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Social Justice Activism and the Question of Politics: The Case of the Struggle over Mathematics Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Over the last few decades, the fight for social justice has increasingly been couched in terms of combating what is referred to as the systemic oppression of marginalized group identities, typically defined in terms of gender, sexuality, religion, or race. According to left-wing social justice educators, these identities are victimized by the system. While there is no lack of studies of identity politics, the understanding of what kind of politics, if at all, this social justice activism entails remains deficient. Influential social theory scholars contend that identity politics is individualizing and depoliticizing because it fails to engage with structural inequalities and economic inequalities between social classes. While we agree that social justice activism clearly deviates from the class-based politics of modern/industrial society, we argue, nonetheless, that it is political by its very nature and that it, amongst other things, politicizes education. Based on the case of recent initiatives to rid mathematics education of “white supremacy, the article suggests that social justice educators engage in decidedly politicizing actions based on a matrix of oppressor and oppressed that is designed to foster collective mobilization along antagonistic friend/enemy lines. The article’s overall contribution rests on a novel and more adequate understanding of the political implications of social justice activism.

Keywords: Mathematics; Politicizing/Depoliticizing; Racism; Social Justice; White Supremacy

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, critiques of racism—conceptualized as white supremacy—have gained traction within the education sectors of the United States and other Western, especially Anglophone, societies. This development forms part of a broader movement where left-wing scholars and activists pursue social justice by addressing perceived oppression based on race and gender. In view of the growing prominence of identity politics and the institutionalization of “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” (DEI) policies in education and other sectors, it is important for contemporary social theory to assess the political significance of these developments. The pronounced hostility of the second Trump administration towards identity politics reinforces the need to understand the latter phenomenon. In his presidential address to Congress on 5 March 2025, Donald Trump declared: “We have ended the tyranny of so-called diversity, equity, and inclusion across the entire federal government, the private sector, and our military. Our country will be woke no longer.” The advent of the second Trump administration may turn out to be a significant setback for left-wing activist educators in the United States, but it is too early to declare it dead. It should also be noted that if we want to better understand the widespread support of right-wing populism, we need to pay attention to a key source of right-wing fury and mobilization, namely the institutionalization of left-wing identity politics, especially in the educational sector.

Influential scholars within social theory have recently characterized contemporary social justice trends as overtly individualistic, self-centered, and ultimately depoliticizing^[1,2]. Dean and Zamora liken social justice activism to historic public rituals of redemption of guilt and acts of purification. They find that the problem with these actions lies with the displacement of formal politics by ‘conflicts between charismatic sects claiming exemplary subjectivity and virtuosity’ (p. 82). The two sets of authors are part of a wider trend in political sociology that tends to reduce social justice activism revolving around identity to individualizing and purifying rituals of self-critique that have little if any political leverage^[3–5]. We will argue that this analysis has merits but overlooks fundamental political and politicizing aspects of social justice activism. Given

that social justice activism is a widespread form of critical social action, there is a dire need to provide a better understanding of this phenomenon.

On this basis, the research question guiding the article is: What are the political ambitions and strategies of social justice discourses as exemplified by the attempt to rid mathematics of racism? It should be stressed that our objective is not to assess whether the achievement gap in mathematics between white and non-white students is caused by white supremacy culture, and that its elimination will close this gap. It needs mentioning that several university mathematicians argue that the current problems of mathematical achievement among disadvantaged ethnic minority groups are likely to increase rather than decrease if antiracist reforms were to be implemented, and that it would be detrimental for social mobility^[6–8]. However, this is not our main concern here. Instead, we focus on the political implications of social justice activism. Based on the case of social justice activist-educators seeking to eliminate what they perceive as racial oppression from mathematics education in the United States, we examine—via a wide range of publicly available documents issued by social justice activists—how social justice educators seek to guide mathematics teachers towards a politicization of education, which they regard as emancipatory.

Our principal argument is that the social justice approach to mathematics instruction is based on a Manichean logic, which construes mathematics either as a tool to combat white power—manifested in its ideological manipulation of neutrality, objectivity, and color-blindness—or as an instrument for “upholding capitalism and imperialist ways of being and understanding the world”^[9] (p. 59). In brief, we argue that activist-educators promote social justice discourses grounded in collective identities of the oppressed vs. oppressors, friends vs. enemies, i.e., that their actions are highly politicizing.

The article is organized in four sections (2–5). In the first, we engage in a theoretical discussion on the political implications of social justice educational activism. We challenge the argument, advanced in two recent contributions, that contemporary social justice theories have depoliticizing consequences. The second section considers the central role of ideology critique within social justice discourses, particularly regarding their conceptualization

of racism and strategies for its eradication. The third section addresses the depiction of mathematics as a cultural phenomenon—one that is neither abstract nor apolitical—within these discourses. Finally, in the fourth section, we analyze the core principles for action proposed by social justice reforms aimed at eliminating racism from mathematics instruction.

2. Understanding Antiracist Social Justice: Politicisation or Depoliticization?

For the educational social justice activists, we are looking at here, anti-racism is the key term, which ought to be the organizing nexus for everything that happens in the classroom and beyond: interaction between teachers, school administration, and students, teaching material, as well as how education links up with students' community life.

The question we will be dealing with now is whether social justice discourses and activism are politicizing or depoliticizing education and more broadly society. There are several left-wing and Marxist critics of social justice discourses who argue that they are, in fact, depoliticizing, because they are mainly dealing with symbolic politics, morality, and personal identity instead of material conditions related to social classes. We will shortly outline the main tenets of this type of criticism and then move on to four scholars who have recently spelled out how social justice discourses are depoliticizing even though they emphasize community, collective action, and advocate radical institutional changes.

The depoliticisation argument—as presented by Wendy Brown^[10], Slavoj Žižek^[11], and Nancy Fraser^[12], and amongst many others—goes roughly like this: social justice politics, centered mainly on race, gender, and sexuality, often emphasize symbolic recognition and representation, while ignoring material conditions, notably economic inequality, exploitation, and class power. In addition, by dividing people into identity categories (often referred to as 'affinity groups' in education), social justice activism partakes in fragmenting the working-class and weakening class solidarity instead of uniting the working class around its shared material interests.

