



**Episode 1,724: Postmodernism, Critical Theory, and What's Wrong With (Much of) Academia**

**Guest: James Lindsay**

**WOODS:** Let's start off with a little bit of your background, because people looking at a book like this might draw conclusions about you that aren't altogether true. So I want to give you a chance to just talk about where you're coming from and maybe some of your own professional background.

**LINDSAY:** Okay. Academically, my professional background is that I majored in physics originally and after getting a bachelor's degree in physics, I left that discipline, went on to get a masters and then PhD in mathematics. That was 10 years ago, and I left the academy and started to work in a personal small business with my wife for the ensuing 10 years. During that time, I got both I guess philosophically or intellectually active in broadly what might be construed as the culture wars, while also trying to make sense of the so-called debate in the atheism movement in particular. So the new atheism movement was something I was very active in from maybe 2011 until 2015, at which point I decided that it had become enough of its own problem and enough of its own almost religious thing that I wasn't particularly interested in it any longer. I also watched it get kind of conquered and destroyed by social justice, which was the faction that had arisen within that movement and asserted dominance over and I think is the reason for its demise.

When I say I got politically active, I was campaigning for President Obama, to place me politically. So I would consider myself a denizen of the left if I have to be labeled, although I prefer not to be that interested in politics anymore. I feel like I was kind of always faking it. Politics isn't something I'm greatly interested in. I guess I'm slightly knowledgeable about it in the world, but it's not really what I do.

So that would be sort of the big-picture stuff, left-wing atheist who decided that what's going on with social justice is not the best way to try to achieve a fairer society and started to look into the scholarship that defines that movement and justifies that movement and saw just how piss poor it is, to be completely honest. It's poor methodologically, it's poor ethically, poor epistemologically. It doesn't really have anything going for it. It's sophistry at the most extreme level.

So what I'm most famous for, and maybe the last thing to introduce myself, is that two years ago I was part of the trio of academics who participated in what has been come to be known as the grievance studies affair or sometimes Sokal Squared, wherein we wrote 20 fake academic papers and submitted them to journals in things like gender studies and ethnic studies, cultural studies, critical race studies and so on, and had a significant number, seven

of them, accepted for publication within about a year's time total, including a rewrite of a chapter of *Mein Kampf*, which was accepted by a feminist social work journal, and a very famous paper about dog humping and rape culture that was accepted and given an award for excellence by the leading feminist geography journal, among several others. So I'm probably best well known for that. The book *Cynical Theories* was born out of trying to say — I guess our logic, Helen's and mine, our logic would have been, okay, with the grievance studies affair, we showed that there is a problem with the scholarship, and then now let's explain what that problem is very clearly and show how it works and where it came from. And that's what *Cynical Theories* was about.

**WOODS:** Well, let's start then with some terms. And, gosh, I almost hate to do this, because when I was reading your book and you get to postmodernism, you talk about how maddeningly difficult it is to nail down exactly what it is and what it's all about and that it's kind of slippery, there. So there are a couple terms, though, that I'd like you to wrestle with all the same for the sake of the audience: postmodernism and critical theory. Now, postmodernism, you do outline a couple of what you describe as its principles, and I'm just going to read those:

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

And then the postmodern political principle: a belief that society is formed of systems of power and hierarchies, which decide what can be known and how.

Maybe we can use that as the beginning of a discussion of postmodernism. But also, what does critical theory mean?

**LINDSAY:** Sure. So that is really, if you just asked me in the briefest form to define what postmodernism is, that's what I would have told you, so it's a good background. Post modernism really is this very cynical and pessimistic philosophy about knowledge at its root. It's a philosophy proceeding from the observation that ultimately human beings are the ones who have to decide what we think is true about the world and what we think is false about the world. And so since human beings are involved in doing this, they have inherent social and political biases, and that those are not typically well examined, which is actually false in the case of scientific inquiry, but the postmodern assumption is that those are not examined at all, and thus there is a complete removal from objectivity in all human endeavors, including science, and it needs to be replaced with a radical subjectivity that understands that politics pervades every claim to knowledge. So it's a shift in thinking about knowledge in terms of politics and thus power, which it equates as being the same.

