

Critical Race Theory and the 'Hyper-White' Jew



IMAGINE you've just been accepted to college. You open your welcome packet. It contains the bestseller all first-year students are expected to read: Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility*. You flip to a random page and read, "Only whites can be racist." You flip to another page where you read that to deny being racist is itself evidence of "white fragility." You wonder what you're supposed to do in order to not have "white fragility."

You dutifully read the book.

Your first day arrives. You decorate your room with pictures. Your favorite is the one of you and your extended family in Israel when you were little. Your cousins live in Tel Aviv and you love visiting them. You hang a *hamsa* above your desk. Your roommate seems nice.

The theme of orientation is "Campus Inclusion." The first thing you learn about is "microaggressions." The associate dean of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion explains that perpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware of the harm they're causing.

They can even have good intentions. But as the handout says, "almost all interracial encounters are prone to microaggressions."

You were looking forward to meeting people from different backgrounds. You didn't realize it would be so fraught—you don't want to perpetrate anything. It never would have occurred to you that asking someone where he's from could be a microaggression. Or that saying "I believe the most qualified person should get the job" is. Even saying "America is a melting pot" is on the list.

You cringe when you read that it's a microaggression to say "there is only one race, the human race." That's something your grandmother always says. Her father, who survived several concentration camps, used to say that, too. They aren't racist. But according to the list, it's also a microaggression to *deny* being racist.

You wonder whether it's a microaggression to deny being anti-semitic. You look on the list for examples of microaggressions against Jews. There aren't any.

In your second year, you attend a campus protest against systemic racism. You hear from the Asian American and Pacific Islander Student Union, the Latinx Student Union, the LGBTQIA+ Alliance, the Black Student Union, and the leaders of student government. All of them reiterate in various ways that any system with unequal outcomes is a "white supremacist" system. "We're either racist or antiracist," says Sandra, the president of the student government. She adds, quoting this year's summer reading for all students, Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist*: "The claim of 'not racist' neutrality is a mask for racism."

You're against racism. Now saying you're "not racist" is not only a microaggression and evidence of white fragility, but is itself racist? It makes your head spin. In any case, you know how evil white supremacy is. Your great-grandparents were unambiguous victims of it. Your grandmother was born in a displaced-persons camp, and most of her extended family were murdered by the Nazis.

"Denial is the heartbeat of racism," Sandra says before closing, again quoting Kendi. She adds something about being a true

“ally” and antiracist, accepting her own racism, “doing the work,” and standing in solidarity with all movements for liberation and self-determination.

In your third year, you take a class called “Privilege, Domination, and Oppression” to fulfill the college’s new diversity requirement. You learn that being white, heterosexual, cisgender, middle class, and able-bodied are all associated with privilege, oppression, and domination. Belonging to an opposing category means you have a “marginalized identity” and that you are, definitionally, oppressed. You’re all supposed to define your own “intersectionality” and, if you have “multiple marginalized identities,” understand that you experience “multiple forms of oppression.”

This seems pretty different from what you learned in law class about intersectionality: Black women who faced hiring discrimination sued General Motors, but GM proved that they hired plenty of black people and plenty of women. Because the company didn’t discriminate against any one protected category, the women lost their case. But all the black people GM hired were men, and all the women they hired were white. The law didn’t recognize discrimination on the basis of the “intersection” between two protected categories.

Understanding this legal loophole in discrimination law doesn’t seem like the same thing as accepting your “internalized dominance and oppression,” or acceding that marginalization and privileging “are things that are done to us,” or working to determine which of our identities are privileged and which are marginalized.

The week before your Privilege, Domination, and Oppression final, you’re assigned two articles: one about how Jews “became white” and another about an Orthodox woman who wanted a divorce, but her abusive husband refused to provide the *get* (a Jewish divorce). Her rabbi didn’t help at all; instead, he told her that the wife’s responsibility was *shalom bayit*, making peace in the home.

During the discussion, a student named Feigah objects. She is the daughter of an Orthodox rabbi. Domestic abuse, she points out, happens across all cultures. Why has the topic been covered only with

In the critical social justice paradigm, Jews, who have never been seen as white by those for whom being white is a moral good, are now seen as white by those for whom whiteness is an unmitigated evil.

respect to Jews? Furthermore, while certainly there are exceptions, victims of domestic abuse can find help in Jewish communities. And men who try to withhold a *get* are not generally aided by rabbis. Plus, *shalom bayit* is not the sole responsibility of women. This lesson conveys all kinds of false concepts about Jews and Judaism.

For the entire semester, she adds, the class has discussed intersectionality, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, ableism, fat-shaming, and the marginalization and oppression of black people, indigenous people, and other people of color. Yet, in a class about oppression, antisemitism wasn’t even covered. Members of her community have been violently attacked on the streets for being Jews, and not by white supremacists. But none of this was included in the material.

