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Defending Liberty in Australia

Cancelling the Culture:
Critical Theory and the Chasm of Incoherence

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When Meaning is Stretched

The 'scourge' of racism is 'resurgent' in Australia, according to the Australian Human Rights Commission's Race Discrimination Commissioner, Chin Tan. In March 2021, Mr Tan declared that racism poses "significant threats" to this country and urged the federal government to replace the existing anti-racism framework, created in 2018, with a new one that takes into account the actual prevalence of racism in Australia.[1]

But for many Australians, talk of resurgent racism doesn't accurately describe their experience of the country they know and love. This is not to say there are no racists in Australia — clearly an absurd proposition — but rather that systemic, oppressive racism is not a deeply embedded characteristic of a country that has forged one of the world's most successful multicultural societies.[2]

Yet so many critics of Australia persist in describing a society few of us readily recognise. It can feel as if those critics are depicting an entirely different country. To find the key with which to unlock this conundrum, it is important to look more closely at the language used by critics to frame their argument, and at the ideological framework underlying this use of language.

'Racism' originally meant a form of bigotry which held that people who belonged to different racial groups — itself now a discredited concept — had differentiating characteristics that, in turn, rendered them inferior or superior to other groups.

It was a definition widely accepted across the political divide and was exemplified most notably in the fervent hope expressed by Martin Luther King that the day would come "when people will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character."[3]

Even though the notion of 'race' is now discredited, King's vision appealed to sense of common humanity in which the innate quality of human beings transcends what he considered the incidental feature of skin colour. However, when Tan used the familiar word, 'racism', he was not using it in that notable, if discredited sense to refer to prejudice, but in a new way to mean something quite different.

In this instance, he used 'racism' to identify perceived social and economic injustice, as well as imbalances of power. When he said that Australia was suffused with systemic racism, what he meant was that *all* our social interactions and institutions are 'racialised'. In effect, Tan, who also thought the 'Black Lives Matter' movement highlighted the problem of racism, attempted to sweep up every problem of social injustice and deposit them in the box marked 'racism'.

Taking an old word — such as 'racism' — and attaching a new meaning to it is a key tactic used by progressive warriors, who view the world through the lens of what has come to be known as 'identity politics' and claim to detect oppression and misuse of power just about everywhere. But it is a tactic that confuses the rest of us. While the words being used are familiar enough, their meaning is being stretched and new meaning applied in ways that are seldom apparent — or even comprehensible.

Elasticising the language — that is, taking old words and stretching them to fit new meanings — does not just generate semantic friction between scholars of linguistics. It poses a far more serious and fundamental threat to the intelligibility of everyday, ordinary discourse. When words lose their ordinary meaning and have a veiled, specialised meaning drawn over them, it becomes impossible to pursue intelligible conversations about not only social, cultural, and political matters — but about *anything.*

Language used in ways that manipulate the meaning of ordinary discourse threatens to precipitate a descent into incoherence and meaninglessness. As this report makes clear, the danger we face of a descent into incoherent meaninglessness is not simply due to the faddish use of language generated in the ivory towers of our universities — although it certainly began there.

Rather, the danger comes from sustained and aggressive activism that has spilled out of university campuses and into our schools, businesses, defence forces, the not-for-profit sector, the churches, the medical profession, and much of the media. From there, it is directed against all the perceived injustices that, together, are deemed to comprise the toxic legacy of imperialist Western civilisations. This activism is underpinned by a particular species of theory called Critical Theory.

Box 1: What is Critical Theory?

In its essential form, Critical Theory holds that there are many biases and imbalances of power in society which are actually hidden from view by dominant cultural structures, such as use of language and the ways in which knowledge is imparted. These structures are deemed 'problematic' by Critical Theory and need to be identified, exposed, and overturned in the name of Social Justice.

