

BOOK OF THE YEAR
THE TIMES • *SUNDAY TIMES* • *FINANCIAL TIMES*

CYNICAL

~~CRITICAL~~
THEORIES



How Activist Scholarship Made Everything
about Race, Gender, and Identity –
and Why This Harms Everybody

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‘Instead of sexual, racial and other differences becoming unimportant, critical, cynical theories have rendered them the only things of importance. A new generation has been taught to hate not just the societies from which they come, but whole races (presently white people, but it could be someone else next). For Pluckrose and Lindsay this does not seem like progress’

The Times

‘In *Cynical Theories*, Pluckrose and Lindsay try to explain the spread of the “great awakening” in universities by bravely delving deep into the waffling, obscure prose of the key texts of postmodernism, postcolonial theory, queer theory, critical race theory, and so on. The madness on the streets of Portland shows why it matters’

Sunday Times

‘The authors argue that academia’s embrace of “critical studies” is damaging society. A book for the year in which “woke” and “cancel culture” became buzzwords’

Financial Times

‘The authors describe a totalitarian cult that is hostile to the rule of reason and that has infiltrated academic and cultural institutions across Britain and the US. Its adherents seek to persecute those who disagree with them, censor academic discourse and promote manifest falsities to the point that silence is a treason against liberal values ... The authors plead simply that those who hold the central

tenets of western liberalism stand up for them, for reason, debate, tolerance, democracy and the rule of law'

TLS

'At last comes an attempt to explain the extraordinary origins of the cultural revolution of our times — the onslaught against the liberal order by woke crusaders waging a zero-sum struggle in the cause of racial, sexual, gender, disability and other identities across our institutions'

The Australian

CYNICAL THEORIES



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about Race, Gender, and Identity
—and Why This Harms Everybody*

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& JAMES LINDSAY





SWIFT PRESS

This paperback edition first published by Swift Press 2021

First published in the United States of America by
Pitchstone Publishing 2020

First published in Great Britain by Swift Press 2020

This edition published by arrangement with Susan
Schulman A Literary Agency, LLC and Pitchstone
Publishing

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80075-032-6

eISBN: 978-1-80075-005-0

*To my husband, David, who makes all things possible, and
my daughter, Lucy, who never wants to hear about
postmodernism again.
My work there is done.*

*And to my wife, Heather, who just wanted a simple life and
never to have learned that any of this exists.*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



We owe our gratitude to many people for making this work possible, accessible, and clear, and the list of those deserving extends well beyond those we have space to mention here. Our thanks go especially to Mike Nayna, the long-suffering editor of many early drafts of this book and our chief advisor on accessibility to the layperson. We hope we eventually grew sufficient ovaries for his satisfaction (well, Jim doesn't, but nevertheless). Thanks to Peter Boghossian for his support and editorial advice and for his constant nagging of us to spend less time arguing these points on Twitter and more on writing them in the book. Special appreciation goes to Jonathan Church for the fruitful discussions of DiAngelo's work on white fragility and his identification of the fallacy of reification, which helped us to give shape to the third stage of postmodern thought. We are indebted to Alan Sokal for his close reading of our manuscript and numerous helpful suggestions for clarifications, qualifications, and additions that greatly improved the text. We are particularly grateful

to our editor, Iona Italia, for her unsurpassable wordsmithery and to everybody who provided feedback, support, and encouragement, notably including Gauri Hopkins, Dayne and Clyde Rathbone, Heather Heying, and Bret Weinstein.

INTRODUCTION



During the modern period and particularly in the last two centuries in most Western countries there has developed a broad consensus in favor of the political philosophy known as “liberalism.” The main tenets of liberalism are 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 viewpoint diversity and honest debate, respect for evidence and reason, the separation of church and state, and freedom of religion. These liberal values developed as ideals and it has taken centuries of struggle against theocracy, slavery, patriarchy, colonialism, fascism, and many other forms of discrimination to honor them as much as we do, still imperfectly, today. But the struggle for social justice has always been strongest when it has cast itself as the defender of liberal values universally, insisting that they be applied to all individuals, not just to wealthy white males. It must be noted that the general philosophical position that we call “liberalism” is compatible with a wide

range of positions on political, economic, and social questions, including both what Americans call “liberal” (and Europeans call “social-democratic”) and moderate forms of what people in all countries call “conservative.” This philosophical liberalism is opposed to authoritarian movements of all types, be they left-wing or rightwing, secular or theocratic. Liberalism is thus best thought of as a shared common ground, providing a framework for conflict resolution and one within which people with a variety of views on political, economic, and social questions can rationally debate the options for public policy.

