

Review of “Cynical Theories” by Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay

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Book: Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship made everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and why this harms everybody* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone Publishing, 2020)

Introduction

Cynical Theories, a play on “critical theory,” is a book that addresses the issue of critical theories, from a critical, liberal perspective. The authors Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay identify as liberals, and support what they believe to be LGBT equality (p. 19), but are against critical theories and thus the addition of “Q” to the gender alphabet group acronym. In their view, critical theories have hijacked the liberal project and are destructive of both it and society. Of concern to them is the fact that critical theories are provoking the rise of an equally identitarian right (p. 259), and the attack of the two extremes on society will eviscerate liberal society as it currently stands.

The book acts as a critical primer of Critical Theories, a set of theories which are critical of certain things but are not themselves self-critical. Chapter 1 looks at its origin in Postmodernism, chapter 2 links postmodernism with its applied form, chapters 3 to 7 look at various applications of postmodernism in the critical theories of postcolonialism, queer theory, critical race theory, gender studies, and disability and fat studies. Chapter 8 deals with the self-proclaimed “Truth” of the overarching Social Justice scholarship and thought, chapter 9 with how it looks in practice in cancel culture, and chapter 10 rounds up the book with Pluckrose and Lindsay proclaiming what they believe to be the true answer to Critical Theories, which is secular Liberalism. Through the book, Pluckrose and Lindsay point out how postmodernism metastasizes through the social sciences into irrational theories and then into monstrous applications in practice.

As a primer into Critical Theories, this book is indeed helpful. It is a good primer without question begging assumptions that books promoting critical theories mandate that you accept to be true (“by faith”) without necessarily informing you what they are. Thus, this book would be helpful for all who want to get a sense of what critical theories are, without having to read through tons of material if they do not wish to do so.

I would look to focus here on three aspects of the book. First, the irrationality of critical theory and some of its negative consequences will be looked at and highlighted. Second, the issue of social justice will be touched on. Third, I want to examine the alternative put forward by Pluckrose and Lindsay, especially for Christians whose first and foremost commitment should be to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The irrationality of Critical Theory and its negative consequences

Critical Theory has its root in postmodernism, a deeply irrational movement. That of course is not taken to be a negative point by its adherents, although it should. Why irrationality is bad is because there is no reason why laws of logic, if they can be disregarded in some ways, cannot be violated in other ways. If, according to critical theories, what one identifies as is important such that men who identify as women have women's rights, then why is transracialism (e.g. whites identifying as blacks c.f. Rachel Dolezal) wrong? If the laws of logic can be disregarded, then postmodernism itself is both true and not true, and critical theories are both true and not true.

According to Pluckrose and Lindsay, postmodernism is marked by two principles and four themes. They are:

The postmodern knowledge principle: Radical skepticism about whether objective knowledge or truth is obtainable and a commitment to cultural constructivism.

The postmodern political principle: A belief that society is formed of systems of power and hierarchies, which decide what can be known and how.

The four major themes of postmodernism are

1. The blurring of boundaries
2. The power of language
3. Cultural relativism
4. The loss of the individual and the universal

(p. 31. Bold original.)

If the postmodern knowledge principle is right, then nobody can know this principle to be true per se. To treat it as truth, as applied postmodernism has done, is to violate the principle itself. When postmodern relativism is applied to the political principle and the four major themes, this universal acid renders them all false, and true and false at the same time. How does one know that society is formed of systems of power and hierarchies? Is that objectively true? How does one know whether a boundary does not exist? How does one know that language is only about language games, or that all cultures are equally valid and invalid, or that the group is important while the individual is not? All these are merely the negation of aspects of Western culture, but who is to say that negations must be true if the positive positions themselves are false? That is the fallacy of the false dichotomy, which shows that postmodernism is not even consistent with its own knowledge principle. In other words, its epistemology is self-contradictory even by its own standards, for after all a denigration of logic means one should not use logic in its system.

Applied postmodernism takes place in its echo chamber, and thus does not have to actually deal with postmodernism's own failure to be consistent with itself. What had

happened is these self-contradictory gibberish have become axioms for the development of critical theories, where everything is reduced to power dynamics and group identity and language games. Thus, in the whole idea of “systematic X,” where X is racism or sexism or whatever fetish the rabid Theorist can think of, what they mean is a conspiracy theory whereby no one is actually guilty of X, but that the bad system perpetuates itself without any human agency involved (p. 36). Yet, it is at the same time asserted that individuals are culpable for the systemic “sin” of X, thus *disconnecting the link between rights and responsibility which is fundamental for our ideas of justice*. The irrationality of postmodernism has given rise to absolute idiocy in practice, where those in power demand that they be treated as victims whose every whim must be pandered to.

Pluckrose and Lindsay are correct to see the mutation of postmodernism into something more akin to religion than to science (pp. 48, 211, 264). In fact, this secular cult parodies the worst of the caricatures of religion, without any of its attendant benefits. In many religions and especially Christianity, rationality is considered important, although not ultimate. Biblical Christianity further asserts that all sciences can cohere and make sense within its own rational worldview. The cult of wokeism, on the other hand, is not rational, is purely emotive, and does not care about any science at all (p. 191). To call its proponents beasts is to insult the beasts, because even beasts have minds that have some rudimentary understanding of logic, such that they know how to reason from their perceptions of indicators of danger to avoiding or running from it.

Critical Theories create degenerate morons in every sense of the term. “Cancel” culture is what happens when morons are given power over society, and Pluckrose and Lindsay has shown how bad they are, shown with an example from Evergreen College’s despicable conduct towards Bret Weinstein (pp. 231-3). The lunatics are running the asylum, and babies rule over society. That is the consequence of Critical Theories, and anyone with even a sense of rationality and self-respect should oppose it.