Another student in the class tells Feigah that she’s invalidating the abused woman’s “lived experience.” The professor suggests that Feigah can share her concerns with the dean of curriculum.

In your final year, your first-year roommate invites you to an event co-hosted by Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP). As you arrive, the speakers are promoting the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions proposal that the student government is considering, and volunteers are handing out a petition to prevent the campus police from being trained in Israel.

Someone asks, “The *campus police* are being trained in *Israel*?”

The head of JVP flips over a copy of the petition and holds it up. On the back is a cartoon of an Israeli soldier and an American police officer, each with an arm around the other's shoulder. They are deploying the same knee-on-the-neck technique that was used on George Floyd—the Israeli soldier on a Palestinian, the American cop on a black man. “This petition is a precaution,” the JVP leader says. “We don't want to wait until they're already doing it.”

Someone asks, “What about Palestinian terrorism?”

The room goes quiet. The head of SJP addresses the crowd. Palestinians, he insists, unlike racist, “transnational” Zionists, do not have an army. Whatever Palestinians do in their struggle for their liberation and rights is *necessary*. Labeling their actions “terrorism,” he says, is the white, colonialist, imperialist propaganda of an illegitimate, apartheid country.

As people disperse, you express your angst to a Jewish friend about how Israel and Jews are sometimes depicted on campus. She stops and puts her hand on your arm. “You know how Robin DiAngelo says she wants to be ‘less white’—meaning she wants to be ‘less oppressive’? We should be less white, too.”



I tell this story—a composite account based on real trainings, classes, resources, and the experiences of actual students—because some readers may not fully understand the extent to which our universities are promoting and exporting a certain kind of indoctrination, one that has especially profound consequences for Jews.

Why Jews in particular? Because current social justice ideology (“critical social justice”) is heavily influenced by critical theory of various kinds, including critical race theory (CRT). Despite its laudable goal of opposing racism and white supremacy, CRT relies on narratives of greed, appropriation, unmerited privilege, and hidden power—themes strikingly reminiscent of familiar anti-Jewish conspiracy theories.

To make matters worse, the expectation of solidarity between social justice allies allows anti-Zionists to use the latent antisemitic themes of CRT to propagate a false narrative about Israel without opposition from within the movement. This magnifies the existing anti-Jewish nature of the social justice project.

The subtlety is that, instead of targeting Jews directly, the target of critical social justice is “whiteness.” But this does nothing to protect Jews. In 2018, when Hasidic Jews were victims of a wave of violent attacks—a precursor to another cluster of bloody attacks to come a year later—Mark Winston Griffith, the executive director of the Black Movement Center in Crown Heights, told *The Forward* that some black Americans see Judaism as “a form of almost hyper-whiteness.”

Race is the locus of power in the critical social justice worldview, which holds that the dominant group—white people—will, when it serves their interests, conditionally invite minority groups into “whiteness.” When people (such as “light-skinned Jews”) can “gain the benefits of whiteness by dropping ethnic markers of difference,” as California's Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum teaches, those people gain “conditional whiteness.”

The above is from the lesson, “Jewish Americans: Identity, Intersectionality, and Complicating Ideas of Race,” which instructs students that, “to the present day,” Jews continue to change their names (in other words, drop ethnic markers) and benefit from whiteness. At a time when the moral imperative is to “be *less* white,” there is no identity more pernicious than that of a once powerless minority group that, rather than joining the struggle to dismantle whiteness, opted into it.

In the critical social justice paradigm, that is how Jews are viewed. Jews, who have never been seen as white by those for whom being white is a moral good, are now seen as white by those for whom whiteness is an unmitigated evil. This reflects the nature of antisemitism: No matter the grievance or the identity of the aggrieved, Jews are held responsible. Critical race theory does not merely make it easy to demonize Jews using the language of social justice; it makes it difficult not to.

Simply put, the ‘critical social justice’ movement, informed by critical theory, represents an assault not just on core concepts of liberal democracy, but also on the epistemology that undergirds it.

This is not merely theoretical. The CRT lens, and the theories with which it is suffused, are brought into corporations and non-profits through diversity trainings and imposed on students across the country through campus activism, student-life programming, and even course curricula.

One “critically informed” social-work curriculum teaches that the notion of Jews “pulling themselves up by their bootstraps” is a “myth.” Instead, having “become white,” Jews benefited from federal programs that allowed “Jews and other European immigrants to be recognized or rewarded.” In other words, these social-work students are not taught that antisemitism is a conspiracy theory about Jews gaining unmerited success and power. They are taught that Jews, having been initiated into whiteness, have gained unmerited success and power.

Why does current social justice theory target Jews?