I think the best simple sentence that characterizes the postmodern knowledge principle is a derivation directly from the postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault. And his idea is that it misses the point to talk about whether or not a claim on the truth is actually true or false, because what's relevant is that politics are what end up authenticating the statement one way or another. And that means some people who have power are behind deciding to call something true, and that power is what needs to be investigated instead of the truth or falsity of the claim itself.

If you add in one extra dimension to post modernism, it is an extreme skepticism that language can convey meaning at all. So our words are in a sense — you've probably heard of

the distinction between the map and the terrain. Well, the words that we use, the sentences that we construct, the discourses that we speak in are in a sense the map. And the postmodern view of this is that they have no faithful connection whatsoever to the terrain. The words are more or less utterly arbitrary and defined only in relationship to one another. And so if I were to say something like "dog" and pointed at a dog, that wouldn't really be a sufficient way for you to understand what a dog is, and so it's clear that pointing to reality doesn't tell us anything about what words mean.

Maybe one extra dimension is a general skepticism of sweeping explanations of how society works, such as Enlightenment reason and empiricism, or Christianity, or Marxism even. It was a very pessimistic view that had given up on all of these things. That's phrased by Jean Francois Lyotard as a general incredulity toward meta narratives, is how he puts it. So that's post modernism in a nutshell.

Critical theory is a completely separate branch or nearly completely separate branch of European philosophy that extends back to about 1920. It arises originally from the Marxist thinkers, Lukacs and Gramsci. Eventually you had Walter Benjamin and then Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. And they had this view – I should just say what their purpose was. They were Marxists, and they had seen the failures of Marxism to manifest, and they were trying to figure out why. And so they were turning to the nascent fields of psychology and sociology primarily to try to make sense of it.

So on one level, there is the attempt to bring Freudian psychoanalysis into Marxist analysis, to marry Marx and Freud. They also turned to the sociology primarily of Max Weber. Gramsci was very interested, for example, in describing how the elite in society construct a culture that dictates how the I guess middle class or the even lower class will think about the world and accept their lot. And so they tried to start getting into the heads of ordinary people to try to figure out why they were voting against their own interests. And in particular, what "against their own interests" means from their perspective is *not Marxist*. They're not doing a Marxist revolution.

And this developed over the course of the 20th century. These people started in Frankfurt, Germany. They were also mostly Jews. World War II started to break out. Not the best place in the world to be as a Jewish thinker, so they took off to Geneva I think in the late 1930s and eventually moved to the United States.

And the postwar critical theory school was headed up primarily by a guy named Herbert Marcuse, who was at Columbia University. And Marcuse was the one to identify that in his opinion we live in a permanent threat of fascism in a world where fascism has come about ever, and so we have to repress anything that could lead to intolerance or fascism, including by violence, and called this repressive or discriminating tolerance. And he was also probably the first significant thinker to shift – so you can think of Marxism as being focused on economics, and the Frankfurt School shifted the focus to culture, and Marcuse very explicitly shifted the focus to matters of identity politics and very explicitly in *One-Dimensional Man* talks about the need – which is his most famous book – for the need for thinking in terms of minority race, kind of rising up against the systems of oppression that he saw as interlocking with capitalism and other things.

He inspired a generation of very radical activists, most prominently or importantly, Angela Davis, who's getting a lot of press again today. She's still alive. Angela Davis was at UC I think

SD with Herbert Marcuse for a while and saw him as a mentor and became very radical. She said that he radicalized her, in fact, and she informed the black feminists, who later as we turned in *Cynical Theories* to try to describe, took up postmodern tools to continue the radical activism around 1990.

