# White Complicity and the "Inability to Dissent/Disagree"

Barbara Applebaum

*Syracuse University*

**Scenario 1:** At a recent conference, a paper presentation focused on the meaning of and the significance of teaching about white complicity and systemic racism in higher education. During the question-and-answer period, a well-known academic scholar inquired: "How can this idea have any meaning if there is no way to disagree with it? The concept is apparently self-justifying. Anything I say to challenge the idea can be construed as a reflection of my white complicity in an infinite circularity."

**Scenario 2:** In an all-school faculty workshop on the topic of building anti-racist curricula in higher education courses, a white professor insisted that teaching such ideas as white privilege, white fragility, and white complicity is a form of indoctrination and censorship because students cannot ask legitimate questions without being accused of being racist. Citing John McWhorter's recent book, *Woke Racism*, the white professor contended that white students are being "muzzled, straitjacketed, tied down, and chloroformed for good measure."[1] The white colleague continued, "If white students are forced into a dilemma so that whatever they do will be construed as racism, then unless they conform to the social justice agenda their only response is to remain silent in the classroom."

The "inability to dissent critique" often arises in discussions around white complicity in anti-racist education. The academic scholar in the first scenario intimates that the coherence of the concept is compromised when

the concept itself can be mounted as a defense in any attempt to defeat it. Not being able to disagree with a concept allegedly delegitimizes it and disproves the attendant experiences the concept is attempting to shed light upon. The white professor in the second scenario maintains that the inability to dissent entails that teaching about white complicity (among other anti-racist concepts) is a form of indoctrination because students are shamed into silence. I refer to this charge as "the inability to disagree critique" or the ITD critique. While some may argue that dissent and disagreement differ, in this paper I will be using the terms interchangeably. This charge is especially worthy of close critical examination because such accusations have supported State bans prohibiting the teaching of specific approaches to race and racism in schools and higher education.

Most perplexing is how the criticism continues to be launched at the same time as opposition (that is, disagreement) persists and is amplified. Thus, one way of responding to the claim is to show the many ways in which disagreement is not restricted and, in fact, abounds. However, I am interested in exploring what the ITD critique does. Therefore, I inquire, what is the force behind the assumption of "inability" in the critique? Does white complicity *conceptually and/or pragmatically* prohibit the ability to contest it, and if so, does this ascribed "inability" invalidate the phenomenon the concept attempts to expose? Perhaps this exploration can clarify whether the critique does something other than what it says it does.

Nishi et al. argue that in the context of questions around whiteness, it is appropriate to offer both straightforward responses as well as subcontextual responses that acknowledge when such questions do other things than what they appear to do.[2] In the spirit of this advice, I weave together both direct and subcontextual responses to the ITD critique in the hopes of exploring whether this claim does things other than what it appears to do.

The first section of this paper addresses the meaning of the concept of white complicity and is followed by the second section that establishes the prevalence of the "the inability to dissent/disagree critique." The third section explores the type of "inability" the critique presumes by contrasting it to other types of ideas and statements that do not allow for disagreement or that make

disagreement so difficult that both agreeing and disagreeing incur undesirable consequences. Exploring the type of constraints involved in paradoxes, dilemmas, and double binds may illuminate the implied force behind the critique against white complicity and the concomitant charge of indoctrination.

The final section proposes that in the context of white complicity the charge of being unable to dissent/disagree is more about protecting innocence and avoiding discomfort than about coercion, on the one hand, and results in inhibiting certain concepts that help us to understand social injustice from being included in the mainstream epistemological framework, on the other. Rather than interpreting white complicity as primarily an accusation of guilt, the concept of white complicity calls for cultivating a willingness to stay with the discomfort of learning difficult knowledge. Teaching about white complicity does not entail that white people are muzzled or silenced but rather underscores the need for vigilance.

## WHITE COMPLICITY

White complicity brings to the forefront the ways in which white people through their constitution as white, through discursive practices of denial, and by benefitting from white privilege, contribute to the maintenance of systemic racial injustice. From this perspective, all white people, regardless of one's good intentions, must *vigilantly consider* the ways in which they are implicated in the perpetuation of systemic white supremacy.

