

Critical Theory vs. “Mostmodernism”

by William L. Krayer

James Lindsay, co-author of *Cynical Theories* (2020), has done a great thing by establishing the website New Discourses, documenting in gruesome detail the development in academia of “Critical Theory,” the basis for critical race theory and other mania of the intelligentsia which are rapidly infecting virtually all aspects of American life. Overwhelmingly, the “scholarship” of Critical Theory is almost impenetrably dense, designed to shock and awe casual bystanders. Its unabashed principle is that society is organized to benefit white males—that is, to perpetuate their “power.”

In the recent past, together with Peter Boghossian and Helen Pluckrose, Lindsay wrote twenty deliberately undecipherable hoax papers on ridiculous subjects and submitted them to various academic journals, some of which were published and praised before they were found to be hoaxes. Lindsay’s website New Discourses contains a wealth of information about the language and purported scholarship of “Social Justice.”

A helpful starting point for anyone wondering where the vocabulary and tenets of “wokeism” come from is the site’s “Knowledge” tab in its Social Justice Encyclopedia.

Under “Knowledge,” an academic is quoted:

Research, in its traditional form, is the very process through which domination and violence are justified and carried out via producing knowledges that legitimize the accumulation of power through investigation. Increasingly, neoliberalism has influenced this process toward an ever-growing socialization that knowledge should be individualized and privatized, fashioned into a commodity that one can own and lay personal claim to. This has shifted relationships to knowledge away from diverse forms of collectivity, memory, feeling, experience, sense, intuition and reciprocity, thus alienating the producers and carriers of knowledges away from their own stories in a quest to map and patent secrets, tools, traditions, relationships, histories, and even ways of knowing and relating to the world.

The passage goes on to include time, space, and the cosmos as areas in which normal thought does violence. In view of the widespread acceptance, albeit of-

ten with little comprehension, of such “scholarship,” an attempt to address it seems worth pursuing.

To begin, the term “marginalize” and its derivatives do not appear in this quote. This word permeates the “Social Justice” literature but, as the commentary in the Social Justice Encyclopedia notes, the theory elides the details of where, how, and why marginalization is supposed to take place. Here, the term “alienating” is used instead, implying that the producers and preservers of the allegedly downgraded knowledge react in some way to their victimhood. Exactly how this happens is left unexplained. But the quote also seems oblivious to huge areas of history and other empirical research, such as economics.

For example, it should be undeniable that, beginning with the earliest stages of civilization, the incremental advances of technology have continuously improved the lot of humanity; putting aside the technology of ubiquitous warfare, which is defensive as well as offensive, advances in technology do not lead to “domination and violence.” Agriculture, transportation, including seafaring, textiles, mining, metallurgy, and engineering of all kinds had humble beginnings but steadily improved the standard of living everywhere. The more modern plethora of technologies opened by the steam engine, discovery of electricity, the airplane, modern medicine, and many others have made possible the prosperity, and vastly increased longevity, of billions. If all of this is some sort of nefarious accumulation of power by certain

people, maybe it’s not a bad thing. But it wasn’t planned. Nor was it a conspiracy to convey power to anyone, white or not. It happened everywhere.

One part of the passage that deserves attention is the claim that “increasingly” a “socialization” has somehow determined that “knowledge should be individualized and privatized, fashioned into a commodity that one can own and lay personal claim to,” and that leads some to “a quest to map and patent secrets, tools, traditions, relationships, histories, and even ways of knowing and relating to the world.”

While the term isn’t mentioned, the theme of this part of the quote seems to be what is called in the social justice vernacular “cultural appropriation.” So consider a history of India written by a British historian. As a professional, he will look for original records beginning many centuries ago, follow through the Raj to the present, and reflect the findings as accurately as possible. In a perfect world, the Indians will not prevent him from doing so. The book will be copyrighted. What’s wrong with that? The actual history is still there, available to native Indians or anyone else to present it any way they like. India was very much affected by British rule, and to recognize its benefits in the twenty-first century, if that is what happens, does not diminish the negative aspects of this prime example of colonialism. Japan is a much more homogeneous country than India. Despite adopting many Western practices, especially after World War II, its industry and culture are singularly Japanese.

