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Turning Critical Theory on Its Head

Academia's Palestine exception



AN WE BLAME the 19-year-olds pitching tents on campus quads for imagining that, as student protesters, they are on the “right side of history?” The phrase became a mantra of spring 2024. Columbia historian Rashid Khalidi took a megaphone to his lips to proclaim it.

Faculty at other universities parroted the cliché. Opinion pieces in *Jacobin*, *The Guardian*, and *Chicago Tribune* invoked it. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei posted it on X.

Although Iran’s supreme leader is under no obligation to complicate students’ understandings of history and their own place in it, university faculty are. We might have taken this opportunity to teach students about the brutalities of the Iranian student revolution in 1979 that put the first ayatollah in power. Closer to home, we could have introduced undergraduates to their forebears at the University of Alabama, where

in 1956 white students (with faculty support) fought racial integration by burning desegregation literature, raising Confederate flags, and preventing fellow students such as Autherine Lucy from entering class, pelting her with eggs and pebbles in protest of her matriculation. Behaviors like this presage the kind that courts today say plausibly constitute “severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive...harassment” of Jews on campus. Free-speech experts can argue whether the behavior of a Columbia student holding a sign identifying her fellow students as “Al-Qassam’s next targets” would fall under the same description.

Regardless, our failure as faculty to challenge our protesting students, opting instead to shrink the complicated history of youth activism to a single, unrepresentative (but well-soundtracked) moment of it several decades ago, is symptomatic of a profound *intellectual* failure on our part. Put in academic terms, we, faculty particularly in the humanities and social sciences, have failed to apply critical theory, the predominant method of analysis in our fields, to our present situation and our own participation in it.



Consider the letter of “gratitude and solidarity” that faculty at UC San Diego presented to student protesters. The letter was signed by more than 50 humanities and social science professors, along with two oceanographers, hardly a random distribution of departments. The disciplines that make up the humanities and social sciences are largely if not entirely animated by the Frankfurt School of analysis known as critical theory. Developed in the early-20th century by (mostly Jewish) philosophers and sociologists such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Wilhelm Reich, and Herbert Marcuse at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, critical theory is, according to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of*

Philosophy, “defined by its aim of contributing to the emancipatory transformation of society by critically reflecting on the ways in which thinking itself can be distorted by structures of domination.” This is an admittedly jargon-heavy way of saying that critical theorists try to figure out how oppression gets produced and reproduced within and across societies.

Critical theorists look for patterns of oppression and the power dynamics that perpetuate those patterns. The now-household terms of *structural* and *systemic* oppression are native to this method of analysis, which is why scholars who think about racism or sexism as structural or systemic are called, respectively, critical race theorists or critical gender theorists. In their analysis, discriminatory practices grow out of power inequities, reflect them, reinforce them, and reproduce them. These power relationships also shape the way people think. Inequitable systems produce ideologies that justify the inequities. The vicious cycle sustains itself. This is how fascism and other totalitarian systems perpetuate themselves — by redeveloping theories that justify their existence.

Such notions arouse controversy more outside the academy than in it. Intellectual currents change and this one might too, but at present, this is standard fare in graduate programs and academic journals. If you want to read about systemic or structural racism, for instance, open the *American Journal of Public Health*, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, *Annual Review of Criminology*, *Annual Review of Psychology*, *Annual Review of Sociology*, *Gender and Society*, *Journal of Victorian Studies*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, or any number of other publications up to and past the *Yale Law Journal*.

In almost every academic department at almost every research university in the country, you can find scholars investigating or engaging the world, or adjusting graduate training and undergraduate instruction, based on the premise that we have to reckon with past systems of

inequality in order both to *understand* and *improve* the present. Critical theory is at once a method of analysis and a strategy for social change.

And here is the root of the intellectual failure in the humanities and social sciences today. Regardless of whether one thinks critical theory is a good or bad approach to analyzing oppression, the critical theorists' failure to apply it to the study of Jewish oppression means that they end up reproducing this oppression rather than challenging it. This is why they fail to see Zionism for what it is: critical antisemitism theory.



Given that Jews have been subjected to more than their share of inequities in the past, one would expect that scholars would apply this same approach when studying the status and treatment of Jews. If only the critical theorist faculty who study race knew that, back around the same time that W.E.B. Du Bois was offering a socio-philosophical account of the American Negro's struggle to break out of the system of racial oppression, a cadre of Jews, mostly socialists and disaffected liberals in Europe, were analyzing their own oppression in terms of systemic inequities. Like Du Bois they were frustrated that step-by-step reform and supposed emancipation hadn't brought the social, economic, and political equality that they had hoped for.

After decades of their governments going back and forth debating whether to grant Jews full citizenship rights, some of the more sociologically minded started pointing out that the very notion that Gentiles arrogated to themselves the right to decide whether Jews could or should be equal suggested the problem's systemic or structural nature. It was a fundamentally inequitable power dynamic that would never end as long as Jews lived under Christian or Muslim authorities. In their view, when approaching governments that have crosses or crescents

emblazoned on their flags, Jews should not come as supplicants begging for rights. They should enter as equals. Create a country and then meet ambassador to ambassador. Leon Pinsker called it “self-emancipation.” Later it was called Zionism.

Different thinkers analyzed the structural dimensions differently. Ber Borochov, in his Marxism, placed greater weight on socioeconomic factors. Nachman Syrkin, likewise. Ze’ev Jabotinsky attributed it to the inherent dynamics of majority-minority relations: “the bedrock fact that we are everywhere a minority.” In this, they presage today’s critical race theorists more than either CRT’s advocates or opponents would care to admit. Neither camp wants to speak of the position of Jews today as still constrained by ongoing legacies of systemic oppression. But is this a tenable position?

