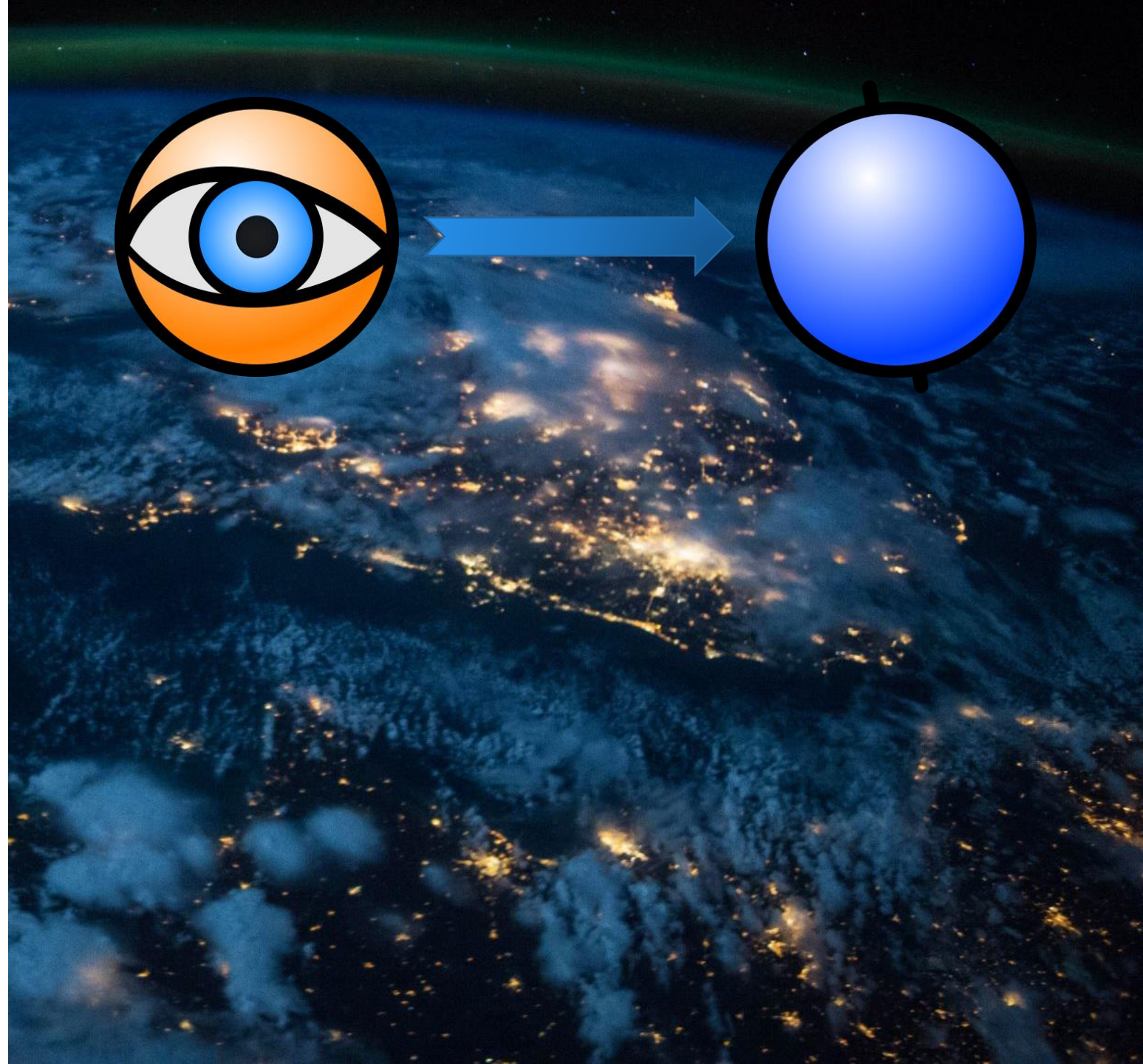# COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL WITH OTHER WORLDVIEWS

Critical Theory / Identity Politics

OVERVIEW

- What is Critical Theory?

