

# Three Theories of Understanding

## Theory of Social Inequality

In its current manifestation, social inequality is not an isolated product of the twenty-first century. Today's social inequality exists in a complex, interconnected domain, as a strategic, ongoing historical project. Throughout the last ten centuries (approximately), capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy developed together. These systems are all connected – they are now intertwined, as they fuel and intensify one another. The idea of race and racial hierarchy was created to justify and support the systems of capitalism and colonialism, which are deeply tied to patriarchy – the irrational racial hierarchy quickly produced the system of white supremacy. The present stage of capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy cannot be separated or understood without the system of white supremacy. The interconnection of these systems with white supremacy further intensified and fueled social inequality. This understanding is informed by Ibram X. Kendi's book *Stamped from the Beginning*, which explores the journey of racist ideas in this country from the past to the present.

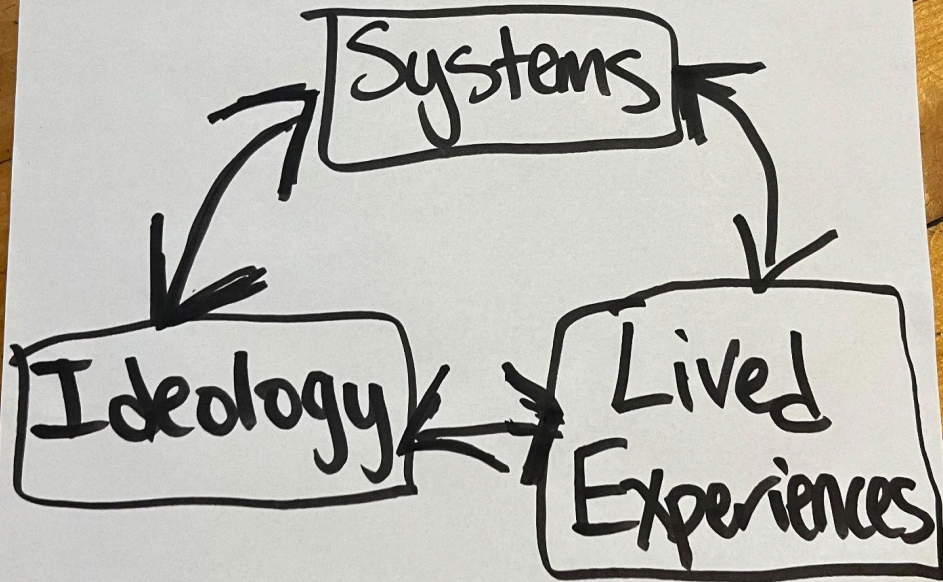
As Kendi argues, racism is an ideological justification for capitalism and colonialism. Capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy also inform ideology, including white supremacy. As the previous statements show, ideology informs systems and systems inform ideology. Lived experience also influences ideology, and ideology is used to understand, rationalize, and/or justify one's lived experience. Furthermore, both lived experience and ideology influence systems. Lastly, systems, with capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy as strong examples, clearly influence lived experiences. Through this ideological, lived experience, and systems web, social inequality is upheld, justified, and expanded.

Moreover, social inequality, despite other positive advances in society, continues and intensifies today because of the widespread assumption/belief that social inequality, and more specifically, that the white supremacist, patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist society that we live in, are innate and the "best" possible version of world governance and humanity. Furthermore, social inequality is upheld by popular ideologies for who is and who is not to blame for inequality and one's oppression. There is a popular ideology that the symptoms and negative experiences of inequality are caused by and the fault of the communities that experience them, or by the "failing" of individuals. Through this view of oppression, with utter ignorance of the dominant exploitative and inequitable systems and ideology, the reality and presence of widespread social inequality is obscured and upheld. At the same time, the opposite extreme of the argument, which solely blames systems, with no individual or community responsibility, upholds social inequality, too.

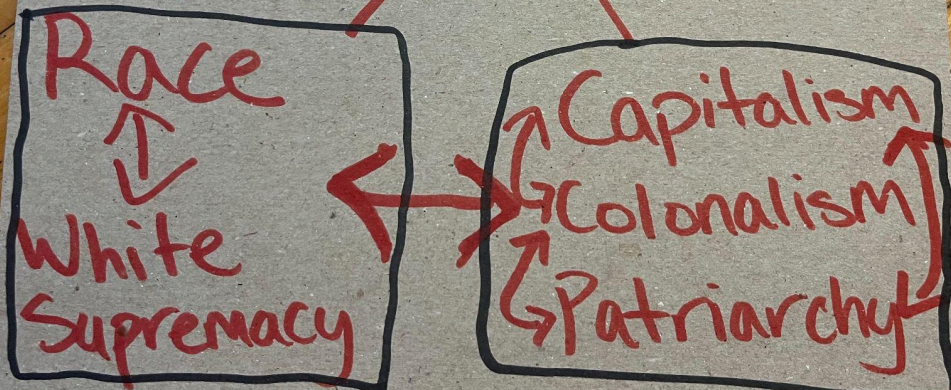
Oppressed individuals, or marginalized communities as a whole, may not have created the circumstances of their oppression, but it is possible to play a role in our own oppression. We can play by the script written by society's unjust systems and structures, or we can choose otherwise. To ignore the agency of the oppressed and their ability to support, challenge, and/or cope with their situation is to aid in their oppression. To reject that even the most marginalized people have agency and the potential to play a role in sustaining or resisting their own oppression is to say that they have no power, no control, no thought over the conditions of their daily lives. In doing so, we support the ideology and conditions of social inequality. Both sets of beliefs propel social inequality forward and are used to discredit policy and people who argue for positive change and justice, and who advocate for the possibility of a different world and experience.

