

Book Review

Helen Pluckrose & James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone Publishing, 2020), 352 pp. \$27.95

Reviewed by Nils I. Borquist

THE POST-ENLIGHTENMENT EMPHASIS ON THE scientific method in academia deeply infiltrated universities and scholastic institutions, ultimately proving very valuable in accelerating intellectual breakthroughs across various fields, including medicine, physics, anthropology, and philosophy. Especially over the past couple of centuries, these institutions have also aimed to create optimal conditions to inspire their great minds to pursue their curiosity in productive and creative ways. As a result, a collection of methods known as liberal practices became significant for making discoveries. The subsequent decades proved incredibly progressive in terms of new ideas and innovation, and this fruitful period serves as the precursor to Pluckrose and Lindsay's text.

Unfortunately, once the 1960s arrived in the West, especially in the United States, France, and Germany, the term “liberalism” veered off its original path and into a usage that persists today. As Pluckrose and Lindsay note, liberalism's “main tenets” originally included “political democracy, limitations on the powers of government, the development of universal human rights, legal equality for all adult citizens, freedom of expression, respect for the value” of “honest debate, respect for evidence and reason,” and “freedom of religion” (11). While these principles are valuable for encouraging the informed perspectives of all people—long-standing exceptional and beneficial values that existed for many years in both theory and practice—today's academic leaders and instructors often seek to manipulate and distort these tenets for their own ends, often aligning with a postmodern ideology focused on social justice through the “woke” mindset. This distortion of meaningful liberal principles gained momentum by convincing students and self-identified social rejects that supposed oppressive cultural tactics aim to keep the young, the minorities, women, and the outcasts forever away from achieving the success they believe they deserve.

With the obsession of the “woke” socially-minded on “power, language, knowledge, and the relationships between them” as well as their interpretation of “the world through a lens” of “power dynamics,” they have centralized “social and

cultural grievances and aim to make everything into a zero-sum political struggle revolving around identity markers” (15). The results of social equity practices have thus proven to be quite harmful to freedom of speech, freedom of expression, and engagement in critical thinking. Specifically, the authors directly state that postmodernists rejected “Christianity...science, reason, and the pillars of post-Enlightenment Western Democracy,” often proclaiming each of these cornerstones of European and American progress as racist, sexist, and classist “meta-narratives” meant to maintain the authority and social standing of white, male rulers (17).

In the chapters following their introduction, Pluckrose and Lindsay outline the theories of postmodernists who have infiltrated academic institutions, thereby spreading their damaging theories that influence the brightest students in the country. Additionally, the authors describe the theories, such as Queer Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Gender Studies, illustrating the troubling directions the new “intellectuals” promote as the only path to truly creating an equal and just society, as well as their particular views on scholarship and its application in society and institutions nationwide.

The rise of Postmodernism most prominently occurred through several French theorists, such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-François Lyotard. These theorists and their followers radically opposed the so-called modern era and modernists with their “desire for authenticity, unifying narratives, universalism, and progress, achieved mainly through scientific knowledge and technology” (22). Framing success as a power struggle rather than a meritocracy, postmodernists pushed to reshape the minds of impressionable youth, constructing a framework based on four main pillars. First, they sought to eliminate traditional notions of identity and instead emphasized culture as creating identity through superficial means. Second, they aimed to demonstrate that morality results solely from social constructs rather than from culture and religion. Third, they wished to strongly incorporate the idea of deconstruction, or the dismantling of art, literature, and canonical texts across the disciplinary spectrum in order to critique them using their own criteria derived from various critical theories. Finally, they concluded that globalization will be the most liberating path for the world; in doing so, imaginary and arbitrary borders will be eliminated along with the assumptions held by those from such regions. Above all, the pillars emphasize the subjective individual over the objective universal, with the goal of critiquing not “*what* we believe but *how* we believe” (30), thus making it easier to judge the individual—especially if that individual avoids conforming to politically correct sensitivities.

In discussing postmodernism and its application to society, Pluckrose and Lindsay note that the ideology compares quite closely to a virus, but one that works so brutally that it destroys its host before replicating. As such, the spread of this “disease” needed to be closely monitored. Through “Social Justice Scholarship,”

postmodern professors and writers successfully developed a methodology that allowed for a simmering effect, in which slow progress occurred in schools, workplaces, and the home. By focusing on “systems of power and privilege” (47) and constructing “New Theories” of “race, gender, and sexuality,” they were able to argue that “knowledge is a construct of power” and that “the categories into which we organize people and phenomena were falsely contrived in the service of that power...[and] that” because “language is inherently dangerous and unreliable” (49), it is used by those in power to continue suppressing those without an equal voice. Ironically, by using this very notion, social justice seekers sought to “revise and rewrite history” (52) to present a narrative more aligned with their goals. Unfortunately, they succeeded, and the last two decades deviate substantially from the prior decades and centuries. Specifically, “we hear laments about cultural appropriation” and simultaneous complaints about a “lack of cultural representation.... We hear that only white people can be racist and that they always are so, by default.... Companies flaunt their respect for ‘diversity,’ while making it clear that they are only interested in a superficial diversity of identity” (65) rather than perspectives. The fear tactics employed and accepted by universities and companies have, therefore, promoted such faulty views and further rely on socially degrading those unwilling to comply.

