

Roger's Note

Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody*. Durham, NC: Pitchstone Publishing, 2020.

This volume is the most lucid exposition of critical theory, identity politics, and other related doctrines that define the “progressive” left and have infiltrated mainstream American culture. The authors explain the underlying principles of these movements and their curious evolution. Originating in literary postmodernism, they developed by the 1980s into separate but related movements of applied postmodernism—postcolonial theory, queer theory, critical race theory and intersectionality, feminist and gender studies, and disability studies. Then, beginning around 2010, these fields morphed into dogmatic assertions of absolute truth that the authors term the “Social Justice Movement” (capitalized). The term can usefully represent the political thrust to reorder society based on the doctrines just indicated, the goal of those who now considered themselves “woke.” Further, the authors carefully distinguish it from their own endorsement of liberalism, including political democracy, universal human rights, legal equality, freedom of expression, and rationalism. They emphasize that social justice in terms of racial and gender equality was achieved through liberalism, but is now threatened by Social Justice, an illiberal ideological movement that has permeated American society.

Postmodernism was originally a literary posture that denied certainty by probing the ambiguity of language. However, applied more broadly it crystalized around two fundamental premises. The first is a radical rejection of objective knowledge or truth in favor of cultural relativity and the social construction of knowledge. The second is the assertion that society is dominated by systems of power and hierarchies, and that these determine the dominant knowledge systems. Four themes elaborate these principles. Since knowledge is culturally constructed, conventional boundaries (male/female) are illusory and without objective validity. Instead, knowledge is embedded in language discourses that reflect power relations in society. An individual’s culture is determined by such discourses which are shaped by their relation to power. Consequently, individualism or universal humanity are fictions, displaced by identities determined by the common perceptions and experiences of particular sets of people. The initial inspiration for this worldview came from Michel Foucault, who argued that knowledge systems were shaped by dominant social powers. An additional dimension on language-discourse was derived from Jacques Derrida, and all these concepts were elaborated by legions of followers. They focused, above all, on knowledge, language, and power—their relationships and relative fluidity. And this perspective was gradually applied to contemporary domains.

The authors devote five chapters to separately examining the areas of applied postmodernism listed above. Each has an enormous literature and many permutations, but the tautological assumptions of Social Justice make these writings impervious to reasoned criticism,

which they reject in any case as illegitimate. Postcolonial theory holds that Western rationality and science perpetuated Western power and marginalized nonrational forms of native knowledge. Edward Said wrote that such “discourses” embodied inherent power imbalances, which called for a rewriting of history from the perspective of the oppressed. From this perspective it is a short step to condemning knowledge solely for its origins. One quoted author ticked off all the evil boxes: “philosophy ... in modern Western universities remains a bastion of Eurocentrism, whiteness in general, and white heteronormative male structural privilege and superiority.” (80) Of course, indigenous knowledge is rarely conducive for economic development or human rights, but these things too are often dismissed as Western.

Race, gender, and intersectionality each receive their own discussions, but are closely interrelated both in Theory (capitalized for its postmodern meaning) and in contemporary application. Critical race Theory is “critical” in its single-minded focus of finding and analyzing problems in society, supposedly to be rectified but actually unrectifiable as defined. Critical race Theory reflects postmodern assertion of the social construction of knowledge systems determined by power relations. White people benefit from systemic white supremacy and are incapable of transcending it. Black consciousness is formed from the common experience of oppression. Racism is consequently embedded in the culture and omnipresent. Whites are thus inherently racist and privileged as beneficiaries of white culture; blacks correspondingly oppressed. In a typical rejection of liberalism, color-blindness is considered racist in that it denies pervasive racism and thus perpetuates white privilege. These views are obviously self-referential, but they may be conveniently invoked in any circumstance for protest purposes (e.g. institutional racism).

Feminism has always included multiple definitions and orientations. Liberal feminism deserved much credit for the equity achieved by women in American society, while more radical strands have been prominent in academic women’s studies. However, these feminisms have been superseded in postmodern Theory by gender studies. Its tenets are: gender is central to systems of power and privilege, and hence key to all facets of the social order; gender and sexuality are socially constructed; analyses of power and privilege reveal the hegemony of masculinity and heterosexuality; socially constructed “standpoints” (positions in society) create identities for oppressed women, combining gender and sexuality with race and class. This last point links gender studies with intersectionality, which developed from critical race Theory.