- History

- On Origins

- On our Problem

- On the Solution

- Comparison with Christianity

- Ideas for engagement

WHAT IS CRITICAL THEORY?

And what is Identity Politics?

"CRITICAL THEORY" ACCORDING TO WIKIPEDIA

Critical theory is an approach to social philosophy which focuses on providing a reflective assessment and critique of society and culture in order to reveal and challenge power structures. With origins in sociology, as well as in literary criticism, it argues that social problems are influenced and created more by societal structures and cultural assumptions than by individual and psychological factors. Maintaining that ideology is the principal obstacle to human liberation, critical theory was established as a school of thought primarily by the Frankfurt School theoreticians Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, and Max Horkheimer. Horkheimer described a theory as critical insofar as it seeks "to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them."

"IDENTITY POLITICS" ACCORDING TO WIKIPEDIA

Identity politics is a term that describes a political approach wherein people of a particular religion, race, social background, class or other identifying factor develop political agendas and organize based upon the interlocking systems of oppression that affect their lives and come from their various identities. Identity politics centers the lived experiences of those facing various systems of oppression to better understand the ways in which racial, economic, gender, and other forms of oppression are linked and to ensure that political agendas and political actions arising out of identity politics leave no one within that group behind.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CRITICAL THEORY & IDENTITY POLITICS

- Identity politics is the primary, current application of critical theory

- NOTE: when we talk about "critical theory" here, we are talking about "contemporary critical theory," the postmodernist form, not the modernist form.

"CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL THEORY"

Contemporary critical theory, which we'll distinguish from the critical tradition as a whole (see below), divides the world into oppressed groups and their oppressors along lines of race, class, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical ability, age, weight, and a host of other identity markers. The central goal of contemporary critical theorists is to work for the liberation of oppressed groups: "Critical theory research critiques historical and structural conditions of oppression and seeks transformation of those conditions." Critical theorists pursue this liberatory work in part by deconstructing hegemonic narratives, which are stories, discourses, and accounts that oppressor groups offer to justify their dominance in society.

—*Engaging Critical Theory and the Social Justice Movement*, Dr. Neil Shenvi & Dr. Pat Sawyer, p. 2

CORE IDEAS OF CRITICAL THEORY

1. Individual identity is inseparable from group identity as "oppressed" or "oppressor."

2. Oppressor groups subjugate oppressed groups through the exercise of hegemonic power.

3. Different oppressed groups find solidarity in the experience of oppression.

4. Our fundamental moral duty is freeing groups from oppression.

5. "Lived experience" is more important than objective evidence in understanding oppression.

6. Oppressor groups hide their oppression under the guise of objectivity.

7. Individuals at the intersection of different oppressed groups experience oppression in a unique way (i.e., intersectionality).