This is a narrow and doctrinaire interpretation of what most people commonly understand 'social justice' to mean. The aim of Social Justice is to correct bias and prejudice, and to redress imbalances in power. It pursues its objectives by silencing — or 'cancelling' — dissenting opinion and deleting unwelcome ideas. These practices are bundled together under the term, 'woke'*, because Social Justice activists believe they, alone, are 'awakened' to the realities of oppression and prejudice.[4] Historian, Giles Udy, has explained Critical Theory like this:

> Critical Theory views humanity through cynical, reductive eyes. It analyses society and human relationships through the lens of power, classifying society into oppressors and oppressed. Unlike Marxism, it does so not by class alone but also by race, sexual orientation, gender identity, and so on.[5]

The mid-2020 CIS paper, *Cancelled! How ideological cleansing threatens Australia*, examined the phenomenon that has come to be known as 'cancel culture' whereby those who do not subscribe to the 'woke'* agenda of Critical Theory activists are attacked and pulled down — both literally (in the case of statues,) and metaphorically (in the case of people who express unacceptable opinions).[6] That report examined cancel culture and the practice of ideological cleansing.

This new report looks at key philosophical and ideological issues underlying cancel culture and examines the flawed foundations upon which Critical Theory rests. It will show how — and why — the language used by Critical Theory activists confuses and perplexes the rest of us.

In conclusion, this report will also set out some key principles to guide responses to critics who insist that Australia — a country we know exemplifies a liberal and tolerant society — must be condemned and branded as systemically racist, misogynistic, homophobic, and colonial.

Beware: Danger Ahead!

We must not underestimate the intellectual hold Critical Theory already exerts on the formation of policy and the conduct of discourse in the Australian public sphere. In particular, this report argues that the prevalence of Critical Theory, and its influence upon the language, culture and institutions of Australia, confront us with three significant dangers:

Danger 1 — Eroding tolerance: 'unacceptable' opinions and ideas are denounced

Personal preferences, opinions or points of view — for example, about gender, sexual orientation, race, or history — no longer belong to the private realm but have become political claims that can be enforced both by legal sanction and by social intimidation and humiliation.

This poses a great threat to the foundational freedoms of conscience and speech and, as such, represents blurring of the boundaries between the public and private lives of individuals.

Danger 2 — Emphasising difference: discrimination is no longer bad but good

Ending discrimination against people on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, and skin colour has been one of the most significant social, legal, and cultural changes to have occurred during the past 60 or so years.

However, Critical Theory reverses these changes and elevates incidental features of the human person, such as skin colour, above characteristics of personality and character. Critical Theory advocates discrimination and the emphasis of difference as tools of social and political reform.

* 'Woke' — from a corrupted form of 'awakened' — is a term that has been around since the early 1940s. Today it signifies a determined commitment to eradicate any perceived form of injustice or oppression deemed to harm members of a minority group. Woke is more than a goal; it is the *means* of pursuing it.

Danger 3 —Inciting rage: reasonable discourse is no longer possible

Critical Theory activists are aggressive, and sometimes violent, towards people with differing opinions. Disagreement is now personalised and those who hold 'unacceptable' views are targeted for attack and vilification.[7]

This can be by practices such as 'doxing' (releasing personal information such as addresses and phone numbers), de-platforming, and cancellation. Even the homes and former homes of people are attacked.[8] For Critical Theory activists, the ends always justify the means.

Critical Theory confronts Australia with all three of these dangers today; but its subversive influence — especially through its manifestation as 'cancel culture' — can only be properly understood once its ideological foundations have been identified and exposed. Once that is done, it will be clear that Critical Theory activism must be understood for what it is: a political movement intent upon nothing less than the exercise of power. Australian academic Gary Marks has highlighted the danger each of us faces from this subversion:

> Citizens at home and in their workplaces are continually exposed to extremist political views. But as they are packaged in non-threatening language including social justice, equality, and progressive politics, the public is unaware that many of the issues are under-pinned by neo-Marxism, critical theory, and post-modernism. Their totalitarian agenda must be vigorously opposed by those who value Western civilization.[9]

How Critical is Critical Theory?