Whilst advocates of postmodernism in the 1980s celebrated 'politics of difference', today's critics hold that the celebration of liberal diversity politics masks growing class inequality. This links up with a critique of neoliberal multiculturalism in which identity politics functions as a substitute for class politics. This benefits elites within identity groups and the professional—managerial class in private companies and public institutions at the expense of the working class. The point is that fighting racial and sexual discrimination can sometimes substitute for or even distract from fighting economic inequality and poverty. Žižek argues similarly that the focus on identity allows capitalism to avoid addressing issues of economic inequality, exploitation, and class struggle, and that this fits the depoliticized and culturalized logic of late capitalism or neoliberalism^[11]. By "culturalisation of politics," he means the process through which political and economic conflicts are reinterpreted and neutralized into cultural differences typical for identity politics, such as struggles between tolerant and intolerant values, traditional and progressive lifestyles. Common for this type of 'politics' is the displacement of material relations of power and class.

Nancy Fraser pushes in the same direction when she holds that the ideal of balancing recognition and redistribution is out of joint. She claims that politics today has been reduced to recognition and that this depoliticizes economic inequality and hence the structural roots of injustice. She moreover criticizes the alliance between social movements' demands for recognition and neoliberal capitalism, which has no problem with accommodating multiculturalist identity politics. This has led to a fusion of culturalist identity politics and economic inequality. This presents a double problem with depoliticisation. First, identity-based struggles for recognition displace struggles for redistribution centered around social classes and economic justice, which fragments collective solidarity and the depoliticizes economic inequality. The second problem with depoliticisation is that the state's recognition of identities tends to reify group identities, which leads to conformism and 'internal' repression^[12] (pp. 31–32).

Fraser's focus of critique is that the shift from redistribution to recognition has implied the co-optation of social justice and identity politics by neoliberalism. This has an affinity with Wendy Brown's arguments that neoliber-

alism depoliticizes politics by reducing political demands to moral claims of injury, which are translated to legal demands for recognition. She is critical of identity-based movements that define themselves through their historical suffering. This is what she discusses as “wounded attachments”^[12] (Chapter 3), which means that political identity becomes anchored in victimhood that is feeding a struggle within liberal discourses of the sovereign subject and prevailing norms of middle-class aspirations^[12] (p. 60). While Wendy Brown does not reject that identity politics has emancipatory potential, she warns against its structural tendency to restrict itself to an ethicizing politics favoring moralizing and therapeutic actions that tend to reinforce rather than transgress the current liberalist and capitalist order^[12] (p. 70).

With these general comments on the criticism of social justice, we will now turn to two articles by Bolan and Moore-Ponce^[2] and Dean and Zamora^[1] who likewise offer critiques of contemporary antiracist social justice discourses, by asserting that they have lost sight of traditional left-wing concerns with class struggle and the systemic inequalities produced by capitalism. The two sets of authors follow an increasingly common analysis of current identity politics centered around minority groups as being focused on introspection, confession, and self-purification^[3–5] (Chapter 4). This analysis entails that social justice activism leaves no room for the collective action of mobilization and politicization. In the following, we unfold this analysis and explain why we think it is partly wrong and misses out important political and politicizing features of social justice activism.

According to Dean and Zamora^[1], “with the collapse of any collective grand narratives, we had now to look inward, in the depths of the subject to either find our ‘true self’, or alternatively, to endlessly reinvent ourselves.” They object to what they perceive as a conflation of critique and confession, which they argue has led to a depoliticized focus on self-examination. Instead of looking at the macro-level by targeting structural inequalities and the mechanisms of repression contemporary antiracist discourses have reduced “politics to a therapeutics of the self [which] has transformed anti-racism into endless personal commitment and introspection and public avowal” (p. 83).

Similarly, Bolan and Moore-Ponce^[2] (p. 41) argue

that the stress on “confessional critique”—in which critical politics are remodeled as an exercise in self-purification—diverts energy from collective political action and instead demands “interminable critiques of oneself”, leading to repeated confessions of internalized racism. This type of critique prioritizes personal identity over class interests and neglects how capitalism produces structural inequalities. This is the reason Bolan and Moore-Ponce^[2] find it mandatory “to clarify the political stakes of critique,” thereby “contributing to revitalizing effective political critique.” The aim is to clarify the stakes of political struggle and focus on macro phenomena such as economic structures and social classes.

Although this critique highlights salient tendencies within contemporary social justice identity politics, it neglects the collectivist and politicizing dimensions of social justice activism, which are linked to broader programs of systemic critique and collective mobilization and resistance. For social justice educators, confession serves to encourage reflection on pedagogical practices and to inspire transformative strategies for teaching mathematics. These strategies seek to enact radical changes in educational institutions. Such critical engagement politicizes mathematics education by transforming it into a site for ideological contestation of white supremacy. This process is articulated through the friend/enemy framework, where people of color, so-called Black, Latinx, and multilingual learners, are positioned as the oppressed and whites as the oppressors.

While these diagnoses are persuasive in many respects, they fail to acknowledge the extent to which contemporary antiracist social justice activism has developed new forms of politicization. The decline of class-based politics has not entailed the disappearance of grand narratives; rather, it has seen the emergence of alternative narratives centered on race, gender, and sexuality. The distinction between politicization and depoliticization cannot then be reduced to an opposition between class-based collective action and individualized identity politics.

The conceptual and analytical problems with Dean and Zamora, and Bolan and Moore-Ponce, lie in their narrow take on politicization and depoliticization. They lose sight of the historical framing of these terms by ascribing them a trans-historical status: they extrapolate the typi-

cal form of politicization in industrial society (collective action in the form of class struggle and market vs. state planning) to the form of politicization. They operate with a covert moralizing premise by assuming that politicization is good and depoliticization is bad, because the former questions structures of power, whilst the latter does not, which entails that power is bad. This implies that discourses and activism that do not target economic and social structures, and do not revolve around class struggle, are depoliticizing by deflecting real political action. Because antiracist discourses and activism today do not conform to the authors' understanding of politics, they regard them as depoliticizing. The result of this reductionist understanding of politicization is that we are excluded from examining whether social justice activism in its recent forms launches new forms of politicization. This touches upon how Dean and Zamora, and Bolan and Moore-Ponce, conceive of critical politics and political critique. There are several assumptions in the two articles that are not made explicit. Both articles hold that critique proper politicizes, whereas pseudo critique depoliticizes. The implicit assumption is that the former, by virtue of telling the truth about class society—speaking truth to power—raises the consciousness of the oppressed and facilitates collective action against oppression. The latter, by contrast, numbs resistance. Surprisingly, the authors do not account for the criteria making up this distinction except that critique worthy of its name is extrovert and concerned with macro phenomena (e.g., economic structures and social classes), whilst pseudo critique is introvert and focuses on micro phenomena (e.g., confession). It follows that the quality of critique (proper or pseudo) is a matter of location (macro or micro) and direction (extrovert or introvert), which determines the political status of critique (politicization or depoliticization). The nature and quality of critique thus depend on location, direction, and effects.