**WOODS:** I think she was at University of California Davis, at least at one point.

**LINDSAY:** Davis, yes, yes, that's right. Sorry, Davis.

**WOODS:** Yeah. Yeah, that's interesting, by the way, in parentheses, about Angela Davis that, as there's been this talk about defunding the police and talking about prisons and prison abolition and stuff, I've seen on social media people saying, What a shame we're not hearing from Angela Davis. Angela Davis should be front and center in America right now, talking about prison abolition. And I thought, but in the '70s, when there were prisoners of conscience behind the Iron Curtain and people turned to Angela Davis to see if she could use some of her influence to get them removed, she said, *No, they probably were causing trouble for the regime. They should stay in prison.* I thought, *this is some champion of prison abolition you have here.*

But all the same, now, sticking to our topic, at least when listening to a discussion of postmodernism, the man on the street may say this all sounds very abstract. How does this translate into reality? How does it manifest itself in real life?

**LINDSAY:** Well, it's a way of viewing the world, and it really has to be seen as such. What's developed between the school of critical theory and the school postmodernism, each of those presents a way of viewing the world. And as we argue in *Cynical Theories*, they've combined into a single worldview now that we're seeing in the so-called woke movement. And the critical way of viewing the world is a couple of things: that traditional theories about the world like science and philosophy and rationality are not sufficient to fully understand the world, because it doesn't deal with moral problematics. It doesn't deal with taking ideas out that cause problems in the sense of establishing and creating systemic oppression. And so that moral adjudication has to be added to the evaluation of ideas.

And so what critical theory does is it separates the world, following Marx's idea of conflict theory to the letter, it separates the world into classes of oppressor versus oppressed. The oppressor class is usually unaware that they're participating in oppression, and they need to be awakened to it and guilted out of it and overthrown. The oppressed class is usually driven into false consciousness by their oppressors to accept their oppression, and they need to be awakened to a revolutionary consciousness called critical consciousness that makes them want to do this. So it's a way of viewing the world where there are the oppressed and those who are oppressing them, with a very clear moral dynamic of who is good and who is bad. Those who are supporting liberation are good. Those who support the status quo are bad. And that's a critical theory worldview.

It's a very seductive worldview if you happen to be sociopolitically aggrieved, and so it makes its way out into the world through activists who have taken up this worldview, literally teaching people to think that way. And that's relevant because the critical pedagogy movement started in the 1970s, and by the early 1980s, had basically turned most of our colleges of teacher education into critical pedagogy schools that were teaching them to see the world through this particular lens, systems of power, oppressor versus oppressed, in a

zero-sum conflict, and to make that an educational priority. So it also made its way out into the world through teaching people to think this way.

The postmodern way of thinking about the world is that we can't trust things like science, we can't trust things like reason, everything is biased, our own lived experience is the only trustworthy thing. And when that ended up getting mixed with this very radical critical identity politics, then it became identity groups have their own knowledges. Those knowledges if they are from an oppressed group cannot be challenged. If they are knowledges from a dominant group, they must be interrogated for their biases. And so it's a way of viewing the world that feeds very, very powerfully into ideas of victimhood or grievance as mediated through these concepts of systemic oppression. And they are very seductive ideas.

So it all seems very abstract, but at the bottom of it is a worldview that is very easy to take up, can be very seductive because it gives many people a way to completely deny their own responsibility for any of the bad things that happened to them or the ways that things aren't working out or their lack of success, while it gives other people a perspective in which they can become something like miniature civil rights heroes who we all venerate merely by engaging in kind of strange verbal, almost symbolic activism like hashtags and calling people names and forming social media mobs.

**WOODS:** Maybe I'm stating the obvious, but it seems as if the way these people have constructed their view of the world, it's impossible for there to be civil discourse between different groups. Do you think that's really more or less true?

**LINDSAY:** Yes, it's simultaneously impossible and completely discouraged, strongly discouraged. Civility is seen as a value that has been brought into the world under a doctrine of white supremacy and also sometimes patriarchy. And so demands for civility and civil discourse are seen as ways to suppress those who are in oppressed status. The oppressed aren't allowed to speak on their own terms. They're forced to speak in civil terms that deny their anger, that deny their pain, that deny their trauma.

