



Episode 1,747: Ex-Marxist Exposes Postmodernism, Critical Theory, and Cultural Studies

Guest: Michael Rectenwald

WOODS: All right, you just did something that I don't think has been done: you created a course that is in very much in need of being done and you did it, Critical Theory, Cultural Studies, and Postmodern Theory. All these are things people need to talk about and know about, and now we've got this thing. And it was a bear, I'm sure, because you're dealing with very dense material and very heavy texts. And doggone it, you slogged through all that for the sake of mankind, so thank you very much.

Let me start off by asking you this. Before we even get into what these various things are – we've talked about them before – in the course of sitting down to prepare formal lectures on all this, did you learn anything new that surprised you? Or is it all pretty much predictable and the same old, same old?

RECTENWALD: No, I learned some things, because I had to go review some histories and I had to review some – I had to go review what other people thought about these discourses, as they call them. So I learned that some of the assumptions I had taken from my graduate work were just slightly off, and some other things, I think, I come through stronger than the material I read. So I think that all together, I added a lot to my knowledge base, but I think it'll add a lot to the students', if you will, knowledge base, definitely.

WOODS: And then before we get into the details, I think even though you have been on before, ever since this COVID thing started and I gave a talk at the Mises Institute, that thing just blew up. I mean, it's like 820,000 views of that video. So I've gotten a lot of new listeners. They may not know your NYU story. Do you have like the two-minute version of, first of all, where you came from philosophically and then what happened?

RECTENWALD: Sure, yeah. I mean, as you know, I was a Marxist and a full professor at NYU. And I'm not on tenure, on a contract basis. NYU's a weird institution. But yeah, I set up a Twitter account, and I started tweeting about the social justice excesses at the university and around the country. I did it anonymously. Then I was contacted by a student reporter from the student newspaper at NYU and asked me if I would do an interview. I did the interview. Within two days, I would find myself being strong-armed into a leave of absence and being denounced by a committee called the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Group.

And they made my life hell on campus. I was lambasted in a bunch of emails from so-called colleagues, calling me every name in the book for nothing because all I had done is made institutional critiques and basically pointed out the excesses of what was going on on campus. And they called me a racist, sexist, alt-right, short-pants white devil Satan himself, so I really

made the greatest hits list. Then they moved my office to the Russian department. I call it my own personal gulag. They put me in a room with no books and metal shelves and no support staff and basically completely treated me like a pariah. I was shunned by over 100 professors. All this for criticizing bias reporting hotline, safe spaces, trigger warnings, and no-platforming of speakers on campus.

WOODS: Ah, geez, that's just crazy. Just crazy.

RECTENWALD: It's crazy, and things have gotten worse, as you see all over these campuses. They're like prison camps at this point.

WOODS: Yeah, they are. And I mean, yeah, it was sort of bad when I was in college in the early '90s, but I would take that any day over the situation we have now. And I'd love to spend some time at some point – maybe when it comes out, we could talk about your novel that you've been working on.

RECTENWALD: Sure.

WOODS: Because that that is going to be, I think, very much welcome among our people. But let's stay focused on – I mean, you poured so much energy into this.

RECTENWALD: Yes.

WOODS: We're talking about three things, and I don't know in what order to attack them, because maybe we do just a little bit on each one. But there's a lot of words that are thrown around, like people hear *deconstruction* and they hear *postmodernism*. Sometimes they hear *critical theory*, and they don't often hear *cultural studies*, and they just don't know what to make of it. And I recently had a fellow on who's coauthored a book on this who said that defining and describing postmodernism is actually – you think you're just asking me a simple thing: give me a definition of what you're working on. But it's actually easier said than done. Do you agree?

RECTENWALD: Oh, yes, it's virtually ineffable. It's like tackling a bear that has no body. I mean, it's incredibly difficult to describe. And that's what makes the lecture on it difficult, but I tried to break it down into the most tangible terms and using analogies and things like that to make sense of it all. But yeah, these are very, very ineffable, almost unspeakable fields, especially postmodern theory. That's the one that's the most nebulous and abstruse and notoriously obscurantist. But yeah, did you want me to give us a short definition of each?