The term 'Critical Theory' is best thought of as an umbrella term that applies to a series of related fields of enquiry, or 'studies', concerned with revealing hidden biases, prejudice, and power structures. These fields of enquiry include postcolonial theory, queer theory, gender studies, disability and fat studies, and critical race theory.

Critical Theory is the most recent form of 'postmodernism' which is, itself, a wide-ranging term applying to a series of ideas that originated from the Frankfurt School, the name commonly given to the school of social theory at the Institute for Social Research, which developed in the inter-war years in Germany.

Postmodernism began its rise to prominence in the 1960s in reaction to the acknowledged failure of Marxism to overthrow capitalism and establish socialist societies in its place. It was also a reaction against the post-Second World War vision of liberal modernity that promoted concepts such as universal human rights, and equality under the law for all citizens. Notoriously difficult to define with precision, postmodernism is "a multi-faceted phenomenon encompassing vast tracts of intellectual, artistic, and cultural terrain."[10]

Critical Theory began to emerge in the late 1990s and early 2000s and, unlike earlier forms of postmodernism, soon developed and promoted an activist agenda. Critical Theory holds that reality, and one's understanding of it, is shaped by social, cultural, and political factors. It is 'critical' to the extent that it aims "to question the assumptions of dominant forms of thinking by challenging the power relations that are normative and assumed."[11] But soon enough, 'challenge' gives way to revolt, with calls to overthrow systems which lead to injustice and oppression.

Box 2: Postcolonial Theory: Down with the West!

Critical Theory is having an enormous impact on the education of our children through a particular manifestation known as 'Postcolonial Theory' which informs the school curriculum. The goal of Postcolonial Theory is to expose oppressive structures imposed by the West as cultural constructs and to 'decolonise' them. Postcolonial Theory holds that 'Western' ways of knowing — as exemplified in such subjects as science, mathematics, and history — are intended to perpetuate the West's own power and influence and must therefore be devalued.

For example, the 2021 draft report of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority came under particular criticism for appearing to abandon Australia's heritage as a Western liberal democracy in favour of giving exclusive priority to indigenous, non-Western interpretations of the country's history.

"By all means teach Indigenous history," said historian, Geoffrey Blainey, "but not at the expense of classical and Western civilisations. Ancient Rome surely did at least as much as Uluru to shape the modern Australian way of thinking and living."[12]

No longer intent upon simply describing and questioning notions of truth, knowledge, and structures of power that have been taken for granted, Critical Theory actively seeks to overturn and uproot them. As such, Critical Theory questions — and even frequently rejects — the foundations upon which contemporary modern, Western civilisations are built.

In its readiness to question all institutional arrangements and systems of thought, Critical Theory has adopted a radical scepticism about the possibility of obtaining objective knowledge of truth. As political scientist Stephen Eric Bronner has remarked:

> Critical theory insists that thought must respond to the new problems and the new possibilities for liberation that arise from changing historical circumstances. Interdisciplinary and uniquely experimental in character, deeply sceptical of tradition and all absolute claims, critical theory [is] always concerned not merely with how things [are] but how they might be and should be.[13]

It is essential to understand that the intent of Critical Theory is not simply social reform or adjustment, but revolution. This revolutionary taint makes Critical Theory especially dangerous and heightens the importance of both understanding and resisting its agenda. In their analysis of postmodernism, Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay identify two key principles that characterise it.