So it's strongly discouraged to use civil discourse, but it's also impossible because when you have now a shift to a very lived-experience-based or subjectivist frame of reference for truth claims, which is the postmodern contribution here, there's no possibility for discourse. If somebody says that racism is present in our organization, and then somebody says, "Well, I'm willing to hear the evidence. Where's the evidence?" the reply is: if you lived as somebody who's systemically oppressed by race, you would already know, so asking for evidence is proof that you're not, and you're therefore acting in a racist way.

The subjective experience of being able to claim racism is sufficient, because it's something that exists inside somebody's own personal experience and personal interpretation of the world. It is unfalsifiable. It is unassailable. And then when you add in the moral implication that it is furthering the oppression and preventing liberation to question such a narrative, you literally have a recipe to make it impossible to have civil discourse or to discuss the issues whatsoever. It is a perfect storm for being unable to debate the issue.

As an atheist coming at this from somebody who did the atheism movement stuff years ago, it's very much like when I would encounter a fundamentalist Christian who would say, "Well, as an atheist, because God gives reason and you don't believe in God, you don't have any reason, so nothing you're saying is based on reason, so it's not even an argument." But it's

worse than that, because it adds in layers and layers of moral judgment and then there is no – like, at least with religion, they see God as the objective standard, so they're still appealing to an objective standard. This is literally each person has their own truth which reflects their own so-called lived reality, which literally is viewed as a separate reality from everybody else's. So there's no shared reality upon which discussion could take place.

**WOODS:** Now, again, I hate to just be standing here stating the obvious, but if this kind of idea wherever to really gain a foothold – now, it's obviously present in parts of academia, maybe much of academia, and it has spread into some popular movements, let's say. I don't know how many people think this way, but it's not a trivial amount, I'll say. If this ever were to reach critical mass, an outlook that claims that it's an impossibility and even undesirable to have the kind of back-and-forth discourse that, well, I don't know, I guess has characterized Western civilization since the platonic dialogues, for heaven's sake, what other way of adjudicating our disputes is there than violence?

**LINDSAY:** As far as I can tell, there's not one if it reaches critical mass, because the only options when you don't have dialogue are marginalization and violence. You can marginalize that which is small enough to not have a bid on cultural hegemony. You can't marginalize something that becomes big enough, which might only be as few as, depending on the different studies that you look at, anywhere between maybe 5 to 8 or upwards to 15 to 18% of the population. Once you hit that level, that is your critical mass and you no longer can marginalize.

And so violence is going to be – [laughing] *going to be* – violence is already occurring as a predictable consequence of an ideology that thinks this way. There's absolutely no way to resolve conflicts between individuals. I don't want to even say to resolve conflicts between groups, because groups are made of individuals who are not necessarily defined by their group. This is an error that this scholarship and ideology makes, is that people are representatives of their identity group first and individuals much further down the line, if at all. So there's no possibility to have dialogue. Violence is going to be a necessary consequence. If you can't kind of – it sounds mean and it sounds like exactly what they claim is happening, but if you can't squash the ideas out to the fringes and allow any people who want to believe them to do so as matters of private conscience, but not as something that they can gang press other individuals or institutions into having to adopt.

**WOODS:** Well, let's take a little time to look at some specific examples that you have in succeeding chapters. So for example, so called queer theory or queer studies. I really hadn't known much about this. I knew it existed, I had a sense of what it must be about, but it's much more radical than I thought it was. And of course, I see exactly, in light of post modernism, I see how it fits into the picture. But can you describe it?

**LINDSAY:** Sure. Queer theory, basically it's a relentless war on the idea that the normal should be allowed to be considered stable and normal. And so it's an assault on the idea of normality itself, especially where it pertains to sex, gender, and sexuality. So the roots of queer theory, the people who espouse this idea think that the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality that we all are aware of and can see as being stable – categories like man and woman, as far as sex goes; categories like gay and straight and bisexual, as far as sexuality goes; categories like masculine and feminine, as far as gender goes – that those categories are, in fact, meaningless. And in fact, believing that those categories have meaning causes oppression for people who don't feel like they fit within them.

