Fighting the New Theocrats: Review of 'Cynical Theories' by Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay

by [Daniel Sharp](#) (August 2020)


Group of Faces, Jean Dubuffet, 1946

It really is a forever war. Victories against superstition are only temporary; even as one foe is defeated, another comes along. So, with Christianity in serious (though unfortunately not quiet) decline, here is the theology of the early 21st century: Social Justice. The capitals are deliberate, for

Social Justice is not social justice; that eminent term has a centuries-long pedigree in political thought, while its latter-day, perverted manifestation is an inflexible ideology built on an intricate theology which is baffling to the outsider.

Furors over prom dresses, screeches raised at the merest criticism of an 'eastern' religion, abuse directed at eminent children's authors—these and many other confected controversies represent the triumph of Social Justice. What on earth is this belief system, which speaks of 'problematizing,' 'cultural appropriation,' 'white privilege,' and suchlike? What are its organising principles? How do decent-minded people, not racists or colonisers or transphobes despite what might be hurled at them, fight back?
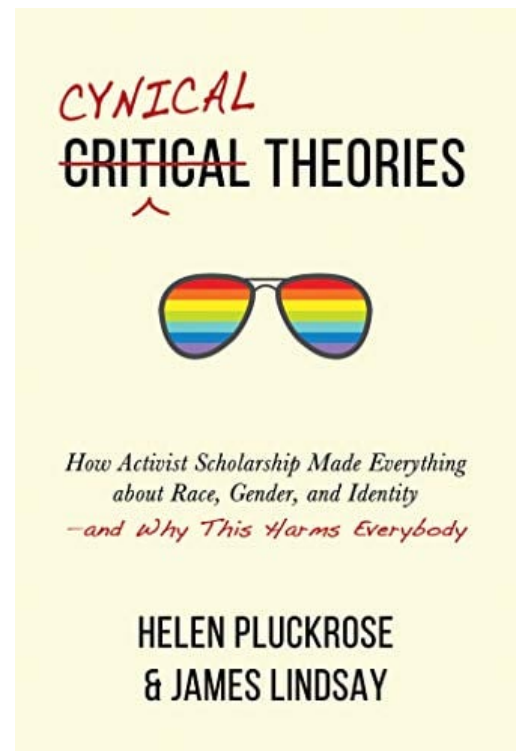
These and other questions are addressed and answered in the forthcoming *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity- and Why This Harms Everybody* by Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay. Despite the rather unwieldy title, the book is a lucid analysis of Social Justice, its roots, its evolution, and its effects. It also provides valuable ammunition in the never-ending fight against authoritarian ideologies in its expression of a broad philosophical liberalism which can be harnessed against them. As the authors put it, Social Justice is 'a wholly new religion, a postmodern faith based on a dead God . . . ' and what we need is a renewed commitment to secularism, broadly conceived, wherein free expression, debate and open dissent are championed, beliefs are not enforced, and punishments are

not meted out to heretics.

Before going any further, I should declare that I write for Pluckrose's *Areo Magazine* and am a friendly virtual acquaintance of hers. I take reviewing duty seriously, though, and I really consider *Cynical Theories* to be *the* guide to the ideology which animates so much of the culture wars these days. Pluckrose and Lindsay are experts in this field, as shown by the book's copious references and detailed delineation of Social Justice's ancestry and central concepts.

Some of their detractors on Twitter like to say they are ignoramuses, neophytes (or closet reactionaries) who grumble about a sophisticated academic practice that they just don't understand (or feel threatened by). *Cynical Theories* should shut these critics up once and for all. Pluckrose and Lindsay are way ahead of them; they're steeped in this stuff, from Derridean linguistic analysis to Butlerian queer theory to intersectional feminism. They have done the research, and it shows. And they are liberal humanists who avow constantly and consistently their commitment to the rights of all people, whether straight white men or transgender women of colour. If such critics want to duel with the deconstructors of their metanarrative, they will have to come armed to the fangs—Pluckrose and Lindsay certainly are.

Cynical Theories provides an intellectual history of postmodernism, starting with Derrida and co. in the second half of the twentieth century, through 'applied' postmodernisms such as queer theory, to the 'reified' postmodern ideals at the heart of Social Justice today. It may seem contradictory to say Social Justice ideologues are postmodernists in any sense, since the original postmodernists disavowed *all* metanarratives and objective truths. But the original postmodernists bequeathed some principles and themes which emerge again and again in the history of Social Justice.