When the aim is to revitalize political critique, it seems strange that the authors do not take an interest in exploring the nature of critique as engagement in public reasoning and decision-making. This is what Foucault had in mind when he mentioned that political parrhesia is the origin of critique ^[13–15] (p. 107, 170; Chapter 4). Instead, Bolan and Moore-Ponce categorize parrhesia as a confes-

sional practice and hence as a means of depoliticization. This short-circuits the parrhesia/critique nexus, which implies not only that Foucault appears as a depoliticizing woke theorist *avant la lettre*, but also and more importantly that the authors do not explore what is important for them – the meaning of critical politics and political critique today ^[14,15].

As we will argue, the current form of social justice antiracism does indeed invoke a mode of politicization that is more extroverted and collectivist than the two sets of authors and the other social theorists mentioned above allow for. Whilst introspection, confession, etc., are vital for these discourses, they are inseparable from public avowals, agitated moralization, and systematic attempts to radically change the form and content of education. The identity-based take on antiracism endorses collective actions when it sees the individual as defined by 'its' group, typically race and gender, as opposed to social class; and by targeting white supremacy, they operate with the powerful majority vs. the victimized minorities.

Based on the case of attempting to fight racism in mathematics teaching, we set out to show that this binary logic triggers a mode of politicization that structures everything and everybody in friend/enemy constellations among identity-based groups, typically along racial lines. In this respect it has affinities with previous revolutionary class politics marked by strong lines of enmity. The difference is that for social justice trends today culture and education play a much more significant role. Both types of identities are organized around clearly marked lines of enmity between major groups in society. The ways and arenas of politicizing have changed, and the activists have changed. These are significant changes, but they do not warrant the conclusion that left-wing identity politics is depoliticizing.

The attempts to "cleanse" mathematics education of whiteness exemplifies the politicizing aim to shape the hearts and minds of future generations. It is essential to understand how this politicization operates and to identify its principal features. This is what we will explore in the following sections. When looking at the case of launching 'anti-white' mathematics, the *California Mathematics Framework* ^[16], which constitutes a significant politicizing development by becoming authoritative policy.

3. Ideology Critique Redux: Mathematics' Complicity with White Supremacy

To substantiate our claim that social justice educators emphasize how community and being part of oppressed groups frame students' lives, we now turn to how these educators view "mathematics as a racialized space." Their point is to link students' experiences in the classroom with their experiences outside the classroom, which is a focal theme in these discourses. Central to their approach is the examination of what they perceive as the internal racist structure of mathematics education. They argue that it is necessary to "document the institutional ways in which white supremacy in mathematics education acts to reproduce subordination and advantage" ^[17] (pp. 49–51).

Our empirical analysis is based on a document analysis ^[18] of a single case of the wider phenomenon of the politics of social justice activism, namely mathematics teaching in the USA. The reason for focusing on mathematics is that we consider it a least likely case ^[19]: If the abstract and universal principles of mathematics can be accused of being political, then anything can be seen as political by social justice activists. The reason for focusing on the USA—and California in particular—is that it represents an extreme (exemplary) case, i.e., we find an unusually high level of social justice activism on mathematics here. While this choice obviously limits the potential for making empirical generalization, it serves well to identify the arguments and logics underpinning the ways in which social justice activism is politicizing social phenomena ^[20]. The document analysis is based on articles, books, pamphlets, and online teaching material produced by social justice mathematics educators in the USA. There are many articles and edited books on the subject. In line with our exemplary case argument, we chose to focus on the so-called *Stride* documents issued by a network of mainly California-based educational researchers, educational authorities and teaching institutions engaged in promoting social justice via mathematics education (<https://equitablemath.org/#about>). We also draw on key edited volumes on the issue ^[21,22]. To better grasp the connection between academic analyses and discussions, on the one hand, and educational politics, on the other, that together feed the politicization of mathe-

matics teaching, we pay specific attention to three widely referenced sources that inform both teacher-activists and educational policymakers who advocate for racial equity. We have identified the issue of politics and politicization in the documents by looking for two things: the use of friend/enemy terms and the call for collective action. Regarding friend/enemy terms, we have paid particular attention to arguments claiming that certain groups are situated in an enduring antagonistic relationship. We found this was clearly the case as the texts over and over again distinguish between whites, on the one hand, and non-white minority groups, on the other, who are seen as oppressed by the former. Regarding collective action, we looked for calls for action that explicitly addressed actors not as individuals, but as groups, organizations, or entire segments of the population.

The first source is the handbook *A Pathway to Equitable Math Instruction, Dismantling Racism in Mathematics Instruction*. It consists of five 'Strides'. We focus on the first ^[9] and the third ^[23]. The handbook provides guidance to mathematics teachers on how to teach in ways that avoid reproducing white supremacy cultural patterns. It was produced by more than 25 educational organizations, predominantly based in California, specializing in mathematics instruction, English language development, and culturally responsive teaching. It addresses all stakeholders in the school system, including teachers, leaders, coaches, and administrators, outlining principles for teaching what it terms "anti-white mathematics". The second source providing exercises for educators is based on *Dismantling Racism*, which summarizes the nature of white supremacy in education in 14 characteristics ^[24]. The third source is the *California Mathematics Framework* ^[16], a policy document adopted by the California legislature that, albeit in a moderated form, echoes the diagnoses and remedies proposed in *Pathway*.

These documents address different stages of politicization: (1) the diagnosis of how white mathematics harms people of color by repressing their cultures, which calls for a "culturally responsive pedagogy" ^[25,26]; (2) proposing emancipatory reforms that approach mathematics through the lived experiences of the oppressed, which is the theme of connecting in and out of the classroom; (3) enshrining these reforms in legislation and policy; and (4) implement-

ing new educational strategies, including revised teaching plans. Our focus in this section is on the first three stages, with an emphasis on their ideological underpinnings and the solutions they propose.