- The **postmodern knowledge principle** is radically sceptical about the possibility of objective knowledge. Truth is held to be a representation of a cultural framework and, as such, is determined by that culture. As Gary Marks has remarked:

  > Since there is no such thing as objectivity, scholars are free to promote their own personal political and ideological orientations as scholarship and tailor research findings to political agendas.[14]

- The **postmodern political principle** holds that society is formed of systems of power and hierarchies that decide what can be known, and how, and which serve their own vested interests. This, in turn, gives rise to an ethical imperative to challenge and deconstruct all such oppressive structures.[15] As Pluckrose and Lindsay have observed:

  > [Postmodernists] are obsessed with power, language, knowledge, and the relationship between them. They interpret the world through a lens that detects power dynamics in every interaction, utterance, and cultural artefact — even when they aren't obvious or real.[16]

No longer content merely to critique social and cultural structures, by the 1990s postmodernism developed a more radical approach determined to overthrow oppressive forms of power, knowledge, and language. Pluckrose and Lindsay call this activist, prescriptive form of postmodernism, "applied postmodernism":

> For the activist-scholars of the 1980s, the suffering associated with oppression implied the existence of something that could suffer and a mechanism by which that suffering can occur. The Theorists who took elements of postmodernism and sought to apply them in specific ways were the progenitors of the applied postmodern turn and therefore of Social Justice scholarship.[17]

Applied postmodernism asserts *with absolute certainty* that knowledge is socially constructed and that power hierarchies are oppressive. Power hierarchies must therefore be challenged by changing the language with which they are described, thus changing the knowledge. However, scepticism about the possibility of objective truth, and insistence that knowledge is legitimised by particular forms of linguistic discourse, give rise to a profound paradox lying at the heart of applied postmodernism.

The paradox is that, while asserting the objective truth of the proposition that knowledge is socially constructed, Critical Theory is unable to justify that the assertion is, itself, *objectively* true. Yet Theorists are undeterred, using — or misusing — whatever notion of truth best serves their purposes.

Critical Theory and the Assault on Truth

Having denied the possibility of establishing objective truth, applied postmodernism finds itself bereft of the very philosophical category — an objective understanding of truth — upon which it needs to rely for it to have any hope of intellectual integrity. Critical Theorists assert the truth of their views while, at the same time, dismissing the attempts of anyone else to assert the truth.

Ambiguity about truth claims reveals a significant weakness in the intellectual architecture of Critical Theory and is one of the principal reasons why the prevalence of Theory threatens, unless checked, a descent into incoherence. Once it becomes difficult — if not impossible — to say anything intelligible about truth, it becomes increasingly hard to say much that is intelligible about anything else.

Box 3: What do we mean by truth?

The idea of truth expresses a relationship between the world and what we want to say about it. Philosophers of language engage with describing the nature of that relationship and, although it is an extremely complicated area of philosophy, their responses fall, very broadly, into two theories:

Correspondence theory of truth

According to this theory, a statement is true if it corresponds with a state of affairs and does not depend for that correspondence on the judgment of the observer. A proposition is true because it *corresponds* with — that is to say, it accurately describes — a certain state of affairs. The correspondence account of truth is the theory that probably matches most closely the way the idea of truth functions in ordinary discourse. It is attractive because of its simplicity: it works by stating what is factually true, independently of the observer.

Coherence theory of truth

According to this theory, truth depends on language and the way it is used. A statement does not describe an external relation with a state of affairs but an *internal* relationship between a set of beliefs. That is to say, a judgment is true if it coheres with other judgments held. Truth of a proposition is determined by coherence. In other words, what makes a fact true depends on what is believed about the fact and the extent to which it coheres with other facts that are believed to be true. Truth, understood in this way, is relative and not absolute. What is true in one culture may not be true in another culture.

Critical Theory activists reject the correspondence theory of truth and the notion of objective truth. Yet while relying on the coherence theory of truth, they insist that the statements they make — such as that Australia is a systemically racist or misogynistic society — are *objectively true*. Theorists also reject — often with contempt — the truth of statements made by their critics.

This assertion of radical scepticism and relativism, on the one hand, and the assertion of objective truth, on the other, is philosophically incoherent and renders their arguments a good deal less invincible than they at first appear. Theorists seem to have effected this intellectual sleight of hand without being found out. How did they pull off this conjuring trick?