If anyone in Japan is “alienated” by the adoption of modern ways, there are also those who naturally want to preserve as much of the old Japanese traditions and culture as possible. No one is stopping them. There is no great conspiracy to rob the Japanese of their cultural heritage, much less one powered by white men.

In the allegations about knowledge as a “commodity,” the author clearly has no idea what the patent system is about, or how it operates as a significant force for everyone’s prosperity and progress.

At the very least, the author should understand that one cannot patent “histories,” which by definition are previously known. Only new things are patentable. In the United States, the patent system was authorized by the Constitution, in order to “promote the progress of the useful arts.” It has proven to be excellent at that since the beginning of the Republic, by providing incentives not only to invent, but to invest in innovation and, as a condition for the patent grant, to publish one’s idea in complete detail, which makes its “knowledge” available to everyone. And everyone means the whole world. In recent decades, roughly half of the patents issued in the United States have been granted to foreign inventors, from everywhere. But the patent system is only a part of a much greater engine for human prosperity.

A brief review of the scholarship in economics describes further how technology has constantly moved forward for the benefit of all.

Adam Smith observed that the ordinary artisan or craftsman who wants to improve his well-being does so by striving to satisfy his customers’ wants and needs, thus benefiting both, and the whole of society as well. Friedrich Hayek saw a larger “spontaneous order,” commercial activity not organized from on high but based on prices and other indicia of customer satisfaction. More recently, the prolific economist Milton Friedman’s *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962) explained, in popular language, the role of investment by citizens in a free society, among other conditions for a working free market as opposed to a fiat economy.

Many other scholars have also shown at length that the individual’s freedom to act in his own interest, a widespread characteristic of Western “liberal” society, has proven to be a major driver of constant improvement. Dierdre McCloskey, for example, documents the reality of “trade-tested betterment” in Europe. Robert Friedel writes extensively of *A Culture of Improvement* (2008) in the West, Joel Mokyr (*A Culture of Growth*—2016), Robert J. Gordon, Brian Stock, Jean Gimpel, and Kenneth Minogue, among others, buttress the ideas that the growing recognition of individual worth and the value of freedom led to the introduction of new products and new methods of commerce, almost entirely by ordinary people responding to opportunities and needs in the marketplace. Governments encouraged exploration of the globe, but technology evolved and advanced along all frontiers where

conditions permitted, without direction from on high. And Paul Johnson, the eminent British historian, noted that the government and universities were oblivious to the industrial revolution that took place in Britain.¹

Some people, especially perhaps those whose occupations became obsolete, may be seen as “left behind” or “marginalized,” but even they benefit from the increased general prosperity. This concept of victimhood—being left behind—denigrates the individual by discrediting the dignity of self-reliance. Perhaps most important for our analysis, because there is no world conspiracy to leave anyone behind, there is no evidence in the narrative of continuous improvement (or Schumpeter’s “creative destruction”) for racism, intentional or otherwise. Here, the Social Justice devotees will leap in with some aspects of colonialism, omitting that whatever racism there was in nineteenth century colonialism is long gone.

Nobelist Edmund Phelps, in his recent book *Mass Flourishing* (2003) further develops the idea that “dynamic” and “grassroots” innovation do best where new ideas are looked upon favorably. The paradigm is the United States from 1850 to 1970, an explosion of invention, investment, and entrepreneurship that resulted in an economy capable of supporting hordes of academics among other luxuries. Speaking of the trend or trajectory of innovation, Phelps observes it is unpredictable and should be left alone: “the heading of a modern economy is the net result of millions

of individuals pulling in myriad directions.” The ivory towers, think tanks, and their government enablers believe, despite history, that they know a better way, that a small group of elite planners can somehow produce more and better information about the use of scarce resources than millions or billions of people acting in the marketplace. But, as Friedrich Hayek put it, the broad notion that “anything produced by evolution could have been done better by the use of human ingenuity” is untenable. This also brings to mind the early twentieth century policy of the German patent office, which asked for the applicant’s academic credentials because it was the academic elite who were presumed to be leading the way. The standard was not merely that the idea should be new, but also demonstrate an “advance” in the field. A bicycle mechanic without an academic degree who applied for a patent on a heavier-than-air flying machine would be suspect. In the United States, the possible success of a patented idea has always been left to the marketplace, not the “experts.”

