

Preface to the French translation of
Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*

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“Certain social-science theories that are totally imported from the United States of America” are undermining the struggle against Islamist separatism, says the French President Emmanuel Macron.¹ His Minister of Education, Jean-Michel Blanquer, is more explicit:

There is a fight to be waged against an intellectual matrix coming from American universities and intersectional theses, which want to essentialize communities and identities. This is the polar opposite of our republican model which postulates equality between human beings, independently of their origin, sex or religion. This is the breeding ground for a fragmentation of our society, and it is a worldview that converges with the interests of the Islamists.

To which he adds:

This reality has infected a significant part of French social science — I challenge anyone to tell me the contrary.²

One may legitimately wonder, of course, whether this passionate defense of France’s republican ideals against an intellectual virus imported from the English-speaking world might have something to do with a presidential election that will take place a year from now and in which Macron’s principal opponent will in all likelihood be the candidate of the right-wing National Rally (formerly National Front), Marine Le Pen.³ Nevertheless, what these two politicians have evoked in such a polemical way is far from being a pure invention: they are drawing attention to a serious intellectual debate — or rather, to several distinct intellectual debates, which they have imprudently mixed — which cross national borders because they concern universal human issues. But in this warning to the French against subversive doctrines coming from the United States, there is, above all, a profound irony. For these same ideas — or, to be more precise, their precursors — were loudly denounced by the American cultural Right, barely thirty years ago, as subversive imports from . . . France.⁴

The book you are now reading, co-authored by Helen Pluckrose (who is English) and James Lindsay (who is American), aims to clarify these transatlantic misunderstandings, to unravel the intellectual trajectory that gave rise to the ideas now being condemned by Messrs. Macron and Blanquer, and above all to separate what

¹Macron (2020, p. 12).

²Enault *et al.* (2020). See also Onishi (2021).

³And, on the other side, the founder of the left-wing party France Unbowed, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, accused here by Mr. Blanquer of being “republican one day and islamo-leftist the next. . . . It is an enormous historical paradox to see the French extreme left, for the first time, turn its back on the ideals of the French Revolution and embrace a worldview closer to that of the United States [!] and in the service of the darkest obscurantism. Mr. Mélenchon wants to be in History. But it is for this betrayal that he will appear there.”

⁴The best-known of these jeremiads were the books by Allan Bloom (1987), Roger Kimball (1990), Dinesh D’Souza (1991) and Gertrude Himmelfarb (1994). It should be stressed that the main targets of these books were American academics of a multiculturalist or feminist orientation; the attack on certain French intellectuals, notably Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, remained secondary. Among these critiques, the most in-depth treatment of the French precursors can be found in Himmelfarb’s chapter on “postmodernist history” (1994, chapter VII). For a detailed and brilliantly scathing assessment of both the conservative critics and their leftist academic targets, see Jacoby (1994).

the authors find to be positive in these currents of thought — for there is some — from what they consider to be harmful or even dangerous (while giving the reader the knowledge necessary to form his or her own judgment). The main subject of the book is the set of Theories (the authors use capital letters to identify them) going under the general rubric of “Critical Social Justice” — CSJ for short. They point out from the start that this term, chosen by its supporters, is radically misleading: in this ideology, neither the idea of social justice nor the notion of critical thought takes on its ordinary meaning. They therefore lead the reader through the literature of this sector with the aim of elucidating what “social justice” and “critical thought” mean to CSJ advocates. After having done this, Pluckrose and Lindsay argue in their final chapters that this so-called “critical” thought is in fact very far from being critical in the usual sense of the word, and that the dogmas of CSJ are in fact counterproductive to the struggle for social justice.

The history of the ideas leading to CSJ is long, but for brevity our authors start in the Paris of the 1960s, with the writings of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard — what they call “classic postmodernism”. From these writings they extract two philosophical principles: the *postmodern knowledge principle*, which displays a radical skepticism towards the possibility of objective knowledge (or even objective truth), along with a cultural constructivism; and the *postmodern political principle*, which asserts that society is structured by systems of power and hierarchy that unconsciously organize everyone’s ways of thinking so as to reproduce this same system of domination.⁵

These postmodern ideas crossed the Atlantic (and the English Channel) towards the end of the 1960s and became fashionable in some left-wing academic circles in the English-speaking world, principally in departments of literature and (as a minority view) in certain sectors of the social sciences. Our authors trace, after an initial deconstructive phase (until around 1990), the later evolution of the various branches of what they call “applied postmodernism”: postcolonial theory, queer theory, critical race theory and postmodern feminist theories, among others.⁶ Finally, they document the transformation of these Theories into a “reified postmodernism” (starting around 2010), in which the two philosophical principles of postmodernism become fundamental truths that are henceforth treated as beyond all doubt.