Truth as ‘lived experience’

Pluckrose and Lindsay argue that the trick may have been effected because of an adjustment Critical Theorists have made to the relationship between knowledge and truth, and to the way they claim to interpret knowledge. Perhaps recognising the intellectual incoherence in the old formulations of their position, Critical Theorists have altered the meaning of words used, such as ‘knowledge’ so as to patch over the gaping paradox about the nature of truth in their argument.

It is no longer enough for Critical Theorists to hold that reliable knowledge depends upon the notion of independently verifiable claims — that is to say, upon reliance on evidence and reason. Rather, knowledge is now obtained by listening to the ‘lived experience’ of members of marginalized groups which can be expressed in terms of purely subjective feelings and intuition. Certain favoured interpretations of marginalized people’s experience are selected and anointed as authentic:

> In this way, the logical contradiction between radical relativism and dogmatic absolutism is resolved, but at the price of rending the Social Justice Theory completely unfalsifiable and indefeasible: no matter what evidence about reality [is] presented, Theory always can and always does explain it away.[18]

Critical Theory’s ambiguity about truth and its equivocal use of language have enabled it to wield enormous power in the exercise of its revolutionary pursuit. When words no longer mean what we think they mean, it becomes easier for Critical Theorists and Social Justice activists to evade calls for accountability or explanation as they pursue every aspect of their deconstructionist agenda — including the deconstruction of the individual.

Deconstructing the Individual: Critical Theory and Intersectionality

Critical Theory's hostility to the individual is one of the most significant examples of its contempt for liberal modernity. Critical Theory has little time for the modern concept of the individual who attracts a universal bundle of rights and liberties in virtue of her standing as a human being. Instead, it insists a person must be viewed not as a whole, but as a conglomeration of different identities.

Furthermore, since Critical Theory also holds that these identities are social constructs that reveal — or maintain — certain forms of privilege, knowledge, and power, the identities constitutive of a person can be *de*-constructed and *re*-constructed to address these distortions. This forms the basis of what has become known as 'identity politics'.

According to Canadian philosopher Cressida Heyes: "Identity politics starts from analyses of oppression to recommend, variously, the re-claiming, re-description, or transformation of previously stigmatised accounts of group membership."[19]

Race, gender, sexual orientation, and disability are the most prominent social constructs with which identity politics is concerned, but the list of possible identities that can be manipulated and deconstructed is, quite possibly, endless. This has led Karl Zinsmeister, former Director of the White House Domestic Policy Council under President George W. Bush, to remark that "Identity politics is thus an aggressive marshalling of human divisions. It draws its energy from factional resentments and fractures."[20]

Closely linked to the categories of identity is the theory of 'intersectionality', a term first coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American civil rights activist and Theorist, which holds that the marginalisation experienced by an oppressed person is determined by the accumulation of identity traits, such as gender, race, or sexual orientation. Intersectionality thereby reduces all analysis to examination of one category or variable, and looks for the power imbalances and biases it assumes are present.

However, in addition to being little more than a mechanism for ranking grievances, intersectionality also represents a deliberate assault on the liberal notion that rights, freedoms, and opportunities are universal and apply to all people regardless of identity categories, such as race or gender.

Liberalism diminished the emphasis placed on such identity categories and argued for the opening of opportunity and liberty to all individuals. The concept of 'equality under the law' extended to all individuals, regardless of incidental characteristics such as ethnicity or gender, simply in virtue of their status as human beings.

By contrast, intersectionality renews and enforces an emphasis on difference, and usually denounces so-called 'white, Western' ways of knowing — such as the concept of 'anti-discrimination' — as tools of dominance. 'Equality under the law' is rejected precisely because it *refuses* to discriminate between people.