For most of the past millennium and a half, two religious civilizational empires divided the Western world among themselves. Christendom and Islam each shared the unquestioned assumption that theirs was the right to rule. Each birthed academies and intellectual traditions that reflected and reinforced these assumptions. Under neither order was the religious, political, social, economic, moral, or human equality of Jews assumed. Rather, even as Christian and Muslim empires raised armies to establish their superiority over the other, they both subscribed to supersessionist theologies vis-à-vis Judaism. They took it for granted that Jews were — and were supposed to be — subordinate. They should not wield power over Muslims or Christians. Terms such as *dhimmi* (under Muslim rule) and *servi camerae regis* (under Christian rule) tried to codify the natural order in law.

And when Jews did manage to rise above their station, how was this challenge to the proper way of the world explained? Consider the system of anti-Jewish polemics that these cultures produced in response.

If Jews gain wealth, it is not deserved, but ill-gotten. Greed. Usury. Miserliness. Shysterism. Shylocking. Controlling the banks.

If Jews become empowered politically, it is because they don't play by the rules. Conspiracy. Cabal. Puppet-mastering. Serving other masters. Dual loyalties. Controlling the press. Controlling the government.

There is a common thread: the illegitimacy of Jewish equality. An illegitimacy so dangerous to the natural order that it's repugnant. The theme persists into the secular-not-secular Christian and Islamic worlds of our own day.

Zionism names this power dynamic and rejects it. It is the revolutionary praxis emerging from a critical antisemitism theory. When humanities and social science faculty ignore this, and instead frame Zionism as the exemplar of systemic colonialism, imperialism, and genocide rather than as a response to these evils, they are themselves reinforcing and reproducing the systemic power dynamic that has for centuries kept Jews in their subordinated place.



Critical theory starts from the premise that systems of power do not simply disappear or dismantle themselves. They operate in and through societal institutions. Universities do not stand outside this dynamic. They are part of it. They are not immune from power relations. They are thoroughly implicated in them, by virtue of their own practices of knowledge production and the ideas that they create and spread.

Our contemporary intellectual failure to analyze Jewish oppression and Zionism by these same standards is a function of how steeped our universities are in the shared Christian, Islamic, and even Greco-Roman Western civilizational context that has never been able to extricate Jewish subordination from its own structure. Living in this culture makes it difficult for us as faculty to recognize, much less cri-

tique, how this civilizational inheritance shapes our own assumptions about Jews' proper place.

Not convinced? Just listen to the faculty assurances that students in the pro-Palestine encampments stand on “the right side of history.” Where does this odd phrase come from? It has an intellectual history, after all. The phrase derives from Marx’s notion (adapted from Hegel) that history is governed by objective laws and progresses toward an ultimate universalistic liberation. Only because history is teleological—because it is heading toward a known destination—can it have a “right” and “wrong” side. But neither Hegel nor Marx had any place for Jews at their historical culminations. For Hegel, Judaism was just one flawed step in the evolution toward an Absolute Spirit. Marx, who identified Judaism with “huckstering,” envisioned “abolishing the empirical essence of Judaism,” thereby making the Jew “impossible.” He called this the “emancipation of society from Judaism.”

The very language of “right side of history” is drawn from the ideas of Western philosophers who envisioned glorious futures untainted by Jews or Judaism. It is not a far leap from these 19th-century Marxist and Hegelian utopias to today’s 21st-century visions of setting history right by “decolonizing” Palestine “from the river to the sea.”

Our great universities are heirs to a civilizational legacy and reproduce its anti-Jewish pathologies unconsciously. What is the pattern playing out before our very eyes? Columbia University deans responsible for creating inclusive communities text each other to mock Jewish students’ concerns about discrimination. Advocates of speech codes discover the virtues of free speech specifically for Arabic words and English phrases that get shouted even louder after Jewish students say they hear them as code for killing Jews. And when universities do try to discipline students who have harassed Jewish classmates, occupied buildings, and vandalized property, members of the faculty contest the penalties and call for amnesty.

Can anyone make the case that these behaviors are disconnected? That we are seeing coincidence and not pattern? Or that this is the result of a few “bad apples”? No sociologist worthy of the name would offer such an individualistic account. In my discipline, if researchers were to notice the same discriminatory patterns on so many different campuses and at so many different levels within each university system, their starting premise would be that the problem is systemic.

Or at least researchers would do this if the systemic problem did not implicate scholarship at its roots.

Rehearse the litany of abuses and double standards against Jewish and Israeli students and faculty in campuses this past year. These are all examples of structural inequity, where the ruling regime seeks to justify and maintain its power dynamic. How else to explain the exclusion of Jews from the category of “the historically oppressed” in which all other, younger minorities have an undisputed space? Those parts of the academy that have most embraced critical theory have failed to critique the ways in which their own discourse participates in historically rooted, socially entrenched power dynamics that subordinate and marginalize Jews.



It all is a rather ironic circle, and universities have historically provided the centrifugal force. In the 1880s, students mobilized (with faculty support) to create Germany’s first Christian nationalist student associations. Building off their success in rallying for a petition campaign demanding that Kaiser Wilhelm roll back Jewish political rights, young scholars created the Association of German Students in 1881, which led to the proliferation of similar associations and the strengthening of nationalist student fraternities across the German-speaking countries. At the University of Vienna in that year, a

photo was taken of a fraternity initiation. One of the students can be seen with a bandage on his cheek. Two years later, he would leave the fraternity because of its entrenched and persistent antisemitism. His name was Theodor Herzl. *