Prime among them are these ideas: objective knowledge

is unattainable, everything is culturally constructed, and our societies are merely expressions of systems of power whose 'discourses' decide rightness and wrongness. Therefore we must blur all boundaries and categories, declare ourselves cultural relativists, agonise over language (the vehicle of power), and abandon notions of the individual and the universal because each of us is constructed by discourses and all universals are expressions of relative cultural knowledges. There is no individual and no humanity; there is only the positional group, defined by race or sex or some other local category, which is constructed by society; the individual's experience is therefore defined by the experiences of this group alone.

This is pretty nihilistic, more likely to encourage a lifetime spent smoking slim cigarettes in cafés and ruminating on oppressive linguistic constructions than engagement in impassioned activism. But the applied postmodernists added their own twists- yes, everything is culturally constructed, but rather than despairing at this fact, we can act on it by championing the discourses of the oppressed in opposition to dominant 'epistemes' (as Foucault would put it).

Hence postcolonial theory and the rest. And then, around the early 2010s, these ideas were 'reified'. That is, the view that society is structured along lines of legitimising discourse and that positional power or marginalisation permeates absolutely everything became a real, objective fact about the world. The postmodern principles at core were still there, but they had mutated- into Social Justice scholarship and activism. Ironically, we are therefore faced with a metanarrative that evolved from a philosophical movement which decried metanarratives. And because the Social Justice conception of the world is taken as a given, there can be no dissent. If you disagree, you require re-educating or are irredeemably evil.

Pluckrose and Lindsay put it thus:

The result is that the belief that society is structured of specific but largely invisible identity-based systems of power and privilege that construct knowledge via ways of talking about things [discourses] is now considered by social justice scholars and activists to be an objectively true statement about the organizing principle of society.

This is 'The Truth According to Social Justice . . . [treated like] the analogue of the germ theory of disease, but for bigotry and oppression.' Since this is The Truth, it must be acted upon. These ideas have spread from the academy, to the media and activists and to the wider world, even though most people barely know of theorists like Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, the mother of intersectionalism. Thus, James Damore was fired from Google for stating that there might be some biologically based sex differences which might explain some of the differing decisions of men and women (that view would fall foul of the cultural constructivist narrative whereby such differences can only be explained by systems of power). And you only have to spend a few minutes on Twitter to hear about the latest Social Justice brouhaha.

We should be grateful to Pluckrose and Lindsay, for they have provided a valuable service to those of us who can barely face parsing the lucubrations of obscure theorists without feeling a migraine coming on. They have waded through the rivers of ink wasted by these theorists and translated their bizarre dialects into terms anyone can understand. Indeed, once you understand the core principles, it is apparent just how feeble Social Justice is as an intellectual system; no amount of phrases such as 'intersectional queer trans liberatory epistemology' (to improvise in applying the jargon) can hide the unfalsifiable paranoia which is at the ideology's heart. Just as traditional religion has its own 'sophisticated' theology, so too does Social Justice have a laughably thin veneer of complexity.

And in case you think dealing with this subject matter

is an ordeal not worth putting yourself through, Pluckrose and Lindsay leaven their discussions with flashes of dry wit. Discussing the current vogue for deploring 'traditional' or 'toxic' masculinity, for example, they comment, 'One suspects Michel Foucault is rolling in his grave over this development'. Indeed! And, incidentally, that might be the only thing I have in common with Foucault.

Even the theorists are funny, albeit unintentionally. Pluckrose and Lindsay quote the activist Lydia X. Y. Brown:

> [A]bleism might describe the value system of ablenormativity which privileges the supposedly neurotypical and ablebodied, while disableism might describe the violent oppression targeting people whose bodyminds are deemed deviant and thus disabled.

This is merely bloviating, but the following sentence had me, I'm not ashamed to say, snorting out loud for a good minute or so: 'In other words, ableism is to heterosexism what disableism is to queerantagonism.' Queerantagonism! I'm laughing even now.

All that is to say: worry not, Pluckrose and Lindsay are clear, often witty, and there are chuckles to be had even while wading through the swamp.

For all that, Social Justice is an issue we should take seriously. It is nonsensical, authoritarian hogwash in itself and has given us an aggressive and hysterical '[cancel culture](#).' But it also opens the door to far worse. Pluckrose and Lindsay point out that one of the hard-fought triumphs of Enlightenment liberalism was the dismantling of the legitimacy of defining by tribe. For liberals, the individual is the paramount unit, and should be understood as a human first, not as a member of a race or a sex. Those who categorised by group tended to be racists, sexists, homophobes, and other assorted bigots. If the Social Justice ideologues want to legitimise

once more the judgement of people in that way, they should beware the ammunition they provide to the far right who would also love to do so. And Social Justice nonsense is a sure way to alienate otherwise moderate voters; if you give people a choice between an absurd, aggressive, and hysterical left and a right which posits itself as the antidote, don't be surprised when you lose elections.