WOODS: Can you try? I mean, I almost feel bad asking. [laughing] Can you try?

RECTENWALD: Right, it's easy to start with the critical theory because that's coming from the Frankfurt School of critical theory, which was founded in Germany in 1923. They emigrated to the west into the US. By '34, they set up shop at Columbia University. This was a Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and others. Those are the three principal characters. And this began what has been termed by many cultural Marxism. I mean, they actually set out to undermine or subvert – they use that actual term – to subvert the institutions of the West, deliberately, and to ideologically convert them from a capitalist ideology to a socialist ideology. And they did it in many different ways. They attacked it from

the standpoint of sociology, psychology, philosophy, basically in every which way you can imagine.

And then cultural studies is a field into which the other two actually flow. It is actually the field that exists now in the university system. Cultural studies is kind of an amalgam, but it started off as a school in Great Britain in 1964 at the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham. And it was basically the same, but less of the German edge to it, right? So it was cultural Marxism, but with a sort of a softer edge, and they sought to study working class culture and media and, as they call it, everyday life for working class people. But their objective was the same as the Frankfurt schools, and that was to basically figure out what was wrong with the working class, why weren't they revolutionary in effect.

And then postmodern theory, the most ineffable one, the most difficult to describe. I call it a nebulous a body of disparate theories that aim at undertaking analysis of social reality through philosophical means, through historical means, through sociological means, and so on and so forth. And I call them post-Marxists in the lectures because they broke with Marxism, but it was Marxism they broke with, and they then undertook different ways to overthrow the hierarchies, really, I would say. They figured these hierarchies in different terms, in terms of language, power — power, which they really define as something that's completely nebulous and non-centralized. It's not the state and so on and so forth.

So deconstruction is a subfield of postmodern theory, and actually it's a subfield of post-structuralism, which is a subfield of postmodern theory. Deconstruction is not what people really think it to be. It's not deconstructing the world or deconstructing texts. According to the founder, Jacques Derrida, it's actually observing as the text deconstructs itself. Yes, you heard that right. So I go into great depth on Derrida's book *Of Grammatology*, where it really is the inaugural book of postmodern theoretical deconstructive theory. And it's a real mind-bender, but I try to make sense out of it using passages and then interpreting them, things like that.

So what is different about the course, Tom, is that most of these fields are just treated in caricature form. I mean, you go on the web and you'll go to YouTube and you look up the Frankfurt School of critical theory, and you'll just basically run into a bunch of rants about how they were trying to undermine Western civilization. And if you go into it, postmodern theorists are generally lampooned as just anti-realist and anti-objective-truth and all that. So what I found lacking was somebody that actually takes them on their own terms and is yet still critical. So in academia, you have everybody basically imbibing it without question, and then elsewhere you have everybody just sort of going into screeds about it without really talking about what they actually had to say. And that's what the course does.

WOODS: Now, the subtitle of the course has to do with how these things relate to liberty, because they're interesting in and of themselves, but if they're just abstract ideas that stay in academia, nobody would really care that much about them.

RECTENWALD: They haven't. Yeah, they have metastasized, really, to put it in medical terms, well beyond academia. I think they're informing the whole political universe that we're living in right now.

WOODS: Well, I think maybe it's similar to Marxism in that most people, like especially young kids who think they're being cheeky by calling themselves Marxist, they never read any Marx.

RECTENWALD: No.

WOODS: And likewise, people who maybe don't even know that that they're part of these various traditions of thought – they don't even know that, they've never read any of the texts – but more or less, though, they've absorbed it one way or another.

RECTENWALD: Yes, basically it's been put into practice, strangely enough, through practical politics, which in my book *Spring Time for Snowflakes*, I call social justice practical postmodernism, because they actually take these ideas and they apply them. And it sounds really almost self-contradictory to apply something that's really almost impossible to even describe, but they do. And there are many facets of society where we can see postmodern theory and its effects working. You can see cultural Marxism coming from the Frankfurt School working. You can see it, as I say – in the lectures – I don't want to give too much away here, but I'll give a little bit of a taste. Critical race theory, for example, which is so predominant today, critical race theory derives directly out of critical theory, out of the Frankfurt School. It takes the same sort of idea that everything, the totality is a disaster, and that the totality has to be up-ended. The whole system is racist through to the court, including the legal system. Critical legal studies takes this view, for example. And all these fields have entered into so many areas. It's inscrutable, Tom. You can't even trace it out in all the directions that it's gone because it's ubiquitous, really.