And so those categories themselves have to be taken apart and shown to be absurd, and that's the mission of queer theory. Doing that process is what they call queering something, to make it more queer or more odd or more absurd or more strange than meets the eye. And the purpose is so that anybody who feels like they don't fit properly into those categories can feel liberated from them. As Michel Foucault, to dip back into our postmodern philosophy would have said, it expands the potentialities of being. They're no longer being limited. And of course, Foucault was a gay man who was into some pretty radical sex and didn't think there should be age of consent laws and things like this. And so you can kind of see where the motivation for it comes from.

But the idea is to break down any sense of stable categorization. And in particular, the one at the heart of everything is normal versus abnormal. The belief that we can say this is normal and that is abnormal isn't merely descriptive in a statistical sense – saying that like 99.8% of the population falls into the normal category, so that means that's what normal is by definition in a descriptive sense – but it also carries the moral implication that people should have to be that way. They literally call being put into categories like man or woman or straight or gay, it's literally called a violence of categorization. They see it as a violence being done to their identity that needs to be fought and needs to be usually fought through subversion. Queer theory tends to like parody and subversion to make things look silly and absurd and make the people who believe in things like men are men and women are women to look like silly, retrograde people who don't understand the nuances of life.

**WOODS:** It's interesting that people who are so interested in the limitations of language and whether language can convey truth or whether it's even sensible to make an inquiry like that, at the same time what they've done to the word *violence* is rather astonishing, because virtually all the times they use it, they're referring to clearly nonviolent activities. And yet, when we have clearly violent activities occurring in the street, there's always some euphemism to describe those.

**LINDSAY:** Yeah, so when people are saying that they don't really believe in the ability of language to convey stable meaning, and if those people who say that are actually able to gain power to enforce that, what that means is that they're setting themselves up as the arbiter of what words mean in certain contexts and what they mean in other contexts can be different. So they get to adjudicate what the words mean and when they mean what they mean that.

So it sounds like it's all silly when we talk about queering this or whatever, but it's actually very, very serious. It's a very serious problem, because if you can start manipulating – the word *violence* is such a good example – if you can start manipulating what the word means so that it's always to your own advantage, you don't have to change the wording of a law, you don't have to change the wording of a policy, you don't have to change the wording of a contract, you don't have to change the wording of the Constitution, and the document at hand means something different, because you've changed the meaning of the words within it. And therefore, the lack of stability of meaning gives the ability to change that meaning at will to people who end up having the political power.

So now you can start to see why that observation from Michel Foucault, which has been repeated by generations of activists since, that it is irrelevant whether a claim on the truth is true or false, because all it matters is the political ramifications and political processes that installed it as being believed as truth. You can see how that is not just a weird description of reality, but it's actually a very potent activist weapon, because if the people who believe that

are able to gain power, they can then manipulate the language in any domain that they want in order to maintain their own advantage.

So words are violence, so you can't say certain words near or to these people or around these people or in any context where they might ever stumble upon them or at all. But then, at the same time, looting and destroying property that people have built with their livelihoods, including sometimes that they're inside and they're being injured or in some cases they've been burned to death and these riots, that doesn't constitute violence, because that's just property, and property damage isn't violence. So it's a means to control society by setting up basically a priesthood who decides what words mean and when they mean them that way, and can therefore set the rules arbitrarily and control everything.

**WOODS:** I want to cover a couple more things. You have a chapter, "Disability and Fat Studies," and this I think helps to clarify the difference between, let's say, reform liberalism like just of the 20th century variety and the social justice leftism that we see. Because I could see — it was George H.W. Bush who helped pass the Americans with Disabilities Act 30 years ago. That seems to me like the kind of thing that a reform liberal would want to see done. But maybe the analogy I would draw would be the way a Marxist would react if you said, "Well, labor unions will solve the problem," he would just think, *Oh, my gosh, how naive and ridiculous can you be? You're not even thinking in the same ballpark as the way I'm thinking.* I think that's the way a social justice person might look at it if you say, "Well, we passed the Americans with Disabilities Act." That's not even remotely what we're talking about here. So tell me more about this. How is disability politicized?

