

# CYNICAL THEORIES



*How Activist Scholarship Made Everything  
about Race, Gender, and Identity  
—and Why This Harms Everybody*

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## 5 CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND INTERSECTIONALITY



### *Ending Racism by Seeing It Everywhere*

Critical race Theory is, at root, an American phenomenon. So thoroughly is this the case that although its ideas have been used outside the United States for some time, they are often highly flavored by U.S. racial history. Critical race Theory holds that race is a social construct that was created to maintain white privilege and white supremacy. This idea originated long before postmodernism with W. E. B. Du Bois, who argued that the idea of race was being used to assert biological explanations of differences that are social and cultural, in order to perpetuate the unjust treatment of racial minorities, especially African Americans.

There are good reasons to accept this claim. Although some average differences in human populations—such as skin color, hair texture, eye shape, and relative susceptibility to certain diseases—are observably real, and an individual's geographical heritage can be discovered via DNA tests, it is not clear why this has been regarded as so significant as to divide people into groups called "races." For one thing, biologists don't. Biologists talk of populations, which can be identified through

genetic markers as having had slightly different evolutionary heritages, but reducing this to what we usually call "race" is so often wrong as to be nearly useless in practice. For example, in medicine, "race" is not very useful because socially constructed racial categories do not reliably map meaningfully onto more biologically relevant genetic lineages. For another thing, the contemporary idea of "race" doesn't stand up historically. There is compelling reason to believe that it was not considered significant in earlier periods. The Bible, for example, written over two thousand years ago in the Mediterranean, where black, brown, and white people were to be found, is filled with moralistic tribalism, but makes almost no mention of skin color. In late medieval England, references to "black" people often simply described the hair color of Europeans now regarded as "white."

While other factors may have contributed, race and racism as we understand them today probably arose as social constructions, made by Europeans to morally justify European colonialism and the Atlantic Slave Trade. European historians have tracked the rise of color-based prejudice over the early modern period, from roughly 1500 to 1800, and argued that prejudice on the grounds of religious difference gave way to racism—a belief in the superiority of some races over others—over the course of the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> In order to justify the abuses of colonialism and the kidnapping, exploitation, and abuse of slaves, their victims had to be regarded as inferior or subhuman (even if they had converted to Christianity). This raises a common point of confusion, because it is also undeniable that other peoples at other times practiced slavery, colonialism, and even genocidal imperialism, and they justified these atrocities similarly—by characterizing those they enslaved or conquered as inferior, often using characteristics like skin, hair, and eye color, which we might identify with race today. This sort of discrimination and even dehumanization was already widespread, but, in Europe and its colonies, a few key differences lead to a unique analysis.

Firstly, the concept of race was not consistently connected to *heritability* in Europe until the sixteenth century. Before then, it was generally assumed that traits like skin color were determined largely environmentally, rather than genetically, although the related concepts in ancient Greek (*genos*) and Latin (*genus*) along with records from the Chinese and

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elsewhere indicate that descent wasn't wholly neglected.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, the constructed ideas of race were specifically used to justify the atrocities of European colonialism and the Atlantic Slave Trade. Third—and perhaps most importantly—this was done by emerging forms of scholarship in what we would now call the social sciences and natural sciences although they had neither separated clearly into the disciplines we would now call “anthropology,” “sociology,” and “biology” nor formed what we would now consider rigorous methods.

This is important because naturalism and science were rapidly becoming a knowledge-production, thus idea-legitimizing, methodology the likes of which the world had never seen. It is the legitimizing authority of science that, ultimately, postmodernism rails against most vigorously. The rise of the sciences—and of an intellectual and political culture that accepted science as legitimate—together with the horrors of colonialism and the Atlantic Slave Trade, led to new social constructions of race. This, we hear from Theorists today, is the “scientific origin” of racism, which can be taken to mean that these discourses that misapplied very preliminary results from science allowed the first *socially constructivist racists* to come into existence. In other words, with this oversimplified, overreaching, and self-serving scientific categorization came social constructions associated with extremely low-resolution categories: being black (“blackness”) and being white (“whiteness”), to which value judgments were soon attached. Enter racism as we understand it today.

The earliest contributors to the effort to challenge the assumptions underlying racism were former American slaves, including Sojourner Truth<sup>3</sup> and Frederick Douglass,<sup>4</sup> in the nineteenth century. Later, in the twentieth century, influential race critics like W. E. B. Du Bois<sup>5</sup> and Winthrop Jordan<sup>6</sup> set out the history of color-based racism in the United States. The work of these scholars and reformers should have been sufficient to expose racism for the ugly and unfounded ideology that it is, but belief in the racial supremacy of whites survived nevertheless. This was especially extreme and long-lived in the American South, where slavery remained an essential part of the economy until Abraham Lincoln's emancipation of the slaves in 1863. Jim Crow laws, racial redlining, and legal segregation survived the longest, persisting into the mid-

1960s and, in some ways, beyond. Even after the victories of the Civil Rights Movement under Martin Luther King, Jr., when discrimination on the grounds of race became illegal and attitudes about race changed remarkably fast in historical terms, these longstanding narratives didn't disappear. Critical race Theory was designed to pick at, highlight, and address them.

