



“The Church of Critical Theory”
a 5 star review by Dick Burkhardt of

Cynical Theories

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

By Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay
(2020)

This outstanding book pulls back the covers from the toxic doctrines underlying Critical Race Theory (CRT) and related Critical Theories of gender and disability. Personally, I think Trump is off his rocker, but every now and then he hits paydirt, even if he’s so screwed up that he doesn’t know how to follow up. A prime example is when he recently characterized CRT, and the associated Robin DiAngelo-type diversity training, as “divisive anti-American propaganda”.

Pluckrose and Lindsay explain how our core civic values are under assault from cult-like ideologies derived from nihilistic “postmodern” intellectuals from France, like Foucault and Derrida. Many find this very hard to believe, because it is so well disguised from the public, but its results are all too much in the news. These consequences include cancel culture, victimhood culture, and the Red/Blue state culture wars, with Trump ever eager to magnify and exploit the ensuing societal resentments and animosities and political gridlock.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

So how did this all come about? Pluckrose and Lindsay have identified several phases since the WW II era. “Critical Theory was first laid out in detail in 1937 by Max Horkheimer [of the Frankfurt School of philosophy in Germany] who was concerned that traditional theories are only concerned with what is true, not what is right and wrong. ‘[Problematic](#)’ ideas, as they came to be called, have to be removed from society for being morally wrong, even if they are true”.

Post WW II, Michel Foucault proceeded to cast even more doubt on truth: “Power decides which statements are able to be considered true, in one way or another, and thus we ought to be radically skeptical of all truth claims” since the “political process is going to be inherently [biased](#) and corrupt”. Thus, Foucault assumes a fascist, Trump-like conception of power, making “knowledge and power literally the same thing”. This phase, called postmodern philosophy, continued until around 1980, emphasizing deconstruction of language (Jacques Derrida) and the rejection of “metanarratives” of truth, like Christianity, Marxism, and Liberalism (including reason and science).

The middle phase, roughly 1980 to 2010, featured the creation of identity politics focused on identities like race and gender, termed “applied postmodernism” by Pluckrose and Lindsay. Most

of postmodern philosophy was inherited, except the identities in question were assumed to have a stable, independent, knowable reality that can't be deconstructed. In the current phase, roughly 2010 to the present, fully developed "critical theories" came to be taught as "truth" for activist "Social Justice" agendas. Pluckrose and Lindsay call this "reified postmodernism", meaning elaborations of applied postmodernism with the Theory becoming reality in the eyes of its adherents.

CRITICAL THEORY AS RELIGION

This applied Theory is "what in other eras might have been called speculation, or even indeed philosophy" (p 49). Yet Critical Theory goes further: it has come to function as a religion in the sense of the Ben Clements legal definition: "Religion can be defined as a comprehensive belief system that addresses the fundamental questions of human existence, such as the meaning of life and death, man's role in the universe, and the nature of good and evil, and that gives rise to duties of conscience." The belief system is centered around a victimhood culture for each identity.

For Critical Race Theory typical doctrines, or creeds, are that all whites are racist (= oppressors), as an original sin to be confessed, and that we live in a white supremacy culture. Any "white" person who objects is branded as suffering from a pseudo-medical/moral malady called "white fragility", basically a sinner who is relegated to second class citizenship, subject to "cancellation" (= excommunication) in extreme cases. The primary "duty of conscience" is to defend the purity of the doctrines, like belief in God in traditional Christianity, against perceived heretics, such as vocal scientists, scholars, or humanists.

This religious movement has now spread from its stronghold in US universities to closely aligned institutions such as non-profits and government agencies. An example I know well is the coup at the Unitarian Universalism Association, decades in the making, finalized over the last 3 years. This has been a top-down hostile takeover, imposed without debate, "hostile" since the principles and themes of applied postmodernism, as described below, are a direct assault on key principles and practices of the Association (even legal due process), principles derived from liberal philosophy and democracy as developed since the Enlightenment.