At this point it may seem that the postmodernists have made a complete *volte-face*: from a radical relativism to an extreme dogmatism, at least about certain matters. And so, indeed, they have; that is what is so bizarre. At the heart of applied postmodernism — and even more so, reified postmodernism — is a glaring logical contradiction, or at the very least, a flagrant double standard. On the one hand, applied postmodernists insist, echoing classical postmodern Theory, that all purported “truths” are mere social constructs, and that it is impossible to use reason and evidence to obtain any reasonably reliable objective knowledge; all claims to employ reason and evidence are simply assertions of power. On the other hand, applied postmodernists proclaim that social oppression is an objective fact; indeed,

⁵It goes without saying that these principles are widely contested. For critiques of the postmodern knowledge principle, see Chalmers (1990), Brown (2001), Boghossian (2006), Brown (2009), Sokal and Bricmont (1998, chapter 4) and Sokal (2008), among others.

⁶See also Lamont (1987) and Cusset (2005) for astute analyses of the evolution and mutation of “French theory” in the English-speaking world.

for reified postmodernists it is so fundamental a fact that it is simply beyond question. And not just the existence of social oppression (which hardly anyone denies); rather, the specific mechanisms by which it comes about and by which it can be combatted. In this way, applied and reified postmodernists seek to have their cake and eat it too: they can reject the ideas they dislike, without bothering to examine (much less to refute) the evidence and arguments that have been offered in their favor; and they can simultaneously assert the ideas they do like, without needing to offer detailed evidence in their support or to respond to reasoned objections.

But the postmodern knowledge principle is a universal acid, and anyone can play the game. At first the tactical deployment of postmodern relativism was confined to those parts of the identitarian left that were strongly influenced by elite academia. But the ideas gradually percolated into the rest of society, where they became part of the mother's milk — the unexamined conventional wisdom — of the CSJ left. “There is no objective, neutral reality,” writes Robin DiAngelo, author of the best-selling *White Fragility*; this sentence is thrown out almost as an obvious platitude, with no justification and no follow-up, during an otherwise thoughtful exploration of the intersection between race and class.⁷ But what goes around, comes around. Now everyone — including the pseudo-populist extreme right — can have their own “alternative facts”.⁸ And that is very bad news for anyone who cares about social justice. In a “post-truth” society, power does indeed trump evidence and reason, just as the postmodern political principle would have it; and it goes without saying that the oppressors invariably have more power than the oppressed. A disdain for evidence and reason can hardly bode well for social justice or, indeed, for social sanity.⁹

Against all this, Pluckrose and Lindsay argue that the cause of social justice is best served by a philosophy anchored in the Enlightenment. They defend the idea that there exist objective truths about the natural and social world and that we can at least sometimes obtain reasonably reliable knowledge of such truths by employing evidence and reason. And they argue that social injustices are best combatted within a political system that values free and open debate, democratic decision-making, and respect for universal human rights. They call this political philosophy by its traditional name — *liberalism* — and take care to define it carefully in the first paragraph of their book:

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.

— stressing immediately that

These liberal values developed as ideals and it has taken centuries of struggle

⁷DiAngelo (2006, p. 54).

⁸See, for instance, Sokal (2021) for an example in the American context, citing polls showing that fully two-thirds of Republican voters believe — contrary to all evidence — that the 2020 election was fraudulent.

⁹Diverse analyses of the social, political and intellectual origins of the phenomenon sometimes called “post-truth” — and of how to combat it — can be found in the recent books of Bronner (2013, 2019, 2021), Ball (2017), D’Ancona (2017), Davis (2017), Ferraris (2017), Levitin (2017) and McIntyre (2018), among many others.