A foundational assumption in *Dismantling Racism* and *Pathway* is that white supremacy is an ideological construct that privileges whites while oppressing people of color, and that it works covertly by naturalizing white privilege by seeing white knowledge as objective. According to this view, the only way to explain the achievement gap between whites and Asians, on the one hand, and blacks and Hispanics on the other, is white supremacy/privilege/ideology. “Policies and reforms are, says Berry ^[27] (p. 5) in explaining the nature of this oppression, “about dominant culture interests rather than the needs and interests of marginalized students.” Dominant and white are two sides of the same coin. Thus, Berry insists that “schools and schooling were created for maintaining the power and privilege of whiteness” ^[27] (p. 9), and that “prior policies and reforms in mathematics education have failed due to having been developed to address the needs and interests of those in power” ^[27] (p. 8). Over and again, Berry and other social justice educators explain the underperformance of black students by reference to the ways in which education is framed by dominant interests and whiteness ideology which are alien to the interests, needs, and life experiences of oppressed minorities and do not therefore improve their life situations ^[27] (pp. 10, 16). “Marginalized students” are defined slightly more broadly by Naresh and Kasmer ^[28] (p. 312) as “those students who are considered to have low socio-economic status and/or students whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds are different than their White peers.” Their claim is not that mathematics *per se* is oppressive, but that the ways of teaching it systematically disqualifies People of Color. This implies that it is essential to single out those ways of teaching that sustain racist oppression, and to provide an antidote to “white mathematics”. Hence, the imperative is to identify these practices and to counteract them.

The core axiom underlying this critique is the concept of whiteness as an omnipresent bias. Whiteness is defined as “the idea (ideology) that white people and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions are superior to those of people of color” ^[24] (p. 21). *Dismantling Racism* argues

that racism has been deliberately constructed for political purposes, with all institutions in the United States historically implicated in promoting white supremacy. This is the reason for defining racism as systemic and based on institutional power. Consequently, only white people can be racist, as they are the group possessing the requisite power within society.

Drawing on a framework that parallels Frankfurt School ideology critique, social justice educators assume that hidden structural mechanisms—akin to those critiqued in Marxist analyses of class domination—serve to maintain white supremacy and whiteness ideology today. Educators are urged to “leave their comfort zones” and reflect how these systemic factors impact on their teaching. The underlying pedagogical assumption is that by “de-neutralizing” mathematics, educators can reduce alienation and close achievement gaps. This position presumes that white supremacy culture has stripped mathematics of its cultural roots, rendering it abstract and inaccessible to non-white students. Only by restoring the cultural relevance of mathematics to these communities can educational equity be achieved.

In line with prior forms of ideology critique, social justice educators informed by Critical Race Theory hold that whiteness ideology can co-opt ethnic minorities to become white. This ideological mechanism works by getting colored students to give up their culture to attain white privilege and become part of the hegemonic coalition ^[24] (p. 21). Apparently, Asians have given up their cultures to the point where they are entitled to be called “honorary whites” as they outperform whites in mathematics. When blacks close the achievement gap, and hence no longer fit into their status as victims of white supremacy, they are branded as “white adjacent, which indicates that their cultures are victimized. The mode of explanation is simple: if there is an achievement gap in which some groups perform less well than whites, this can only be explained by white oppression; but if the achievement gap is eliminated, the only possible explanation is that non-whites have surrendered their cultural heritage and identity, which again proves white supremacy.

Oppression is ubiquitous and defined as the combination of power and prejudice ^[24] (p. 20). White oppression, sustained by whiteness ideology, is entrenched in

cultures, institutions, and personal relations. Culturally, it “defines and shapes norms, values, beliefs and standards to advantage white people and oppress people of color”^[24] (p. 17). Institutionally, it is expressed in “the structures, systems, policies, and procedures of institutions ... [which] are founded upon and then promote, reproduce, and perpetuate advantages for white people and the oppression of people of color”^[24] (p. 17). On a personal level, it holds that “white people are inherently better and/or people of color are inherently inferior on an individual basis” (p. 17).

In line with Marxist understandings of ideology, social justice educators regard whiteness ideology as operating covertly. In fact, the power of white supremacy in mathematics teaching is predicated on its invisibility via claims of neutrality, objectivity, and universality. Once considered progressive, color-blindness is now criticized as a mechanism that sustains systemic racism. As prior critical theories, Critical Race Theory argues that people of color have internalized their oppression, that is, without knowing it. For Battey and Leyva, “[r]acism is enacted through a dialectic that is both symbolic or ideological and material or resource-based ... When ideologies are internalized, they become implicit racial attitudes, which then can guide behavior and social interactions”^[17] (pp. 22–24). These attitudes include microaggressions, that is, “insults or slights that are automatic and sometimes unconscious, directed toward oppressed groups”^[17] (p. 30). The authors refer to “the stereotyping of African Americans as innately incapable in mathematics”^[17] (p. 30).

Dismantling Racism mentions five characteristics of this internalization: the need to forget or deny experiences of oppression; the compulsion to lie to oneself and others about these experiences; emotional numbness as a survival mechanism; the loss of a critical voice and distrust in one’s own truth; and the adoption of the oppressors’ values and worldview, resulting in cultural alienation^[24] (p. 22). This comprehensive schematic of the internalization of oppression draws upon multiple theoretical fields, including the Frankfurt School’s critique of ideology, while adapting it to the racial dynamics foregrounded in Critical Race Theory. One of the pioneers of Critical Race Theory, Richard Delgado^[29] (pp. 136–149), outlines the multifaceted consequences of racist stigmatization, many of which are incorporated in bullet points in *Dismantling Racism*^[24] (p.

23). Critical Race Theory activists have a long tradition of educational activism from kindergartens to universities^[17], which has, especially since the Covid lockdowns, been met with increased criticism from parents and the second Trump administration.

The ideological mechanism outlined in these analyses assumes that white supremacy obfuscates reality and imposes false consciousness on the oppressed, leaving only those who embrace the “correct” theoretical framework capable of perceiving the truth. Any refusal to accept the axiom of white supremacy is attributed to internalized oppression. Within this epistemological framework, truth and power are positioned as antagonistic forces. It follows that speaking truth to power is an emancipatory act that facilitates collective mobilization and the dismantling of repressive structures. This is politicization as it is conceived in the lineage of previous Critical Theories.

4. Mathematics Viewed as White Supremacy Culture

This section examines the way social justice educators diagnose mathematics teaching as an extension of white supremacy culture. We explore how this diagnosis informs their strategies for concerted action against systemic racism inside and outside the classroom. It should be clear that this questioning of ‘white’ knowledge and how it is taught politicizes what has hitherto been taken for granted. It should also be clear that this endeavor relies upon collective action, partly by opposing systemic racism and partly by accenting the links between students and their communities.