APPLIED POSTMODERNISM

Given this overview, let's back up to look at postmodernism in more detail. Following Pluckrose and Lindsay, a deep theme of the "postmodern metanarrative" is

"Denying universal or objective reality" (Steiner Kvale). That is, knowledge, truth, meaning, and morality derive only from what is perceived and expressed locally, grounded in the subjectivity of group "lived experience" and language.

Some consequences of this theme for applied: Group differences are fundamentally irreconcilable, leading to inevitable conflict, resolved only by the regional dynamics of power. Global and national law, even declarations of human rights, are illegitimate for resolving such conflicts, as the power dynamics will just lead to more oppression of marginalized groups. "Incrementalism" will never succeed - the only real solution in revolution.

Here are three pillars of applied postmodernism as identity politics (Walter Anderson):

1. **"Social construction" of identity.** That is, social conventions and ideologies far outweigh other sources of identity, such as biological differences and economic class.

2. **“Relativism” of morality and ethics.** That is, traditional religious, philosophical, or civic norms have no legitimacy for determining standards of morality or ethics, only what is socially constructed by your identity group
3. **“Deconstruction in Art and Culture”.** That is, looking for hidden or subtle identity-based themes or depictions in cultural media.

Lindsay and Pluckrose have distilled these concepts into Two Principles and Four Themes (p 31):

1. **The Postmodern Knowledge Principle** that knowledge and morality must be constructed, according to one’s own situation, without regard to universal goals or standards. This constitutes “radical skepticism”, an explicit rejection of John Rawls’ concept that **a just society is one which has been constructed in accordance with the principle that a supermajority of citizens find acceptable, no matter their status or identity.** Cynical theories ignore the enormous progress of the US over the last 250 years, viewing Rawlsian justice as a pipedream at best. They reject the **correspondence theory of truth** that, at least as provisionally established by the scientific method, “there are objective truths and they can be established by their correspondence with how things actually are in the world” (p 33)
2. **The Postmodern Political Principle** that society is formed of systems of power and hierarchies that operate out of self-interest, carrying out power plays to keep certain groups subjugated, ignoring principles of justice and future generations. All structures which exercise power, including social, educational, legal, and scientific institutions and practices are presumed to operate as a conspiracy to enable “oppressors” to dominate “victims”, with evidence and reason being as suspect as any political, economic, psychological, social, or cultural ideology.

The four themes:

1. The theme of **“blurring of boundaries”**. This includes intentional complication of theories and categories to disrupt reason and knowledge. Myriad redefinitions of words like racism are a prime example., as are the numerous varieties of gender The unfortunate, but predictable consequence, has been to open the door to sophistry, prejudice, and dogma, as in the work of DiAngelo.
2. The theme of **“the power of language”**. The focus here has been on Derrida’s deconstruction of language, especially the search for hidden meanings within the context of a presumed hierarchy of oppression, or victimhood culture. This justifies concepts from “microaggressions” to “white supremacy culture”, from the personal to the civilizational, neither requiring hard evidence or rigorous scholarship.
3. The theme of **“cultural relativism”**. Since “no set of cultural norms can be said to be any better than any other”, all cross-cultural critiques are automatically invalid. In addition, these cultural norms and practices are accessible only to insiders – outsiders will inevitably misunderstand and misrepresent them. In fact, this is attacked as “cultural appropriation”, rejecting the validity of “honoring or learning from other cultures”. This also explains why identity politics and tribalism are sometimes promoted even over strong opposition from identity groups themselves. A prime example is that the vast majority of immigrants to the US want to assimilate, especially

to get a good education, to enable both social and economic success, despite the edicts of prominent Critical figures like Ibram Kendi.

4. The theme of “**loss of the individual and the universal**”. Thus the survival or welfare humanity as a whole has no significance, nor do individual human rights. Life is all about the winners and losers among groups, a zero-sum game.

KEY FIELDS OF CRITICAL THEORY

Lindsay and Pluckrose proceed to explore how these principles and themes play out in chapters devoted to prominent areas of Critical Theory: Post-colonial, Queer, Race & Intersectionality, Feminism & Gender, Disability & Fat studies.