Intersectionality holds, in the words of a proponent, “social inequality, people’s lives[,] and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, but by many axes that work together and influence each other.” (127) Thus, analyzing discrimination calls for exposing all the imbalances, bigotry, and biases that are assumed to exist. These multiple axes of oppression/privilege exist everywhere, at all times, and their intersections form the identities of marginalized persons. Intersectionality intensifies the most negative aspects of critical race Theory. It assumes every interaction of a person with a dominant racial identity and one with a marginalized one must be characterized

by a power imbalance. Intersectionality makes the same assumption for multiple identities. This paranoid mindset, which assumes discrimination “is everywhere, always, just waiting to be found,” the authors note, “is extremely unlikely to be helpful or healthy for those who adopt it.” (132)

But in fact these convictions have not only been widely adopted, but in the last decade have been propounded in Social Justice scholarship as incontrovertible truths. These doctrines now form a kind of religion—a “Gospel of Social Justice—that expresses with absolute certainty that all white people are racist, all men are sexist, racism and sexism are systems that can exist and oppress absent even a single person with racist or sexist intentions or beliefs, ... sex is not biological and exists on a spectrum, language can be literal violence, [etc.] That is the reification of the postmodern political principle.” (183) These articles of faith are based upon an epistemology that regards knowledge as dependent upon a person’s standpoint in society. Such knowledge then determines identity, and identity politics are to be mobilized to change the world. For Social Justice advocates, adherence to the faith must be absolute. “Confessing to white privilege is far from sufficient. White students must accept their ongoing complicity in perpetuating systemic racism simply by being white.” (199) Arguments that might challenge Social Justice must not be “assessed for their truth value, but as expressions of power that function to re-inscribe and perpetuate social inequalities.” (203) And, “White fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable,” “evidence of complicity in—if not collusion with—racism.”¹ (205) The authors conclude: Social Justice Theorists have created

“a faith that is actively hostile to reason, falsification, disconfirmation, and disagreement of any kind. Indeed, the whole postmodernist project now seems, in retrospect ... a wholly new religion, a postmodern faith based on a dead God, which sees mysteriously *worldly* forces in systems of power and privilege and which sanctions victimhood. This, increasingly, is the fundamentalist religion of the nominally secular left.” (211)

In the penultimate chapter, the authors pose the obvious question: how has an arcane and dubious Theory become ascendant in American culture, media, and popular consciousness? The depiction of Social Justice by Pluckrose and Lindsay provides the basis for addressing this monumental issue, and I cannot refrain from some elaboration of their analysis. Basically, the majority of Americans share traditional liberal wishes for the advancement of minorities in terms of education, earnings, and standard of living, and for the equal rights of all citizens; but Social Justice forces have redefined those sentiments in their own terms. They have imposed their language on discussion of these matters; they have intimidated alternate views and facts by calling them racist, sexist, etc.; they have mobilized Social Justice activism for political advantage; and they have monopolized consideration of these topics through control of higher education.

Political correctness in language probably began with the feminist offensive against masculine nouns and pronouns. By the 1990s, it expanded to all the concerns of applied postmodernism, requiring the general substitution of language reconfigured to avoid offending the sensibilities of these groups. Social Justice, however, has legitimized a vocabulary that is aggressively partisan (and racist and sexist in its characterization of whites and males). In *Theory*, white racism and white supremacy exist by definition—their definition. *Cynical Theories* went to press before the George Floyd phenomenon. To many, Floyd was murdered by racist American society—not by a bad cop. No matter. It became widely acceptable (and proof of wokeness) to call the U.S. a racist society, and such expressions are casually repeated, among others, by Black Lives Matter, most Democrats, NPR, and the left generally. This was not new, just greatly inflated. The previous year the *New York Times* published the ‘1619 Project,’ a tendentious history contending that America was an inherently racist society from its origins. Despite its distortions, this text has been adopted by many school systems and will be taught as gospel truth.

Social Justice terms benefit from an inherent ambiguity between English-language meanings and Social Justice meanings. Non-wealthy Americans are bewildered by the charge of white privilege, but in *Theory* privilege is derived from white culture no matter how unprivileged the actual lives of white individuals. Similarly, white supremacy exists by definition without any explanation of how whites collectively do this. And of course, most Americans favor social justice, not Social Justice.

