

Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody, Helen Pluckrose, James A. Lindsay, 2020 Pitchstone, pp. 352, \$25.16 hardcover.

Down from Liberalism

Michael Walsh

“All of humanity’s problems,” wrote Blaise Pascal in 1654, “stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone.” The French mathematician, inventor, and religious philosopher was writing from the vantage point of the mid-seventeenth century, in the middle of the theological battles between the Jesuits and the Jansenists. Sickly (he died at the age of 39), solitary (he spent his later years in part living at the convent of Port-Royal, where his sister was a nun) and possessed of a febrile, useful genius (he invented the first calculator), Pascal’s seminal insight into the human condition is rivaled perhaps only by his famous wager: that betting

against the existence of God is a losing proposition.

Taking the odds against God while being unable to sit still, however, are twin hallmarks of the modern secular left. And that Pascal’s two observations are related has been amply illustrated through subsequent Western history. There are, after all, few if any anchorites on the disruptive left.

Indeed, atheism and agnosticism inevitably intersect with political activism and radicalism as society’s malcontents and troublemakers act out their animus against God and their fellow man. Their war against God may be a fight they cannot win, but their desire to dominate and control other people, which is generally couched in terms of punitive beneficence, is inextinguishable.

“The postmodernist project,” write Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay in their important new book, *Cynical Theories*, “is overwhelmingly prescriptive, rather than descriptive. An academic theory that prioritizes what it believes ought to be true over the aim of describing what is—that is, one that sees personal belief as a political obligation—has ceased to search for knowledge because

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it believes it has The Truth. . . . Declarations of ought have replaced the search for what is.”

The pair, along with Peter Boghossian, came to public attention a couple of years ago in what has become known as the “Grievance Studies Affair,” in which bogus scholarly essays on “social science” subjects, such as rape culture among canines, and tricked out in po-mo Foucauldian drag, were submitted on vogueish but imaginary disciplines such as “queer,” “fat,” and “gender” studies to academic journals for peer review. Several were published and a few more were under consideration before the joke was revealed, to some praise and much fury on the left, along with widespread ridicule on the right.

The real joke, of course, is that “social science” bears the same resemblance to real science as the “hard” sciences bear to astrology. It’s an invented, posited, and then instituted “study” of literally nothing that can be “scientifically” measured.

But, as Pluckrose and Lindsay abundantly illustrate, intellectual charlatanism weaponized by malice lies at the heart of Critical Theory and its demon child, Social Justice, which employ the trappings of academic discourse to “push boundaries” and “test limits” in the same way that sappers tunnel under defensive

fortifications in order to blow them up. That the boundaries are not those of crenelated structures but rather those of foundational Western cultural history is obscured by the welter of bafflegab. Reification—the post-modern tactic of asserting a counterfactual and then acting on it as if it were true—is one of the most potent weapons in their arsenal, leaving their opponents battling phantoms while the citadel is sacked by barbarians.

Whence comes Critical Theory and its animus against the West? The answer is cultural Marxism. Marx thought of himself as a scientist, and was convinced his model of economic and social organization would ride the arc of history to its inevitable, triumphant conclusion: teleology without God. As we might say today, he “believed in the science,” which certainly was “settled” in his mind.

As Paul Johnson notes in *Intellectuals*, Marx “has himself, in the person of God, say: ‘I shall howl gigantic curses at mankind,’” in one of his savage early poems. The man was touched, not by the magic fire that has inspired so many great artists but by a diabolical rage against truth, order, light, and beauty that characterizes Satan in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and has the same object of hostility: humanity.

Although his economic system failed spectacularly in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, Marx's animus lived on in the persons and works of the Frankfurt School of mostly German-born philosophers who arrived on American shores as refugees from Hitler and promptly set about undermining the foundations of the New World as eagerly as they had been doing in the Old. Following Marx's dictum as expressed in the *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845)—“Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it”—they set about to “fundamentally change” not only the United States but Western civilization itself.

In that, they have succeeded. Perhaps not yet as definitively as they hoped, but in each decade since the revolutionary year of 1968 (sometimes history not only rhymes, it repeats), our culture has been moved further off its foundations until in almost every way it bears little or no resemblance to the U.S. of the 1950s in which the Baby Boomers grew up to sit at the feet of the Frankfurters a few years later.

Their pseudo-scientific vehicle was Critical Theory—a battering ram against everything from the temples of ancient Athens to the Roman Catholic Church to the medieval universities of Aquinas to the laboratories of the

Enlightenment, to the American constitution and institutions of republican government. It's been a century-long campaign by devoted enemies of civilization, its swath of destruction planetary, and its dewy future one of nihilism and despair.

That it has been conducted from the captured heights of academia is no accident. Post-1960s academics were not fired by a love of learning but by what has come to be called “social justice,” a philosophy of resentment and revenge masquerading as scholarship in the service of equity. The authors write:

This book aims to tell the story of how postmodernism applied its cynical theories to deconstruct what we might agree to call ‘the old religions’ of human thought—which include conventional religious faiths like Christianity and secular ideologies like Marxism, as well as cohesive modern systems such as science, philosophical liberalism, and ‘progress’—and replaced them with a new religion of its own, called ‘Social Justice.’ This book is a story about how despair found new confidence, which then grew into the sort of firm conviction associated with religious adherence.

