

Andrew Sullivan: Privilege Is Beginning to Trump Reason in Our Culture

Super-blogger Andrew Sullivan [wrote about](#) a recent podcast that reveals a growing fissure between two schools of modern thought that could have far-reaching implications.

The discussion involved atheist author Sam Harris and Ezra Klein of Vox, two well-respected progressive thinkers, and began with genetics. Sullivan offers an overview:

“Klein doesn’t believe you can discuss the latest scientific arguments about genetics, environment, and IQ without integrating an account of the historical and political context that surrounds them. That means, for Ezra, that any contemporary discussion must defer to the context of the history of white supremacy, and its nefarious abuse of science, and thereby be deemed guilty of racism until proven innocent. What Harris is insisting on, in contrast, is that the science is the science regardless of history, and you can discuss that separately from a discussion of social policy or the past, and that, in scientific debate, the race and gender and identity of the participants are irrelevant, and only the arguments matter.”

The debate is actually about much more than genetics and science, however, and Sullivan understands this. Klein’s views, which largely embrace [critical theory philosophy](#), stand to reshape the entire foundation of social democracy, Sullivan suggests.

“Much of the left now holds that structural racism/sexism et al. is so overwhelming that it pollutes the exercise of reason itself. And it further argues that the very premises

of debate in a modern democracy – that everyone has an equal voice, regardless of their identity – must therefore be modified to account for these power differentials. And so Harris's position is flawed because, in Klein's words, it is simply a reflection of tribal bias, i.e., Harris is a white male, merely defending his privilege, not a free mind grappling with data. Indeed, Klein even believes his own engagement is flawed because he's white. All thought, in this view, is filtered first through racial and gender power structures. It has no independent realm.

'Privilege,' in other words, trumps reason, hence the need to 'check it' all times."

Harris and Klein appear to largely represent two schools of postmodern philosophy. Harris is on Team Reason, made up of Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire, Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza, etc. Klein is on Team Marx-Hegel, the thinkers most responsible for the critical theory ideas that emerged from [the Frankfurt School](#) in the 1960s.

Nietzsche came to believe that the primary driving force of mankind was the will to power. In this he was prophetic, for as Sullivan explains, the philosophy of the Frankfurt School is will to power writ large.

"This is the Frankfurt School made manifest. All discourse is a function of power; and power has to be restructured before any debate can be legitimately had; which means that 'diversity' must come before reason; and that suppression of some voices is required for true tolerance and an actual free debate to exist. Hence affirmative action – not to give some disadvantaged but able kids a chance to prove themselves as individual thinkers, regardless of their race, but to resist and overturn the racial power structures that exist on campus, before any truly free discussion can take place at all.

Science, for the Frankfurt School, therefore has no real validity as a separate mode of human thought. It is a social construct, like everything else, embedded in 'whiteness' and thereby oppressive in its essence."

Some Christian thinkers have [expressed concern](#) that modern politics has essentially become a form of will to power in which winning is all that matters, [no matter how it is achieved](#). But it's worth pointing out that will to power is not just antithetical to a Christian worldview; in some respects, will to power is also the antithesis of *reason*. At least Sullivan seems to think so.

"There has to be a space left for reason alone, for a free and open-ended review of evidence and data and arguments, regardless of the consequences, irrespective of the racial and gendered identities of the people trying to think things through. There has to be a space where reason can liberate an individual from his or her identity, rather than a world in which identity is fundamental and creates thought. We once constructed a space in liberal society, where that principle was sacrosanct, where ideas could be exchanged in rare freedom, regardless of who offered them, and debated on their merits."

Because of this, one might expect Christian intellectuals to make common cause with thinkers such as Sullivan and Harris to defeat the champions of Frankfurt School ideas. But there's a

snag: Christianity itself increasingly is [infused with social justice doctrine](#), at least as far as seeing the world through a prism of race, class, and gender.

This is perhaps not surprising. Most Christians, after all, probably are not unsympathetic to the *ends* of Frankfurt School thinkers: a more equal society. It is the *means* used to achieve the leveling of society that poses the great threat.

People who grasp this distinction will begin to see the truth of Sullivan's final words, in which he urges thinkers to resist the purveyors of identity politics.

"Resisting this tendency is not racist or sexist. It is about defending the possibility of a place where ideas matter more than identity."

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