

Human Reactions to Rape Culture and Queer Performativity at Urban Dog Parks is not a title likely to impress anyone with real-world worries and responsibilities. Yet this hoax paper was accepted by a peer-reviewed journal because it's not noticeably more absurd than much of the "social justice" research taken seriously in higher education. Now, two of the scholars involved in that instructive hoax have published a sober analysis of the various studies in race and gender that make claim to being "critical" but in fact are uncritical activism. This new book, *Cynical Theories*, by Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, has featured in our pages with an extract, commentary by Paul Kelly and an author interview by Rosemary Neill.

Concern about profound intellectual corruption in the social sciences and humanities has been dismissed by progressives for years as a culture war with little purchase on reality. But many thoughtful commentators are turning to *Cynical Theories* as a timely explanation of the bad ideas responsible for some of the polarisation and conflict deranging the supposedly advanced democracies, most graphically in US cities such as Portland, Oregon, and institutions including *The New York Times*. Critical race theory is a large part of the reason decent people and good intentions have been too easily sidelined as Black Lives Matter protests morph into violence and anarchy.

Critical theory emerged from the postwar failure of the left's economic program as it reinvented itself in the battlegrounds of culture and identity. Power and group membership are realities, of course, but the new progressive dogma reduces human society to a crude, unending struggle for dominance between designated oppressor categories (white blokes, take a bow) and victims who monopolise a new currency of virtue. The chaotic dynamism of interpersonal relations is dumbed down into tribal identities. Fact, truth and knowledge are not allowed any overarching validity but are seen as yet another contest for power dictated by hierarchies of oppression. Taken to an extreme, this paralyses debate because there is no common language of fact for varying opinions to interpret. This stance frustrates the political compromise that lies at the heart of a healthy democracy. The task of mutual understanding and building bridges between parties in dispute becomes fraught. Conflict sharpens and, in the worst case, intimidation and force rule the day. A society such as this cannot solve its problems, and spirals downward.

In Australia we are a long way from that dystopia, and America's racial divide poses problems of a different order, but the very rapid decline in law, order and civility witnessed this year in the great republic of the US is a warning we cannot ignore. Critical race theory is especially counter-productive for any multicultural nation. As Pluckrose and Lindsay write: "We are told (by activist scholars) that racism is embedded in culture and that we cannot escape it. We hear that white people are inherently racist." Racism exists and whites are not free of it, but the task of social harmony requires us to bring together people of goodwill, whatever their skin colour or politics, and to find common ground for respect and co-operation. Critical race theory does the opposite: it deepens the divide and offers toxic slogans instead of practical changes and new opportunities.

"Social justice" sounds unambiguously good and that is why its banner has been uncritically passed from the universities to government agencies, cultural institutions, sections of the media and major corporations. But social justice activism of the critical theory kind is

misleading: it masquerades as a solution to problems that in truth it can only worsen. It comes packaged in misleading language and attractive catchphrases; its incoherent assumptions and dogmas are hidden. This is why *Cynical Theories* is important: it is the idiot's guide to woke ideology. Kelly says the book "should be read by every institutional leader and executive so they understand the ideological goals that lie beneath the policies they are implementing". He is dead right.