Pluckrose and Lindsay are not foaming antagonists of Social Justice though; throughout *Cynical Theories* they point out some of the ways the theorists get it right. Of *course* we should beware of biases and prejudices. Of *course* we should strive to be more sensitive to genuine oppression. And to say something nice myself, [I] [enjoy] what might be termed postmodern literature, particularly the works of Salman Rushdie. But those and other slivers of truth are lost under the weight of the theories built atop them. And if only postmodernism could be confined to novels . . .

There is at least one factual slip up that I noticed in the book. Pluckrose and Lindsay at one point state that '[i]n the early seventeenth century . . . the Enlightenment began to take hold and revolutionize human thought in Europe.' In fact, the Enlightenment really began towards the end of that century. This is minor, but worth pointing out because the Social Justice ideologues will latch onto anything to discredit opponents like Pluckrose and Lindsay.

How, then, can such ideology be combatted? The solution, beautifully expressed in the book's final chapter, is simply to champion a philosophical liberalism in which free speech and debate in the marketplace of ideas are the guiding norms. This liberalism is not a dogmatic metanarrative, but a process, which can self-correct based on empirical evidence rather than being beholden to *a priori* commitments. With such rigid ideologies there is always the latent tendency towards authoritarianism, even totalitarianism; if that seems an exaggeration, consider that the Social Justice crowd are

powerful people with an explicitly stated desire to control your speech, re-educate you, and make you think and act in approved ways (see also the anti-anti-modernist [manifesto](#) in *Areo* by Pluckrose and Lindsay).

In the liberal system, no one should be punished for not signing up to a set of dogmas and all ideas must meet the demands of reason and evidence if they are to be given weight. Liberalism is also 'a spirit' of generosity, as Andrew Sullivan recently [put it](#). And, note Pluckrose and Lindsay, we should remember and be proud of the fact that we *have* made progress thanks to liberalism, whereas postmodernism and its descendants have not given us very much:

> There is nothing that postmodern Theory can do that liberalism cannot do better, and it's high time we regained the confidence to argue for this, applied liberalism to address its past shortcomings and orient it towards future challenges, and got on with things.

Ironically, it may be liberalism's very success which allowed Social Justice in; with the advent of greater equality for all races, sexes, and sexualities, those who still wanted to fight were forced to come up with ever more nebulous varieties of bigotry to cast as enemies.

One very simple way of pushing back is to simply be an open dissenter. Don't be browbeaten into keeping quiet and passively accepting the dictates of these ideologues. Challenge them. Tell them how *you* believe in equal rights for all- show them that theirs is not the only way. In facing an authoritarian and absolutely certain theology, complete with a priestly class of 'sophisticated' interpreters, we would do well to keep some Enlightenment tools in mind: dissent, resistance, mockery, irony, criticism, fearlessness in debate, and, above all, reason. Homer was indeed wrong in wishing for the end of struggle and conflict, for without these no progress can be made and no life worth living attained. Keep

arguing and remain sceptical, then.

There are emerging signs of a concerted pushback—most notably in the form of the now-notorious [Harper's open letter](#), a missive against absolutism signed by a wide range of writers and intellectuals from Salman Rushdie to Thomas Chatterton Williams to J.K. Rowling. This letter has generated a great deal of bitterness on the part of those who wish to control the public square. One criticism hurled at the letter (or The Letter as it's now known) is that its signatories are just wealthy, fragile elites. Never mind that the Social Justice crowd are themselves powerful elites (and as Cynical Theories shows, Social Justice is a veritable industry; where there are dopes there is money to be made- another point in common with organised religion, incidentally) but a brave and moving [piece](#) by Angel Eduardo in *Areo* gets the point that The Letter, as noted by Steven Pinker, is in defence of those too weak to resist cancellation. And how big and brave and revolutionary the Social Justice mobs are, ruining peoples' careers and lives with their screeching tweets and emails to employers.

As the historian Mark Mazower has [reminded](#) us, the battle for liberal democracy in the twentieth century was not destined to result in victory. It was a long and hard and bloody fight which could so very easily have been lost. It still could be. There are many threats to it, some, such as jihadism, much more deadly than Social Justice. But Social Justice is in the ascendant in the west right now and therefore deserves much of the focus. The ideals of civilisation and pluralism are not going to stand without a staunch defence. So, do not step quietly aside while those values are under threat, even if the current enemy is not quite so evil as some other ones past and present. Inform yourself of its nature and meet it, squarely and openly, on the intellectual battlefield. For those like me who prefer an old fashioned and true radicalism to Social Justice's faux-radicalism and reactionary tenets, and for everyone on the

left, right, and in the middle with a broad allegiance to liberal ideals, it is utterly necessary to resist.

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