On social justice

Early in the book, Pluckrose and Lindsay differentiate between what “normal social justice” and “Social Justice” with a capital “S” and a capital “J,” defined as “a very specific doctrinal interpretations of the meaning of ‘social justice’ and means of achieving it while prescribing a strict, identifiable orthodoxy around that term” (p. 14). Most certainly, the Social Justice with capitals is false, being wedded to Critical Theories as a “reified postmodernism” (p. 183). The question then is what about the small letters “social justice”?

The counter to such an enquiry is: What is it about “social justice” that makes it distinct from “justice”? If “social justice” is just “justice,” then the adjective “social” is redundant. The onus of those who see no issues with that phrase “social justice” is to show why they phrase is even necessary. Unless and until there is a case made that “social justice” is not the same as “justice,” there is simply no need for that phrase. Now, one reason for the phrase “social justice” is that people implicitly know that “justice” is about negative

rights, while they need some term for positive rights, and thus the phrase “social justice” is coined. If that is the case, then the point of discussion should be about the nature of human rights (positive and negative), which is another topic for another day, but suffice it is to say that this reviewer does not believe in positive rights.

Liberalism and the question of epistemology

Pluckrose and Lindsay’s solution to critical theories is a return to secular liberalism. In a certain way, secular liberalism with its commitment to freedom of speech and embrace of viewpoint diversity does make for a much better society. Nevertheless, here is where I as a Christian would differ from Pluckrose and Lindsay, and this chapter is one place where I think Christians ought to be careful.

It is natural, after agreeing with Pluckrose and Lindsay, to feel some affinity to them. It is natural, when faced with unhinged nutjobs, to be co-belligerent with others who reject them as well. But, with no animosity towards either of these authors, this is where Christians ought to be wary. Rejecting Critical Theories does not bring you salvation; but only faith in Jesus Christ is what matters. There is no point in being right in the cultural wars if you lose your soul in the process!

The authors are perfectly ok with transgenderism, though not its “queer” aspect. Why “T” should be accepted into the LGB acronym is unclear. After all, the essence of feminism is that only women have women’s rights. But transgenderism asserts that biological men who self-identify as women can also have women’s rights and must be accepted as women. The two propositions contradict each other. Either “women” is an essential category (feminism), or “women” is a social construct that biological men can participate in if they identify as women (transgenderism). The embrace of “T” by Pluckrose and Lindsay is thus surprising given how much transgenderism is derived from Critical gender theory.

The key questions Christians should be asking at this defense of secular liberalism is “by what standard”? In other words, how does one determine what is considered true, what is considered acceptable (truth applied), and how should one evaluate such matters. First of all, secular liberalism is not the only system for maintaining freedom of speech and viewpoint diversity. The Christian and Reformed Two-Kingdoms theory for example also does that. Secondly, we note that Pluckrose and Lindsay hold to LGBT and decry “homophobia” and “transphobia.” By what standard are these to be considered actual things and that the LGBT “identities” be accepted? Here, we see the weakness of secular liberalism, in that it is *incapable* of actually governing society unless that society holds to a unifying metanarrative. The Christian starts with a view that the moral law proscribes homosexuality, and thus LGBT are unacceptable, at best to be tolerated as part of “viewpoint diversity,” and at worst to be treated as crimes. Secular liberalism therefore fails to be the proper solution to Critical Theory as it cannot justify itself against other systems. It cannot justify any of its preferences, and as such, is unable to stop the

emergence and progression of Critical Theories, which all happened under the watch of the liberal intelligentsia.

Secular Liberalism therefore, while friendlier towards Christians, is a failure. Pluckrose's and Lindsay's promotion of it is understandable given that that is the best system for their particular socio-political slant, but it fails because it feigns neutrality while having an unconscious bias towards certain positions. Its commitment to freedom of speech, viewpoint diversity, and against standpoint epistemology means that Christians are tolerated within the system, a benefit that we will not have under Critical Theories. But it is a mistake to think that secular liberalism is congruent with the Christian's commitment to having Christ as Lord. The idols of secular liberalism in framing the narrative of what freedom means (freedom is from external restraint only), and having society framed around their view of freedom has to be challenged. Christian freedom is the freedom to do what is right and just, not just the freedom from external restraint. External restraints like laws against certain moral depravities (e.g. incest) are proper and we do not require freedom from them, for true freedom is congruent with law.

It is due to the conflict that secular liberalism has with Christianity that I disagree with Pluckrose and Lindsay in their promotion of their version of liberalism. Their secular liberalism is a failure. Certainly from a secular point of view, we wish them well in their endeavor, but Christians ought to move on a different path. Pluckrose and Lindsay are good in diagnosing the problems in society, but we do not have to accept their solutions for the problems that have arisen under their watch.

Conclusion

This book by Pluckrose and Lindsay is a good book introducing Critical Theories for those who want to understand what is going on in modern society in the early half of the 21st century. We will all be made to care by these ignoramus grandstanding as prophets of society. Therefore, it is imperative that we understand what is going on. Understand postmodernism and its applied turn, and know just how badly critical theories have infiltrated the academy and society. After we have done so, we can read about their proposed solution in secular liberalism, but we have to go further. All of these critical theories come about because of Man's rejection of God. For those whom God wants to destroy in His wrath, he will give them over to a degenerate mind (Rom. 1:28). Critical Theories are the very manifestation of His wrath against the intelligentsia, destroying them in their "brilliance."

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who

practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them (Rom. 1:28-32)

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (1 Cor. 1:20)