

There's a story told about legendary Texas football coach Darrell Royal. When asked about his strategy for college football games, Coach Royal frequently said, "You dance with the one who brung ya." He meant he would use players and plays that had been successful in previous wins.

There's another meaning to the phrase.

If you go out to a dance, or on a date with someone, you don't fool around with someone else. If you've ever had that happen to you, it's one of the most painful things to experience, and one of the cruelest things you can do to another person.

All of which is by way of preface to some of what's going on in Unitarian Universalism and the larger culture these days. I have some strong opinions about this, which you may or may not agree with. But holding a diversity of views and ideas is a big part of our heritage, one that I think is under attack from both within and without.

So... who brung us to this dance?

By dance, I mean our vision of a better future for all.

Liberal Social Justice brought us.

Liberal Social Justice is grounded in our Protestant Christian heritage, which believes that people should be judged primarily by their individual characteristics rather than by their group membership. And although we may differ on many characteristics, we share a common humanity and fundamental universal rights.

Its political foundations are rooted in the Magna Carta, the 18th century Enlightenment, U.S. constitutionalism, including the Bill of Rights, and other documents, like the Civil Rights Act, and the Declaration of Human Rights. It seeks limited government with democratic elections, protections for freedom of the press and speech, separation of government powers, separation

of church and state, legal due process, and equal justice under the law.

Critics are invited to engage in civil debate, and to pursue and evaluate different viewpoints. It believes that laws of nature exist independently of humans. Truth can be discovered by empirical observation and experimentation, and it is subject to revision with new evidence.

Liberalism believes that we all share a common human nature, and that our common humanity trumps cultural, philosophical and religious differences.

That worldview brought us to where we are today as a religion and a country. Like all philosophies, it has flaws and weaknesses. It can be corrupted and abused by the powerful. And yet it has taken us from a world of unquestioned obedience to state and religious power, to one of greater freedom for all.

Let us contrast this with Critical Social Justice, popularly known as wokeism.

CSJ is rooted in postmodern critical theory and identitarian politics. It posits a simplistic model of society in which people are primarily divided by their race and/or gender, and then ranked and allocated certain resources depending on their identity. This goes against empirical evidence which paints a much more complex picture of society than a straightforward white supremacist, patriarchal, homophobic, ableist system of oppressions.

Disagreeing with this conception of the world cannot be a legitimate alternative viewpoint about how society works but is a symptom of complicity or fragility. Debates are rhetorical power struggles, not a way of discerning truth through dialog. Viewpoint diversity is not acceptable, only the diversity of race and/or gender.

CSJ advocates believe that human behavior is socially constructed, and is best explained via the lenses of learning theory, social constructionism, and cultural determinism. Humans are born a "blank slate" and there is no such thing as human nature. With proper socialization, utopian

societies emerge. It's worth noting that every attempt to create utopias that we know about has shipwrecked on the reefs of that non-existent human nature.

"Truth" is also socially constructed. "Truth" is subjective, and objectivity and reason are tools of the oppressors.

These are two wildly different ways of looking at, and interacting with, reality and other people. Trans author TaraElla breaks this down really well, when she writes:

*I think the conflict between woke and anti-woke is essentially a conflict between cultural systemism and those opposed to this worldview. On the systemist side are the woke, who believe that our culture primarily consists of interlocking and mutually reinforcing systems of oppression, and that to liberate women and oppressed minorities all these systems need to be deconstructed and dismantled. On the non-systemist side are liberals, conservatives (both libertarian and authoritarian), and even the progressive 'SJWs' of the 2010s. People on the non-systemist side have different and conflicting views of what culture is and what it should look like, but broadly speaking they believe that it is ideas, rather than systems of oppression, that create and influence our culture. Note that non-systemists don't always deny the systematic nature of some of the discrimination present in society, we just don't believe this is a good primary lens with which to analyze and change society. For example, for wokeists, 'white supremacy' is a system of oppression to be dismantled, while I see it as a bad idea that needs to be defeated in the marketplace of ideas. In the case of draconian abortion bans, wokeists see them as a product of the system of 'patriarchy', while I see them as the product of religious authoritarianism, an ideology rooted in unsound ideas and assumptions. Non-systemists also have different reasons to oppose systemism. I believe that cultural systemism is bad because it inherently denies the power of ideas, the importance of free will, truth and morality, and ultimately our personal agency to make society better.*

Liberalism and liberal social justice are our heritage. They brought us here, and enabled the

progress we've made on so many fronts. Unfortunately, critical social justice has quietly replaced our liberal heritage, with few of us aware of the distinction, and without any real discussion. I want to address a few ways in which CSJ is antithetical to that heritage and undermines it to our detriment.