By 1980 “the main barriers to social equality in the West were lingering prejudices” (p 47) and institutional practices, instead of legal barriers and cultural norms. Hence the focus on subtleties like “implicit bias”, “microaggressions”, etc., also on ideological elaboration and purity tests. All this served to command attention and develop followers, feeding off guilt over both past injustices and recent incidents, both receiving far more publicity. Attacks against established scholars and activists for their “privilege” reduced competition and accountability. The morality of “victimhood culture” mushroomed to challenge the “dignity culture” of the last two centuries.

Feminism & Gender theory: This began as more of Marxist critique, “through which Western patriarchy is largely as extension of capitalism” (p 53) but was soon reformulated under the influence of Derrida and Foucault, with gender becoming more of a socially constructed performance, independent of biology, with definitions dispensed with to “blur boundaries”.

There were traditional broad-based “liberal feminists” (equal opportunity, affordable child care, etc.) through

the 80s, then “materialist feminists” focused on patriarchy and capitalism, then “radical feminists” with men / women cast as oppressors / victims, and now “intersectional feminists” with a multitude of competing identity subgroups. Increasingly, failing theories have been complexified, and recast to make their assumptions matters of faith, to make them less falsifiable and divert criticism.

“The intersectional approach [to feminism & gender] appears to operate like a kind of circular firing squad, continually undermining itself over petty differences and grievances. It does this through calls for the various oppressed tribes to support each other: under the banner first of “allyship” and later “solidarity” – both of which are then Theorized as problematic in “centering” the needs of more privileged allies at the expense of oppressed minorities groups of ever increasing specificity” (p 136), an exhausting game of factional infighting to keep up with.

“Nowhere in gender studies can one find men or masculinities being studied through any lens but feminism” (p 154). There has even been proposal to categorize “traditional masculinity” as a psychological illness. “The current analytical framework does not allow for the possibility of a situation in which gender power imbalances to not exist or one in which they disadvantage men”.

“Scholars are severely limited in the extent to which they can even do gender studies unless they are trans women of color...This results in large sections of academic papers dedicated to scholars performatively acknowledging their positionality and problematizing their own work...hindering from producing scholarship of value” (p 157).

Race & Intersectionality theory: The intersectionality of identities is the current basis for “identity politics”, with identities becoming objectively real, with meaning and consequence, instead of arbitrary social constructions, as in earlier postmodern philosophy. Yet the postmodern focus on the “power of language” theme is retained through such concepts as “verbal violence, safe spaces, microaggressions, and trigger warnings” (p 60). The “loss of the individual and the universal” theme is reflected in the assumptions of deeply ingrained prejudice and oppressor/victim power plays.

Whereas early CRT had more of a focus on “material”, or practical goals such as legal policy, later CRT is mostly based on propagating its own ideology and race consciousness, especially diversity training and education, with the former being ineffective, even counterproductive, according to many studies, while the latter has often been taught at “truth”, which is educational malpractice.

Delgado & Stefancic in their standard CRT textbook, write openly that CRT “questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law” (p 115). This leaves the doors wide open to double standards, prejudice, dogma, and propaganda, based on simplistic, cynical, and counter-factual assumptions about ubiquitous racism and white supremacy. Thus, Lindsay & Pluchrose conclude that CRT “sounds rather racist itself”.

A fundamental issue is that “if we train young people to read insult, hostility, and prejudice into every interaction, they may increasingly see the world as hostile to them and fail to thrive in it” (p 132). It “puts social significance back into racial categories and inflames racism” ... “It also sees racism as omnipresent and eternal, which grants it a mythological status, like sin or depravity” ... “everything that the marginalized individual interprets as racism is considered racism by default” (p 133).