American universities are what geographers would call the hearth of Social Justice, the site where it was created and from which it spread. Diversity has been the Trojan Horse (to switch metaphors) for the conquering forces. *Every* university embraces diversity as a part of its mission. They hire legions of “diversocrats” to recruit, promote, and provide for, originally mainly blacks, but now all favored postmodern categories.² They provide Social Justice indoctrination in orientations for incoming students, and often compulsory sessions for faculty. Dedicated Social Justice faculty teach required diversity courses as well as their own applied postmodern studies. Of course, much of this can be and is ignored by professionally dedicated faculty and students—but it cannot be opposed. Social Justice forces mobilize to *cancel* any heretical person or utterance. This can be accomplished through ‘bias response teams’, but more often through social media, finalized by craven administrators. These forces use their institutional leverage to ensure and perpetuate their dominance. Diversocrats have a hand in faculty hiring committees, and University of California campuses, among others, have instituted political tests for hiring or promotion: candidates are required to submit an essay on their “contributions to diversity.” Villanova asks students to rate diversity on faculty evaluations. Being “woke” is a prerequisite for university administrators—and for good reason since they are most vulnerable to being canceled.

Cynical Theories depicts how the “mob madness” (231) that engulfed Evergreen State University was a consequence of the acceptance of Social Justice ideology on a leftist campus.

Having committed to antiracist Theory, the university had no possible response to charges of institutional racism. Any denial of racism was ipso facto “racist.” The mayhem was only ended by accepting the protesters far-reaching demands, including the canceling (resignation with compensation) of a professor who challenged their claims. In fall 2020, this scenario was repeated at Haverford and Bryn Mawr, two of the most left-leaning campuses in the country (along with Evergreen). In separate cases, mostly black protesters (a truly privileged group) closed the campuses for nearly month-long strikes with chimerical claims of institutional racism and systemic oppression. The strikes were called off when the humiliated presidents acceded to the strikers’ terms and issued abject apologies for doubting their racist allegations.³

The authors conclude with an eloquent defense of liberal alternatives. Postmodern Theory is the antithesis of liberalism, and fiercely critical of it for that reason. Proponents present Theory first and then invoke evidence for illustration. Liberalism seeks objective data, refined by reason and science, to arrive at conclusions that are always subject to further review and improvement. They apply a liberal critique to the two postmodern premises and four themes (listed above). Knowledge may have social influence, but liberal science is “neither racist, sexist, nor imperialistic.... Science and reason belong to everybody.” (252) The notion that people parrot certain discourses according to their positions within the power structure, should be displaced by judging ideas of all identity groups by evidence and reason. Similarly, science and reason supply liberal arguments to overcome radical skepticism. “The idea that social justice is best served by restricting what can be said and by banning some ideas and terminologies and enforcing others, is unsupported by history, evidence, or reason.” (255) Knowledge production transcends specific cultures, and real social justice requires principles and rights that are applicable to all. And, individuality and universal human nature are far more important than, and should not be constrained by, group identities.

Unlike conservative critiques of the postmodern left, *Cynical Theories* finishes by conceding that those doctrines express a “kernel of truth.” Trusting in liberalism, the authors hold that the ideas in Social Justice “need to be engaged and defeated within the marketplace of ideas.” (264) To this end, they propose strategies for admitting that racism, sexism, social injustice still exist to some degree, but that affirmations of liberal principles are more effective in addressing them than Social Justice dogma. But for an open marketplace of ideas to function, the institutionalization of the Social Justice movement must cease—by removing “any requirement of an orthodox Social Justice statement of diversity, equity, and inclusion, or mandatory diversity or equity training.” (264) And, “the academic disciplines involved need to be reformed, to make them more rigorous and ethical ... once the taboo against criticizing Social Justice scholarship evaporates.” (265) If only that were possible.

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Notes

¹ These quotations paraphrase, respectfully, Barbara Applebaum, *Being White, Being Good: White Complicity, White Moral Responsibility, and Social Justice Pedagogy*; Alison Bailey, "Tracking Privilege-Preserving Epistemic Pushback in Feminist and Critical Race Philosophy Classes"; and Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It Is So Hard to Talk to White People about Race*.

² E.g., more than 60 at Yale, nearly 100 at the universities of Michigan and Texas, 175 at UC Berkeley: Mark Pulliam, "The Campus Diversity Swarm," *City Journal*, (Oct. 10, 2018). Pluckrose and Lindsay do not use this term.

³ "Minnie Doe," "A Student Mob Took over Bryn Mawr. The College Said Thank You," *Quillette*, (Dec. 27, 2020).