Our first principle is that of the inherent worth and dignity of each person. It sees people as individuals, not just members of a group. I think we have to reject the crude and simplistic worldview promoted by the CSJ folks, and seek to overcome racism, sexism, and homophobia by always objecting to anybody's worth being evaluated by their race, gender, or sexuality and seeking empirical evidence of discrimination so we can overcome it.

Quite frankly, subsuming individuals into a group identity of any kind, and ascribing characteristics and motivations to them based on that identity, is what we've fought so hard against for centuries. And to find that idea being used to somehow create justice is a moral and theological corruption that I personally find repulsive.

The idea that the only cure for past discrimination against a group is discrimination against ancestors of the group that originally did the discriminating – well, that's just tit-for-tat. And it will just create more resentment, and continue the cycle of injustices that we are trying to break out of.

CSJ seeks to dismantle the perceived systems of oppression, which is a fine idea in theory, but it never tells us what institutions it will replace them with. When I ask various CSJ advocates this question, the answer is usually that some form of council or committee of the oppressed will make decisions. Once they get power, it'll be different. We've heard that story before.

This is not surprising, though, since the philosophical roots of CSJ go through Foucault, who believed that there was no such thing as justice, only power. Might makes right, which means there is no moral center there.

You can almost hear the click of Madame Defarge's knitting needles as she sends people to the guillotine.

The great UU theologian John Luther Adams, wrote that "The decisive forms of goodness in society are institutional forms." He goes on to say that, "The faith of the liberal must express itself in societal forms, in the forms of education, in economic and social organization, in political organization. Without these, freedom and justice in community are impossible... The creation of justice in community requires the organization of power. Through the organization of power, liberated persons tie into history; otherwise they cannot achieve freedom in history. Injustice in community is an abuse of power, and justice is an exercise of just and lawful institutional power."

Lawful power means rule by law, and rules for people and institutions. Are they perfect? Can they be corrupted? Of course, but if the alternative is committees of the elect, or the Politburo, or religious elites that rule by dogma and fiat, then give me those flawed institutions.

There are multiple other ways that critical social justice violates our heritage and our principles, but there are two things that I think are in direct conflict with our theology and traditions.

First, and this is perhaps not obvious, the trust necessary for the larger social good is not possible in a world that is seen as solely based on systems of oppression.

To put it simply, this lens not only corrupts all relationships, it devolves them into the war of all against all. This ultimately divides rather than unites, and leads nowhere a religious people want to go. The only question in such a world is: "Are you with us, or against us?"

My answer is: Neither, and piss off.

*Second, the original liberal consensus that arose during the Enlightenment was a radically new social structure that enabled people to freely discover the truth for themselves. It replaced*

*feudal society with a liberal society that allowed free inquiry to flourish, and ended religion's monopoly on power and knowledge.*

*Liberalism is not just a philosophy but is also a means to resolve conflict. Liberalism views the wide variety of human beliefs on almost every subject imaginable as a strength. It encourages civil, reasoned debate for the purposes of advancing knowledge, finding common ground, and making reasonable accommodations for differing opinions. Liberalism is not the solution to disagreements, but a system that allows us to disagree without turning to violence or authoritarianism. Its philosophy is that principled people from across the political spectrum have a vested interest in protecting the foundations of liberal society— especially advocates of social justice.*

*Acting in the service of a more socially just society requires acting against Critical Social Justice and in the service of liberal social justice. It is only within a liberal framework that multiple viewpoints on social justice can exist and be argued for. It is only within the liberal marketplace of ideas that people's arguments can be separated from their identities, allowing anybody to subscribe to any viewpoint and challenge any viewpoint and not be confined to the one presumptuously deemed to be appropriate for their race, gender, or sexuality.*

*It was liberalism that convinced society that women and racial and sexual minorities were individuals with their own minds and voices and in possession of exactly the same moral right to access everything society had to offer—including the full range of ideas.*

*It is this liberal concept of social justice, with its extraordinary record of achievement, that we must defend and continue to promote.<sup>1</sup>*

Liberalism and liberal social justice brought us to this dance, and have taken us a long way.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Helen Pluckrose for her excellent defense of liberal social justice.

I believe that they can and will take us all the way to a truly fair society. I'm not going home with CSJ, no matter how sweet their talk, or how attractive they may be. I'm not leaving liberal social justice broken-hearted at the dance.

That's because I respect the work and struggles of those who came before us, and in carrying on those ideas and institutions, not because 'tradition' or I'm 'fragile', but because they work.

I'll dig deeper next month, in Part 2. But for now, I hope I given you some ideas to think about and debate.