**LINDSAY:** So the disability studies example is really a good one. In fact, I think it's the most useful part of the book for really understanding in a way that most people who you've described as reformed liberals can understand, because there's a lot of sense making going around at the basic claims, and then there's a very clear line where it's obvious that it's gone too far. So disability studies originated out of a development that was known as the social model of disability. There are three different models of disability, of how humans have understood disability, going back at least over the last maybe 100 years or so. They're the individual model, the medical model, and the social model.

So the individual model would say that a person's disability is a matter of who they are as an individual, and in some sense they've got some responsibility to take to make up for it, and we wish them the best. The medical model would see a disability as a medical issue, so you could imagine an amputee being seen as a medical issue. How do we come up with a prosthetic that can enable them to participate more fully in life? And so the onus of working with disability falls on the medical community rather than just individual. And then the social model goes a little further and says, well, society should take some effort as well to increasing, say, disability accessibility or opportunities or non-discrimination.

So when we see things like wheelchair ramps; when we see things like handicap parking spaces; those sidewalk bricks that have the texture so that blind people can follow them; when you go to cross the street and you press the button at the crosswalk, and it makes a noise because they can't see the crossing light but they can hear; when you have closed captioning for the hearing impaired: these are efforts that society can take in order to create increase disability access.

And almost everybody thinks, yep, that was a good idea. That was a really good idea that, if you want to look at it from a humanitarian perspective, improves lives that have no reason to not be improved, we can afford to do it. If you look at it from an economic perspective, it is an investment probably that's worth making, even if, because of the humanitarian side maybe it doesn't have to have good ROI. But even if it doesn't, you're still enabling people to participate in the economy who would be less able or not able to participate in it by taking these measures. So the social model of disability puts some responsibility on society.

This isn't what disability studies – disability studies started there and went nuts. They decided instead that we need to see it that society has all of the responsibility for dealing with disabilities. So in their view, a person is not disabled, say, because they're deaf or because they're blind or because they're missing a limb or whatever else leads to their disability status, the person is disabled because society isn't accommodating them. Therefore, society is the thing that's disabling them. And society is therefore responsible to take every conceivable measure – not every plausible, not every affordable, but every conceivable measure to make their disability irrelevant, or else society is the disabling entity or agent. And that's the way that disability studies sees the world.

And they then take it further, because everything becomes identity politics, and they start to say that people who have various disabled identities need to put that identity first. They need to identify as a deaf person who has a culture around them of deaf people, a deaf culture that they are a part of, which is then going to be seen in an identity political way like a tribe. Just like when you hear people say "the black community," well, there's the deaf community. And when they say that, they often mean in a politically active sort of way to be used for identity politics.

And they've leaned into this so far that to suggest that we would come up with some high tech solution like we see in Star Wars, where every amputee can have their limbs either regrown or cybernetically replaced would be a genocide of people with those identities. They've literally jumped the shark completely by putting the responsibility 100% on society to accommodate and then to see the identity itself as something that needs to be leaned into – which when you say, okay, deafness, blindness, if people choose to want to not have medical interventions, that's fine, but when you start looking at it in terms of mental illness, as seeing that as an identity factor and not something that necessarily that can or should be treated – or in addition, fat studies, which is kind of a specific version of this, or that obesity that shouldn't be treated, now you're definitely working in a very bizarre realm that most people don't recognize as being responsible or good for society.