However, we have reached a point in history where the liberalism and modernity at the heart of Western civilization are at great risk on the level of the ideas that sustain them. The precise nature of this threat is complicated, as it arises from at least two overwhelming pressures, one revolutionary and the other reactionary, that are waging war with each other over which illiberal direction our societies should be dragged. Far-right populist movements claiming to be making a last desperate stand for liberalism and democracy against a rising tide of progressivism and globalism are on the rise around the world. They are increasingly turning toward leadership in dictators and strongmen who can maintain and preserve “Western” sovereignty and values. Meanwhile, far-left progressive social crusaders portray themselves as the sole and righteous champions of social and moral progress without which democracy is meaningless and hollow.

These, on our furthest left, not only advance their cause through revolutionary aims that openly reject liberalism as a form of oppression, but they also do so with increasingly authoritarian means seeking to establish a thoroughly dogmatic fundamentalist ideology regarding how society ought to be ordered. Each side in this fray sees the other as an existential threat, and thus each fuels the other's greatest excesses. This culture war is sufficiently intense that it has come to define political—and increasingly social—life through the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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. This is partly because we believe that, while the two sides are driving one another to madness and further radicalization, the 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. As we have written previously, the problem arises from the fact that,

The progressive left has aligned itself not with Modernity but with postmodernism, which rejects objective truth as a fantasy dreamed up by naive and/or arrogantly bigoted Enlightenment thinkers who underestimated the collateral consequences of Modernity's progress.¹

It is this problem that we have dedicated ourselves to learning about and hope to explain in this volume: the problem of postmodernism, not just as it initially arose in the 1960s but also how it has evolved over the last half century. Postmodernism 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. Postmodernism was developed in relatively obscure corners of academia as an intellectual and cultural reaction to all of these changes, and since the 1960s it has spread to other parts of the academy, into activism, throughout bureaucracies, and to the heart of primary, secondary, and post-secondary education. It has, from there, begun to seep into broader society to the point where it, and backlashes against it—both reasonable and reactionary—have come to dominate our sociopolitical landscape as we grind ever more painfully into the third decade of the new millennium.

This movement nominally pursues and derives its name from a broad goal called “social justice,” which is a term dating back almost two hundred years. Under different thinkers at different times, this term has taken on various meanings, all of which are concerned on some level with addressing and redressing social inequalities, particularly where it comes to issues of class, race, gender, sex, and sexuality, particularly when these go beyond the reach of legal justice. Perhaps most famously, the liberal progressive

philosopher John Rawls laid out much philosophical theory dedicated to the conditions under which a socially just society might be organized. In this, he set out a universalist thought experiment in which a socially just society would be one in which an individual given a choice would be equally happy to be born into any social milieu or identity group.² Another, explicitly anti-liberal, anti-universal, approach to achieving social justice has also been employed, particularly since the middle of the twentieth century, and that is one rooted in *critical theory*. A critical theory is chiefly concerned with revealing hidden biases and underexamined assumptions, usually by pointing out what have been termed “problematics,” which are ways in which society and the systems that it operates upon are going wrong.

Postmodernism, in some sense, was an offshoot of this critical approach that went its own theoretical way for a while and was then taken up again by critical social justice activists through the 1980s and 1990s (who, incidentally, very rarely reference John Rawls on the topic). The movement that takes up this charge presumptuously refers to its ideology simply as “Social Justice” as though it alone seeks a just society and the rest of us are all advocating for something entirely different. The movement has thus come to be known as the “Social Justice Movement” and its online critics often refer to it, for brevity, as “SocJus” or, increasingly, “wokeism” (due to its belief that it alone has “awakened” to the nature of societal injustice). Social

