

COMING CLEAN

The Rise of Critical Theory
and the Future of the Left



ERIC HEINZE

“A necessary corrective to our poisoned politics of historical memory.”—**Abby Smith Rumsey**, author of *Memory*, *Edited*

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**The Rise of Critical Theory and the Future
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To George—and to Ivan

We have to own even the darkest parts of our past, understand them and vow never to repeat them. We must not shield our eyes. We must not shrink away lest we lose it all.

—Ketanji Brown Jackson, speech commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing

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1 INTRODUCTION

“This was the right thing to do,” sighed Karl Frisch, the first openly LGBTQ+ member of the Fairfax, Virginia, school board. “But it will not sweep away the pain and hurt transgender and other gender-expansive students have experienced for years at the hands of careless peers or adults.” It was a sizzling day in the summer of 2021, and by a unanimous vote the board had just adopted rights for trans kids. Frisch felt relieved after school boards in neighboring counties had “descended into chaos” caused by “extremists” who wanted “to deny these students their very existence.”¹ From that day onward, teachers and staff would be expected to call children by their preferred names and pronouns—if a trans pupil in the past had been clothed and spoken to as a girl, the child could now decide to be called “he” and “him.” The children were also free to use bathrooms and locker rooms matching their chosen identities.

Not everyone celebrated. Traditionally minded parents, both white and nonwhite, had already marched against the new rules. Why did their race matter? They were also demonstrating against their children being taught critical race theory, a set of ideas about how racism has driven US history and society. That protest in turn sparked a counterprotest from liberal parents, including Michelle Leete, who snapped at her conservative rivals: “Let them die.”

Leete was a member of the local Parent-Teacher Association and local vice president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), one of the leading civil rights organizations in the United

States. She branded the right-wing backlash as “anti-education, anti-teacher, anti-equity, anti-history, anti-racial reckoning, anti-opportunities, anti-help people, anti-diversity, anti-platform, anti-science, anti-change agent, anti-social justice, anti-health care, anti-worker, anti-LGBTQ+, anti-children, anti-environment, anti-admissions policy change, anti-inclusion, anti-live-and-let live.”² Leete immediately apologized for her outburst, but it was too late. Conservatives were already tarring her online as a “hard” leftist who spouts “hateful, incendiary rhetoric.”³

“TEACHING PEOPLE TO HATE OUR COUNTRY”

A year earlier Donald Trump was still president. Rallying for a second term, Trump blasted a federal diversity training program, charging that course leaders were “teaching people to hate our country.” On the campaign trail, he threatened to slash the program’s funding.⁴ A few weeks later Trump was snarling that his reelection had been stolen, and from that moment onward right-wing assaults on racial and gender politics swung into high gear. Trump’s disciple, then rival, then disciple again Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida echoed: “Teaching kids to hate their country and to hate each other is not worth one red cent of taxpayer money.” Eyeing his own White House bid, DeSantis growled: “There’s no room in our classrooms for things like critical race theory.”⁵

The term *critical race theory*, already circulating for decades on college campuses, now spread like wildfire, and people across the globe were googling it. Trump called for a nationwide ban on promoting these ideas in schools and government programs. Steve Bannon, the one-time Trump confidante who was later convicted for contempt of Congress in conjunction with the attacks on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, boasted that the people scorning race and gender theory were not fanatics but “mainstream suburban moms.” He winked at one interviewer: “This is how we are going to win.”⁶

But going back to Michelle Leete, what jumps out from her impromptu list is the mix of causes she fused together. Consider the two that sparked the protests, trans rights and racial justice. Where some people would see two very different issues, many on the left see a shared history of social exclusion.

Of course, several items on Leete's list do not belong only to the left. We all want children to learn history, but whose history? How much time should schools spend on the accomplishments of straight, white men and how much on slaves, women, colonized peoples, and ethnic, national, or gender and sexual minorities?