The concept of white complicity emerges from the idea that racism is not exclusively about individual bad attitudes or inaccurate beliefs but is *about how these attitudes, beliefs and practices are connected to a realm of social and structural power*. Systemic white supremacy is the term often employed by critical race scholars to encompass this broader idea. The concept does not refer exclusively to the self-conscious racism of white supremacist hate groups. Instead, following Frances Lee Ansley, systemic white supremacy denotes,

> … a political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance

and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.[3]

The advantage of employing the term systemic white supremacy is that the systematicity of racism is brought to the forefront. More specifically, the concept helps to tie what might seem like isolated practices and events to larger patterns of practices that perpetuate an unjust system and, thus, makes power relations visible. That is, systemic white supremacy connects individuals to systems, hence the term white complicity surfaces.

One of the significant insights that the concept of white complicity exposes is that there are a variety of discursive strategies to deny complicity. Such denials are not isolated acts of an individual but rather patterns of collective discursive strategies that, when understood from a macro-perspective, support white comfort, as well as protect dominant frameworks of intelligibility from challenge. White denials, thus, are "not original – that is, they are already available, already common forms of asserting dominance."[4] Moreover, the effect of patterns of denials is to obstruct engagement around uncomfortable conversations that may challenge one's world view and one's view of oneself.[5]

It is important to note that the definition of systemic white supremacy, and the resultant concept of white complicity, makes it conceivable to inquire how racial injustice could be reproduced by well-intentioned white individuals, people who might believe that they are paragons of anti-racism. Racial injustice, according to this view, is not only upheld by individuals with prejudicial beliefs or hateful emotions. Effect rather than intention is key for understanding how racial injustice endures. From this perspective, all white people, regardless of one's good intentions, and whether they are consciously aware of the effects of their practices or not, are encouraged to be continually open to the ways in which they may be implicated in the perpetuation of systemic white supremacy. Vigilance, therefore, is key to understanding the white complicity claim.

The concept of white complicity is a tool that makes it possible to contemplate how white people are linked both as beneficiaries and as co-contributors to the maintenance of unjust racial systems. As already noted, even

white people who consider themselves as models of anti-racism are not immune from complicity.[6] In a powerful critique of declarations of whiteness, Sara Ahmed convincingly demonstrates how such white confessions are "non-performative," they do not do what they say but rather do something else.[7] Ahmed draws attention to well-intentioned white people who publicly declare/admit to having privilege. According to Ahmed, the utterance can become a way to show that one is not actually racist, or at least not as bad as white people who refuse to recognize privilege. In a significant warning, Ahmed cautions white people to stay implicated in what they critique.

## THE INABILITY TO DISSENT/DISAGREE (ITD) CRITIQUE

One challenge to the white complicity claim (and other concepts related to it) is that such ideas curtail dissent. James A. Lindsay, mathematician and cultural critic who founded The New Discourses website, substantiates his claim that "woke racism" is a cult of indoctrination by pointing to its contradictory tenets. According to Lindsay,

> You must understand racism and admit that you cannot understand racism. You must admit to your complicity in racism and pledge to do better knowing that it is impossible to do better. You must be an ally but accept that you will always do your allyship wrong.[8]

Lindsay asserts that the cognitive dissonance created by such impossible and paradoxical demands can only be relieved by committing oneself to "do better," which he argues is a technique of recruitment attributed to cults. Although Lindsay focuses on the concept of white fragility, he also expands his critique to "more or less all of the Critical Social Justice" concepts and ideas, contending that:

> the cult doctrine … is that every white (and white adjacent) person is a racist by default, and there are only those with the moral and emotional fortitude to face that (which is good, according to doctrine) and those who lack the necessary moral fiber.[9]

According to Lindsay the concepts of Critical Social Justice are self-refuting. Moreover, the inability to disagree and to dissent is evidence of a cult of

indoctrination.

It is interesting to note that this claimed inability to disagree does not seem to prevent Lindsay from clearly mounting a critique or disagreement against the tenets of these anti-racist concepts and ideas. Let's put that thought aside for now because Lindsay is not alone in advancing the ITD critique.

Conservative activist and senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, Christopher Rufo explicitly cites Lindsay's arguments about cult programming when he describes the anti-racism training session designed (as he quotes from the training session) "to help white workers for the City of Seattle to examine their complicity in the system of white supremacy" and "interrupt racism in ways that are accountable to Black, Indigenous and People of Color." Rufo maintains that the inability to disagree with the white complicity premise is a "rhetorical trap." As evidence of this "trap," Rufo cites Ibram X. Kendi who writes, "if you are not an 'antiracist,' then you are a 'racist' – and must be held to account."[10]