EXAMPLES OF CRITICAL THEORY IN ACTION

- Fourth-wave feminism

- #MeToo

- Black Lives Matter

- White Privilege

- Cancel Culture

Matrix of Oppression

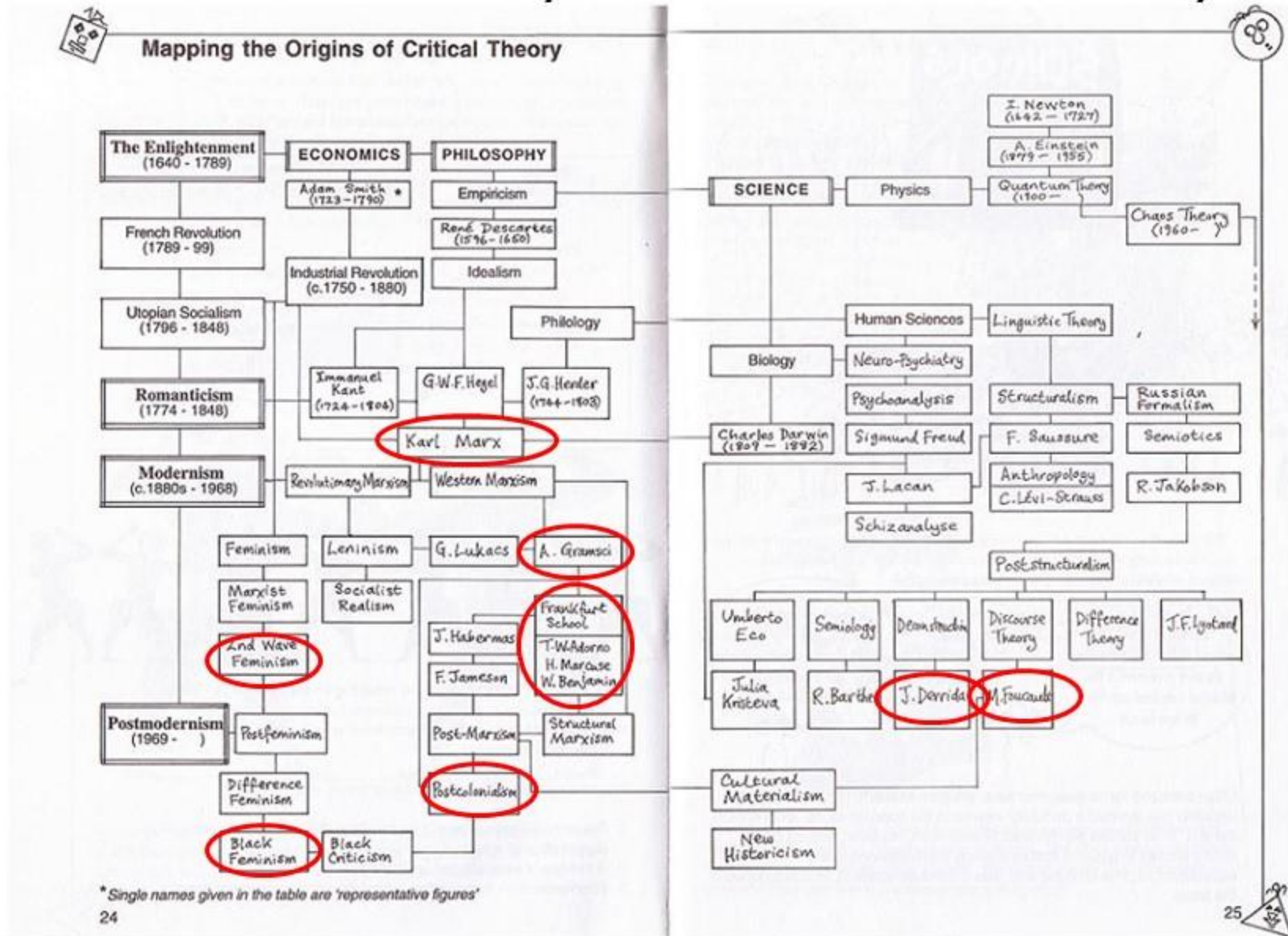| Social Identity Categories	Privileged Social Groups	Border Social Groups ↔	Targeted Social Groups	Ism
Race	White People	Biracial People (White/Latino, Black, Asian)	Asian, Black, Latino, Native People	Racism
Sex	Bio Men	Transsexual, Intersex People	Bio Women	Sexism
Gender	Gender Conforming Bio Men And Women	Gender Ambiguous Bio Men and Women	Transgender, Genderqueer, Intersex People	Transgender Oppression
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual People	Bisexual People	Lesbians, Gay Men	Heterosexism
Class	Rich, Upper Class People	Middle Class People	Working Class, Poor People	Classism
Ability/Disability	Temporarily Abled-Bodied People	People with Temporary Disabilities	People with Disabilities	Ableism
Religion	Protestants	Roman Catholic (historically)	Jews, Muslims, Hindus	Religious Oppression
Age	Adults	Young Adults	Elders, Young People	Ageism/Adultism

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HISTORY

Critical Theory

The Taxonomy of Critical Theory

Sim and Van Loon, Introducing Critical Theory, p. 24-25

KEY HISTORICAL IDEAS

- Marxism: class warfare/revolution

- Post-modernism: language as exercise of power

ON ORIGINS

Critical Theory

SOCIAL EVOLUTION

- Human beings evolved as social creatures
  - Language & society evolved as exercise of power

- Oppressed groups must use whatever social power available to overturn oppressors