The first step towards emancipation, as framed by these activists, involves raising students’ consciousness of white oppression. This entails equipping them with the conceptual tools necessary to resist racism and the ideological forces that induce them to forget, deny, or internalize oppression. The traditional view of mathematics as an abstract and apolitical discipline is false according to these activists. They argue that mathematics has historically developed in response to practical concerns in various civilizations, such as the construction of the pyramids in ancient Egypt or the administrative practices of the Babylonians. What once fell under the academic purview of

ethnomathematics—an anthropological subdiscipline—has been appropriated by social justice activists as part of their ideological arsenal^[30]. The link between mathematics and culture is presented as a key entry point for critiquing what is perceived as the colonization of knowledge. As Naresh and Kasmer^[28] (p. 311) mention, ethnomathematics and related disciplines (e.g., multicultural and everyday mathematics) “are guided by the belief that the role of culture is significant in the learning and teaching of mathematics.”

Social justice educators contend that only non-whites possess distinctive cultural frameworks, which are integral to their cognitive abilities. Consequently, they argue that a “Eurocentric” form of mathematics—purportedly stripped of cultural context—is a racist affront to non-white students. This argument posits that even the most progressive mathematical pedagogies frequently neglect the “unique needs” of Black, Latinx, multilingual, and migrant students^[7] (p. 31). While the specific nature of these needs remains vague, the claim is that racism is the root cause of underperformance, and its effects manifest in the form of perceived individual failings. This is relevant for understanding this type of discourse as collectivist and activist as opposed to individualistic and introspective.

Ethnomathematics is offered as a remedy for this neglect of cultural context and commonality^[9]. It is proposed as a means of reconnecting students with “authentic and cultural ways of teaching and learning that represent the students.” Inspired by intersectional theory^[31], social justice educators assume that people of color, despite their internal diversity, constitute a homogeneous collective by virtue of their shared experience of oppression. *Pathway*^[9] (p. 38) contends that students who have not been taught within the framework of white mathematics are forced to “unlearn their native traditions” or are “deprived of learning math in their ancestral history. Although “native traditions” and “ancestral history” remain underdefined, the prescriptive recommendation is clear: ethnomathematics and “living mathematx”^[30,32] (pp. 4725–4728) must be integrated into the curriculum. For Gutierrez, the task is to attack “[w]hite supremacist capitalist patriarchy in connection to mathematics”^[33] (p. 17). Conrad^[34] and Ravitch^[35], amongst others, criticize her take on mathematics. But for Gutierrez, this affront against whiteness will inevitably reduce the achievement gap because it is the cause of under-

performance. Under the heading of ethnomathematics, the social justice literature provides several examples of how teachers can mobilize the culturally specific experiences and knowledge of students in math teaching to improve their math skills^[33].

A second argument underlying this diagnosis concerns an expansive interpretation of colonization. Activists argue that Western civilization has not only colonized geographic territories but also bodies of knowledge, including mathematics. They claim that the contributions of non-Western cultures to modern mathematics have been systematically belittled or erased. This has “resulted in the omission of ‘significant contributions of most cultures and other groupings of people’ from academic mathematics curricula, and this exclusion can ‘have consequences of devaluing and disrespecting many students’ cultural backgrounds’”^[28] (p. 310). According to this view mathematics exemplifies white supremacy by presenting itself as abstract, universal, and apolitical—qualities that, activists argue, conceal its role in upholding systems of domination.

The colonization argument serves two purposes: that the West can only relate to the Rest in terms of domination, and that antiracist mathematics is part of ‘decolonizing the curriculum’ discourses, which is attacking Western/white knowledge. This perspective implies that the discipline of mathematics, as well as its pedagogy, must be fundamentally transformed. Activists propose a shift from procedural instruction—“how to do mathematics” to conceptual inquiry—“what is mathematics?” This shift aligns with the objectives articulated in the 2021 Draft of the *California Mathematics Framework*^[36], which states that students should first learn to “read the world with mathematics” by identifying inequities, and subsequently “write the world with mathematics” by using mathematical knowledge to challenge oppression (p. 39).

The purpose of learning mathematics is thus redefined. It is no longer an end in itself, but a means to achieve social justice objectives. These programmatic points are political in nature. They strive to reshape the educational system’s governing principles and standards with a view to empowering students through “equitable math instruction” that enhances their creativity and agency to criticize and to act against capitalism, imperialism, and racism both within and beyond the classroom.

5. A Mathematics for Political Mobilization

We now examine the educators' emphasis on student empowerment, both within and outside of the classroom. We argue that their approach to mathematics instruction constitutes a strategy of political mobilization: outward-looking and activist as opposed to introspective and contemplative, collectivist in contrast to individualistic, and framed in terms of friend/enemy distinctions. *Pathway* organizes its critique of white supremacy culture into nineteen examples, which can be distilled into four central principles of political mobilization: empowering students, raising awareness of racist elements in Western mathematics, attuning mathematics to relevant practical problems, and creating the basis for collective modes of action against systemic racism.

Dismantling Racism and *Pathway* articulate cognitive

and political concerns pertinent to mathematics education, which are two aspects of a single phenomenon: knowledge and reasoning are understood as inseparable from power structures, that is, white supremacy. To hold that knowledge and reasoning are part of the dominant power structures is consistent with the Frankfurt School style of ideology critique. This type of critique held that emancipation consisted in getting rid of the political manipulation of knowledge by speaking truth to power—a political power strategy based on objective knowledge to end power and herald universal emancipation. Contemporary social justice activism, by contrast, claims that knowledge and power are inextricably linked. Every cognitive strategy is also a political power strategy. Everything thus depends on who wields power.

Table 1 below lists the attributes of white supremacy culture in cognitive and political terms as they figure in *Dismantling Racism* and *Pathway*:

Table 1. The attributes of white supremacy culture in cognitive and political terms.

White Supremacy Culture: Cognitive and Political Dimensions	
Cognitive:	Political:
Perfectionism	Paternalism
Only One Right Way	Defensive/defensiveness
Objectivity: Linear + procedural	Power hoarding: power structures
Either/Or Thinking	Right to Comfort
Quantity Over Quality	Fear of Open Conflict: no reflection
Sense/system of Urgency	Individualism

The cognitive dimension covers objectivity, quantity over quality, either/or thinking, only one right way, and perfectionism. The social justice mathematics assertion is that the “goal of obtaining a correct answer is racist, which, among numerous others, is criticized by Jackson^[37]. *Dismantling Racism* and *Pathway* also list two other dimensions—‘Worship of the written word’ and ‘Progress is bigger, more’—but they are not applied in *Pathway*, which is why we do not deal with them here. The political dimension covers paternalism, power hoarding, fear of open conflict, defensiveness, right to comfort, individualism, and sense of urgency. These characteristics are connected in white supremacy culture and institutionalized in mathematics education. The power of this culture lies in its appearance of being universal. Yet, this is the ideological smokescreen designed to hide systemic racism.