What also jumps out from these battles is an arsenal of new vocabularies. For decades, conservatives had ignored critical race theory, so how did figures such as Trump, DeSantis, and Bannon suddenly become captivated by it? Before January 2020, the term had been heard on the right-wing Fox News network all of three times, then suddenly it was uttered 537 times in May 2021 and more than 900 times the following month.⁷ Meanwhile, *transsexual* became *transgender*, then *trans person*, which is the opposite of *cis person*, while *gender* in many contexts replaced *sex* for reasons many people still struggle to grasp. When a bill was introduced in Congress in early 2021 to ban discrimination against LGBTQ+ people, unlikely feminists such as the hard-right Ted Cruz, Josh Hawley, and Tom Cotton suddenly turned incandescent that trans rights were sparking a “war on women.”⁸

The mass media soon realized that they needed to bring the public up to speed. For example, the *Healthline* website observed: “Despite their similar definitions, many transgender people don’t identify with the term transsexual.”⁹ Meanwhile, as to critical race theory, one Associated Press article explained that it “examines the way race and racism influences politics, culture and the law.”¹⁰ Yet that definition doesn’t help much, given that the media have talked about these problems for ages. Surely critical race theory must stand for something more or something different. In another article, *Time* quoted Priscilla Ocen, a Los Angeles academic who describes critical race theory as “calling for a society that is egalitarian, a society that is just, and a society that is inclusive.”¹¹ This gets us closer, chiming with Leete’s idea that values such as equality, justice, and inclusion are about more than just race. Also at stake are conflicts around class, sex, gender, religion, poverty, nationality, and any number of intersections of these and other traits.

In fact, *intersectionality* is another term being newly bandied about. It means that histories of oppression include subgroups that divide and interact in complex ways, so we cannot generalize about any single group. For

example, in Western societies the higher status of whites over nonwhites has in some ways overlapped with, but in other ways differed from, the higher status of men over women. Black women are situated neither like white women nor like Black men.¹² Given the range of combinations, it will come as no surprise that the policies in Fairfax concerning critical race theory and LGBTQ+ politics form only a subset that we can place under a broader tent known as *critical theory*, which examines a variety of interrelated histories of violence, exploitation, and discrimination.¹³

MEMORY POLITICS

Today we find critical theorists—or “crits,” as they are often called—around the world, hatching many of the ideas that propel the left. This is why I usually refer to leftist, progressive, and critical theory interchangeably in this book, even though distinctions could be drawn between them.¹⁴ Crits write in fields as varied as economics, law, politics, war, media, education, art, and climate change, and it can be hard to find much unity among them, yet many crits accept some version of the following point: *it is crucial to educate the public about patterns of oppression waged by and within Western societies over hundreds of years.*¹⁵

Some people dismiss this trend as “grievance studies,” serving, as Trump and DeSantis would have it, to make people “hate” Western liberal democracies. It can also be described in more neutral terms as *memory politics* because we can remedy current social controversies only by grasping their historical roots.¹⁶ If you wonder whether dwelling on the past is time well spent, then try telling a group of leftists that you’re a pragmatist—that you refuse to brood about history because you want to tackle problems in the here and now. The longer you persist, the more you will end up talking about history because only in history do patterns of longstanding injustice emerge. Race, colonialism, gender, sex, war, and economic exploitation involve problems of historical knowledge, so there is no such thing as *no* memory politics. State-orchestrated amnesia itself is a form of memory politics—indeed, the most sinister kind. It is the history taught in Putin’s Russia and Xi’s China. It is the history favored by school boards in the United States that want to

replace the words *slave trade* in children's textbooks with euphemisms like *involuntary relocation* or to describe nineteenth-century plantation slavery as an opportunity for slaves to learn "skills" that "could be applied for their personal benefit."¹⁷

Memory politics unfold in two steps. *Memory* forms the first step, where we gather evidence about past injustices. But, for critics, *politics* forms the second and decisive step because harms caused by racism, colonialism, sexism, heteronormativity, or militarism have never stopped. These evils have continued into the present and can never be overcome until the public understands them. Recall William Faulkner's quip: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."¹⁸ Memory politics demands that we connect the dots from past wrongs to present crises. We will end cycles of injustice only by publicly and proactively communicating the West's bleak histories to future generations.¹⁹