Justice, as a proper noun with capital S and capital J, refers to a very specific doctrinal interpretation of the meaning of “social justice” and means of achieving it while prescribing a strict, identifiable orthodoxy around that term. Although we are reluctant to seem to concede the essential liberal aim for social justice to this illiberal ideological movement, this is the name by which it is known and so, for the sake of clarity, we will refer to it as capitalized “Social Justice” throughout this book. “Social justice” in the lowercase will be reserved to describe the broader and generic meanings of the term. Let us make clear our own social and political commitments: we find ourselves against capitalized Social Justice because we are generally for lowercase social justice.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to miss the influence of the Social Justice Movement on society—most notably in the form of “identity politics” or “political correctness.” Almost every day, a story comes out about somebody who has been fired, “canceled,” or subjected to a public shaming on social media, often for having said or done something interpreted as sexist, racist, or homophobic. Sometimes the accusations are warranted, and we can comfort ourselves that a bigot—whom we see as entirely unlike ourselves—is receiving the censure she “deserves” for her hateful views. However, increasingly often, the accusation is highly interpretive and its reasoning tortuous. It sometimes feels as though any well-intended person, even one who values universal liberty and equality, could

inadvertently say something that falls foul of the new speech codes, with devastating consequences for her career and reputation. This is confusing and counterintuitive to a culture accustomed to placing human dignity first and thus valuing charitable interpretations and tolerance of a wide range of views. At best, this has a chilling effect on the culture of free expression, which has served liberal democracies well for more than two centuries, as good people self-censor to avoid saying the “wrong” things. At worst, it is a malicious form of bullying and—when institutionalized—a kind of authoritarianism in our midst.

This deserves an explanation. In fact, it *needs* one because these changes, which are happening with astonishing rapidity, are very difficult to understand. This is because they stem from a very peculiar view of the world—one that even speaks its own language, in a way. Within the English-speaking world, they speak English, but they use everyday words differently from the rest of us. When they speak of “racism,” for example, they are not referring to prejudice on the grounds of race, but rather to, as they define it, a racialized system that permeates all interactions in society yet is largely invisible except to those who experience it or who have been trained in the proper “critical” methods that train them to see it. (These are the people sometimes referred to as being “woke,” meaning awakened, to it.) This very precise technical usage of the word inevitably bewilders people, and, in their confusion,

they may go along with things they wouldn't if they had a common frame of reference to help them understand what is actually meant by the word.

Not only do these scholar-activists speak a specialized language—while using everyday words that people assume, incorrectly, that they understand—but they also represent a wholly different *culture*, embedded within our own. People who have adopted this view may be physically close by, but, intellectually, they are a world away, which makes understanding them and communicating with them incredibly difficult. 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. To an outsider, this culture feels as though it originated on another planet, whose inhabitants have no knowledge of sexually reproducing species, and who interpret all our human sociological interactions in the most cynical way possible. But, in fact, these preposterous attitudes are completely human. They bear witness to our repeatedly demonstrated capacity to take up complex spiritual worldviews, ranging from tribal animism to hippie spiritualism to sophisticated global religions, each of which adopts its own interpretive frame

through which it sees the entire world. This one just happens to be about a peculiar view of power and its ability to create inequality and oppression.

Interacting with proponents of this view requires learning not just their language—which in itself is challenging enough—but also their customs and even their mythology of “systemic” and “structural” problems inherent in our society, systems, and institutions. As experienced travelers know, there’s more to communicating in a completely different culture than learning the language. One must also learn the idioms, implications, cultural references, and etiquette, which define how to communicate appropriately. Often, we need someone who is not just a translator but also an *interpreter* in the widest sense, someone savvy about both sets of customs, to communicate effectively. That is what we set out to provide in this book: a guide to the language and customs that are presently widely promoted under the pleasant-sounding moniker “Social Justice.” We are fluent in both the language and culture of Social Justice scholarship and activism, and we plan to guide our readers through this alien world, charting the evolution of these ideas from their origins fifty years ago right up to the present day.