WOODS: Yeah, this material that you're studying, it has its origins many decades ago. And when I was in college, which would have been the early 1990s, I was more or less aware that stuff like this existed but it really did seem confined to like the academic zoo. It hadn't spilled out into society. And I remember thinking to myself, well, I sure hope these people never get in charge, because if this is the way they look at the world, how are they going to look at me? How are they going to treat me? What's going to happen to people like me? And now suddenly, I feel like I have to worry about that.

RECTENWALD: Yes, because there are – and I go into this in the final lecture on the course, about how antithetical and how anathema their views are to even the ideals of personal individual liberty and self-determination. First of all, postmodern theory takes apart the self to begin with. There's no self as such. The self is a product of language. So you can't really be a self-determining agent under this idea. And I think this gets absorbed into people's thinking so much that they actually think of themselves this way, and it creates this kind of passivity, this kind of – I call it fatalism in the course – a kind of fatalism about what a self is and what a self can do. It's unbelievable how far this goes.

So yeah, this has trickled out of everywhere, and it was like a dam that was – I look at it like a dam that was building up, building up, building up, and that it seems very sudden, but it was building up a long time. It's been building up for 40, 50 years in the case of postmodern theory. In the case of critical theory, it was building up since the '30s. So this stuff has been going on for quite a while. And it's taken over the university system, other than the sciences, and even there, it's permeating STEM fields in these various ways.

WOODS: In the course, you talk not only about the ideas in the abstract, but you also talk about the individual people who helped formulate and promote the ideas. And I'm curious to know – and I don't know if this, actually, because I'm a historian, and yet in most cases, I don't know any of the biographical details. I know the basic biographical details of the people involved, but nothing beyond that. And this drives my friends crazy. They say that's the whole

warp and woof of history, is knowing all these details like about Alexander Hamilton's life and whatever. I don't know, that's just not my thing. But I wonder, do you know of any aspects of the biographies of these people that if we knew them might be rather revealing, let's say, that might show this is not just abstract theorizing, that maybe there's something in the way — Well, anyway, I'd rather you —

RECTENWALD: Absolutely. That's true. And what I tried to do in this course is to treat it as an intellectual history, a history of ideas, rather than getting into too much biography. Why? Because I was afraid of falling into administration homonym arguments, and I didn't want to dismiss these people on the basis of the fact, for example, that Michel Foucault was a sadomasochist and a very bitter young man from his earliest ages. In college, he was a lunatic who ran around campus with a sword and challenged people to duels and things like this. He was a very disturbed person. Or, for example, the Marxist Louis Althusser ended up murdering his wife. I don't go into those, but we could do it here because I think it is telling that these people were —

For example, let's take Foucault. He was he was gay, which is fine, but he died of AIDS. He was a frequent bathhouse guest in San Francisco. He was a sadomasochist. He signed a petition for, for having sex with people 14 years old and under. He tried to make it an exemption for that in the law. He was very, very obsessed with the penal system. He was concerned about prisons, asylums, and other types of sites where people are basically captive. And his whole MO was to basically look at power and to see how we can oppose it. How could we oppose power, because he despised the powerful as he saw it, the powerful. And in the course I say that he stood Nietzsche on his head, because he actually adopted the Nietzschean idea of the will of power, but then instead of embracing it and relishing it in sort of the way Nietzsche sort of writes about it with vim and vigor and zest, he hated it. There's a hatred that's permeating all of his thought.