Memory politics can be called the left's most powerful contribution to today's world, as a quick comparison makes clear. A few centuries ago, our disputes about justice often involved questions about who held the rightful claim to a throne, or how powers should divide between the church and the state, or what kind of authority a monarch could legitimately wield over other members of the aristocracy. But nowadays, when you find yourself locked into a war of words around the dinner table, I doubt you are debating those types of questions. More likely, you are arguing about issues such as race, class, sex, or gender. Here are a few examples. Typical social problems today involve topics as different as earning power, street crime, illegal immigration, health care, environmental protection, child protection, abortion rights, weapons possession, substance abuse, criminal justice, or access to education. At first glance, these issues seem to have little in common, yet in all of them discussions about unfair impacts based on race, class, sex, or gender often end up playing a crucial role.

Progressive stances do not always triumph in debates on these issues, yet the left's single greatest achievement in today's society consists in having defined the very terms we use to discuss justice, regardless of the positions each of us may take on any given controversy. People like Trump and DeSantis may holler right-wing stances in debates about race, class, sex, or gender,

but what leftists pioneered long ago was a culture in which *these* are the issues that define the arguments we are all having and the ways in which we are all thinking about justice. Leftists often claim to speak from an underdog position, yet when it comes to the single most powerful idea in ethics, law, and politics—the idea of justice—it is the left that has defined our conversations. To shape culture in such a pervasive way is to wield power indeed.

Once justice is defined in terms of race, class, sex, or gender, our debates swiftly become debates about history. We saw this in Fairfax’s culture wars, which involved plenty of memory politics. Again, recall school board member Frisch lamenting the “pain and hurt . . . experienced for years” by trans kids. Today, battles about memory are raging around the world. In 2020, more than 250,000 people signed a petition to the British Parliament entitled “Teach Britain’s Colonial Past as Part of the UK’s Compulsory Curriculum.” The document insisted that by educating children about “the events of the past, we can forge a better future.” How would this education work? The petition stated: “Colonial powers must own up to their pasts by raising awareness of the forced labour of Black people, past and present mistreatment of BAME [Black, Asian, and Middle Eastern] people, and most importantly, how this contributes to the unfair systems of power at the foundation of our modern society.”²⁰ At that time, Britain’s government was headed by Prime Minister Boris Johnson of the Conservative Party, whose minister for education dismissed the campaign, announcing that he did not want to “pile on” more topics in schools.²¹ Yet the petition authors fired back: “Vital information has been withheld from the people by institutions meant to educate them.”²² One of them recalled that she had read Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Jane Austin’s *Sense and Sensibility* in school but “never got to read a book with a person of colour in it.”²³

COMING CLEAN

In this book, I discuss some topics that might at first seem unrelated, such as the Ukraine war, LGBTQ+ people in Cuba, the concept of “hatred” in international relations, and the problem of left-wing antisemitism. I also discuss plenty of history, yet this is not a history book. Most of my focus is not on

what I have just described as step 1 of memory politics but on step 2—not on recording facts but on how facts are then spread into public awareness.

For more than a century, critical theorists have revolutionized what it means to discuss history. Today, critics can be found around the world, but in this book I focus on voices active in western Europe and North America. These voices rightly reject efforts to whitewash history through tales of national grandeur. They rightly demand that we must come clean about Western violence and exploitation at home and abroad. At step 2 of memory politics, they also rightly exhort us to push history beyond the seminar rooms and meeting halls. They argue that we must teach the public how to scrutinize centuries of Western wrongdoing, and any critic will tell you that the task is far from complete.

But this leads to my main question: How have critics taught the public about the left's *own* histories? A defining feature of critical theory is the left's ethos of collective self-examination, sometimes called "autocritique."²⁴ What this means is that leftists feel entitled to insist that we must all take a critical view of Western history because they have always reflected on the left's own histories, openly and candidly confessing leftist failures. For example, today's leftists usually distance themselves from atrocities committed in Stalin's Soviet Union, Mao's China, Pol Pot's Cambodia, and the North Korea of the Kim dynasty. In other words, when it comes to a memory politics *of the left*, most leftists today do take step 1. The problem is that they never take step 2. They never carry knowledge of leftist atrocities out of the seminar room and onto the streets. The left pushes the widest possible public education about Western wrongdoing, yet engages in no public education about leftist wrongdoing.