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 word “liberalism” also has many other meanings, and it is crucial to avoid confusion with these. Liberalism in the philosophical sense is compatible with the economic philosophy that Americans call “liberal” and Europeans call “social-democratic”, as well as with democratic forms of socialism; it is also compatible with the very different economic philosophy that Europeans call “liberal” and that many people in all countries call “neoliberal” or simply “conservative”; and finally, it is also compatible with the related but distinct economic philosophy that Americans call “libertarian”. Similarly, liberalism in the philosophical sense is compatible with a wide variety of liberal and conservative views on social and cultural issues. As Pluckrose and Lindsay say,

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.

They contrast this with rising illiberalisms on both the left (such as that of some partisans of Critical Social Justice) and the right (the authoritarian pseudo-populisms that have taken power in Hungary, Poland, Turkey, Brazil, India, the Philippines and many other countries, including the United States until very recently). And in their final chapter, Pluckrose and Lindsay explain the fundamental importance of the freedom of expression: a universal message that will perhaps be particularly relevant in the country of Voltaire, where his ideas seem, alas, to have been somewhat forgotten.¹⁰

Of course, one should not form an excessively idealized view of liberal society. Guaranteeing the freedom of expression is not the same as guaranteeing that everyone will have equal access to it. And guaranteeing the freedom of expression in the legal sense does not create, in and of itself, the cultural and social conditions that would permit a true debate of ideas: one in which objective facts will be respected and taken into account by everyone, and in which honest differences of opinion will likewise be respected, while manipulations, deceptions and appeals to pure emotion will be unmasked and rejected. At the present time, our societies are manifestly very far from this ideal, and one may rightly fear that in the near future the situation will only worsen. It is one thing to defend liberalism as a political philosophy; it is quite another to create the economic, social and psychological conditions that would permit its flourishing.

In sum, the book of Pluckrose and Lindsay is a pioneering contribution to tracing the historical origins of CSJ scholarship and activism, and criticizing its excesses. But like all pioneering contributions, it is necessarily incomplete. Pluckrose and Lindsay concentrate on explicating the intellectual linkages between the three eras of postmodernist thought, culminating in CSJ; they devote less attention to ferreting out the social origins of CSJ. As one reviewer observed, the glaring logical contradictions

¹⁰For a detailed critique of the perverse effects of the current French legislation that criminalizes the expression of certain (rather ill-defined) categories of ideas, and a reasoned defense of the classic liberal conception of freedom of expression, see Bricmont (2014).

within applied and reified postmodernism suggest that non-intellectual motivations may in fact be the key driving forces:

What if the contemporary “postmodernists” needed a way to justify conclusions they already felt certain were true and simply found high theory to be the closest thing at hand — a tool meant to do a specific job, and picked out perhaps due more to convenience and familiarity than due to its appropriateness for the task? This would reverse the order of explanation and suggest that the really crucial causal factors might include things like the political makeup of the professoriate, administrative bloat in the university, the trend of students becoming “consumers” of the product of education, and so on.¹¹

Furthermore, as another reviewer pointed out,

while these intellectual developments have been taking place within universities, political changes have been occurring away from campus. Most notably, the political blows dealt to the working class throughout the 1970s and 1980s left leading activists to seek power not in mass movements but through instigating change from within state institutions, workplaces and supranational organisations. Rather than standing on picket lines, there were HR policies to be written. Rather than winning the backing of unemployed coalminers, there were European bureaucrats to persuade.

... Disillusioned political activists found it far easier to persuade middle-class students and university lecturers of their cause — and, in turn, to take on board the outlook and concerns of this intellectual elite. It was far easier to play at identity politics than engage in class politics. Many activists are far more comfortable arguing that womanhood is a social construct than they are talking to actual women who work as cleaners or carers. Academia, and critical theory in particular, allowed political retreat to be presented as progress, and defeat as victory.¹²

Finally, one key issue — which Pluckrose and Lindsay address at some length in their final chapter, but which I think merits further exploration — concerns the myriad ways in which the excesses of left-wing identity politics provide fuel for the identity politics of the extreme right. This, to my mind, is one of the greatest dangers of CSJ. The right-wing pseudo-populisms currently flourishing in many countries — in some cases achieving state power by winning elections — of course arise from a complex mixture of economic, social and political factors, which furthermore vary from country to country. On the one hand, many working-class voters feel that they have been abandoned by all the traditional parties, both left and right. In France, many former Communist and Socialist voters in economically declining areas turned in the 1980s and after to the National Front¹³; and in the United States, significant

¹¹Traldi (2020).

¹²Williams (2020).

