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The Roots Of Wokeness

It's time we looked more closely at the philosophy behind the movement.

Andrew Sullivan, July 31, 2020

In the mid-2010s, a curious new vocabulary began to unspool itself in our media. A data site, storywrangling.org, which measures the frequency of words in news stories, revealed some remarkable shifts. Terms that had previously been almost entirely obscure suddenly became ubiquitous—and an analysis of the New York Times, using these tools, is a useful example. Looking at stories from 1970 to 2018, several terms came out of nowhere in the past few years to reach sudden new heights of repetition and frequency. Here's a list of the most successful neologisms: non-binary, toxic masculinity, white supremacy, traumatizing, queer, transphobia, whiteness, mansplaining. And here are a few that were rising in frequency in the last decade but only took off in the last few years: triggering, hurtful, gender, stereotypes.

Language changes, and we shouldn't worry about that. Maybe some of these terms will stick around. But the linguistic changes have occurred so rapidly, and touched so many topics, that it has all the appearance of a top-down re-ordering of language, rather than a slow, organic evolution from below. While the New York Times once had a reputation for being a bit stodgy on linguistic matters, pedantic, precise and slow-to change, as any paper of record might be, in the last few years, its pages have been flushed with so many neologisms that a reader from, say, a decade ago would have a hard time understanding large swathes of it. And for many of us regular readers, we've just gotten used to brand new words popping up suddenly to re-describe something we thought we knew already. We notice a new word, make a brief mental check, and move on with our lives.

But we need to do more than that. We need to understand that all these words have one thing in common: they are products of an esoteric, academic discipline called critical theory, which has gained extraordinary popularity in elite education in the past few decades, and appears to have reached a cultural tipping point in the middle of the 2010s. Most normal people have never heard of this theory—or rather an interlocking web of theories—that is nonetheless changing the very

words we speak and write and the very rationale of the institutions integral to liberal democracy.

What we have long needed is an intelligible, intelligent description of this theory which most people can grasp. And we've just gotten one: "Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything About Race, Gender and Identity," by former math prof James Lindsay and British academic, Helen Pluckrose. It's as deep a dive into this often impenetrable philosophy as anyone would want to attempt. But it's well worth grappling with.

What the book helps the layperson to understand is the evolution of postmodern thought since the 1960s until it became the doctrine of Social Justice today. Beginning as a critique of all grand theories of meaning—from Christianity to Marxism—postmodernism is a project to subvert the intellectual foundations of western culture. The entire concept of reason—whether the Enlightenment version or even the ancient Socratic understanding—is a myth designed to serve the interests of those in power, and therefore deserves to be undermined and "problematized" whenever possible. Postmodern theory does so mischievously and irreverently—even as it leaves nothing in reason's place. The idea of objective truth—even if it is viewed as always somewhat beyond our reach—is abandoned. All we have are narratives, stories, whose meaning is entirely provisional, and can in turn be subverted or problematized.

During the 1980s and 1990s, this somewhat aimless critique of everything hardened into a plan for action. Analyzing how truth was a mere function of power, and then seeing that power used against distinct and oppressed identity groups, led to an understandable desire to do something about it, and to turn this critique into a form of activism. Lindsay and Pluckrose call this "applied postmodernism", which, in turn, hardened into what we now know as Social Justice.

You can see the rationale. After all, the core truth of our condition, this theory argues, is that we live in a system of interlocking oppressions that penalize various identity groups in a society. And all power is zero-sum: you either have power over others or they have power over you. To the extent that men exercise power, for example, women don't; in so far as straight people wield power, gays don't; and so on. There is no mutually beneficial, non-zero-sum advancement in this worldview. All power is gained only through some other group's loss. And so the point became not simply to interpret the world, but to change it, to coin a phrase, an

imperative which explains why some critics call this theory a form of neo-Marxism.

The “neo” comes from switching out Marxism’s focus on materialism and class in favor of various oppressed group identities, who are constantly in conflict the way classes were always in conflict. And in this worldview, individuals only exist at all as a place where these group identities intersect. You have no independent existence outside these power dynamics. I am never just me. I’m a point where the intersecting identities of white, gay, male, Catholic, immigrant, HIV-positive, cis, and English all somehow collide. You can hear this echoed in the famous words of Ayanna Pressley: “We don’t need any more brown faces that don’t want to be a brown voice. We don’t need any more black faces that don’t want to be a black voice.” An assertion of individuality is, in fact, an attack upon the group and an enabling of oppression.

Just as this theory denies the individual, it also denies the universal. There are no universal truths, no objective reality, just narratives that are expressed in discourses and language that reflect one group’s power over another. There is no distinction between objective truth and subjective experience, because the former is an illusion created by the latter. So instead of an argument, you merely have an identity showdown, in which the more oppressed always wins, because that subverts the hierarchy. These discourses of power, moreover, never end; there is no progress as such, no incremental inclusion of more and more identities into a pluralist, liberal unified project; there is the permanent reality of the oppressors and the oppressed. And all that we can do is constantly expose and eternally resist these power-structures on behalf of the oppressed.

Truth is always and only a function of power. So, for example, science has no claim on objective truth, because science itself is a cultural construct, created out of power differentials, set up by white cis straight males. And the systems of thought that white cis straight men have historically set up—like liberalism itself—perpetuate themselves, and are passed along unwittingly by people who simply respond to the incentives and traditions of thought that make up the entire power-system, without being aware of it. There’s no conspiracy: we all act unknowingly in perpetuating systems of thought that oppress other groups. To be “woke” is to be “awake” to these invisible, self-reinforcing discourses, and to seek to dismantle them—in ourselves and others.