### TAKING A CRITICAL APPROACH

Critical race Theory formally arose in the 1970s, through the critical study of law as it pertains to issues of race. The word *critical* here means that its intention and methods are specifically geared toward identifying and exposing problems in order to facilitate revolutionary political change. This was especially pertinent because, despite a series of profound but imperfect legal changes aimed at preventing racial discrimination, many activists felt a need to continue work on the racism that remained, which was less clearly demonstrable. To accomplish this, they turned to the tools of cultural criticism that were ascendant at the time. This meant adopting critical approaches and, eventually, Theory.

As a result, the critical race approach, like other methods of cultural criticism, has always been somewhat divided into at least two parts—one “materialist” and the other “postmodern”—which both set themselves apart from the liberal approach. As their designation implies, materialist race critics theorize about how material systems—economic, legal, political—affect racial minorities. Postmodern Theorists, by contrast, were more concerned with linguistic and social systems and therefore aimed to deconstruct discourses, detect implicit biases, and counter underlying racial assumptions and attitudes. Because of this fundamental difference in focus, some materialists have criticized postmodernists for conducting intangible and subjective discourse analyses, which usually take place in wealthy and academic milieus, while neglecting salient, widespread material issues, particularly poverty. Postmodernists have countered that, while material reality is of practical importance, it cannot be meaningfully improved while discourses continue to prioritize white people.

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Critical race theory in both incarnations, materialist and postmodern, reacted against liberalism and stresses a form of radicalism. As described by critical race Theorists Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic,

Unlike traditional civil rights discourse, which stresses 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.<sup>7</sup>

As Delgado and Stefancic further note,

[C]ritical race scholars are discontented with liberalism as a framework for addressing America's racial problems. Many liberals believe in color blindness and neutral principles of constitutional law. They believe in equality, especially equal treatment for all persons, regardless of their different histories or current situations.<sup>8</sup>

This is true—and the illiberal nature of critical race Theory is among the strongest and most enduring criticisms against it.

The late Derrick Bell, the first tenured African American professor at Harvard Law School, is often regarded as the progenitor of what we generally call critical race Theory, having derived the name by inserting race into his area of specialty: critical legal theory. Bell was a materialist, who is perhaps best known for having brought critical methods to bear on understanding civil rights and the discourses surrounding them. Bell was an open advocate of historical revisionism and is best known for his “interest convergence” thesis, described in his 1970 book, *Race, Racism, and American Law*.<sup>9</sup> This thesis holds that whites have allowed rights to blacks only when it was in their interest to do so—a dismal view that denies the possibility that any moral progress had been made since the Jim Crow era. This is no exaggeration of his intent; Bell states this explicitly in his 1987 book, *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice*<sup>10</sup>: “progress in American race relations is largely a mirage obscuring the fact that whites continue, consciously or unconsciously, to do all in their power to ensure their dominion and maintain their control.”<sup>11</sup> This

cynical pessimism pervades Bell's analysis. For instance, he also considered that white people had introduced desegregation, not as a solution to black people's problems, but to further their own interests while suppressing black radicalism during the Cold War (and at other times).<sup>12</sup> Because of his beliefs in a pervasive and irreparable system of white dominance in U.S. society,<sup>13</sup> he argued that such changes lead to a whole new raft of problems through which white superiority would continually assert itself over the interests of black people, for instance through white retaliation and white flight.<sup>14</sup> This was typical of the critical-race mood at the time. His contemporary, Alan Freeman, was similarly cynical and pessimistic, and wrote a number of legal papers arguing that antiracist legislation actually supported racism.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, simple legal equality between races is not sufficient to resolve all social inequalities. There is valuable work in addressing measurable imbalances in the political, legal, and economic realms, by comparing funding for schools in majority white and black areas, differences in sentencing of black and white offenders, disparities in housing and lending in black and white communities, differences in representations of black and white people in high-prestige jobs, with a view to learning why these disparities have come about. Nevertheless, there are plenty of general and liberal criticisms to be made of the materialist critical race theorists, in addition to their pessimism. The materialist critical race theorists frequently advocate Black Nationalism and segregation<sup>16</sup> over universal human rights and cooperation. Also, their supposedly empirical analyses of material reality, which usually find that racism and discrimination are not decreasing at all, can look a great deal like cherry-picking and generalizing from the worst examples.