The book tells it well. Like witnesses for the prosecution, Pluckrose and Lindsay methodically dismantle the pillars of postmodern Wokeism, which “has, depending upon your view, either become or given rise to one of the least tolerant and most authoritarian ideologies that the world has had to deal with since the widespread decline of communism and the collapses of white supremacy and colonialism.”

They treat in turn, the principal signifiers of Wokeism: postcolonial theory (cultural resentment), queer theory (sexual nonconformity), race theory and intersectionality (victimization as status symbol), feminism and gender studies (genital envy), fat studies (body shaming), and wrap things up with a full-scale assault on “social justice”—as the signage at the Black Lives Matter shrine across Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House proclaims: “equity not equality” (in other words, we’re coming for your stuff.)

No one should be surprised. Like the common flu masquerading as the novel civilizational threat, Covid-19, Critical Theory is an ideal weapon against the West: succinct yet vague, elegant in its universality of application, deceptive in appearance, and deliberately malignant in its application. At root, it is a philosophy

of resentful losers who have at least since the 1930s, and certainly since the 1960s, relied on the naiveté and good will of their victims to allow its poisonous tenets into their cultures and civilizations.

That their unholy ranks have included freaks, perverts, masochists, and sexual predators is also not surprising. Marxists prefer to view “marginalized” groups as victims of prejudice, when in fact such marginalization generally results from the consequences of their own behavior or ineptitude. Neither Michel Foucault nor Wilhelm Reich, for example, can possibly be considered role models, except by a process of moral inversion. As Roger Kimball noted in his 1993 review of James Miller’s biography of the man: “Mr. Miller claims that Foucault’s penchant for sadomasochistic sex was itself an indication of admirable ethical adventurousness.” *Au contraire!*

Since then, the transformation of the unacceptable and even the repulsive into the ideal—a truly satanic notion—has conquered not only academe but civic institutions, courts, and governmental agencies. As relativism and the demonic non-virtue of “tolerance” gradually became at first unquestionable and then doctrinal, defenses fell, the walls

detonated, and the keep was stormed and sacked.

And why? *Cui bono*? A ruined and dissipated West would seem to be of no use to anyone, including the sackers. After all, even after Rome fell, the barbarians continued the fiction of consuls and the senate, when all that really mattered was the Emperor.

The reason is a lust for “power”—their great Marxist obsession—animated by revenge and sheer joy of destruction for its own sake. A victorious Satan has no need for God’s heavenly throne; it is enough that it falls. As the authors note:

They are obsessed with power, language, knowledge, and the relationships between them. They interpret the world through a lens that detects power dynamics in every interaction, utterance, and cultural artifact—even when they aren’t obvious or real. This is a worldview that centers social and cultural grievances and aims to make everything into a zero-sum political struggle revolving around identity markers like race, sex, gender, sexuality, and many others.

Where *Cynical Theories* falters, however, is in its conclusive assertion

that the answer to woke theory—the bastard, malicious child of classical liberalism—is . . . more classical liberalism.

“Postmodern Theory and liberalism do not merely exist in tension: they are almost directly at odds with one another,” they assert.

Though the problem to the right is severe and deserves much careful analysis in its own right, we have become experts in the nature of the problem on the left. . . . [T]he problem coming from the left represents a departure from its historical point of reason and strength, which is liberalism. It is that liberalism that is essential to the maintenance of our secular, liberal democracies.

But is that true? Pluckrose and Lindsay labor mightily to distinguish between Critical Theory and the “secular ideology” of Marxism, but that makes no sense. Like an opportunistic virus, Critical Theory emerged from Marxism and then—as Tom Holland points out in *Dominion*—jumped the species barrier by aping some of the liberal tenets of Christianity in order to be made at least partly acceptable to the marks and suckers.

The fundamental flaw in the doctrine of eternal liberalism is that its philosophy is somehow immune to the laws of cultural gravity that affect every other form of human endeavor. Both liberals and conservatives today, however broadly defined, fall into this trap. We would like to believe that reason, the scientific method, empirical knowledge, free speech and open debate will remain hallmarks of our civilization, but there is no historical evidence that this is true.

On the contrary, civilizations peak and fall, often traduced not by their vices but by their virtues. Classical liberalism, via its doctrine of endless questioning, and the Church, via its brother's-keeperism, have given birth to these mutants. This point does not escape Pluckrose and Lindsay:

The willingness of liberal systems to accept self-criticism is, in fact, the feature of liberalism that critical methods like postmodern theory exploit to undermine it. When done cynically, as with Critical Theory, it can destroy people's trust in the liberal system and obscure from them that it is this system that has made modernity possible.

In short, we could all use a bracing dose of Jansenism right about now. As explorers on the human journey know, there is a time to push ahead and a time to pull back, to take stock of the verities and discard the fallacies.

A time, in other words, during which to sit quietly in a small room and plan the next course of action. One of those times is now.