“Some studies have already shown that diversity courses [of the DiAngelo type] have resulted in

increased hostility towards marginalized groups” ... “It is even less helpful to tell them that their own good intentions are proof of their latent racism”. “Such attitudes tear at the fabric which holds contemporary society together” (p 134). Intersectionality has become so problematic that even its creator, Kimberle Crenshaw, is now concerned: “that intersectionality had both expanded beyond and also become a way of talking about complicated intersections of marginalized identities rather than doing anything to alleviate oppression” (p 131).

CURRENT THEORY

Critical Theory has “turned from being largely descriptive to highly prescriptive” (p 61), more like politics and religion than social science or anthropology. This is often critiqued from the Right as “political correctness” enforced by “social justice warriors” vaunting their “virtue signaling”. When a political stance is taught at university, it is apt to become an orthodoxy” (p 64). Even worse, Critical Theory has an agenda called “research justice”, which attempts to suppress or invalidate scholarship if organized by people of the wrong identity, or even if it does not give proper weighting to such things as anecdote, beliefs, or emotions, versus scientific studies.

“This shift away from class and toward gender identity, race, and sexuality troubles economic leftists, who fear the Left is being hijacked by the bourgeoisie within the academy, driving working class voters into the populist right” (p 153). Trump has proved this point. Even worse DiAngelo regards “individualism and color-blindness” as “ideologies of racism” (p 207). A prime example would be her rejection of the first principle of the Unitarian Universalist Association: “The inherent worth and dignity of every person”, which applies to individuals independently of any race or category. What would be acceptable to Critical Theorists? - “The inherent worth and dignity of members of marginalized groups”. Otherwise you’re on your own, morally speaking, without any thought that when their power plays are actually successful, then the oppressor / victim roles have been flipped (a fundamental contradiction of cancel culture).

LIBERAL PHILOSOPHY

The book ends by making a strong case for a revival of liberal philosophy as an adaptive, evolutionary strategy (not a system), that can get sidetracked but will always get back on course if not destroyed (replaced by a

fascist regime, a theocracy, etc.).

“liberal philosophy sees knowledge as something we can learn about reality, more or less objectively. It embraces accurate categorization and clarity of understanding and exposition. It values the individual and universal human values. It encourages disagreement and debate as a means to getting at the truth. It accepts criticism, even of itself, and is therefore self-correcting. It is inherently constructive because of the evolutionary processes its engenders. No individual or group is supposed to get special treatment.” (p 237-238). Nevertheless, when socio-economic imbalances develop, liberalism recognizes the need for regulatory correction, just as the ancient Greeks realized that “democracy would fail if not properly managed” (p 239).

“Liberalism is perhaps best understood as a desire to gradually make society fairer, freer, and less cruel, one practical goal after another. This is because it is a system of conflict resolution, not a solution to human conflicts...it is always a work in progress” (p 239). Liberals believe in reform, not revolution, because the results are in: it works better” (p 246). ‘Nazism, the Holocaust ... show that liberalism has not always been victorious or prevailed... but life will be much better when it does’. “By seeking to expand our circle of empathy ever wider, liberal humanism has

achieved unprecedented human equality. It did so by exploiting the better part of our nature – our empathy and sense of fairness.”

A key feature of liberal philosophy is “secularism”. This means that “no matter how certain you may be that you are in possession of the truth, you have no right to impose your belief on society as a whole” (p 263), that is, outside your “church”. This applies not just to traditional religions but also to ideologies and belief systems like Critical Theory. Thus the rest of us have “the inalienable right to reject your moral injunctions and prescriptions without blame” (p 263).

Instead Critical Theory “seems to be reversing” hard won progress against social injustice by “re-inscribing negative stereotypes against women and racial and sexual minorities”, in addition to divisive tribalism” (p 261). Meanwhile, with moderate voices of criticism silenced or ignored, “the most extreme voices” will gain popular support for speaking “obvious truths” (p 262). In fact, we’ve just seen this in a Trump attack on the evils of diversity training based on Critical Race Theory. In addition he promoted “patriotic education” to counter left-wing depictions of America as a “wicked and racist nation”, with the Left itself depicted as bent on “division by race”, power hungry for “cancel culture” and “toxic propaganda”.