Though the materialists' pessimism persisted, their approach did not. Materialists dominated the critical race movement from the 1970s to the 1980s; but, from the 1990s, postmodernists were increasingly in the ascendant. Over time, the postmodernists came to focus on microaggressions, hate speech, safe spaces, cultural appropriation, implicit association tests, media representation, "whiteness," and all the now familiar trappings of current racial discourse.<sup>17</sup> This change owes much to the influence of a number of female critical Theorists who gained prominence in the late 1980s and 1990s and promoted radical black

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feminist thought, including bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Patricia Hill Collins. These scholars were happy to blur the boundaries of scholarly disciplines, while arguing passionately about both patriarchy and white supremacy in ways that mixed the legal with the sociological, literary, and autobiographical in specifically gendered ways. Significantly, they complained at length about the “whiteness” of feminism. They thereby set the stage for another wave of influential Theorists: scholars like Patricia Williams, Angela Harris, and Kimberlé Crenshaw—a student of Bell who helped him create the term “Critical Race Theory.” These scholars drew on critical race Theory, which included class analysis, and on feminism, which incorporated ideas about gender and sexuality. This produced a highly layered, “sophisticated” analysis of identity and experience, which included social, legal, and economic factors. By looking at multiple systems of power and privilege and situating experience as a source of knowledge within them, they moved away from materialist analysis and towards the postmodern.

This change implied new commitments. Gone was the central focus on the material realities relevant to systemic and structural understandings of racism, especially poverty. This was replaced by analysis of discourse and power. At the same time, critical race Theory invested heavily in identity politics and its supposed intellectual justification, standpoint theory—roughly, the idea that one’s identity and position in society influence how one comes to knowledge. These developments, together with the blurring of boundaries and dissolution of the individual in favor of group identity, reveal the dominance of postmodern thought in critical race Theory by the early 1990s.

This shift is evident throughout writings from the time. For example, Patricia Williams, a professor of commercial law, is best known for her book-length autobiographical essay, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (1991).<sup>18</sup> Its publisher, Harvard University Press, describes it as operating at “the intersection of race, gender, and class” and evokes the blurring of boundaries so common to postmodern approaches, writing, “Williams casts the law as a mythological text in which the powers of commerce and the Constitution, wealth and poverty, sanity and insanity, wage war across complex and overlapping boundaries of discourse. In deliberately transgressing such boundaries, she pursues a path toward racial



justice that is, ultimately, transformative."<sup>19</sup> In the critical race Theory that emerged, we also see the focus on language and discourses and the need to disrupt them. There is, of course, validity to the applied post-modernist argument that it is much harder to rectify societal imbalances without first addressing prejudiced attitudes and assumptions, which, the Theorists rightly observe, often manifest in ways of speaking about things—discourses.

The best practical use of this recognition would be rigorous (rather than purely theoretical and interpretive) scholarship into social attitudes around race. For the applied postmodernists, however, the focus on discourses is primarily concerned with *positionality*—the idea that one's position within society, as determined by group identity, dictates how one understands the world and will be understood in it. This idea is central to critical race Theory, as is evident from the very first lines of *The Alchemy*: "[S]ubject position is everything in my analysis of the law," Williams writes. Then she articulates the importance of language and discourses and the need to disrupt them, by blurring the boundaries between meanings, legal and otherwise:

I am interested in the way in which legal language flattens and confines in absolutes the complexity of meaning inherent in any given problem; I am trying to challenge the usual limits of commercial discourse by using an intentionally double-voiced and relational, rather than a traditionally legal black-letter, vocabulary.<sup>20</sup>

The postmodern concept of a "positional" self—a socially constructed identity that occupies a particular location within the privilege/oppression landscape—is evident. Legal scholar Angela Harris develops this idea further by advocating a multiple-consciousness (standpoint) theory: "It is a premise of this article that we are not born with a 'self,' but rather are composed of a welter of partial, sometimes contradictory, or even antithetical 'selves.'"<sup>21</sup> This idea of a multiple consciousness, rooted in identity and positionality, recurs repeatedly in postmodern scholarship on the blending of differing layers of marginalized identity, and has had a huge impact on how knowledge is studied and understood within feminist scholarship and critical race Theory.

Despite the apparent complexity of constantly having to consider the impact of one's social position on being both a speaker and a knower and relating it to the social positions of those around you, critical race Theory is usually exceptionally clear in its exposition. Indeed, the frustratingly obscure and ambiguous postmodern language of postcolonial and queer Theories is conspicuously absent from critical race Theory, probably because of its genesis in legal studies. Critical race Theory maintains a commitment to the role of discourse in constructing social reality and addresses issues of apparently infinite complexity, but it does not usually despair of conveying meaning through clear language. It has a political purpose, which is not limited to deconstructing or disrupting metanarratives. It is therefore much easier to see what the tenets of critical race Theory are—not least because its scholars have a tendency to list them.

For example, the highly influential reader, *Critical Race Theory*, by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, sets out the core tenets thus:

“Racism is ordinary, not aberrational.” That is, it is the everyday experience of people of color in the United States.

“[A] system of white-over-color ascendancy serves important purposes, both psychic and material, for the dominant group.” That is, white supremacy is systemic and benefits white people. Therefore, “color-blind” policies can tackle only the most egregious and demonstrable forms of discrimination.

“[T]he ‘social construction’ thesis holds that race and races are products of social thought and relations.” Intersectionality and antiessentialism—opposition to the idea of racial difference as innate—are needed to address this.