There is no such thing as persuasion in this paradigm, because persuasion assumes an equal relationship between two people based on reason. And there is no reason and no equality. There is only power. This is the point of telling students, for example, to “check their privilege” before opening their mouths on campus. You have to measure the power dynamic between you and the other person first of all; you do this by quickly noting your interlocutor’s place in the system of oppression, and your own, before any dialogue can occur. And if your interlocutor is lower down in the matrix of identity, your job is to defer and to listen. That’s partly why diversity at the New York Times, say, has nothing to do with a diversity of ideas. Within critical theory, the very concept of a “diversity of ideas” is a function of oppression. What matters is a diversity of identities that can all express the same idea: that liberalism is a con-job. Which is why almost every NYT op-ed now and almost every left-leaning magazine reads exactly alike.

Language is vital for critical theory—not as a means of persuasion but of resistance to oppressive discourses. So take the words I started with. “Non-binary” is a term for someone who subjectively feels neither male nor female. Since there is no objective truth, and since any criticism of that person’s “lived experience” is a form of traumatizing violence, that individual’s feelings are the actual fact. To subject such an idea to, say, the scrutiny of science is therefore a denial of that person’s humanity and existence. To inquire what it means to “feel like a man,” is also unacceptable. An oppressed person’s word is always the last one. To question this reality, even to ask questions about it, is a form of oppression itself. In the rhetoric of social justice, it is a form of linguistic violence. Whereas using the term nonbinary is a form of resistance to cis heteronormativity. One is evil; the other good.

Becoming “woke” to these power dynamics alters your perspective of reality. And so our unprecedentedly multicultural, and multiracial democracy is now described as a mere front for “white supremacy.” This is the reality of our world, the critical theorists argue, even if we cannot see it. A gay person is not an individual who makes her own mind up about the world and can have any politics or religion she wants; she is “queer,” part of an identity that interrogates and subverts heteronormativity. A man explaining something is actually “mansplaining” it—because his authority is entirely wrapped up in his toxic identity. Questioning whether a trans woman is entirely interchangeable with a woman—or bringing up biology to distinguish between men and women—is not a mode of inquiry. It is itself a form of “transphobia”, of fear and loathing of an entire group of people and a desire to exterminate them. It’s an assault.

My view is that there is nothing wrong with exploring these ideas. They're almost interesting if you can get past the hideous prose. And I can say this because liberalism can include critical theory as one view of the world worth interrogating. But critical theory cannot include liberalism, because it views liberalism itself as a mode of white supremacy that acts against the imperative of social and racial justice. That's why liberalism is supple enough to sustain countless theories and ideas and arguments, and is always widening the field of debate; and why institutions under the sway of Social Justice necessarily must constrain avenues of thought and ideas. That's why liberalism is dedicated to allowing Ibram X. Kendi to speak and write, but Ibram X. Kendi would create an unelected tribunal to police anyone and any institution from perpetuating what he regards as white supremacy—which is any racial balance not exactly representative of the population as a whole.

For me, these theorists do something less forgivable than abuse the English language. They claim that their worldview is the only way to advance social progress, especially the rights of minorities, and that liberalism fails to do so. This, it seems to me, is profoundly untrue. A moral giant like John Lewis advanced this country not by intimidation, or re-ordering the language, or seeing the advancement of black people as some kind of reversal for white people. He engaged the liberal system with nonviolence and persuasion, he emphasized the unifying force of love and forgiveness, he saw black people as having agency utterly independent of white people, and changed America with that fundamentally liberal perspective.

The gay rights movement, the most successful of the 21st century, succeeded in the past through showing what straights and gays have in common, rather than seeing the two as in a zero-sum conflict, resolved by prosecuting homophobia or “queering” heterosexuality. The women's rights movement has transformed the role of women in society in the past without demonizing all men, or seeing misogyny as somehow embedded in “white supremacy”. As we have just seen, civil rights protections for transgender people—just decided by a conservative Supreme Court—have been achieved not by seeing people as groups in constant warfare, but by seeing the dignity of the unique individual in pursuing their own happiness without the obstacle of prejudice.

In fact, I suspect it is the success of liberalism in bringing this kind of non-zero-sum pluralism into being that rattles the critical theorists the most. Because it suggests that reform is always better than revolution, that empirical truth is on the side of the genuinely oppressed and we should never fear understanding things

better, that progress is both possible in a liberal democracy, and more securely rooted than in other systems, because it springs from a lively, informed debate, and isn't foisted on society by ideologues.

The rhetorical trap of critical theory is that it has coopted the cause of inclusion and forced liberals onto the defensive. But liberals have nothing to be defensive about. What's so encouraging about this book is that it has confidence in its own arguments, and is as dedicated to actual social justice, achieved through liberal means, as it is scornful of the postmodern ideologues who have coopted and corrupted otherwise noble causes.

This is very good news—even better to see it as the Number 1 Amazon best-seller in philosophy long before its publication date later in August. The intellectual fight back against wokeness has now begun in earnest. Let's do this.

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Andrew Michael Sullivan (born 10 August 1963) is a British-born American author, editor, and blogger. Sullivan is a conservative political commentator, a former editor of *The New Republic*, and the author or editor of six books. He started a political blog, *The Daily Dish*, in 2000, and eventually moved his blog to platforms, including *Time*, *The Atlantic*, *The Daily Beast*, and finally an independent subscription-based format. He announced his retirement from blogging in 2015. From 2016 to 2020, Sullivan was a writer-at-large at *New York* magazine.