Institutions of higher education have increasingly committed themselves to anti-racism and diversity training programs. How these initiatives are implemented have not escaped justified critique.[11] Yet, critiquing the implementation of anti-racism education is not necessarily to reject anti-racism education. Nevertheless, there is a loud call for such rejection from some conservative authorities. They claim that these training programs teach concepts and histories that cannot be challenged without the risk of being labeled racist. Perhaps the loudest outcry of the ITD critique has arisen by those who advocate banning teaching "critical race theory" in public schools. State-level efforts to ban critical approaches to systemic racism they consider "radical" and "divisive" are justified in the name of saving children from anti-racist indoctrination. As John McWhorter forewarns parents, "Make no mistake: These people are coming after your kids."[12]

Notably, the arguments of PACT (Parents Against Critical Theory) explicitly maintain that "critical race theory" delegitimizes dissent.[13] Children, according to PACT, are compelled to believe specific beliefs about race, sex, or religion without being able to disagree. PACT members insist, for example, that concepts such as white fragility and white privilege self-referentially make

dissent impossible. A white person, they maintain, cannot voice disagreement since such disagreement will be dismissed as a product of white fragility or white privilege. As Jesse Lile puts it about white fragility (and PACT extends this argument to all Critical Theory ideas),

> Herein is the larger overarching problem: a discussion doesn't appear to be the goal. … This concept of white fragility is designed to secure one-way lectures, not discussions.[14]

PACT supporters claim that the concepts at the heart of anti-racism pedagogy obliterate the possibility of racial dialogue to which the advocates of anti-racism profess to aspire.

Indeed, the ITD critique (ostensibly) has a lot of force. Being able to disagree is the foundation of democratic education. What type of "inability" might be presumed, however, by the ITD claim? Perhaps examining other situations in which disagreement is curtailed or choice is limited to only alternatives that are undesirable might offer some insights as to what the ITD critique does. In the next section, the coercive force behind paradoxes, dilemmas, and double binds will be considered.

## COERCION, LACK OF FREEDOM, AND DIFFICULT CHOICES: PARADOXES, DILEMMAS, AND DOUBLE BINDS

There are various situations in which choices are experienced as coercively limited and there are statements and concepts that seem impossible to disagree with. The force of a paradox, for example, may emanate from a logical irrefutability, something that is impossible to prove wrong, or to be denied. The famous Liar Paradox involves the statement, "I am lying." If the statement is true, then it asserts that it is false. If the statement is false, then since it asserts itself as false, it is true. Whatever way you turn, the conclusion is a contradiction that leads to vicious circularity or infinite regress.[15] It might be tempting to believe that the declaration is meaningless, yet Western philosophers have debated the issue of paradoxes since the Ancient Greeks acknowledging that the structure of paradoxes make it possible for us to expand our understanding of truth, logic, and language.

One can recognize how ill-advised it is to dismiss such paradoxes as meaningless when we consider the rich debates around Harvey Siegel's tran-

scendental argument for the justification of rationality.[16] If rationality is the condition of its refutation, it cannot be refuted. Any rebuttal of rationality depends on the very presumption of rationality that one is purporting to reject. Although some might want to dismiss this type of transcendental argument as question-begging and limited,[17] the ensuing discussions around this paradox are philosophically enlightening and have contributed to our understanding of the role of rationality and reason in education.

In the context of white complicity, critics may believe that the concept of white complicity seems like a logical paradox whose contradictory force is experienced as unbearably resistant to dissent. The critic might argue that if denials of complicity make one complicit, then opposition is logically impossible. Yet this seems mistaken since the ITD critique is itself a form of dissent and, thus, disagreement per se is not impossible. Moreover, constructive criticism of many ideas related to white complicity exist and continue to grow (see Sara Ahmed, Zeus Leonardo, Timothy Lensmire et al., Lawrence Blum, just to mention a few).[18] In fact, even outside of academia, social media has critically taken up the idea of performative anti-racism. These critiques are not marginalized or silenced but seriously engaged with. Thus, the charge that is focused on an "inability to dissent/disagree" is unpersuasive and disingenuous.

Perhaps the force of "inability" relates less from inherent logical contradiction and more from pragmatic constraints. A dilemma is a difficult choice between conflicting needs or desires. The type of dilemma I am concerned with consists of situations where one is confronted with two undesirable courses of action, and one must choose between the two. Such dilemmas may be referred to as double-binds. Is the force of the ITD critique referring to no-win situations where one is "*damned* if you do, *damned* if you don't"?