A “unique voice of color” exists and “minority status . . . brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism.” This is not understood as essentialism but as the product of common experiences of oppression. In other words, this is standpoint theory.<sup>22</sup>

These core tenets unambiguously assert what is going on in critical race Theory—racism is present everywhere and always, and persistently works against people of color, who are aware of this, and for the benefit of white people, who tend not to be, as is their privilege.<sup>23</sup> Other Theorists and educators include a fundamental distrust of liberalism, a rejection of meritocracy,<sup>24</sup> and a commitment to working towards Social Justice.<sup>25</sup>

### THE SPREAD OF CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Critical race Theory has expanded out of legal studies and into many disciplines concerned with Social Justice. The theory of education (pedagogy) has been particularly strongly affected. As Delgado and Stefancic observe,

Although CRT [critical race Theory] began as a movement in the law, it has rapidly spread beyond that discipline. Today, many scholars in the field of education consider themselves critical race theorists who use CRT's ideas to understand issues of school discipline and hierarchy, tracking, affirmative action, high-stakes testing, controversies over curriculum and history, bilingual and multicultural education, and alternative and charter schools.<sup>26</sup>

They list critical race Theory's strongest footholds, indicating how effectively it can embed itself in other disciplines:

Political scientists ponder voting strategies coined by critical race theorists, while women's studies professors teach about intersectionality—the predicament of women of color and others who sit at the intersection of two or more categories. Ethnic studies courses often include a unit on critical race theory, and American studies departments teach material on critical white studies developed by CRT writers. Sociologists, theologians, and health care specialists use critical theory and its ideas. Philosophers

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incorporate critical race ideas in analyzing issues such as viewpoint discrimination and whether Western philosophy is inherently white in its orientation, values, and method of reasoning.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed. As we will discuss in chapter 8, critical race and feminist Theoretical approaches hold that reason is a Western philosophical tradition, which unfairly disadvantages women and racial minorities. Consequently, critical race Theory takes an unapologetically activist stance:

Unlike some academic disciplines, critical race theory contains an activist dimension. It tries not only to understand our social situation but to change it, setting out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies but to transform it for the better.<sup>28</sup>

As a result, we hear the language of critical race Theory from activists in all walks of life, and one could be easily forgiven—if critical race Theory didn't consider it racist to forgive this—for thinking that critical race Theory sounds rather racist itself, in ascribing profound failures of morals and character to white people (as consequences of being white in a white-dominant society). We are told that racism is embedded in culture and that we cannot escape it. We hear that white people are inherently racist. We are told that racism is “prejudice plus power,” therefore, only white people can be racist. We are informed that only people of color can talk about racism, that white people need to just listen, and that they don't have the “racial stamina” to engage it. We hear that not seeing people in terms of their race (being color-blind) is, in fact, racist and an attempt to ignore the pervasive racism that dominates society and perpetuates white privilege. We can hear these mantras in many spheres of life, but they are particularly prevalent on college campuses. Delgado and Stefancic regard this as positive:

As this book went to press, students on several dozen campuses were demonstrating for “safe spaces” and protection from racially hostile climates with daily insults, epithets, slurs, and displays of Confederate symbols and flags. These “campus climate” issues are

prompting serious reconsideration among university administrators, and for good reason. With affirmative action under sharp attack, universities need to assure that their campuses are as welcoming as possible. At the same time, a new generation of millennials seems to be demonstrating a renewed willingness to confront illegitimate authority.<sup>29</sup>

Critical race Theory has become very much a part of campus culture in many universities and, interestingly, is most evident at the most elite institutions. Intersectionality is central to this culture and has also taken on a life of its own outside it.

### CRITICAL RACE THEORY AS APPLIED POSTMODERNISM

Despite its increasingly postmodern focus on discourses, attitudes, and bias, some scholars have doubted whether this branch of critical race Theory is truly postmodern. One common objection is that postmodernism typically rejected shared meaning and stable identity (or subjecthood). Therefore, identity politics should make little sense from an orthodox postmodern perspective.

Critics making this argument have a point, and are within their rights to insist on only recognizing the first postmodernists as "true" postmodernists, but it is nevertheless true that, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, critical race Theorists took some core postmodern ideas from the radically deconstructive first phase and adapted them to a new, intentionally politically applicable project. The new critical race Theorists explicitly rejected the endless, aimless deconstruction of original postmodernism, often seeing it as a product of the naturally privileged status of white male philosophers like Foucault and Derrida, who failed to account for their privileged positions as white men. The black feminist scholar and activist bell hooks, for example, wrote in the 1980s that the people who wanted to get rid of subjecthood and coherent voices (the original postmodernists) were wealthy, white men, whose voices had been heard and whose identity was dominant in society.<sup>30</sup> In her influential 1990 essay, "Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory," Angela Harris like-

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wise argues that feminism failed black women by treating their experience as simply a variation on white women's experience. These ideas developed into a core line of thought in critical race Theory that was instrumental to the development of *intersectionality*.