But surely this is how politics always works? Doesn't everyone in politics talk more about their rivals' evil than about evil on their own side? Perhaps. But then what do leftists mean when they insist that they engage in collective self-scrutiny? Why do they even bother making that claim? What light does it shed on the positions they advocate? As I argue in this book, to name just two examples for now, no tradition of leftist self-scrutiny can explain how a leading public intellectual such as Noam Chomsky, arguably the best-known American progressive of his generation, could have told the

Ukrainian people in 2022 that they ought to bear Russia's onslaught as if it were a "hurricane."²⁵ Nor can any such tradition explain how Jeremy Corbyn, leader of Britain's opposition Labour Party from 2015 to 2020, could oversee repeated episodes of antisemitism within his ranks while standing on the sidelines, clueless about how to respond.

Depending on definitions, all and sundry people have been described as leftist, from Olympe de Gouges to Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Kwame Nkrumah, Martin Luther King Jr., Simone de Beauvoir, Malcom X, Fidel Castro, Angela Davis, Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas, and Ruth Bader Ginsberg. We could add many more, only to discover that it would be futile to try unifying them under any single set of ideas, not least because they have waged battles against each other. In this book I do not attempt to define leftism but focus only on a few ideas that have exerted influence in recent years. Clearly, figures such as Chomsky and Corbyn do not represent the entire left, yet they raise questions about whether today's leftists are practicing the kind of self-scrutiny that they rightly demand from the rest of us.

This book puts some challenges to the left but not in the usual right-versus-left way. Nowadays the most predictable way to bash the left is through attacks on "wokeness," yet I am not antiwoke. I am pro-woke, but pro a very different kind of woke.²⁶ Another way to bash leftists would be to recite long lists of their hypocrisies, yet that tactic, too, would get us nowhere because hypocrisies arise everywhere in politics. Just to compare, conservatives today rail endlessly about free speech, yet in recent years we have seen them crack down on peaceful protesters and limit educators' choices to teach even an author such as Toni Morrison.²⁷ So for all my criticisms of the left, I shall have no warmer words for the right. Yes, conservatives—the clue lies in their name—may sooner or later be willing enough to concede their classist, racist, colonial, sexist, heteronormative, militarist, and other such histories. Indeed, in some countries conservatives have come up from behind to promote women and minorities within their parties and movements more successfully than their leftwing rivals.²⁸ Yet for the most part, conservatives have come late to the table of historical responsibility, and many still can't find the door.²⁹ At various points in this book, I certainly mention conservatives, but my aim is not to match every criticism of leftist injustice with

a comparison to injustice on the right. I do not attempt to balance every rebuke of socialism with a comparison to capitalism or every objection to the Soviet Union with a comparison to some Western nation at the same period.

Rather, the achievement of having conquered the very terms of our debates about justice comes with more responsibility than many leftists have been willing to acknowledge. If the left is to maintain any integrity in our public conversations, it must start to do what it has taught the rest of us to do. It is time for the left's memory politics *of the left* to progress from step 1 to step 2—to proceed from merely confessing leftist injustices to actively teaching the widest possible public about them. After all, if leftists do not think that mass education about *leftist* injustices is vital, then it becomes a mystery as to why they think that education about *Western* injustices should merit any attention at all. When leftists fail to take charge of their own histories, the right inevitably sweeps in to do it for them, often in mischievous ways. Of course, there are more forms of injustice between heaven and earth than only “Western” ones and “leftist” ones. Yet Western leftists have drawn repeatedly on this binarism without seriously considering both sides of it, so this book is not about all forms of injustice but focuses instead on leftist attitudes toward the left's own injustices. The reason democracy exists is so that we can review the past and debate solutions for the future, but leftists must change their attitudes toward history if they are to contribute credibly to that future.