We begin in the late 1960s, when the group of theoretical concepts clustered around the nature of knowledge, power, and language that came to be known as *postmodernism* emerged from within several humanities

disciplines at once. At its core, postmodernism rejected what it calls *metanarratives*—broad, cohesive explanations of the world and society. It rejected Christianity and Marxism. It also rejected science, reason, and the pillars of post-Enlightenment Western democracy. Postmodern ideas have shaped what has since mostly been called *Theory*—the entity which is, in some sense, the protagonist of this book. In our view, it is crucial to understand the development of Theory from the 1960s until the present day if we are to come to terms with and correct for the rapid shifts we have been experiencing in society ever since its inception, and especially since 2010. Of note, throughout this book, *Theory* (and related words, such as Theorist and Theoretical) with a capital T will refer to the approach to social philosophy that stems from postmodernism.

Cynical Theories explains how Theory has developed into the driving force of the culture war of the late 2010s—and proposes a philosophically *liberal* way to counter its manifestations in scholarship, activism, and everyday life. The book charts the development of the evolving branches of cynical postmodern Theory over the last fifty years and shows that it has influenced current society in ways the reader will recognize. In chapter 1, we will guide you through the key ideas of the original postmodernists of the 1960s and 1970s, and draw out two principles and four themes that have remained central to all the Theory that followed. Chapter 2 will explain how these ideas mutated, solidified, and were made politically actionable in a set of

new Theories that emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s. This we will refer to as *applied postmodernism*. Chapters 3 to 6 will delve into each of the following in more detail: postcolonial Theory, queer Theory, critical race Theory, and intersectional feminism. Chapter 7 will look at the relative newcomers, disability studies and fat studies, which draw on all these Theories.

In chapter 8, we explore the second evolution of these postmodern ideas, beginning around 2010, which asserted the absolute truth of the postmodern principles and themes. This approach we call *reified postmodernism*, as it takes the assumptions of postmodernism to be real, objective truths—The Truth According to Social Justice. This change occurred when scholars and activists combined the existing Theories and Studies into a simple, dogmatic methodology, best known simply as “Social Justice scholarship.”

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 faith that emerged is thoroughly

postmodern, which means that, rather than interpreting the world in terms of subtle spiritual forces like sin and magic, it focuses instead on subtle material forces, such as systemic bigotry, and diffuse but omnipresent systems of power and privilege.

While this new-found conviction has caused significant problems, it is also helpful that Theory has become increasingly confident and clear about its beliefs and goals. It makes it easier for liberals—from the political left, right, or center—to get at those ideas and counter them. On the other hand, this development is alarming because it has made Theory so much more easily grasped and acted upon by believers who want to reshape society. We can see its impact on the world in their attacks on science and reason. It is also evident in their assertions that society is simplistically divided into dominant and marginalized identities and underpinned by invisible systems of white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, cisnormativity, ableism, and fatphobia. We find ourselves faced with the continuing dismantlement of categories like knowledge and belief, reason and emotion, and men and women, and with increasing pressures to censor our language in accordance with The Truth According to Social Justice. We see radical relativism in the form of double standards, such as assertions that only men can be sexist and only white people can be racist, and in the wholesale rejection of consistent principles of nondiscrimination. In the face of this, it grows increasingly difficult and even dangerous to

argue that people should be treated as individuals or to urge recognition of our shared humanity in the face of divisive and constraining identity politics.

Although many of us now recognize these problems and intuitively feel that such ideas are unreasonable and illiberal, it can be difficult to articulate responses to them, since objections to irrationalism and illiberalism are often misunderstood or misrepresented as opposition to genuine social justice—a legitimate philosophy that advocates a fairer society. This dissuades too many well-intentioned people from even trying. In addition to the danger of being labelled an enemy of social justice that comes with criticizing the methods of the Social Justice Movement, there are two other obstacles to effectively addressing them. First, the underlying values of Social Justice are so counterintuitive that they are difficult to understand. Second, few of us have ever had to defend universally liberal ethics, reason and evidence against those claiming to stand for social justice. They have, until quite recently, always been understood as the best way to work *for* social justice. Thus, once we have finished making the underlying principles of Social Justice Theory comprehensible, we move on to discuss how to recognize them and counter them. In chapter 9, we look at the ways in which these ideas have escaped the bounds of academia and are impacting the real world. Finally, chapter 10 will make a case that we should counter these ideas through a clearly articulated mass commitment to the universally liberal

