adopting a defective concept of justice, CSJ has ironically perpetuated the very thing it hopes to address and eradicate – injustice. CSJ has effectively done the same for the problem of racism it addresses: its jaundiced view of racism has made it more pronounced, ferocious and explosive. And with its peculiar conception of equity, diversity and inclusion, CSJ has not made society more united, but more polarised and conflictual instead.

Christians should not blindly acquiesce to or embrace the ideology of CSJ. Here, the warning issued by Scott Aniol, professor of Pastoral Theology at Grace Bible Theological Seminary, is especially pertinent.

No thoughtful Christian ... approves of true racism, injustice, or oppression when it exists. But ... by adopting these secular, leftist categories, which are rooted in ideologies explicitly intended to divide people, well-meaning Christians are making divides within Christianity and even broader society worse rather than better.¹⁵⁹

The Christian should not form their ideas about justice, racism and equality under the tutelage of ideologies such as cultural Marxism and CRT. Their understanding of these issues should instead be shaped by the inexhaustible resources found in Scripture. As Shenvi and Sawyer put it, 'The Bible offers us rich theological resources for thinking about race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and politics.'¹⁶⁰ Christians should also draw from the wealth of resources that can be found in the doctrinal, moral, and liturgical traditions of the Church based on over two millennia of reflection and appropriation of Scripture, her

¹⁵⁸ Shenvi and Sawyer, *Critical Dilemmas*, 461.

¹⁵⁹ Scott Aniol, 'What's Wrong with the Recent Evangelical "Social Justice" Movements?' *Christian Post*, September 3, 2018, <https://www.christianpost.com/voice/whats-wrong-with-the-recent-evangelical-social-justice-movements.html>.

¹⁶⁰ Shenvi and Sawyer, *Critical Dilemmas*, 477.

infallible source of authority for faith and life. It is through the lens of Scripture and the teachings of the Church that Christians should evaluate and critique the ideology of CSJ. It is on the basis of the teachings of the Bible and the Church that Christians should reject this ideology's assumptions and tenets. But it is not enough to just critique and reject this ideology. As Christians, called to be salt of the earth and light of the world, we must also lead the way forward by being the embodiment of the Gospel of grace and love. 'Churches have a chance to lead the way in terms of racial unity' write Shenvi and Sawyer, 'We can demonstrate God's love for the poor in tangible ways.'¹⁶¹

And finally, it is always important that in our critique of culture that we do not lose sight of the fact that we are merely called to be God's faithful but humble witnesses. As Shenvi and Sawyer have so eloquently and movingly pointed out,

Our job as Christians is to oppose contemporary critical theory in our generation, trusting the ultimate outcome to God. We should not aim to be culture warriors, but ambassadors for the Gospel (2 Corinthians 5:20), showing people that their ultimate problem is sin and that the ultimate solution is Jesus Christ. It is the gospel of the unmerited counter-conditional love of Jesus Christ that sends Christians out into the world to love the widow and the orphan, to defend the rights of the unborn, to feed the hungry, and to seek just laws. It is this gospel that creates the church, that transforms hearts, that changes actual oppressors into servants, and that breaks down the wall between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, Black, White, Hispanic, and Asian. May we keep this gospel pure and keep it central. Because if we lose the gospel, we lose everything.¹⁶²

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¹⁶¹ Ibid., 477.

¹⁶² Shenvi and Sawyer, *Critical Dilemmas*, 486.