ON OUR PROBLEM

Critical Theory

OPPRESSION

- Oppressor groups have used historic advantage to oppress victim/oppressed groups

- All an individual's problems can be traced directly to their position in a one or more oppressed groups

- Examples:
  - Women are victims of sexism in the workplace, regardless of their own choices (Fourth wave feminism, as expressed on last week's 4 Corners, etc.)
  - Women are victims of sexual exploitation and must be believed regardless of their character or actions (#MeToo)
  - Blacks are victims of racism regardless of their lived experience (Black Lives Matter)
  - Whites are racist regardless of their actual beliefs or actions (White Privilege)

ON THE SOLUTION

Critical Theory

REVOLUTION

- Social revolution required because oppressor groups must be removed from power
  - No such thing as an "innocent" member of an oppressor group

- Examples:
  - #MeToo strips men of "power" regardless of their guilt (women must be believed)
  - Black Lives Matter overturns society, even if it damages Black lives in the process
  - Cancel Culture removes author/creator's works because of political incorrectness (i.e. using the wrong form of speech, which, remember, is power)

COMPARISON

Between Critical Theory and Christianity

Issue	Critical Theory	Christianity
Identity	An undifferentiated member of an oppressor or oppressed group/class	As an individual with a history (Ps 139)
Agency (ability to act)	As a revolutionary or oppressor acting on behalf of the group	Full agency (Deut 30:19)
Knowledge	Viewpoint dependant, oppressor always distorted	All viewpoints distorted unless set free by Christ (Rom 1:18-23)
Freedom	Valued, achieved by overturning oppressor class	Valued, achieved by accepting Christ's sacrifice for our sin (Jn 8:32)
Sin	The oppression of another class	An individual rebellion against God (usually with negative impacts on self and others, includes genuine oppression and injustice) (Jm 4:17)
Race	A radical divider of people	A difference that can be celebrated but does not define negatively or positively (Rev 21:24-26)
Speech	An exercise of power over another	An attempt at communication (sharing of minds)
Authorities	Traditional hegemonic powers (to be overturned)	Imperfect humans God has given authority to (Rom 13:1-7)
Literature	Reader-centred hermeneutic	Author-recipient-centred hermeneutic (Mt 19:3-9)
Beauty	A subjective opportunity for a power play	Reflection of God's own beauty
Science	A hegemonic power play	"Thinking God's thoughts after Him"
Religion	A hegemonic power play	Mankind's attempt to find ultimate meaning
Marriage (traditional)	Means of oppression by the patriarchy (bar SSM)	Reflection of Christ's relationship to the church (Eph 5:22-33)

POSITIVE ASPECTS OF CRITICAL THEORY (FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE)

- Oppression is a sin

- Power can corrupt our perception of reality (but everyone has power over their own lives)

- Hegemonic power is a genuine phenomenon

- Racism (and many other "isms") are genuine evils (however, prejudice is the problem, not discrimination)

  - Discrimination recognises genuine differences, prejudice ignores crucial commonalities

ENGAGING WITH DEVOTEES OF CRITICAL THEORY

Critical Theory and the Gospel

GENERAL APPROACH

- Devotees of Critical Theory are thoroughly postmodern
  - Skeptical of authority claims and metanaratives (e.g. Scripture)
  - Don't accept objective truth (e.g. history, science, etc.)
  - Do respond to personal stories (e.g. personal testimony)

- Are human beings
  - Feel frustrations of lack of agency allowed by Critical Theory
  - Can care for individuals belonging to another class (e.g. oppressor class)
  - Desire freedom (but think it is achieved through revolution)

- Thus open to love, and relationship evangelism focusing on true justice and identity

RESOURCES

List of resources: https://shenviapologetics.com/intro-to-critical-theory/

Podcast intro: https://www.biola.edu/blogs/think-biblically/2020/critical-race-theory

Interesting Articles:

https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/critical-theory-and-christian-ethics/

https://freethinkingministries.com/critical-theory-vs-critical-thinking/

https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/a-biblical-critique-of-secular-justice-and-critical-theory/

PRAY FOR DEVOTEES OF CRITICAL THEORY

Pray for release from the lies of the accuser