But I want also to invoke the findings of the late Princeton economist William J. Baumol, who studied the competition among twentieth century corporate research laboratories, documenting how the constant generation of new and improved products and processes was necessary just to remain competitive. In a separate study, Baumol proclaimed that entrepreneurs are always with us and can be highly active and influential in any society including those under

autocratic regimes. Following whatever “rules of the game” prevail, they will find a way to improve themselves. The entrepreneur will either see an opportunity or react out of necessity; his action will be either innovative or replicative, the latter meaning it will not contribute to knowledge, and in either case the result will be either productive or unproductive. The innovative, productive approach increases wealth while the unproductive approach or reaction does not generate wealth and therefore does not contribute to the growth of the economy and the general well-being. Redistributive entrepreneurship (rent-seeking) is more of a drag on the economy than an activity that merely benefits passively from prevailing rules of the game. Redistributive entrepreneurship takes place notoriously under autocratic and “welfare state” governments. “Beating the system” is a kind of entrepreneurship. In the context of current events, it can be argued that those who contrive to profit from racial strife are unproductive redistributive entrepreneurs. And, a policy of throwing huge sums of government money at research, as recently proposed by the Brookings Institute,² will be seen as ripe fruit by the redistributive entrepreneur. This policy, if followed, would be more in line with beating the system of genuine research than anything the typical corporate researcher does.

Where there is a truly compelling reason, or where private enterprise is (or was) not capable, completely government-run research projects to produce atom bombs or conduct space explora-

tion have been spectacularly successful and have led to beneficial spin-off technologies. But the huge growth of federal grants for research at universities since the Bayh-Dole Act of 1980 has directed the attention of university researchers into politically trendy projects rather than what President Eisenhower called the professor’s “intellectual curiosity.”

Returning now to patents, the United States patent system was established very soon after the nation’s beginning, as authorized by the Constitution, to “promote the progress of the useful arts.” Over eleven million patents have been issued as I write in 2021, on an endless variety of practical, utilitarian, and technical subjects. The beginnings (and endings) of all sorts of industries can be seen in its record in plentiful detail. The record is fully searchable by anyone, providing a gigantic store of knowledge which keeps increasing incrementally. Each new patent represents an idea that met an objective test of novelty at the time. Since, by definition, it defines something new, it does not subtract from the existing stream of commerce, but adds to it. A patent is indeed property, as alluded to in the quote above, but when it expires, the invention is available for anyone to use. Being property, it can be licensed, which assures widespread use while it subsists. If, somehow, the Patent Office has missed evidence that would have prevented a patent’s issuance, it can be invalidated in court. There is zero evidence that this constant production and spread of knowledge represents an “accumulation of power,” especially one

designed to, or even tending to, alienate legions of people as alleged in the above quote.

The continuing accumulation of new ideas recorded in the Patent Office does not mean the progress of technology is inevitable. Each patent represents the idea of a single human being or a small number of human beings who see a solution to a problem. Someone must generate a fully novel idea and follow through with a complete description of it, usually meaning it has been proven useful. But note that, since the beginning, any person—man, woman, or child—could apply for a patent. It is a truly equal opportunity system, not only race neutral, or race blind, but race oblivious. The applicant for a patent is not asked to select a race or ethnicity from a list. Patents are not “distributed,” proportionately, disproportionately, or otherwise, but they do require the initiative to create an idea and follow through with an application for a patent. Any individual can apply, and there is no way to discriminate against an applicant by race, either systemically or individually. Groups or races don’t apply for patents, individuals or their employers do.