Instead, Critical Race Theory (CRT) substitutes the concept of '*equity*' which has nothing to do with equal treatment of people *qua* human beings. Rather, the object of 'equity' is to achieve equal outcomes for the *group* regardless of how this affects the individual; and thereby to remake society.[21]

Box 4: Critical Race Theory: racial bias in medicine?

No field of human enquiry is exempt from the reach of intersectionality. A fundamental tenet of medicine is that doctors are to heal and not to harm. In times past, this tenet was expressed in the Hippocratic Oath considered to set, in general terms, the limits and scope of the practice of medicine. However, *The Economist* newspaper recently cited research into the efficacy of pulse oximeters, published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, to argue that medical research and practice is systemically racist and sexist.

"The world is designed around white men. They share it with everyone else," trumpeted *The Economist*. Failure "to recognise that human beings are different from one another" leads to what the newspaper calls "design bias" which is unforgivable, if understandable: "In the West, which is still the source of most innovation, engineers have tended to be white and male. So have medical researchers. That leads to groupthink."[22]

By running the obvious — that people and their body types are different — through the filter of intersectionality, *The Economist* used Critical Theory to attack the structure of clinical trials, medical research, and the practice of medicine in their entirety, and to argue that, far from *not* discriminating against people on the basis of gender or skin colour, medicine should *embrace* discrimination in order to equalizes perceived imbalances of power.

Intersectionality thereby allows that each identity category — such as race, gender, sexual orientation, or disability — can be a focus for political activism; and since the number of possible categories can be extended without limit, the principle of intersectionality can also be applied without limit as a means for achieving 'diversity'. However, as James Kirkchick has observed, intersectionality is insidious and fundamentally illiberal:

> Proponents of intersectionality have elevated its categorical paradigms of all-encompassing, omnipresent 'oppression', and its attendant, identity-based hierarchies of virtue, to that of a *Weltanschauung*, a new morality to replace the basic, classical liberal principles of freedom, individual rights, and equality before the law on which Western civilisation is based.[23]

But it is a mistake to assume that the logical endpoint of intersectional analysis, as it divides people into ever smaller identity categories, is the individual. On the contrary, intersectionality leads not to individuality but to group membership. As Pluckrose and Lindsay have correctly observed: "Even if a person were a unique mix of marginalised identities, thus intersectionally a unique individual, she would be understood through each and all of those group identities. She would not be understood as an individual."[24]

On Bridging the Chasm

Critical Theory may have emerged on university campuses as an intellectual fad but it has long spilled over into wider society where it is regarded by proponents as a principal tool of activism with a specific goal, something historian Giles Udy has emphasised:

> The goal of Critical Theory is to work for the liberation of the oppressed by unmasking and thus disempowering the forces which create and impose dominant ideology upon those same oppressed groups.[25]

In pursing this goal of 'liberation of the oppressed', Critical Theory poses the three key dangers which this report identified at the outset: erosion of tolerance; emphasis of difference; and incitement of rage. Together, these dangers combine to form a highly combustible mix.

It is a mix that poses a grave threat not only to freedoms of speech, conscience, and association upon which a free, flourishing, and open society depends, but also to commitment to the liberal principle of tolerance of divergent and diverse points of view. As Karl Zinsmeister has observed, the dangers that stalks us point, in fact, to nothing less than the death of classical liberalism.[26]

This report has argued that gravity of the threat has been disguised from the unsuspecting because of the veil of language drawn across political activism. Previously unfamiliar terms that are nonetheless obscure and opaque — such as intersectionality, heteronormativity, and white privilege — have become part of a new vocabulary.

At the same time, previously *familiar* words — such as race, gender, and colonialism — have been subverted with new but equally opaque meanings. When familiar words are used in new ways to describe activist involvement, the full import of new meanings is not quickly understood. Arguments *sound* reasonable because the old, reason-based meanings of words are assumed.