Insight about double-binds can be gleaned from Marilyn Frye's classic article about the meaning of oppression. According to Frye, oppressive double-binds involve "situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure, or deprivation."[19] Frye is particularly concerned with *oppressive* double-binds or the situation in which no matter what a woman does, she not only confronts danger but also, as Sukaina Hirji points out, risks becoming a mechanism in her own oppression.[20] Frye

underscores how oppressive double-binds are a ubiquitous feature in the lives of marginalized groups.

While Frye's analysis is primarily focused on *oppressive* double-binds, there is something important to highlight when Frye argues that such double-binds *cannot be understood in isolation from the oppressive system that creates them*. In other words, the limitations that contribute to the coercive choice are not a product of discrete and singular barriers but, rather are a result of barriers that are connected by a network of social forces that serve to constrain the mobility of marginalized groups. The network of barriers is only visible, Frye insists, when one shifts from a micro- to a macro-perspective. Indeed, when viewed in isolation from the larger oppressive system, some limitations might seem harmless or have been overcome. Taking a macro-perspective is crucial to understanding the source of the force of the double-bind.

In addition, Frye notes that taking a macro-perspective is important for understanding situations that *might be experienced* as double-binds by dominant group members. Frye explains that a cis-gendered man, not oppressed by other intersections of identity, might reasonably *feel* frustrated and even suffer from the expectations that norms of masculinity impose on men. The force of the limitation, however, is not oppressive. While men might experience the limitation as a restriction, Frye argues that such limitations are both created and maintained by men, and *for the benefit of men as a social group*.

Frye recognizes that reference to a binary of oppressed/oppressors may lead some to argue that her argument implies that all men are "damned" as oppressors by virtue of being male in a patriarchal society.[21] In other words, some may contend, if, by definition, all men oppress women under systems of patriarchy, this is a form of "male bashing." Frye's response to this view is instructive. Frye counsels a shift away from the exclusive focus on blame which can obstruct the possibility of collectively disrupting patriarchy and compulsory heteronormativity that design feelings of constraint.[22] Frye urges such men to ask: *Who constructs such barriers? How are they maintained? Whose interests do such barriers serve?*[23] Borrowing from Frye, I ask: *Who benefits from the interpretation of white complicity as an indoctrinating double-bind that precludes dissent?*

Another version of the ITD charge is informative. Recently, some

have accused critical social justice advocates of using a "Kafka trap."[24] The concept of the Kafka trap is derived from Franz Kafka's novel, *The Trial*, where in an absurd totalitarian world, the protagonist is arrested of serious crimes which are never specified and his refusal to acknowledge his guilt becomes a sign of his guilt.

The connection between the Kafka trap and anti-racist education was first made in 2010, by Eric Raymond, a software developer who had many controversial beliefs.[25] Raymond accused progressive movements, particularly feminism, of circumventing rational grounds and convincing by manipulation. Adopting Raymond's argument, some currently insist that it is ridiculous for "social justice warriors" to maintain that if one refuses to acknowledge one is guilty of racism that this confirms that you are guilty of racism.[26] One becomes trapped in a circular and unfalsifiable argument because accusations of racism, transphobia, or homophobia cannot be refuted without proving one's guilt. Again, building upon Raymond, some recent media commentaries insist that the Kafka trap is used by progressive movements to manipulate people to believe that *no one can be innocent ever again.* This concern is telling.

What this argument willfully ignores is the possibility that the race for innocence can be related to complicity.[27] James Baldwin famously cautions, "It is the innocence which constitutes the crime"?[28] What if protecting white innocence obstructs the ability to understand oppressive double binds that marginalized groups encounter every day? Similarly, scholars such as Gloria Wekker, Terese Jonsson, and Eduardo Bonilla Silva, among others, suggest that passionate attachments to innocence can exist alongside a failure to grasp the experiences of marginalized groups and alongside a willingness to ignore the persistent legacy of systemic racism.[29] I repeat Frye's cautions, "Who stands to benefit from the Kafka trap argument and what does it obscure from consideration?"

## WHITE COMPLICITY: INABILITY TO DISAGREE OR A TOOL FOR EXPOSING HOW SYSTEMIC INJUSTICE IS MAINTAINED?

When a critique is heard as censorship a critique is not heard. In fact the allegation of censorship is often what is censoring; what stops a critique from staying in circulation.[30]

The loud and widespread opposition to the concept of white complicity belies the validity of the charge whose focus is on an "inability to disagree." Thus, the force of the "inability" in the charge must be found elsewhere. The "inability" presumed in the accusation, I argue, stems from the insistence of reading the white complicity claim as a double-bind, "damning" white people. If one is reluctant to consider white complicity as a call for vigilance and instead interpret it exclusively as an accusation of blame, the charge of "inability to dissent/disagree" can function to invalidate the concept that is said to bridge no dissent. This may be a way of shutting down what one does not agree with and may also support a dangerous misconception of what the concept is attempting to do.