Social inequality exists as seen today because of the development of capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy together. These systems intertwined and intensified each other. Moreover, today's social inequality is not just the result of the development of these three systems, but also how these unjust systems and social inequality are rationalized, largely unchallenged, and accepted as natural and inherent. Therefore, today's social inequality cannot be amended with just the elimination of capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. To amend social inequality requires a complete reimagining of society and global order. To amend social inequality, we must not just interrogate and change society—we as individuals must also change. To alleviate social inequality, we need a widespread commitment to human rights and dignity for all. We must integrate how we have accepted and internalized the messages and beliefs of these systems. To dismantle these systems, we must also dismantle their ideology, both implicitly and explicitly, inside us. To truly address social inequality, we must challenge our greed for power and resources. We must acknowledge that to end social inequality will require sacrificing our taken-for-granted privileges, power, and comfort – we must especially let go of white privilege. To amend social inequality, we must acknowledge and accept that both our individual lives and social world will radically change.

# ★ Initial Specific Historic Circumstances



# POWER & GREED



## **Theory of Social Change**

In the spring of 2025, when I first attempted to define my theory of social change, I really struggled. The most significant struggle was in determining the context of social change. Now, over a year later, as I have moved through the Praxis sequence and wrestled with the idea of social change independently and with our Praxis cohort, I have both context and a stronger articulation of my theory. This theory of social change is not etched in stone, and along with my other theories, will change as I experience and learn more. Here is my theory of social change as it currently stands.

### **My Beliefs about Social Change:**

1. Social change is not synonymous with positive action or providing social support. There are plenty of needed resources, services, actions, and important work to be done that is not social change, like donating to your local food pantry. Through these resources, services, actions, and other work, social change can occur if, in the process of doing so, an aspect of the identity, beliefs, practices, or behaviors of an individual or element of society is changed. Therefore, with the example of donating to a food pantry, if, in the process of doing so, for example, the donor's perception and beliefs around food access and inequitable distribution of resources change, or through the act of donating they become passionate and invested in the fight for a better food system, then social change will have occurred.
2. Social change can occur through a practice or an action even if it was not the original intention.

3. Social change can occur within any scale of society and social interactions, where the beliefs, practices, identities, and/or structure of a system, element of society, or person is changed.
4. Most social change will not/cannot address the root causes of social inequality. (I was previously paralyzed by the restrictions of social change that "fixes inequality.") An individual can be an agent of social change, particularly in their community, but a collection of individual agents of social change will not address the foundation of social inequality. To address the foundation of today's social inequality would require the largest social change: a complete reimagining of society and global order.
5. Individuals can make the most fruitful social change in their community or local area.
6. Changemakers can use their identities, personal strengths, and experiences to do their best work and have the greatest impact.

### **How am I best situated to promote and enact social change?**

There are many possibilities for how to enact social change. Broadly, I am best at promoting social change through my relationships – I am a relational activist. More specifically, as I am passionate about education and working with children, I am best situated to promote and enact social change by working with youth and the education system. I believe that change can occur through an expansion of knowledge: when you know better, you can do better. In my support and care for youth, I aid in their journey of knowledge acquisition.

Furthermore, education and carework are powerful tools and spaces to disrupt the interconnected systems of oppression, capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, and white supremacy, which shape and are shaped by ideology and lived experiences. Through education we can

challenge the rationalization and “naturalness” of these systems and our unjust world. Through education and carework, I can share an alternate story to the story put forth by the powerful elite. As an educator and youth worker, I can teach our history that our oppressors suppress. The tools of education support the ability to challenge the internalization of the messages of our oppressors. I can educate and support our youth in the interrogation of their beliefs and dominant societal ideologies. Through education, we can work to dismantle hateful ideology. Through my work as an educator and careworker, I can inspire commitment to human rights and dignity for all. And most significantly, through my role as an educator and careworker, I can support and be part of the youth’s imagination of new possibilities of societal and global order.

It is my intention to be an agent of positive social change through teaching and caring for children, and inspiring them to be change makers as well. As an educator, I will also be a change maker through advocating for a better school environment and experience. I hope to nurture empathy and acceptance in the children I care for and that they bring the values and lessons we learned together into their lives, social interactions, and the world.