Pathway presents these concepts within an annual wheel of educational practice, guiding mathematics teachers through a process of engagement, reflection, planning, action, and further reflection. The objective is to provide ongoing opportunities for teachers to examine their beliefs, values, and teaching practices^[9] (p. 12). These exercises are designed as lifelong commitments aimed at identifying and countering white supremacy in the classroom. For example, if a teacher asserts that an answer in mathematics is either right or wrong, this may be interpreted as reinforcing paternalism, power structures, and a lack of critical reflection. There is no room for legitimate dissent with these dogmas as disagreement is taken as evidence of a failure to properly interrogate one's complicity in upholding white supremacy. This will require further confession and ideological realignment.

DismantlingRacism and *Pathway* assume that teaching geared to highlighting logic and objectivity, proceeding in a linear or sequential fashion from basics to advanced and from simple to complex, focusing on individual performance, distinguishing true from false, conducting tests, and giving grades are all manifestations of whiteness ideology. The latter reinforces competitive, meritocratic, and individualistic values, which are oppressive, especially for non-white minorities. Stieglitz^[38] amongst others criticizes this type of argument. In addition, they are bound up with paternalism and power hoarding, and combined with teachers' lack of reflection, they serve to undermine students' creativity and agency.

To illustrate how activist educators argue their case, we look at characteristics promoting white supremacy thinking as they are outlined in *DismantlingRacism*^[9] (pp. 28–35) and applied in *Pathway*^[23] (pp. 13–79). The method of *DismantlingRacism* is to identify 'white' characteristics and identify when "[w]hite supremacy culture shows up in math classrooms", and how it harms especially non-white students. The documents we examine regard white supremacy as a culture, because it is a conglomerate of cognitive and political assumptions, which forms the backbone of understanding and teaching mathematics, and because mathematics is part of Western imperialist, capitalist, and racist regime forms. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, whites do not have culture, which is, on the contrary, a prerogative of non-white lifeforms. The point is to assert that the logic of whiteness (objectivity, rationality, universality, racial superiority, etc.) is to oppress non-white cultures (the West/Rest antagonism) either by exterminating them or by way of giving "white privilege" to non-whites, which destroys their culture and absorbs them into white culture.

Pathway organizes its critique of white supremacy culture into nineteen examples, which can be distilled into four central principles of political mobilization: empowering students, raising awareness of racist elements in Western mathematics, attuning mathematics to relevant practical problems, and creating the basis for collective modes of action against systemic racism.

5.1. Empowering Students

Both *DismantlingRacism* and *Pathway* emphasize the importance of empowering students to make them ac-

tive participants in class and enable them to relate mathematics to their everyday lives in their communities. To give credit to the critiques provided by Dean and Zamora, and Bolan and Moore-Ponce, there are examples in the social justice literature on math teaching that approach empowerment predominantly as a question of raising the (individual) self-esteem or self-confidence of students in their ability to master mathematics. However, in *DismantlingRacism*, in *Pathway* and other writings, empowerment connects critical thinking, creativity, and agency, which are geared to enabling the students to 'change the world'^[37,39,40].

Social justice educators argue that student empowerment is hampered because of paternalism and power hoarding. Both imply an unwillingness to share power. Adults know what is best for the students, which "does not allow room for student agency" and their experiences and opportunities. This discouragement of agency is serious given the weight these documents attach to students' culture and community as the prime sources forming their cognitive and political abilities^[9] (p. 17). The alternative is to facilitate their creativity and agency vis-à-vis their lived experiences. This requires motivating students by centering attention on their needs and interests instead of focusing on skills and passing exams. The assumption is that this endeavor will raise students' critical awareness. All teaching should see to it that "[s]tudents are taught to see themselves as active participants in their own learning to create an understanding of how to make mathematical connections within the context of their own lives"^[23] (p. 8).

Empowering students is difficult. For instance, in the attempt to encourage student participation in class, the teacher may ask students to raise their hands when they want to take part in discussions. However, such a request "can reinforce paternalism and power hoarding, in addition to breaking the process of thinking, learning, and communicating"^[9] (p. 76). Moreover, paying special attention to some students asking a student to help others is seen as an instance of classroom power structures and white supremacy that is likely to curb students' agency and thinking.

Student empowerment requires that testing and grading be radically altered. *DismantlingRacism* and *Pathway* accept that "grade-level content" is the responsibility of schools and important for equity. But they are also critical of testing and grading as they believe this has negative

effects on students: “grades are traditionally indicative of what students can’t do rather than what they can do, reinforcing perfectionism”^[9] (pp. 27, 51), and because their function is to “assess and test skills rather than concepts, solidifying the notion that skills are more important.” To teach skills “without applying a culturally responsive lens or strategic scaffolding” perpetuates “white supremacy culture and inequities”^[9] (p. 24), by focusing too much on individuals, which “requires teachers to function under a system of urgency to cover all the material that will be on the test and not focus on actual learning of the big ideas.” This is “deficit knowledge” in contrast to “student knowledge”, which empowers students’ agency and creativity^[41]. The pedagogical and political point is that education goes from a system where the teacher as “a knowledge giver”, who provides “the learning and [is] in charge of disseminating new information”, to become a facilitator of what students already know latently^[9] (p. 73).

5.2. Raising Awareness of the Racist Elements of Western Mathematics

It is an all-important part of empowering students that they realize that the cognitive aspects of mathematics teaching are not colorblind but reinforce the biases against ethnic minority students by excluding their culturally determined cognition and needs, and by highlighting racial stereotyping and fortifying the defensiveness of white mathematics. Social justice educators argue that the teaching of mathematics is embedded in power structures that appear as cognitive necessities and common sense, although they are, in fact, white supremacist ways of curbing students’ agency and critical thinking.

One of the key abilities that empowered students should be able to do is to see Western mathematics as part of a system of capitalism, imperialism, and racism. Hence, the importance of enabling the students to achieve “conceptual” knowledge and learning the big ideas. In this argument, *Pathway* is beyond mathematical pedagogy since mathematics is a means to foster critique and resistance. This ambition is echoed in the *2021 Draft*^[36] (p. 39) when it insists that the antiracist task is to disclose the ideological manipulations of color blindness to “equip students with a tool kit and mindset to combat inequities with mathematics”. Here, politicization is taken a step further to be-

come official policy.