72. Ibid., 24.
73. Ibid., 24.
74. Campbell and Manning, *The Rise of Victimhood Culture*, 2.
75. Mike Nayna, "PART TWO: Teaching to Transgress," YouTube video, March 6, 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=A0W9QbkX8Cs&t=6s.
76. Bruce, DiAngelo, Swaney, and Thurber, "Between Principles and Practice."
77. Kathrine Jebsen Moore, "Knitting's Infinity War, Part III: Showdown at Yarningham," *Quillette*, July 28, 2019, quillette.com/2019/07/28/knit-tings-infinity-war-part-iii-showdown-at-yarningham/.
78. Amanda Marcotte, "Atheism's Shocking Woman Problem: What's behind the Misogyny of Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris?" *Salon*, October 3, 2014, www.salon.com/2014/10/03/new_atheisms_troubling_misogyny_the_pompous_sexism_of_richard_dawkins_and_sam_harris_partner/.
79. Southern Baptist Convention, "On Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality" (resolution, Southern Baptist Convention, Birmingham, AL, 2019), www.sbc.net/resolutions/2308/resolution-9--on-critical-race-theory-and-intersectionality.

10 An Alternative to the Ideology of Social Justice

1. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 21.
2. Ibid, 21.

3. Ibid, 21.
4. Ibid, 26.
5. The observation in this paragraph is taken from Jean Bricmont, *La République des censeurs* (Paris, L'Herne, 2014), 24n25.
6. Pinker, *Enlightenment Now*.
7. Edmund Fawcett, *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), xii-xiii.
8. Ibid., xiii.
9. Ibid., xiii.
10. Adam Gopnik, *A Thousand Small Sanities: The Moral Adventure of Liberalism* (London: Riverrun, 2019), 24.
11. Gopnik, *Thousand Small Sanities*, 24.
12. Gopnik, *Thousand Small Sanities*, 42.
13. Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: The Decline of Violence in History and Its Causes* (London: Allen Lane, 2011).
14. Pinker, *Enlightenment Now*, 228.
15. Jonathan Rauch, *Kindly Inquisitors: The New Attacks on Free Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 4.
16. Ibid., 38.
17. Ibid., 48-49.
18. Ibid., 48-49. Readers will notice that here Rauch is echoing the practical argument for the free exchange

of ideas as posited by John Stuart Mill in 1859. See Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays*.

19. Rauch, *Kindly Inquisitors*, 48.
20. Ibid., 49.
21. Ibid., 49.
22. Ibid., 6.
23. Ibid., 6.
24. Ibid., 6.
25. Ibid., 6.
26. Ibid., 6.
27. Ibid., 13.
28. Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013).
29. Nicholas Christakis looks at the way humans from vastly different cultures and times have commonly structured their societies in his book *Blueprint*. He asks,

How can people be so different from—even go to war with—one another and yet also be so similar? The fundamental reason is that we each carry within us an evolutionary blueprint for making a good society. Genes do amazing things inside our bodies, but even more amazing to me is what they do outside of them. Genes affect not only the structure and function of our bodies; not only the structure and function of our minds and, hence, our behaviors; but

also the structure and function of our societies. This is what we recognize when we look at people around the world. This is the source of our common humanity. (pp. xx-xxi)

Christakis identifies a “social suite” of evolved social features that humans possess and, by looking at different communities that have formed deliberately, like communes, and by accident, like shipwrecks, and their success and failure convincingly argues that no successful society can diverge too far from a structure that supports them. They are “(1) The capacity to have and recognize individual identity (2) Love for partners and offspring (3) Friendship (4) Social networks (5) Cooperation (6) Preference for one’s own group (that is, “in-group bias”) (7) Mild hierarchy (that is, relative egalitarianism) (8) Social learning and teaching” (p. 13). Nicholas A. Christakis, *Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society* (New York: Little, Brown, Spark, 2019).

30. Haidt, *Righteous Mind*.

31. Pinker, *The Blank Slate*.

32. Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream” (address delivered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, 1963), available through the Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, jkinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/i-have-dream-address-delivered-march-washington-jobs-and-freedom.