By failing to appreciate the significance of certain concepts and what they tell us about what has been traditionally obscured by dominant epistemological frameworks, the ITD critique can serve to dismiss (not only disagree with) any social justice purpose of the concept. Whose interests are served when white complicity is apprehended in this way? Before I return to this question, I want to briefly mention a related version of the critique.

The ITD critique is sometimes framed as asking hopelessly, "what can white people do?" If there is nothing white people can do (to transcend their complicity), then white complicity is an unhelpful concept. In an oft-quoted passage, Sara Ahmed responds to white students who ask that same question by explaining that if one wants an answer to that question too quickly, one risks not attending to what marginalized groups are expressing about their experiences.[31] As Ahmed puts it,

> If we want to know how things can be different too
> quickly, then we might not hear anything at all. … It is by
> showing how we are stuck, by attending to what is habitual
> and routine in 'the what' of the world, that we can keep open
> the possibility of habit changes, without using that possibility
> to displace our attention to the present, and without simply
> wishing for new tricks.[32]

Instead of avoiding and eluding discomfort, she recommends first sitting with the discomfort, examining it, and considering what might be learned

from it.

In his letter addressed to white Americans, George Yancy similarly cautions white people to tarry with discomfort. Yancy emphasizes explicitly that he is not asking white people to feel bad or to wallow in guilt but instead to be willing to tarry with the possible ways white people perpetrate a racist society.[33] To advocate for such lingering or tarrying, does not entail that white people are "muzzled" or "indoctrinated." Instead, it is a call for vigilance about the ways white innocence is protected and *how shielding white innocence can limit what can be contemplated.*

This may appear to be calling upon the idea of white fragility as the response to the ITD critique but as I have argued elsewhere this type of response is misguided and problematic because these types of critiques do something other than they appear to do.[34] The ITD critique contributes to the exclusion of certain concepts from the mainstream epistemologically framework, specifically concepts that can help us understands how social injustice endures. This shields such dominant frameworks from challenge and, consequently, protects those who are comfortable with and who benefit from them.

Regarding the claim that students are unable to disagree when discussions of systemic white supremacy and white complicity arise in the classroom and that this is evidence of indoctrination, we might ask whether students are unable to disagree or whether they are being encouraged to stay with the discomfort of difficult conversations? The aim of teaching about systemic white supremacy and white complicity is not to indoctrinate but to raise questions about how students may already be indoctrinated in schools that teach from a perspective that is exclusively grounded in dominant norms purporting to be neutral and objective.

Some might retort by raising the issue of "cancel culture."[35] Disagreeing with progressive ideas risks harsh consequences, ostracism, and silencing (sometimes severely damaging careers) due to being cancelled. One may feel that there is no way to defend oneself. Conservative commentators emphasize the chilling effect on speech and maintain that such censorship is a form of social media mob rule, a witch hunt. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to adequately examine this complex contention, one point might be underscored.

Some forms of "cancel culture" function as "resistant epistemic disengagement." Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. contends that disengaging and calling others to disengage from epistemically oppressive frameworks is a form of collective epistemic resistance.[36] In other words, such disengagement is a call for accountability for practices that support the marginalization of certain groups and that rescind hard-fought-for civil rights.[37] To be at the receiving end of such canceling can be distressing, for sure. However, why not understand such canceling as triggered by the violence resulting from statements that give rise for the need to cancel? As Sara Ahmed points out, statements that oppress marginalized groups are not just another viewpoint but "techniques of elimination," a chipping away of marginalized existence.[38] This is related to any attempt to advance democratic dialogue. Is dialogue possible when the existence of one group in the dialogue is being denied?

I hesitate to offer fixed solutions as to how to respond when one encounters the ITD critique as each response must consider the context in which the critique is voiced. Instead, I hope to have demonstrated how teaching about white complicity is not about shaming white students into silence. Rather, the aim is to open up discussion around how white innocence and white comfort can be shielded from challenge, and how certain concepts are necessary for democratic dialogue. When one is willing to consider white complicity as a call for vigilance, teaching about what the term stands for becomes an opportunity for engagement rather than a form of indoctrination claimed to leave no room for discussion. Educating about white complicity does not involve a silencing indoctrination but instead involves a call for vigilance that can help confront and disrupt how systemic injustice is maintained so that a fair society for all is achievable.

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