The axiom of latent knowledge grounded in lived experience is fundamental for *Dismantling Racism* and *Pathway*. It believes that students who have not yet acquired the formal mathematical language have latent knowledge that makes it possible for them to grasp mathematical problems conceptually. When teachers do not take this into account, they “reduce math teaching to ... literal math” (skills). This reduction assumes “that students who are negotiating language are unable to communicate their mathematical knowledge.” The consequence is that “teachers are deciding for students what math they should interact with, without true consideration of the student’s experience”^[9] (p. 20). The consequence is also to give priority to testing skills since it is easier to measure and less time consuming, which links up with sequential thinking and sense of urgency. This reinforces not only “objectivity by requiring a singular path for learning” but also paternalism, which restrains students’ agency and creativity.

Dismantling Racism and *Pathway* argue that focusing on conceptual knowledge in mathematics education will raise student awareness of white supremacy culture and improve their ability to master mathematics. These two aspects are immanently linked because white supremacy is the cause for underperformance among people of color. Skills should be learned on a need-to-know basis to unpack conceptual knowledge. Focusing on conceptual knowledge is regarded as “deep learning”, which allows for “the complexity of the mathematical concepts and reasoning” and justifies “other answers by unpacking the assumptions that are made in the problem.” It is outdated to focus on skills as it belongs to “the industrial revolution, when precision and accuracy were highly valued”. What matters now is to learn to chitchat about “the myriad ways we can conceptualize mathematics”^[9] (p. 66). If the focus on conceptual knowledge can both raise student awareness and their ability to master mathematics, it is because these two things are two sides of the same coin. This also explains the widespread underperformance of students of color. Their cultures are alienated from mathematics because whites have colonized it, stripped it of its original cultural embodiment and decultured it as a set of skills to exploit the world. To raise awareness and provide social justice, teachers must get out of their comfort zone and reflect on the systemic

reasons for underperformance. What is needed is not superficial curriculum changes, but to dig “into the deep and critical work of culturally relevant pedagogy and practice”^[9] (p. 34) and highlight the systemic racism of white supremacy.

5.3. Attuning Mathematics to Relevant and Practical Problems

The key terms in *A Pathway to Equitable Math Instruction Dismantling Racism in Mathematics Instruction*—culture, community, lived experience—signal the weight of the practical use of mathematics: diagnosing, criticizing, and resisting inequity and other forms of social injustice.

The text emphasizes numerous times the need for a practice-oriented mode of teaching that will enable students to deal with complex problems. Instead of a ‘linear approach’ starting with simple mathematical problems and then moving to more complex ones, teachers should tackle complex problems head-on. The linear approach, it is argued, can result in using mathematics instrumentally to uphold capitalist and imperialist ways of being and understandings of the world^[9] (pp. 3, 59).

The alternative to linear teaching is to address complex problems that accept their web-like character^[9] (p. 45). In dealing with mathematical rigor, teachers should focus on the “full complexity” of the discipline, which includes “thoroughness” and “exhaustiveness”, and they should balance “conceptual understanding, procedural skills and fluency, and application.” However, the documents maintain that teachers seem to “fear that students can’t do the work” and so they are “spoon-feeding” them to “make the content easier so that students are more likely to understand”^[9] (p. 48) To shy away from complex problems does disservice to students by depriving them from the “opportunity to engage with rigorous mathematics”, and it illustrates “right to comfort” and “quantity over quality” both of which include teachers’ “discomfort with emotion and feelings”—that students might feel stupid if they have not learned how to solve certain problems because it requires certain skills.

Pathway’s alternative is to “[s]tart with more complex math problems and scaffold as necessary.” What matters is that the web metaphor, as opposed to the ladder metaphor of linear teaching, expresses the primacy of con-

cepts over skills. The former frames the need for the latter. Skills are only important to the extent to which students find them necessary to solve problems at hand, which, for the educators, means that they support the politicized conceptual set-up. Otherwise, they will not be motivated to learn, and when they are not motivated, they cannot take in what teachers are teaching. An example of how to make mathematics relevant for students and enable them to identify and understand the mechanisms of racist and economic oppression is provided by Rubel and colleagues^[42]. They studied how teachers in schools located in poor urban communities learned students to use the concepts of percent to calculate the costs of loans. They also learned students to analyze spatial data on the locations of financial institutions and their differential interest rates. This made students aware of the ways in which the spatial distribution of these institutions and their differential interest rates reflected and reinforced inequalities.

While there may be many good pedagogical reasons for adopting an exemplary and practice-focused teaching approach, the way it is done by Critical Race Theory-informed educators entails a fundamental politicization of mathematics education. The practice-oriented approach adopted here is based on three central tenets: (1) The unilateral focus on structural explanations for racial inequity (in our case the achievement gap) as opposed to individualistic ones. (2) The insistence on strengthening student learning by focusing on students’ lived experience, especially those dealing with white oppression. (3) The focus on complex problems, rather than basic mathematical skills, to raise students’ critical awareness of white power structures in the classroom and in society.

5.4. Creating the Possibility of Collective Modes of Action

To empower students requires that they exercise their creativity, which is essential for building agency. This is described as both a pedagogical and political assignment in the documents we are looking at. While creativity and agency are inherently positive terms and hence uncontroversial, the documents’ definition of empowerment entails specific political objectives, which are closely linked to the view that knowledge and power are two sides of the same coin. Collective modes of action are predicated on stu-

dents' awareness of the essential links between mathematics and systemic racism.

However, the ambition of inducing collective action by way of awareness raising is undermined, social justice educators argue, because mathematics teaching is steeped in the dominant culture of individualism and meritocracy, which evaluates students according to their individual merits vis-à-vis preconceived expectations as to what characterizes good/bad students. This culture of individualism is regarded as problematic because it does not focus on how expectations are generated systemically, and because it “perpetuates the idea that if a student is failing it is because they are not trying hard enough or that they don’t care”^[9] (pp. 1, 3, 6, 13, 14, 19). It is also problematic by not interrogating how white supremacy is sustained, and how it blocks realigning expectations to “antiracist, social justice, transformative justice, and restorative justice practices”^[9] (p. 13).