But meanings have changed. Arguments are *not* reasonable; and reason, itself, has been displaced by emotion and intuition. Chaos beckons. And as words lose their common meanings, and it becomes increasingly difficult to communicate intelligently with one another, we edge ever closer to the deep and forbidding chasm of incoherence.

However, there are very good reasons for thinking this chasm can be bridged if we commit to a four-fold course of action to guide our resistance.

Take courage

One of the most apparent manifestations of Critical Theory activism is cancel culture, which suppresses dissent with ruthless vindictiveness and cows those who might dissent into silence. Cancel culture depends for its prevalence on the timidity of those it attacks. But although the activists appear to dominate public debate, cancel culture is not popular.

A recent opinion poll conducted jointly in the United States — where cancel culture has been most prominent — by Harvard Centre for American Political Studies and The Harris Poll found 64 per cent of respondents regarded cancel culture as a threat to their freedom, while 36 per cent regarded it as a large problem.[27]

A similar lack of public support for cancel culture appears to be emerging in Australia, according to recent polling conducted by True North Strategy. According to that poll, 70 per cent of respondents thought cancel culture had gone too far and now threatened the spirit of larrikinism.

Although many feel cowed into silence by Critical Theory activists, the research company thinks these findings are encouraging: "If we agree for what this means for politicians and the business world, we can pretty safely say they can push back harder with the weight of assurance that public opinion is behind them."[28]

This assurance that public opinion, for the most part, does not support the destructive, cancelling campaigns waged by Critical Theory activists, should encourage people to speak out against attempts made to attack, silence, and humiliate them. But it requires courage to do so: courage to withstand the ending of friendships; courage to say what others say is unsayable; and courage to have the confidence of one's own convictions.

Restore reason

It is essential to lay bare the intellectual incoherence at the heart of Critical Theory. Hostility to objective conceptions of truth, coupled with contradictory assertion of the objective truth of its own dogmas, gravely weakens the claims made by Theory. This incoherence must be named and challenged — something that also requires courage because all efforts to engage rationally are likely to be rejected. As the American political commentator Paul de Quenoy has noted:

> The entire woke movement is based on emotion. The more it is challenged, the more hysterical it becomes for the simple reason that its tenets cannot withstand logic, reason, or ridicule. This is why it classifies logic and reason as features of oppressive "whiteness" to be devalued, and why it is deeply suspicious of humour.[29]

However, while it is important to confront the 'woke movement', efforts to engage with it are ultimately likely to be fruitless because Theory activists reject all standards of rationality accepted by liberal modernity and, as this paper has argued, employ a very different conception of truth.

Another way to put this, is to say that hope of reversing or undoing the damage done by the woke movement by means of reasoned argument is almost certainly futile. However, there remains the challenge to frame reasoned arguments against Critical Theory activism, and this can help stiffen the resolve and resistance of those who neither support nor condone the antics of the Theory activists, themselves.

Reclaim truth

Construction of the arguments of Critical Theory activists — especially those who promote critical race theory — has been likened to a mousetrap: "disagreement with their program becomes irrefutable evidence of a dissenter's 'white fragility', 'unconscious bias', ' or 'internalised white supremacy'."[30] It is hardly surprising that many who disagree with the agenda choose to remain silent. But courage and renewed confidence in reason are essential tasks for equipping ourselves for the third key task: reclaiming truth.

Only by holding fast to an objective conception of truth whereby common agreement can be reached about the meaning of words will it be possible to do two things. First, to reject the unreasoned categories imposed in the name of 'justice' or 'diversity' or 'equity' by Theory; and, second, to use our own moral categories to evaluate, criticise, and refute the practical — and often disastrous — consequences of Critical Theory ideas and practices.