**WOODS:** So it's important then – and I think by now it's obvious for people to understand – that they're probably falling back on traditional ways of thinking when they look at even these extreme corners of the left and thinking, *Well, their hearts are in the right place, even if they have bizarre manifestations of their desires. They just want what's best for the underprivileged and the marginalized, and so they just want to see some improvements brought about* – that is not really what's happened here. I know a lot of people who are traditional left liberals. Like my dissertation adviser at Columbia, Alan Brinkley, was the classic example of a left liberal. I knew his views on virtually everything. I knew how he would defend them. I didn't agree with them, and I thought there were better ways to bring about what he wanted to see happen, but I never questioned that he was a sincere person who thought he was helping people with this with government programs for this group or that. And I think people may think that this is just an extreme, exaggerated version of that.

But wanting to see people's material condition improved and their opportunities expanded does not commit people to post modernism or critical theory or any of the kind of oddball stuff you're talking about, obviously.

**LINDSAY:** Yeah, that's right. These things, you could actually see them as a very odd, extremist cult that came out of that impression of good intentions that the that they have. And I actually would say that I think that the majority of the people doing this are actually sincere in their beliefs. While of course there are always some who are opportunists and grifters and so on who are not, and this is an ideology that's particularly open to being gamed by such bad actors, I still think the majority of people who have taken it up even deeply in earnest are sincere. And certainly most of the people who are – I would call them wokeish, the kind of progressive liberal sympathizers out there who've taken on quite a bit of the ideology without realizing how bad it is, I think they're also sincere in wanting to see a better society.

The problem is that the people driving the ideology believe that the only way – and I mean *only* way. No compromise, no debate, no discussion, no half measures, to literally quote Hitler – the *only* way that we can achieve improvements in society is by burning down the old world and building a new one on its ashes. That's a phrase that is literally being used to describe what's happening in cities like Portland, in cities like Kenosha, Wisconsin, to burn down the old world and build a new one on its ashes.

And if you wonder, yes, this is the Marxist vision, that we have to build the new world in the shell of the old one after it's been overthrown. And they make this very explicit. They say that the system, even if no people are racist, no people have racist intentions, no people have sexist intentions or misogynistic intentions, no people hate women or any of this, the system itself remains racist, white supremacist, sexist, misogynist, and until the system itself is fully remade – and this refers to the knowledge system, the language system, the institutional system, every conceivable facet of our society – until it is completely disrupted and dismantled and then remade anew with a critical consciousness, it will be impossible to create the necessary reforms. So I believe the people who are pushing it believe this, but what they believe is freaking horrifying.

**WOODS:** Well, then that leads to my final question. This is not a question in your book, really, but it's a question that I'm asking you as one human being to another. Maybe a fellow named Michael Rectenwald, who's recently retired from NYU. He had conflict with some of the same people, that was partly because he was a traditional Marxist, and his view was that this stuff is not Marxism. Clearly, it's not the Marxist class analysis. It's a bastardization of it, but it is not traditional Marxism. And then as time went on and he got into more and more fights, he had a complete ideological transformation. And when he saw the way he was treated for being a dissenter, people wouldn't get on the same elevator with him at NYU. It was absolutely bizarre. He drew a conclusion from this, he thought, well, if the ideology I subscribe to or at least is in the ballpark of what I subscribe to generates human beings like this, maybe there's something wrong with this. Maybe I have to rethink everything I've believed my whole career.

So I guess my question to you is, it's hard to know how widespread this is, because the people who spread it tend to intimidate and bully others into silence and compliance. So we don't know how many people are echoing these talking points because they're pressured into it or because it's their deeply held belief. But regardless, it's a major chunk of the left that is

thinking this way. Has it ever made you think to yourself, in the midst of saying to interviewers, *Listen, identify with the left; I just think this is a terrible aberration* – have you ever thought maybe there's something wrong with the left itself that it generates outcomes like this?

**LINDSAY:** I'll go further. I think there's something wrong with thinking in terms of left and right at all. I think that the proper way to think is, here's an issue, here are a set of principles, where do I stand with the relationship to those? And let the cards fall where they may. So when I said earlier that I'm on the left, I very much don't identify as being on the left. I just know that if we were to sit down and take an inventory of my views about how I think society might best work, and we put them on the normal spectra or compasses or whatever they call them, I would land somewhere pretty mainline in the middle of the left and pretty deeply in libertarian territory if we're going to talk about the political compass test.