The *Dismantling Racism* and *Pathway* documents do not specify how activism outside the school should take place. Instead, they focus on critiquing individualism and related issues such as meritocracy and perfectionism, which foster “conditions for competition and individual success” and hostility to “collectivism and community understanding”^[9] (p. 62). The antagonism is drawn between individualism, competition, and skills, on the one hand, and collectivism, community understanding, and “the big ideas” of conceptual knowledge, on the other. The teacher must ask him/herself: “How can I study the community in which I teach and incorporate issues that affect my students into my instruction?”^[9] (p. 60). On a practical level, the teacher should embrace student teamwork and collaboration and downplay “independent practice”^[9] (pp. 16, 62).

While the *Dismantling Racism* and *Pathway* are not very concrete about how mathematics teaching should induce collective action, they refer to several texts that do so. Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Illinois University, Eric Gutstein, for instance, provides seven examples of how he conducted as a mathematics teacher^[43] (pp. 237–250). Ranging from local urban housing to global wealth distribution and military expenses to racial profiling exercised by the local police, Gutstein uses available data and statistics to engage students in mathematics exercises. Again, these real-world examples may be good to

motivate students and improve their mathematical competencies. However, they all point unilaterally to what is seen as instances of racial oppression and white supremacy in the United States and abroad. Take the often used teaching case of the Mercator projection vs. the Gall-Peters projection of the world. In Gutstein’s rendition, the former is an expression of white supremacy because the area of the United States, Northern Europe, and Russia appears over-inflated, whereas the countries near the equator do not. The fact that the most Northern parts of the globe are inhabited mainly by Inuit and other indigenous people is ignored. As are the facts that Arno Peters was a white German and that his projection was widely sponsored by the National Council of Churches, a US-based Christian organization formerly involved in CIA-sponsored programs to fight communism in the South. All this is not to deny the potential pedagogical advantages of real-life examples in mathematics teaching, including cartographic projections, but it is to point out social justice educators’ zealous quest to promote social action based on a narrow-minded, ahistorical, and highly politicized worldview along friend/enemy terms: colored people of color vs. white people.

6. Conclusions

The present article has examined the question: What are the political ambitions and strategies of social justice discourses as exemplified by the attempt to rid mathematics of racism? By analyzing key texts and strategies associated with this trend in the United States, we have sought to illuminate its theoretical underpinnings, broader ideological implications, and practical applications.

Our analysis demonstrates that activist-educators attempts to rid mathematics education of white supremacy represent a concerted effort to reshape the aims and practices of education in accordance with a social justice political agenda. This agenda frames mathematics as implicated in the perpetuation of systemic racism, capitalism, and imperialism.

What we see here is a thorough politicization of education. The teaching principles endorsed by social justice educators to promote student emancipation are politicizing and based on a Manichean logic: mathematics is construed either as a tool to combat white power or as complicit in

the status quo of racist domination. It is moreover based on a culturalist premise, which relativizes knowledge and cognitive abilities vis-à-vis culture and social position.

We found that the strategies adopted by social justice activists have ramifications at the pedagogical, institutional, and political levels. At the pedagogical level, the conflation of mathematics education with political activism threatens the standards of professionalism and academic rigor traditionally associated with the discipline. It is one thing to try to make mathematics relevant for students by relating it to something that is important for them. It is an altogether different thing to disregard the vast body of pedagogical research on what may help disadvantaged students to improve their mathematics competencies because mathematics is appropriated as a vehicle for struggling against white supremacy. Interestingly, a meta-study of the causes of achievement gaps of students of color in the United States suggests that family factors (notably two parents and parental involvement), religious faith and religious schooling matter, whereas classroom structure, the level of teacher expectations, cultural factors (ethnicity), and government policy played little if any role^[44]. Recently, educational scholars have called for moving beyond single-factor studies and instead adopting multi-disciplinary and multi-method approaches to better understand the persistence of achievement gaps in mathematics and science^[42]. It is difficult to imagine current social justice educators taking on this advice.

At the institutional level, the integration of these principles into official policies, such as the *California Mathematics Framework*^[16], signifies a shift in educational governance. Mathematics education becomes a means for shaping the political sensibilities of future generations and promoting an ideological front against white supremacy. Of course, we should be careful not to exaggerate the social justice educators' actual capture of the education sector and policymakers, even if their institutional imprint is clear in states governed by Democrats like California. However, there can be little doubt about Critical Race Theory inspired educators' aspiration of achieving cultural and political dominance through "the long march through the institutions", which is by far more radical than adding, say, decolonization literature to the curriculum in the name of diversity.

At the political level, it is striking that the phenomenon of underperformance or achievement gap is, without further ado, seen as caused by white supremacy. This is a monocausal explanation, which is rarely argued in the sense of providing evidence pro et contra, but rather presupposed to sustain the friend/enemy antagonistic ideological set-up. If left-wing politics is to offer an inclusive and compelling vision for progressive change, it ought to reconsider its dependence on identitarian ideology and consider different and more effective ways to reduce educational achievement gaps and wider political and societal inequalities. Our point is not that schools should eschew normative and political visions about equality and liberal democracy. Schools have always been important instruments for political purposes, not least state formation^[45]. However, such visions for the educational sector are more likely to succeed if they try to avoid polarizing distinctions, whether based on race or wealth, and instead evolve around professionalism, democratic ethos, and the development of a sense of citizenship virtues.

Our article contributes to the academic understanding of the political dimension of social justice activism. While there is no lack of scholarly analysis of the politics of social justice activism and identity politics, it misses out important elements of their political dimension. Thus, on the one hand, we find that the analyses of Dean and Zamora^[1] and Bolan and Moore-Ponce^[2] and a score of other influential social theorists, such as Nancy Fraser and Wendy Brown, offer valuable insights by pointing to the often individualizing and inward-looking take on political change, which is associated with social justice discourses. Our case of mathematics teaching shows that social justice activists are indeed frantically preoccupied with purifying speech and rituals where teachers are urged to confess their racial or gender privileges, often at the neglect of wider economic structural issues. On the other hand, based on the case of mathematics teaching in the United States, we have illustrated that there is more to the story. In fact, social justice educators explicitly regard individualism as a significant source of systemic racism. Even more importantly, the activist discourse is permeated through and through with friend/enemy arguments evolving around race and gender that serve as political arguments for collective mobilization of the oppressed against the white oppressors.

In sum, social theory needs to take the political ramifications of social justice activism and identity politics more seriously by paying attention to their friend-enemy argumentative figures and their call for collective actions. Whether one has sympathy for social theorists decrying the social justice activists' lack of attention to economic class structures, such moral concerns ought to be based on a more concise understanding of the kind of politics implied in social justice activism. We believe this article contributes to the endeavor of improving this understanding.

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