Far from allowing Critical Theorists to tear at the social and cultural fabric of this country, it is essential to hold fast to the objective truth that Australia remains one of the most successful and harmonious multicultural societies in the world. This has been attested to by numerous surveys, most notably the 'Mapping Social Cohesion' report published annually since 2007 by the Scanlon Foundation. These reports have been the most reliable and objective indicators of Australia's social attitudes.[31]

Speaking specifically about the need to counter the impact of critical race theory in schools in the United States, American commentator Christopher Rufo argues theorists must be confronted with facts about these consequences:

> Do they support public schools separating first-graders into groups of 'oppressors' and 'oppressed'? Do they support mandatory curricula teaching that 'all white people play a part in perpetuating systemic racism'? Do they support public schools instructing white parents to become 'white traitors' and advocate for 'white abolition'?[32]

Rufo's questions are just as applicable to Australia, where some schools are known to promote similar ideas about such matters as gender equity and systemic racism. For example, in Warrnambool, Victoria, male students at Brauer College were made to stand as a "symbolic gesture of apology for the behaviours of their gender". The principal was forced, subsequently, to offer an apology of her own when news of this 'gesture' was leaked to the media by unhappy parents.[33]

Never surrender!

As the insidious influence of Critical Theory seeps throughout our society, it is essential that those who oppose it affirm the importance of reason and objective truth in discussions about the social and cultural well-being of Australia. As Australian scholar Stephen Chavura has remarked of cancel culture: "there is no silver bullet" to end it; and the same is true of the influence of Critical Theory.[34]

As Critical Theory extends its reach through the institutions of our society, dominating public discourse and promoting falsehoods about oppression of minority groups, it threatens to divide our society by ignoring the individual person, assaulting communities, and assigning people to one or more groups of 'victims'. More than anything else, it is now essential that our political leaders take a firm stand on the issue and lead the nation away from this divisive and harmful ideology.

Identity politics has reared its head in the ongoing debates in Australian politics about issues such as misogyny, indigenous recognition, religion, and gender. But, as this paper has made clear, anyone who raises an alternative voice or puts forward a different point of view gets shouted down and humiliated.

Hence, the intervention of Prime Minister Scott Morrison in a speech delivered to a dinner in support of the United Israel Appeal on 29 April 2021, was both timely and important.[35] Morrison affirmed human dignity and individual responsibility as principal moral components of liberty and emphasised the importance of community in a healthy society. In particular, Morrison warned against what he called the "growing tendency to commodify people through identity politics":

> We must never surrender the truth that the experience and value of every human being is unique and personal. You are more, we are more, individually, more than the things others try to identify us by, you by, in this age of identity politics. You are more than your gender, you are more than your race, you are more than your sexuality, you are more than your ethnicity, you are more than your religion, your language group, your age.[36]

His attention to the harm identity politics and cancel culture is doing to Australia is welcome, as is his determination to set an example from the top. Morrison — who has come under attack for his own religious faith — appears to think it's getting out of hand and is now beginning to make speeches about identity politics and cancel culture.

Together with other political leaders, he must continue to emphasise the importance of the moral responsibility each of us bears as citizens, and for restoring to its central place in our society the principle of human dignity.

But this is not a task to be left to politicians alone — although strong political leadership on this issue is essential. In order that practices such as self-censorship do not become a prevailing, unconscious habit, anti-Theorists need to ensure they are informed about the ideology that informs Critical Theory, and also that they understand the intellectual paucity of the movement.

But above all, anti-Theorists need to act with courage, and commit to the pressing task of speaking out openly and often to defend the fundamental principles of an open and liberal Australia.

Endnotes

1 Paul Karp, "Australia urged to adopt plan to fight 'resurgence of racism"', *The Guardian,* (17 March 2021), Australia urged to adopt plan to fight 'resurgence of racism' | Australia news | The Guardian

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Related Works

Peter Kurti, *Cancelled! How ideological cleansing threatens Australia* (CIS Analysis Paper 13, 17 August 2020)

Peter Kurti, *The Tyranny of Tolerance: Threats to Religious Liberty in Australia* (Connorcourt Publishing, 18 June 2017)

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