According to Kendi, the leading scholar of antiracism, “racial inequity is evidence of racist policy,” and “racial inequity over a certain threshold” should be “unconstitutional.” This obviously presents a particular problem for Jews, who represent roughly 2 percent of the U.S. population. A much higher proportion of Jews than non-Jews attend college. Jews represent an outsize share of winners of major awards, like Nobel prizes. As of 2020, seven of the 20 wealthiest

Americans were Jewish. In virtually every major American industry and institution, Jews hold leadership roles disproportionate to their overall demographic numbers.

American Jews have generally looked upon Jewish success in the United States as evidence of the country’s fundamental (if far from fully realized) commitment to the principles of tolerance, fair play, and recognition of individual merit. But, according to critical social justice ideology, that explanation is not just false. It’s racist. Jewish success can be explained *only* by Jewish collusion with white supremacy.

Again, this is no accident. Critical social justice is not an extension of liberal or progressive politics, or even a critique of such politics. It is, as its more sophisticated proponents readily admit, a form of anti-liberalism. In *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic explain that “unlike traditional civil rights, critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law.” Concepts like the rule of law, merit, reason, knowledge, and even truth are seen as fictions constructed by the “white cisheteropatriarchy” that are used to perpetuate injustices against BIPOC groups (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color).

Arguments against this view are rejected out of hand. Logical analysis—or any independent thinking that questions the theory’s pivotal presuppositions—is evidence that the questioner is ideologically suspect and requires either education or ostracism. In fact, logic is itself seen as a tool of white supremacy, thereby invalidating it as a legitimate way of making a case. Perhaps this is how people who subscribe to critical social justice ideology can be blind to the inherent antisemitism within it. They must adopt the doctrine as a belief system rather than doing the critical thinking necessary to work through its internal logic.

Simply put, the “critical social justice” movement, informed by critical theory, represents an assault not just on core concepts of

liberal democracy, but also on the epistemology that undergirds it. That's something that ought to concern anyone, Jewish or not, who cares deeply for freedom and reason. And it should also concern everyone who wants to see true social justice succeed.



What can we do?

First, *not only must Jews reject the victim narrative, we must also decline to participate in any “us” versus “them” paradigm.* Despite a long history of persecution, Jews have continually found ways to thrive. Even with a clear-eyed view of a past in which Jews have been objectively victimized and oppressed, Jews have not historically clung to victimhood. Were it not for the “victim” versus “oppressor” narrative in which Jews must either admit to being oppressors or adopt a victim identity, Jews would not feel the need to cling to it now. A Jewish lens allows for complexity and nuance, rather than requiring everyone to play one of those two roles.

Second, while there are wounds to heal within the global Jewish family, a distinction between “white” Jews and “Jews of color” is not a concept that emanates from Judaism or Jewish culture. It is incumbent upon Jews to reject this framing altogether. More pointedly, of all people, *Jews have the historical standing and moral imperative to denounce the ascription of moral virtue or blame as a function of race.*

Third, *only in defending the right to speak freely do we defend the disempowered.* Jews know what it means to be silenced and must become the bulwark against a culture of censoriousness and censorship. Jews must defend the right to say the most distasteful, abhorrent, and even antisemitic things—while at the same time making the most persuasive arguments against those views.

Fourth, *treasuring the habits of a free mind and appreciating the importance of truth-seeking are essential Jewish values.* Critical social justice ideology relies on denigrating critical thinking and reason while promoting logical tautologies and groupthink. By contrast,

Jewish culture is one of curiosity, education, disagreement, and dissent. It is a culture of “argument for the sake of Heaven.”

Fifth, the critical social justice story is an apocalyptic narrative of condemnation, powerlessness, and destruction. Its champions acknowledge that it rarely provides “concrete solutions.” By contrast, Jewish stories of social justice are narratives of overcoming adversity, being responsible for one's actions, grappling with complexity and finding no perfect answers, and being fundamentally *free.* Esther saves the Jews from slaughter. Moses leads the Israelites out of slavery. Abraham argues with God. *It is time for Jews to invoke our own social justice story, one that allows agency even for victims, forgives rather than shames, and embraces rather than condemns.*

Finally, Jewish culture is ideally suited to coexist with a liberal, pluralist society premised on the equal dignity of each individual. It also suggests a path toward true social justice by calling on all of us to make the world a better place, while acknowledging that our efforts will be imperfect. *A Jewish social justice paradigm will always seek to advance the causes of freedom and equality for all, which in turn will safeguard Jewish life and culture as well.*



Let us return for a final moment to our campus story. Must this ideological indoctrination be what Jewish college students have to either endure or adopt over the course of four years?

Not necessarily.

But if this is to change, it will take a concerted effort by Jewish leaders, individuals, and organizations to remind us all that we are not characters in others' scripts. *We are not required to play the parts that others have written.* We can and we must reject any identity and any worldview that is inconsistent with our own past and our own social justice story. Jewish values and habits of mind are among the gifts of our heritage. Only when we are true to who we are and strive to be as Jews can we do our part to repair the world. *