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# Cynical Theories

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

by Helen Pluckrose & James Lindsay

**“Many people are nonplussed by the surge of wokery, social justice warfare, intersectionality, and identity politics that has spilled out of academia and inundated other spheres of life. Where did it come from? What ideas are behind it? This book exposes the surprisingly shallow intellectual roots of the movements that appear to be engulfing our culture.”**

**—Steven Pinker, Johnstone Professor of Psychology, Harvard University**

Liberalism, the political philosophy that has long formed the bedrock of Western societies, is the most potent idea ever developed by humankind to curb discriminatory practices and systems, including, notably, those mired in racism, sexism, homophobia, and fascism. Yet, today, the broad consensus for liberalism, which has served to circumscribe the powers of governments, advance universal human rights, codify legal equality for all citizens, ensure individual freedoms, and allow for viewpoint diversity, honest debate, and due process, is rapidly deteriorating. The causes are complex and multifaceted. But one fact is clear: a growing and increasingly vocal segment of the political left, which has historically been among the greatest champions of liberal values,

today sees liberalism itself as a form of political oppression. At the very moment when a robust universal liberalism is needed to confront the myriad challenges presented by illiberal populist movements and authoritarian leaders emerging on the right, many on the left have themselves taken a sudden and marked turn to the illiberal and authoritarian—embracing beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors openly antagonistic to liberal democracy.

Sound like hyberbole? If so, you haven't been paying attention. As Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay write in *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody* (Pitchstone, August 2020, hardcover, \$27.95), “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.” In short, liberalism is under siege not only by elements of the far right but also the far left, and the attacks from the far left are going mainstream. Further, as Pluckrose and Lindsay demonstrate, this ideological swift isn't inexplicable—nor particularly sudden; it's by strategic design.

“These ideas have been developing in universities for fifty years, and they're now being pushed into society by a generation of scholar-activists,” says Pluckrose. “These are academics who no longer believe in science, in reason, in individual rights, or in the liberal principles that underlie an ideologically diverse society. These ideas are spreading into classrooms, media, companies, schools, and just about everywhere.” Adds Lindsay, “Collectively, these ideas have distilled into a new dogma—an ideology of Social Justice that seeks to upend all existing structures and reinvent society wholesale.”

Here, Pluckrose and Lindsay are quick to make a careful distinction between “Social Justice” as an emergent ideology and “social justice” in the general sense. “As a matter of

making ourselves clear about our social and political commitments,” they write in the book, “we find ourselves against capitalized Social Justice because we are generally for lowercase social justice.” Lindsay clarifies, “It’s really not what people think it is—Social Justice. Social Justice, the movement, is postmodernism put into application; postmodernism made into a kind of religious faith.” This “religious faith” is recognizable as much by its effects, such as cancel culture and social-media dogpiles, as by its tenets: knowledge is a social construct; science and reason are tools of oppression; all human interactions are sites of oppressive power play; and language is dangerous.

Coming from highly respected universities and academics with prestigious titles, these ideas are all-too-often unquestioningly embraced as axiomatic within the media and in popular culture. “In truth,” argues Lindsay, “these scholar-activists have created social theories based on assuming the most cynical motives of anyone they decide to target, and they pass them off as legitimate scholarship. They want to remake society from the ground up according to their own subjective ideas, which are almost always untethered to scientific and social reality.” Citing specific examples, Pluckrose adds, “One day we might hear from scholar-activists that obesity is healthy, and the next that there is no such thing as biological sex, or that only white people can be racist, and then we’re told that to ask any questions or to challenge any of their personal views or core assumptions is ableist, transphobic, or racist.”

Part of the appeal to these ideas, they write, is that “new, radical answers have a certain appeal. They get people excited, especially when things seem bad. Problems that feel big and pressing seem to invite revolutionary new solutions.” But, they warn, “This is an invitation to radicalism, authoritarianism, fundamentalism, and cynicism.” They

liken this current ideological push to “populism, or Marxism, or any other form of Utopianism that looks good on paper and is ruinous in practice.”

Rightwing media outlets and political figures have been quick to pounce on the many excesses of these scholar-activists, gleefully casting the entire left as elitist, authoritarian, finger-wagging scolds. Some on the liberal left, however, are beginning to recognize the challenge posed by this new orthodoxy, especially within the context of electoral politics, where the ability to communicate and work across divides and through differences is vital. At an Obama Foundation summit in October 2019, for example, former U.S. president Barack Obama himself warned: “This idea of purity, and you're never compromised, and you're always politically woke, and all that stuff, you should get over that quickly.... You know, that's not activism. That's not bringing about change.”

Pluckrose and Lindsay's work echoes this sentiment. They are quick to point out that all liberal democracies are experiments in progress and that, of course, ongoing societal problems and inequalities need to be remedied, not least those related to true sexism, racism, homophobia, or any other form of bigotry. But the best mechanism for bringing about meaningful change that ensures equality and addresses injustice for all citizens, they remind, is the same as it has always been: universal liberal ethics. Says Lindsay, “That's why we wrote *Cynical Theories*, to expose and explain these wild ideas that seem to have just popped out of nowhere and to remind people that there are much better ways to address social issues.” Pluckrose concludes, “People need to know what's going on so they can resist this new dogma because it is not liberal, it is not consistently ethical, and it is dangerous. We wrote *Cynical Theories* to show people where these ideas came from,

how they work, and how they escaped the university. We are explaining them so people can understand them and know how to push back.”

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### **About the Authors**

**Helen Pluckrose** is a liberal political and cultural writer and speaker. She is the editor of *Areo Magazine* and the author of many popular essays on postmodernism, critical theory, liberalism, secularism, and feminism. A participant in the Grievance Studies Affair probe, which highlighted problems in social justice scholarship, she is today an exile from the humanities, where she researched late medieval and early modern religious writing by and for women. She lives in England.

**James Lindsay** is a mathematician with a background in physics. He is interested in the psychology of religion, authoritarianism, and extremism and is the author of *Everybody Is Wrong about God*. His other books include *Life in Light of Death* and *How to Have Impossible Conversations*. His essays have appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Philosophers' Magazine*, *Scientific American*, and *Time*. He led the Grievance Studies Affair probe that made international headlines in 2018, including the front page of the *New York Times*. He lives in Tennessee.

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