After presenting the synopsis of postmodernist goals and methods, the authors provide similar summaries of the leading postmodern theories currently affecting proper intellectual progress. While they provide overviews of several “woke” theories, perhaps the two most influential and divisive are Queer Theory and Critical Race Theory. Queer Theory, which promotes the mindset that traditional perspectives of gender and sex are “oppressive” and even “violent,” all while rejecting “biology nearly completely” (89), is discussed first. Notably, Queer Theory aims to demonstrate that sex and gender are fundamentally separate, with sex being biologically determined and gender being purely constructed through cultural norms and expectations. Theories about sexual practices and desires get investigated, with the eventual already decided outcome being that essentially very little should be considered off-limits regarding sexual practices, and citizens should, in turn, treat everyone as equal regardless of sexual orientation or even psychological dysfunction (such as severe body dysmorphia). Michel Foucault played a decisive role in shaping queer theory, as his power theories arose quite conspicuously within that circle of defenders. His argument centered on “a deep suspicion of science as an oppressive exercise of power rather than a knowledge producer” and “a skepticism of categories that describe gender and sexuality” (98). Judith Butler also became a leading voice, arguing “extensively that gender and sex are distinct and that there is no necessary correlation between the two” (101). Clearly, this viewpoint appears scientifically and reasonably flawed, and the authors state that ignoring biological facts reflects a lack of insight and a rejection of proven evidence.

Critical Race Theory follows the example of Queer Theory, with supporters describing race as “a social construct that was created to maintain white privilege and white supremacy” (111). Of course, much like Queer Theory and other similar theories, a strong political agenda is evident. Pluckrose and Lindsay list a series of beliefs of Critical Race advocates, including “racism is embedded in culture” and “we can’t escape it,” “white people are inherently racist,” “only white people can be racist,” “only people of color can talk about racism” and “white people need to just listen,” and to “ignore the pervasive racism that dominates society...perpetuates white privilege” (121). Such statements are made or written when efforts to manipulate individuals are used for social, financial, or political gain, and often the targeted individuals of these baseless views—which are themselves undeniably racist and intended to harm—are prevented from arguing to the contrary. If they do, they show the true ignorance of their own racism. The authors highlight this clearly, especially when discussing contemporary workplace “workshops,” where white workers are made to endure embarrassing exercises accusing others of being racist and are expected to admit to their own racist tendencies they do not even know exist, perhaps because they actually do not exist at all. Pluckrose and Lindsay conclude their chapter by stating, “Critical Race Theory threatens to undo the social taboo against evaluating people by their race. Such an obsessive focus on race, combined with a critique of liberal universalism and individuality...is not likely to end well” (134) for anyone.

As social theories developed within universities and colleges, unfounded and often unverifiable beliefs became reified as facts, which dilutes the academic process of critical thinking. Further, “it exhibits a deep cultural relativism, focuses on marginalized groups, and has little time for universal principles or individual intellectual diversity” (183). All of these points add up to a heavy investment “in identity,” which is used to create new, real truths and initiate the changes they desire (186). Reason and science continue to be dismissed, and any disagreement with “woke” policies and directives is met with social devastation or being canceled. However, a new type of truthing has supposedly emerged: the “reliable knowledge...obtained by listening to the ‘lived experience’ of members of marginalized groups—or to what is really more accurate, to marginalized people’s interpretations of their own lived experience” (209), after, of course, they have participated in a proper education of social theory indoctrination. The trajectory social theories have taken—from university classrooms into society at large—has been advanced by students from academic institutions, although the number of students engaging in this remains a small proportion of the total population. Nonetheless, the intensity and volume of shouting by those seeking “justice” create enough noise to be heard and amplified across social media and the news, making their voices so loud enough to reach everyone paying even minimal attention.

Fortunately, enough truth-seekers exist who uncover facts and offer truthful commentaries that contradict the false claims of Social Justice supporters. Books discussing the victimhood mentality and the coddling of youth who persistently support the narrative of social constructs as the enemy are multiplying. Pluckrose and Lindsay, beyond this text, have been arguing against postmodern principles and even going so far as to write fake academic papers (along with philosopher Peter Boghossian) to prove that postmodern “academic” journals and experts lack true intellectual principles and scholastic ethics. The three composed 20 articles in approximately a single year that relied on postmodern tropes, and seven of the articles were either published or in the preparation phase of publication. The experiment proved that any potential justification for the academic authority of such papers and journals should lose substantial footing. “Social Justice approaches that focus *solely* on group identity and neglect individuality and universality are doomed to fail for the simple reason that people are individuals and share a common human nature” (257). Perhaps the biggest issue with Social Justice Theories, among an enormous list of problems and detrimental practices, is simply the idea that advocates of such theories dismiss the potential of humans to make rational, informed decisions about themselves, their families, and their neighbors. By making baseless accusations, expecting people today to apologize for past wrongs, and falsifying the academic process, Social Justice practitioners create a dynamic of distrust, thereby erecting walls to true positive social interactions and improved intellectual enhancement.

Nils Borquist is an ILT PhD student and English teacher at Neville High School in Monroe, Louisiana. He attained a BA from Tabor College, an MA from the University of Louisiana at Monroe, an MAT from the University of Mississippi, and a PhD from Liberty University.



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