## INTERSECTIONALITY

The critical race scholar who references postmodernism most explicitly in her work and who most clearly advocates for a more politicized and actionable use of it is Kimberlé Crenshaw, a founder of critical race Theory and the progenitor of the concept of *intersectionality*. Intersectionality began as a heuristic—a tool that lets someone discover something for themselves—but has long been treated as a theory and is now described by Crenshaw as a “practice.” Crenshaw first introduced the idea of intersectionality in a polemical 1989 scholarly law paper called “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.”<sup>31</sup> There, she examines three legal discrimination cases and uses the metaphor of a roadway intersection to examine the ways in which different forms of prejudice can “hit” an individual with two or more marginalized identities. She argues that—just as someone standing in the intersection of two streets could get hit by a car coming from any direction or even by more than one at a time—so a marginalized person could be unable to tell which of their identities is being discriminated against in any given instance. Crenshaw argues persuasively that legislation to prevent discrimination on the grounds of race *or* gender is insufficient to deal with this problem or with the fact that a black woman, for instance, might experience unique forms of discrimination that neither white women nor black men face.

This poignant, though seemingly relatively uncontroversial, idea was about to change the world. It was more fully articulated two years later, in Crenshaw's highly influential 1991 essay, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” in which she defines intersectionality as a “provisional concept linking contemporary politics with postmodern theory.”<sup>32</sup> For Crenshaw, a post-

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modern approach to intersectionality allowed both critical race Theory and feminism to incorporate political activism while retaining their understandings of race and gender as cultural constructs. Furthermore, this Theoretical approach allowed for ever more categories of marginalized identity to be incorporated into intersectional analyses, adding layer upon layer of apparent sophistication and complexity to the concept, and the scholarship and activism that utilizes it. This Theoretical complexity, which Patricia Hill Collins dubbed the “matrix of domination” in her 1990 book *Black Feminist Thought*,<sup>33</sup> spurred two decades of fresh activity by scholars and activists. “Mapping the Margins” provided the means: openly advocating identity politics over liberal universalism, which had sought to remove the social significance of identity categories and treat people equally regardless of identity. Identity politics restores the social significance of identity categories in order to valorize them as sources of empowerment and community. Crenshaw writes:

We all can recognize the distinction between the claims “I am Black” and the claim “I am a person who happens to be Black.” “I am Black” takes the socially imposed identity and empowers it as an anchor of subjectivity. “I am Black” becomes not simply a statement of resistance but also a positive discourse of self-identification, intimately linked to celebratory statements like the Black nationalist “Black is beautiful.” “I am a person who happens to be Black,” on the other hand, achieves self-identification by straining for a certain universality (in effect, “I am first a person”) and for a concomitant dismissal of the imposed category (“Black”) as contingent, circumstantial, nondeterminant.<sup>34</sup>

In its return to the social significance of race and gender and the empowerment of black and female identity politics, “Mapping the Margins” can be considered central and foundational to Social Justice as it is practiced and studied today. It also revitalized the conditions under which socially constructivist racism takes hold—the reification of socially constructed racial categories—after decades of chipping away by liberal approaches. It thereby laid the groundwork for the “strategic racism” that has come to characterize the racial dimension of Social Justice

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scholarship in recent years, which will be discussed further in chapter 8. Because intersectionality has become such an important framework within Social Justice scholarship and within the recent explicit rejection of liberal universalism in favor of identity-based politics, it is worth looking at its foundational tenets in more depth. By drawing on postmodern cultural constructivism, while considering oppression objectively real and advocating actionable political goals, it also provides the clearest example of the emergence, imperative, method, and ethos of applied postmodernism, and is paradigmatic of the applied postmodern turn of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

### INTERSECTIONALITY AND THE APPLIED POSTMODERN TURN

In "Mapping the Margins," Crenshaw critiques two ways of understanding society: (universal) liberalism and (high-deconstructive) postmodernism. Mainstream liberal discourse around discrimination, Crenshaw felt, was inadequate to understand the ways in which structures of power perpetuated discrimination against people with more than one category of marginalized identity. Because liberalism sought to remove social expectations from identity categories—black people being expected to do menial jobs, women being expected to prioritize domestic and parenting roles, and so on—and make all rights, freedoms, and opportunities available to all people *regardless* of their identity, there was a strong focus on the individual and the universal and a deprioritization of identity categories. This was, to Crenshaw, unacceptable. She writes,

[For] African Americans, other people of color, and gays and lesbians, among others . . . identity-based politics has been a source of strength, community, and intellectual development. The embrace of identity politics, however, has been in tension with dominant conceptions of social justice. Race, gender, and other identity categories are most often treated in mainstream liberal discourse as vestiges of bias or domination—that is, as intrinsically negative frameworks in which social power works to exclude or marginalize those who are different. According to this



understanding, our liberatory objective should be to empty such categories of any social significance. Yet implicit in certain strands of feminist and racial liberation movements, for example is the view that the social power in delineating difference need not be the power of domination; it can instead be the source of social empowerment and reconstruction.<sup>35</sup>

Crenshaw is initiating a major change here. At the height of its deconstructive phase, postmodernism enabled the analysis of power structures and usefully (in Crenshaw's view) understood race and gender as social constructs. However, because of its radical skepticism, it did not allow for the reality of those social structures and categories that it is essential to acknowledge if one wishes to address discrimination on those grounds. She therefore criticizes that aspect of radically deconstructive postmodernism, while insisting that the postmodern political principle is otherwise cogent:

While the descriptive project of postmodernism of questioning the ways in which meaning is socially constructed is generally sound, this critique sometimes misreads the meaning of social construction and distorts its political relevance. . . . But to say that a category such as race or gender is socially constructed is not to say that that category has no significance in our world. On the contrary, a large and continuing project for subordinated people—and indeed, one of the projects for which postmodern theories have been very helpful—is thinking about the way power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, in the early 1990s, Crenshaw proposed that an entirely new way of thinking was required, one that accepted that complex layers of discrimination objectively exist and so do categories of people and systems of power—even if they have been socially constructed. This is intersectionality. It explicitly embraces the postmodern political principle and accepts a variant on the postmodern knowledge principle—one that sees knowledge as positional. Crenshaw's intersectionality explicitly rejected universality in favor of group identity, at least in the political

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context in which she wrote, and intersectional feminists and critical race Theorists have largely continued to do so ever since.<sup>37</sup>

Within this framework, far from being irrelevant socially—as in liberalism—gender and race have become sites of renewed political activism, and identity politics is in the ascendant. Intersectionality is the axis upon which the applied postmodern turn rotated and the seed that would germinate as Social Justice scholarship some twenty years later. It is therefore important to understand intersectionality and the ways in which it preserved the postmodern principles and themes, while making actionable use of them.

### COMPLEX, YET SO VERY SIMPLE

Since its conception, the meaning and purpose of intersectionality have expanded hugely. For intersectional sociologists Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge,

Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves.<sup>38</sup>

The number of axes of social division under intersectionality can be almost infinite—but they cannot be reduced to the *individual*. (People often joke that the individual is the logical endpoint of an intersectional approach that divides people into smaller and smaller groups—but this misunderstands the fundamental reliance on *group identity*. Even if a person were a unique mix of marginalized identities, thus intersectionally

a unique individual, she would be understood through each and all of those group identities, with the details to be filled in by Theory. She would not be understood as an individual.) Consequently, the categories in which intersectionality is interested are numerous. In addition to those of race, sex, class, sexuality, gender identity, religion, immigration status, physical ability, mental health, and body size, there are subcategories, such as exact skin tone, body shape, and abstruse gender identities and sexualities, which number in the hundreds. These all have to be understood in relation to one another so that the positionality each intersection of them confers can be identified and engaged. Moreover, this doesn't just make intersectionality incredibly internally complex. It is also messy because it is so highly interpretive and operates on so many elements of identity simultaneously, each of which has different claims to a relative degree of marginalization, not all of which are directly comparable.

However, there is nothing complex about the overarching idea of intersectionality, or the Theories upon which it is built. Nothing could be simpler. It does the same thing over and over again: look for the power imbalances, bigotry, and biases that it assumes must be present and pick at them. It reduces *everything* to one single variable, one single topic of conversation, one single focus and interpretation: prejudice, as understood under the power dynamics asserted by Theory. Thus, for example, disparate outcomes can have one, and only one, explanation, and it is prejudicial bigotry. The question is just identifying how it manifests in the given situation. Thus, it always assumes that, in every situation, some form of Theoretical prejudice exists and we must find a way to show evidence of it. In that sense, it is a tool—a “practice”—designed to flatten all complexity and nuance so that it can promote identity politics, in accordance with its vision.

### THE CASTE SYSTEM OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Because of its internal complexity and single-minded focus on oppression, intersectionality is riddled with divisions and subcategories, which exist in competition with—or even in unrepentant contradiction to—each other. Some people in the United States therefore argue that gay

white men<sup>39</sup> and non-ginalized groups—ne This can lead to the ir their privilege over ( have been described not uncommon to h by attitudes towards ascended to male p who are seen as doubl men and lesbians m at all, particularly if respectively, which i ing.<sup>44</sup> Asians and Je status due to the co their participation i be decolonized—m tual origins in white

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white men<sup>39</sup> and nonblack people of color—generally assessed as marginalized groups—need to recognize their privilege and antiblackness.<sup>40</sup> This can lead to the insistence that lighter-skinned black people recognize their privilege over darker-skinned black people.<sup>41</sup> Straight black men have been described as the “white people of black people.”<sup>42</sup> It is also not uncommon to hear arguments that trans men, while still oppressed by attitudes towards their trans status, need to recognize that they have ascended to male privilege<sup>43</sup> and amplify the voices of trans women, who are seen as doubly oppressed, by being both trans and women. Gay men and lesbians might well find themselves not considered oppressed at all, particularly if they are not attracted to trans men or trans women, respectively, which is considered a form of transphobia and misgendering.<sup>44</sup> Asians and Jews may find themselves stripped of marginalized status due to the comparative economic success of their demographics, their participation in “whiteness,” or other factors.<sup>45</sup> Queerness needs to be decolonized—meaning made more racially diverse—and its conceptual origins in white figures like Judith Butler need to be interrogated.<sup>46</sup>