So I don't like to think in terms of being on a side at all. And I understand why people need to or why they do and why it's valuable to do so, and to kind of like say it's conservative thought, for example, you want to deepen your view of conservative thought. I do think that there are profound problems with the left. I think there are profound problems also with the right. And I think there's a profound problem with thinking in terms of left and right instead of thinking in terms of principles in specific issues.

So I have absolutely no problem saying that I'm on the left, but I'm not really of the left, if that makes any sense. So I don't agree with a great deal of what's going on in leftist thought. I think that, in fact, the most important thing politically to be doing is to be facilitating dialogue across divides of political orientation. And I'm not so naive as to say, well, there's the left and the right, because it's not quite right there. There are lots of people within the world of what's broadly seen as the left, there are lots of orientations there. There are lots within conservatism. The libertarians kind of spread out across both sides of that and form a sort of third pole, and we probably could find more poles, more universes of political thought. And people disagree across these. And I think the most important thing is to find ways for those people to communicate and learn from each other.

My general belief is fundamentally scientific, which is that I think that human beings have – and this applies even to the political realm, despite saying scientific – but I think that human beings generally are pretty clever, but we're not nearly as clever as we think we are, and that the process of checking each other against people don't agree with us is the way that we whittle out good ideas from bad ideas. And if you want to talk about collectivism, move forward as a collective, but that's through you disagreeing with me, me disagreeing with you, and each of us putting our ideas up on the table to be criticized by one another.

My father gave me an analogy that I've extended when I was a teenager, and I thought about it this way kind of all along, is that politically, if we're going to talk right and left, he said that the left side is like the gas pedal and the right side is like the brakes. Sometimes you have to go; sometimes you have to stop. And taking it further – or slow down.

And taking it even further, you have two hands on the wheel – or I hope you do. Hands free laws, everybody, I guess. You have two hands on the wheel. One hand is the left hand, one hand is the right hand, and if you want to steer the car successfully, they have to coordinate with one another. They have to be able to figure out what the right thing to do is – hopefully the brain of the person driving is where that's mediated – and figure out what needs to be

done. And then when it's time to turn left, turn left, and when it's time to turn right turn, right. And then you use our faculties of reason, our ability to discuss, to disagree, to have dialogue, our ability to gather evidence and weigh the evidence and apply different methods to suss out truths from the evidence, to decide when it's time to turn left, when it's time to apply the brakes, when it's time to apply the gas, and when it's time to turn right.

And so in that sense, if it turns out that I have a suite of beliefs that put me on the right instead of the left, that doesn't bother me in the least, and I'm happy to be seen as a conservative. If I have a suite of beliefs to place me in the progressive left or anywhere else, I'm content to be placed there, as long as I can be consistent in my own principles and feel like I have rationally derive those principles and values and am willing to submit them to a process of dialogue and debate – which is kind of a dodge of your question, I guess, but that's genuinely how I think about it. So it's like your question didn't really apply to me.

**WOODS:** Yeah, I think that's a perfectly legitimate answer given where you're coming from. Well, the book is *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything About Race, Gender, and Identity and Why This Harms Everybody*, co-authored by our guest today, James Lindsay, and Helen Pluckrose.

Well, best of luck with this great project. It's extremely readable. Obviously there's a lot of jargon in academic scholarship, particularly this type of scholarship, but you have taken that, translated it into English, and made it easy for people to understand, so really they're not hitting at a straw man. I think some conservative critics of this material have not really read it, and so they are not representing it very well, but I think you guys are. And that's a very important thing. We have to understand what's happening in the country right now. And what's driving a lot of events and the transformation in thought that's taken place is chronicled very well in here, as well as a rational path forward. So it's extremely worthwhile. I'm linking to the book at [TomWoods.com/1724](http://TomWoods.com/1724), our show notes page for today. Jim, thanks so much.

**LINDSAY:** Hey, thank you very much.