¹³But one should not exaggerate this phenomenon. After a detailed analysis of the results of the 1988 presidential election, compared to prior elections, Platone and Rey (1996, p. 275) concluded that “The electorate of the National Front was built to the detriment of all the other political forces, without exception; defections of Communist voters played a role, but not in any privileged way.” See also Mayer (2017) for a more recent study of the National Front electorate, and see Lee and Sergent (2017) for an interesting journalistic account.

numbers of white working-class Americans who had voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012 later voted for Trump.¹⁴ On the other hand, the grievances of working-class voters are not purely economic: many feel *culturally* disparaged by educationally superior elites who also fancy themselves as *morally* superior.¹⁵ Hillary Clinton’s infamous characterization of half of Trump voters as a “basket of deplorables . . . They’re racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic” — a characterization made *to laughter and applause* at an LGBT fundraising event in New York City — is only the most glaring and disgusting example.^{16,17} No surprise, then, that some working-class people respond by “voting with our middle finger,” as one Trump supporter elegantly put it.¹⁸ French readers can perhaps cite analogous examples. There

¹⁴For analyses of the social and psychological characteristics of so-called “Obama-to-Trump voters” — attempting to measure the relative importance of economic hardship and precarity versus racist, sexist, authoritarian and anti-immigrant attitudes — see Kliman (2018, 2019), Morgan and Lee (2018, 2019), Muravchik and Shields (2020), Reny, Collingwood and Valenzuela (2019), Schaffner, Macwilliams and Nteta (2018). These authors do not reach any consensus.

¹⁵On this, see especially Williams (2017).

¹⁶A full transcript of this speech can be found at Reilly (2016); videos of the relevant excerpt can be found at Reilly (2016) and CBS News (2016). To her credit, Clinton went on to accuse Donald Trump, correctly, of encouraging and amplifying this bigotry; and she went on to express sympathy with the other half of Trump voters (according to her count)

who feel that the government has let them down, the economy has let them down, nobody cares about them, nobody worries about what happens to their lives and their futures, and they’re just desperate for change. . . . They don’t buy everything he [Trump] says, but he seems to hold out some hope that their lives will be different. They won’t wake up and see their jobs disappear, lose a kid to heroin, feel like they’re in a dead-end. Those are people we have to understand and empathize with as well.

¹⁷An equally nauseating example was provided, some years earlier, by Italy’s most famous intellectual, Umberto Eco, on the eve of the May 2001 elections that brought Silvio Berlusconi’s right-wing Pole of Freedoms (*Polo delle Libertà*) coalition to power. According to Eco, the Berlusconi electorate can be divided into two categories: “Motivated Voters” and “Beguiled Voters”. The former consist of

fanatics of the Northern League who would like to load non-EU citizens, and perhaps our own southerners, into sealed wagons. . . . League moderates who want to defend the interests of their region, imagining they can live and prosper separately from the rest of the world. . . . businessmen who reckon (correctly) that the tax changes promised by the Pole would benefit the well-off. . . . people who, having had trouble with the judiciary, reckon the Pole can rein in independent public prosecutors. . . . people who do not want their taxes spent on depressed areas.

The second group consists of people who

have learned their own set of values through creeping education by television for decades . . . [who] read few newspapers and fewer books . . . There’s no point warning these people that Berlusconi would change the constitution, because these people have never read the constitution. . . . Why talk to them of “offshore”, when this denotes only exotic beaches to visit on holiday? What sense does it make to talk to these voters about *The Economist*, when they don’t know the names of many Italian papers? They buy a left- or right-wing magazine indifferently, depending on whether there’s a pretty derriere on the cover. (Eco 2001)

In short, all those who decline to vote as Eco would like are either selfish (if not downright evil) or stupid. It goes without saying that Eco did not deign to provide any statistical evidence to back up his purportedly factual claims about the Berlusconi electorate.

¹⁸Bierman and Mascaro (2016), cited also in Williams (2017, p. 3).

is ample anecdotal evidence that the excesses of CSJ are playing some role in fueling this resentment — gleefully amplified by horror stories in the right-wing press and the fulminations of right-wing politicians — but to my knowledge there has been no rigorous research on this phenomenon, whether by large-scale quantitative surveys or by in-depth interviews. This seems to me an extremely urgent area of study.

With all these thoughts in mind, I eagerly await the second edition of this book.

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