Children will always be our future and will always need to be cared for and educated. Children must be cared for and nurtured while we work towards a more just and equitable society. I am dedicated to protecting, caring, and inspiring our children as I support others' more direct actions in challenging and dismantling the systems we exist in.

## **One Theory of Identity**

College is a time for exploration, including navigating your evolving identity in the world. Throughout my college experience, I have reconstructed my identity in a way that I did not foresee. While I have wrestled with the meaning of various aspects of my identity throughout college, one aspect of my identity has fundamentally changed. Prior to college, disability was not part of my identity. Now disability is very salient to who I am. I will now give a brief overview of my journey with disability and the resulting reconstruction of who I am.

Headaches and then migraines, too, after age 15, have always been part of who I am, but chronic migraine is new. At 19 and in my first year at Clark, the headaches and migraines became more frequent. This pattern continued. Despite this pattern and the emotional, mental, and physical toll of migraines and frequent headaches, I rowed on and off the water (on the erg), lifted, stretched, and ran around with toddlers at work. At this point, the migraines did not challenge who I believed I was— that was until I dislocated my shoulder, and everything got so much worse.

I believe that the dislocation triggered something or disrupted my body in a very harmful way. From May 2024 onward, the frequency and strength of daily headaches and the intensity and duration of migraine episodes increased. Throughout the summer, I started to experience nausea and lightheadedness frequently, symptoms that used to be exclusive to "only the bad migraines." Mid-September 2024, I cried as I told my coach, Juliette, that I could not do it anymore; my body was failing me. I no longer had a connection with my body, and the body I was experiencing was a painful and humiliating invisible malfunction. Then, from there, everything got worse; again, I was in a different body with greater limits and difficulties. Chronic migraine quickly stripped my identity and my life from me.

My junior year of college was dominated by chronic migraine. Chronic migraine consumed me. In November of that year, I got a new neurologist whom I saw every three months on the quest for medication to solve the problem of my migraines. (This quest has still not been accomplished.) My junior year experience was isolating and vastly miserable. Most bluntly, beyond time spent at work and in class, when migraines allowed, I was almost exclusively alone in my apartment, with my cat Beatrice as my most frequent companion and conversationalist. I did not row, let alone be the training athlete I know I can be, practicing six days a week and lifting three days a week. I hardly ever saw my friends, including those living right down my street. I did not go anywhere on the weekends. I could not attend social gatherings or college or community events. When people asked what I did over the weekend or what I had going on, I answered with migraines and headaches.

I wished I could live my life the way I wanted to. I felt selfish for my limited energy and involvement. I felt terrible that I could not show up for my friends or teammates as they deserve. I felt embarrassed for the small amount of energy, ability, and time I can manage. I was not the person I knew myself to be. I knew what I wanted to and should be doing, yet this monstrous invisible illness was in constant battle for ultimate control of my body. I lost many aspects of who I believed myself to be. Chronic migraine disabled me, yet I did not acknowledge that I was actually disabled. I feared that claiming disability would make my disability “real.” I feared the implications of being disabled, as if they were not already impacting me. I was in denial, and I was drowning in internalized ableism.

Now in May 2026, I both acknowledge and honor my disability identity. Over this past summer, I finally started to accept that I am disabled. Through claiming disability, I have redefined my identity and sense of self. Acknowledging my disability helped me understand that

disability does not take away from my personhood but informs it. By claiming my disability, I feel way less embarrassed or selfish for my limitations. By not shying away from the reality that I am disabled, others have recognized me as such, which supports recontextualizing my limitations and choices. Furthermore, in accepting my disability, I have been able to reimagine my life and what is possible, as I no longer am weighed down by my desire to escape disability. Though I have accepted chronic migraine as a disability, this does not mean I do not wish for the condition to go away. Instead, with claiming disability, chronic migraine does not just consume me, but is one aspect of who I am. Instead of trying to ignore my disability in hopes it will go away, by accepting it, I can plan, dream, and live my life without hiding in the shadows. Once I claimed disability as part of my identity, I was no longer isolated by my condition; I became a member of the disability community. Within the disability community, I find comfort, recognition, and support.

I had chronic migraines both my junior and senior year of college. I missed many experiences and opportunities each year. The difference between these two years is the year I hid from disability and the year I accepted it. With acceptance came better advocacy and support for my needs. By claiming my disability, others began to see me as such, which reconceptualized my social identity and interactions. With acceptance of my disability, I became a whole person again.

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While disability is a central aspect of my identity, it is not all I am— as we are all complex human beings. I am a white, middle-class, college-educated, neurodivergent, disabled, lesbian woman. I have privileged and marginalized identities, with my whiteness being the most prevalent identity in society. Before anything else in society, I am white. Therefore, I am

intentional about contending with my white privilege and my journey of anti-racism, along with anti-ableism. Lastly, I am a person who is continuously working to understand who I am as an individual and as a member of society. Therefore, this is just one of many theories of my identity.