Perhaps the left’s statistical zealots could determine that certain zip codes containing high percentages of blacks obtain fewer patents than others, and conclude that patents are therefore systemically racist. This is, shall we say, patently false. Patent law does not recognize race, income, gender, religion, sexuality, or zip code. But where are the statisticians who could readily show

that the same zip codes, many with black mayors and school boards, have the worst education? Thomas Sowell’s recent book *Charter Schools and Their Enemies* (2020) places voluminous statistics and test results in the body of the book to demonstrate irrefutably that good schools can do an excellent job in “marginalized” areas for “disadvantaged” students. If there is systemic racism in those areas, it is the fault of Democratic officials, often non-white, and the stranglehold of teachers’ unions, not straight white men, the default villain in Social Justice lore.

As explained in Pluckrose and Lindsay’s *Cynical Theories*, Social Justice lore grew out of “postmodernism,” the main theme of which seems to be a radical skepticism that anything can ever be viewed as certain or true. It holds that everything considered to be knowledge is simply a product of one’s background, experience or environment, meaning at least that it cannot be true for people of cultures different from those who developed the knowledge. In effect, there is no such thing as objective truth or certainty. This brief summary may miss the mark somewhat and certainly leaves out huge volumes of “discourse,” but it serves the purpose for this essay.

Americans too often find themselves simply reacting to the left’s latest iteration of the Social Justice dictates, rather than leading the way in the culture wars. It is time to mount not a mere defensive reaction, but a counteroffensive. So here is a proposal: we should move beyond postmodernist thought to Most-

modernest thinking. In this new frontier of social philosophy, a Mostmodernist is one who appreciates continuous improvements in science and technology as vital and perhaps most important to progress. So long as technology keeps coming up with new ideas, we will always be in the Mostmodernest stage of progress; the Social Justice zealots cannot get ahead of us. Of course, people may differ in their definition of progress, but as shown above it is impossible to deny that incremental improvements in technology over the millennia have steadily improved the lot of humankind of all races. If you're not convinced, think of yourself at the very beginning of civilization and then make a list of all the things you don't know how to do. Even today, do you know how to make a simple T-shirt, starting in the middle of a field, jungle, or forest? A radio? A single piece of paper? How about just surviving, and raising a family, in the Ice Age? Would you recognize iron ore, and then what? Create a sail (from what?), not to mention a seaworthy boat. You get the idea. It is also undeniable that each increment of improvement represents a creation by an individual. Here, we could address those who assert there is no such thing as a new idea, or that patentably new ideas are simply rearranging old parts or concepts: where did the old parts come from?

Looking at the more complex modern society, consider Friedrich Hayek's famous 1945 article "The Use of Knowledge in Society," describing the crucial part played by individuals everywhere

when they act on their own individual perceptions, thereby determining the course of a free economy, pursuing the wants and needs of real people without direction (or "stimulus") from government. Following Hayek, Thomas Sowell wrote an award-winning book called *Knowledge and Decisions* (1996) which, among other points, deplored the tendency of governments to interfere with economic decision-making, rendering it difficult for the market to work as it should. Knowledge of all types is generated by individuals.

A further thought-provoking excursion could be to read Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The First Circle* (1968) which centers on a sharashka, or prison laboratory, staffed entirely by technically educated prisoners in the Soviet Union. They are forced to work on projects they abhor, but because their families are threatened they comply or fake it in various degrees. One of many "takeaways" in this remarkable work is that it is impossible to force someone to invent. Whether the Social Justice zealots like it or not, individuals have free will, and creativity is the epitome of free will. The quotation which is the subject of this essay sees an "accumulation of power" through modern research. No, not even in a sharashka, or a coerced cultural revolution.

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ACADEMIC QUESTIONS

1. Paul Johnson, *Modern Times: The World from the Twenties to the Nineties* (Harper Perennial, 2001).
2. Robert D. Atkinson, Mark Muro, Jacob Whiton, "The Case for Growth Centers: How to Spread Tech Innovation Across America," Brookings Institute, December 9, 2019.