In the real world, attempting to “respect” all marginalized identities at once, as unique voices with the inherent, unquestionable wisdom connected to their cultural groups, can produce conflict and contradiction. We saw examples of this when the lifelong human rights campaigner Peter Tatchell was accused of racism for criticizing black rap musicians who sang about murdering gay people.<sup>47</sup> It appeared again in the confusion and conflict about whom to support when ethnic minority beauticians essentially misgendered a person claiming to be a trans woman by declining to wax around her testicles on the grounds that their religion and customs prohibited contact with male genitalia.<sup>48</sup>

All this “sophistication” keeps intersectionalists busy, internally argumentative, and divided, but it is all done in the service of uniting the various Theoretically oppressed groups into a single meta-group, “oppressed” or “other,” under an overarching metanarrative of *Social Justice*, which seeks to establish a caste system based on Theorized states of oppression. Social Justice in the contemporary sense is therefore markedly different from the activism for universal human rights that characterized the civil rights movements.<sup>49</sup> These liberal, egalitarian approaches sought and seek to equalize opportunities by criminalizing discrimina-

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tion, remedying disenfranchisement, and defeating bigotry by making prejudice on the grounds of immutable characteristics socially unacceptable. They thus provide an achievable goal for the well-meaning liberal individual: treat people equally regardless of their identity. The Social Justice approach regards this as, at best, naivety about the reality of a deeply prejudiced society, and, at worst, a willful refusal to acknowledge that we live in that kind of society. Consequently, the only way to be a virtuous person under Social Justice is to assume that these power imbalances and prejudices exist everywhere at all times, masked by the egalitarian false-promises of liberalism, and assiduously seek them out, using the right kind of Theoretical analysis. For Collins and Bilge,

Social justice may be intersectionality's most contentious core idea, but it is one that expands the circle of intersectionality to include people who use intersectionality as an analytic tool for social justice. Working for social justice is not a requirement for intersectionality. Yet people who are engaged in using intersectionality as an analytic tool and people who see social justice as central rather than as peripheral to their lives are often one and the same. These people are typically critical of, rather than accepting of, the status quo.<sup>50</sup>

This is echoed by Rebecca Lind, who defines intersectionality as “a multifaceted perspective acknowledging the richness of the multiple, socially-constructed identities that combine to create each of us as a unique individual.”<sup>51</sup> However, by this method, the “unique individual” is not really understood as an individual at all. As noted, the number of axes of social division under intersectionality can be almost infinite—but they cannot be reduced to the *individual*. Theory insists that only by understanding the various groups and the social constructions around those groups can one truly understand society, people, and their experiences. This conceptual shift facilitates group identity and thus identity politics, which are often radical.

Because of intersectionality's sheer versatility as a tool, it appeals to those involved in many different forms of engagement, ranging from legal activism and academic analysis to affirmative action and educational theory.<sup>52</sup> Mainstream activism has also eagerly embraced intersectional-

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ity—especially its concept of *privilege*, an idea that is vigorously insisted upon, often to the point of bullying and browbeating.

### THE MEME OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

The expansion of intersectionality's sphere of influence has been considerable and perhaps unavoidable. Ange-Marie Hancock, in her book about the intellectual history of intersectionality, remarks on its growing popularity in both the intellectual and academic realms and as a kind of meme, noting that there are many different definitions and conceptualizations of intersectionality available online.<sup>53</sup> Hancock writes, "As a result, intersectionality as an analytical framework is in the process of reaching maximal salience across academe, the nonprofit sector (including global philanthropy), and politics."<sup>54</sup> In popular culture, Hancock notes, intersectionality is often evoked to *cancel* people, and public figures as diverse as Michelle Obama and the feminist group Code Pink have been criticized for failing "to understand and act from a place deeply cognizant of the multicategory dynamics of power at play."<sup>55</sup> Applying critical race Theory, Hancock argues that the mainstreaming of intersectionality is itself problematic because it whitens and "memeifies" intersectionality. For Hancock, the danger of "whitening" intersectionality and taking it away from the experiences of black women<sup>56</sup> happens at all levels, whether by tracing the concept back to (white male) Foucault or expanding it to encompass myriad forms of simplified cultural critique, which she belittles as "memeifying."<sup>57</sup>

As Hancock notes, intersectionality has gone viral and has rapidly taken on new and unexpected applications—especially in activism—many of which are justified by the academic literature on the subject. In 2017, Crenshaw herself observed that intersectionality had both expanded beyond her intended scope and also become a way of talking about complicated intersections of marginalized identity, rather than doing anything to alleviate oppression.<sup>58</sup> Thus, in addition to the confusion that stems from its highly interpretive Theoretical approach, which is rooted in the postmodern principles and themes we've outlined, critical race Theory and intersectionality are characterized by a great deal

of divisiveness, pessimism, and cynicism. The beliefs that the decline in racist attitudes has largely been a mirage and that white people only allow people of color rights and opportunities when it is in their interest to do so can produce profound paranoia and hostility, especially among activists, on college campuses, and within competitive workplace environments. These feelings occasionally erupt, fracturing institutions from within, especially when well-meaning people, who don't want to incessantly defend themselves against accusations of racism and white supremacy, either submit to, retreat from, or avoid these situations.<sup>59</sup>

