

Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender and Identity

By Helen Pluckrose & James Lindsay (Pitchstone Publishing, 2020). 351 pages. \$19.61. Order, www.amazon.com.

Reviewed by Attorney Kevin M. Connelly

“White fragility,” “implicit bias,” “cultural appropriation,” “intersectionality,” “privilege,” “silence is violence” — these are just some of the linguistic creatures of a tribalistic and cynical ideology that underpins the current woke social justice movement according to the authors.

Examining decades of social justice scholarship, they trace the underlying critical theory school from its origins in the diffuse radical skepticism of postmodernism philosophy of the 1960s through its evolution into present-day group identity variants including critical race theory, postcolonial theory, queer theory, intersectional feminism, and gender, disability, and fat studies.

Two tenets form the foundation of the woke creed: first, a radical skepticism of universal objective and scientific truth because, they believe, all knowledge is relative as a cultural construct of power. Second, society is formed by systems of power and hierarchy wherein a dominant culture, such as white western culture, oppresses marginalized cultures using language and “discourses” to maintain its privilege. (Note the illogical reasoning--“There is no objective truth. Power is an objective truth.”)

Through this conceptual lens the true believer only sees power imbalances and prejudice everywhere, in all social relations, all the time--though largely invisible. For example, the history of civil rights progress in this country would appear to most of us to have been a moral arc, an improvement in race relations, social progress. But that is not what the woke see. According to the late legal scholar Derrick Bell, a leading progenitor of critical race theory, achievements such as desegregation were just measures that *whites allowed* in furtherance of their self-interest. It’s all about maintaining power.

Casting aside the epistemological rigors of the western scientific method--science is a tool of Western oppression--members of marginalized identity groups have constructed their own subjective knowledge, (rewritten) histories, and truths derived from "lived experiences" and "standpoint theory." Dissent is not tolerated; to question these subjective and relativistic truths is to commit "epistemic oppression."

After being nurtured in academia for a few decades, this secular religion graduated with a mission to spread an intolerant identity-based activism through our society. The key strategy of this activism is to not treat people as individuals but rather as members of identity groups sharing a common trait. For example, anti-racist activism jettisoned the colorblind and individual rights political goals of liberalism as deficient and naïve in favor of fighting for group power using tactics of intimidation, shaming, collective guilt, and an 'enemy is everywhere' attitude targeting "white privilege" and "systemic racism."

Theory-educated activists ensconced themselves in "diversity, equity, and inclusion" offices and "bias response teams" in universities, corporations, and governments to enforce the truth according to social justice, sending employees to "implicit bias" training, always on the lookout for "microaggressions".

One casualty of this illiberal ideology is one of our most cherished rights--free speech. Saying the *perceived* wrong thing often results in public shaming by "cancel culture" or losing one's job; scholars who publish papers straying from the orthodoxy have had death threats and coerced retractions; STEM departments and school curricula are pressured to incorporate critical race theory; speakers whose views might be offensive (or who uttered something offensive long ago) are routinely deplatformed; physicians worry their advice might be construed as fat shaming.

The authors note the contradiction that critical race theory begins with the belief that all categories, such as race, are socially constructed, and then does exactly that in its activism – it puts social significance back into racial categories which inflames racism.

It is this reviewer's opinion that everyone who believes that Enlightenment values (e.g. individual rights, science, and free speech) will continue to be the best path forward for social progress should read this book to be prepared to resist the woke cult. Pluralism, not tribalism, is what binds us in a liberal democracy.