Critical race Theory's hallmark paranoid mind-set, which assumes racism is everywhere, always, just waiting to be found, is extremely unlikely to be helpful or healthy for those who adopt it. Always believing that one will be or is being discriminated against, and trying to find out how, is unlikely to improve the outcome of any situation. It can also be self-defeating. In *The Coddling of the American Mind*, attorney Greg Lukianoff and social psychologist Jonathan Haidt describe this process as a kind of reverse cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), which makes its participants *less* mentally and emotionally healthy than before.<sup>60</sup> The main purpose of CBT is to train oneself *not* to catastrophize and interpret every situation in the most negative light, and the goal is to develop a more positive and resilient attitude towards the world, so that one can engage with it as fully as possible. If we train young people to read insult, hostility, and prejudice into every interaction, they may increasingly see the world as hostile to them and fail to thrive in it.

### NOBLE ENDS, TERRIBLE MEANS

Critical race Theory and intersectionality are centrally concerned with ending racism, through the unlikely means of making everyone more aware of race at all times and places. They proceed upon an assumption that racism is normal and permanent, and the problem is primarily that people—particularly white people—are failing to see, acknowledge, and address it. As scholar-activists Heather Bruce, Robin DiAngelo, Gyda Swaney (Salish), and Amie Thurber put it at the influential National Race and Pedagogy Conference at Puget Sound University in 2015,<sup>61</sup>

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“The question is not ‘Did racism take place?’ for that is to be assumed, ‘but rather ‘How did racism manifest in that situation?’” That is, we are to assume that racism is always taking place and our job is to examine situations for evidence of it. This follows from the beliefs that “all members of society are socialized to participate in the system of racism, albeit in varied social locations,” and that “all white people benefit from racism regardless of intentions.”<sup>62</sup> These quintessentially critical-race claims prompt some familiar Theoretical imperatives: “Racism must be continually identified, analysed, and challenged. No one is ever done,” and “The racial status quo is comfortable for most whites. Therefore, anything that maintains white comfort is suspect.” Moreover, “Resistance is a predictable reaction to anti-racist education and must be explicitly and strategically addressed.”<sup>63</sup>

The core problems with critical race Theory are that it puts social significance back into racial categories and inflames racism, tends to be purely Theoretical, uses the postmodern knowledge and political principles, is profoundly aggressive, asserts its relevance to all aspects of Social Justice, and—not least—begins from the assumption that racism is both ordinary and permanent, everywhere and always. Consequently, every interaction between a person with a dominant racial identity and one with a marginalized one must be characterized by a power imbalance (the postmodern political principle). The job of the Theorist or activist is to draw attention to this imbalance—often described as racism or white supremacy—in order to begin dismantling it. It also sees racism as omnipresent and eternal, which grants it a mythological status, like sin or depravity.<sup>64</sup> Because the member of the marginalized racial group is said to have a unique voice and a counternarrative that, under Theory, *must* be regarded as authoritative to the degree that it is Theoretically “authentic” (the postmodern knowledge principle), there is no real way to dispute her reading of the situation. Therefore, everything the marginalized individual interprets as racism is considered racism by default—an episteme that encourages confirmation bias and leaves wide open the door to the unscrupulous. In scholarship, this leads to theories built only upon theories (and upon Theory), and no real means of testing or falsifying them. Meanwhile, adherents actively search for hidden and overt racial offenses until they find them, and they allow of no al-



ternative or mitigating explanations—racism is not only permanently everywhere and latent in systems; it is also utterly unforgivable. This can lead to mob outrage and public shamings, and it tends to focus all our attention on racial politics, which inevitably become increasingly sensitive and fraught.

In addition, interpreting everything as racist and saying so almost constantly is unlikely to produce the desired results in white people (or for minorities). It could even undermine antiracist activism by creating skepticism and indignation and thus producing a reluctance to cooperate with worthwhile initiatives to overcome racism. Some studies have already shown that diversity courses, in which members of dominant groups are told that racism is everywhere and that they themselves perpetuate it, have resulted in increased hostility towards marginalized groups.<sup>65</sup> It is bad psychology to tell people who do not believe that they are racist—who may even actively despise racism—that there is nothing they can do to stop themselves from being racist—and then ask them to help you. It is even less helpful to tell them that even their own good intentions are proof of their latent racism. Worst of all is to set up double-binds, like telling them that if they notice race it is because they are racist, but if they don't notice race it's because their privilege affords them the luxury of not noticing race, which is racist. Finally, by focusing so intently on race and by objecting to "color blindness"—the refusal to attach social significance to race—critical race Theory threatens to undo the social taboo against evaluating people by their race. Such an obsessive focus on race, combined with a critique of liberal universalism and individuality (which Theory sees as largely a myth that benefits white people and perpetuates the status quo), is not likely to end well—neither for minority groups nor for social cohesion more broadly. Such attitudes tear at the fabric that holds contemporary societies together.

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