And so yeah, there's attitudinal — I don't know how else to talk about this except in terms of attitudes, because really it comes down to a sort of orientation towards life. And, for example, also to go back to the Frankfurt School, you have Theodor Adorno who's just a very — shall we say he was a kind of a killjoy. Everything was miserable. If people were enjoying pop culture, that was a disaster. If people were enjoying consumer products, this was a disaster. And everything was totalitarian. They came from Nazi Germany and they sort of couldn't leave it behind. They sort of saw Nazism everywhere. So they looked at the West, living in the West Coast, at times, basically basking in luxury out around Berkeley, lounging — and you can see them in their chairs. I tried to use some pictures of them in their reclining modes, and they're sort of always enjoying cigars or pipes, smiling and then bitching about everything on Earth. It's just unbelievable. And they even methodologized it. They call it a negative dialectic. Everything had to be negated.

WOODS: You said early on that you can connect critical race theory to critical theory. Now, we all are seeing critical race theory all over the place. And in fact, I'm sure you saw the news item about Trump saying there's going to be no federal agency that's promoting critical race theory. That comes to an end.

RECTENWALD: Right.

WOODS: So it's interesting, I mean, if we were to ask how many what percentage of Americans would describe themselves as subscribing to any of the schools of thought you're

describing, it would be very small. I mean, almost nobody's even heard of them, frankly. We think more people have because we travel in circles where they have, but go to the go to the mall, if they allow you to go to the mall where you're living, and you'll see that none of these people know about this. But yet how interesting it is that we have a very small academic minority that believes in them, and somehow, like for example in the form of critical race theory, they managed to get these things if not accepted, then at least they get to intimidate people into accepting them. And this is really an extraordinary accomplishment.

RECTENWALD: It is. It is. They make you at least contend with it. You can't really not contend with it, especially if you're confronted over your whiteness, for example. And critical race theory, they basically drew from the Frankfurt School this idea of the negative dialectic, and that is opposing everything. Marx said this, that his whole aim in life was a ruthless criticism of everything existing. He said this in black and white and plain English, just like that – or plain German, I suppose it was – ruthless criticism on everything existing.

So they took that same sort of stance, and they took it in and they opposed it in terms of race. They took that position to the whole totality, as they called it, and they made it so the whole totality is seen in terms of race. So race isn't just an aspect of life. It is everything. It is the way life is. Everything is racial all the way to the core. So this is why they can scream in the faces of people sitting in restaurants for being privileged just for having a drink or trying to eat a meal outside because they can't eat it inside, because they have this justification, they have this belief that everything is racist.

And therefore, like to put yourself in the mind to an Antifa character. Everything that exists is to be torn down. I mean, it's that simple. They see everything as an expression of capitalism and racism, which they see as basically totally racist. So capitalism is racist to the core. the legal system is racist to the core. Basically, the whole totality is racist to the core, and also classist. And they don't really think that way, but in effect, really it is a class. It's a kind of classism, which is converted into race and then converted back into class. That's really what's gone on. I've said this before, that Black Lives Matter, for example, took Marxism, converted it into identity politics, and then converted the identity politics back into Marxism. So yeah, it's just everywhere, and you're going to be confronted with it. Almost anybody is confronted with it now, especially for walking around with the unfortunate condition of having white skin.

WOODS: I remember hearing some Southern voices saying they may be coming for our statues now, but they're going to come for your statues soon enough. Everybody said, *Ah, come on, you stupid, backward people.*

RECTENWALD: Right.

WOODS: But they are. And of course, this is about a lot more than statues. I mean, people want to trivialize things and say that we're focused on trivialities, but statues symbolize things. That's why they're there.

RECTENWALD: Exactly.

WOODS: And what I think is happening is you have a small minority of people who are very determined and have a very clear-cut sense of what their mission is. And then you have the

general run of the public that just doesn't want to be accused of being haters, that thinks they're dealing with people of goodwill who are just unhappy about something. And if I make some concessions to them, then maybe that'll make them happy. Because they think that these people think the way they do. Because if you yourself were angry, maybe if somebody approached you, you could try to work out some kind of compromise. They think that's what they're dealing with, and they're not. And so if you have this organized minority that knows what it wants and is driven by a burning hatred, and then you have the general run of the public that has other concerns in life and is generally conciliatory, I think I know how that's going to turn out, unfortunately.

RECTENWALD: Yeah, it's going to turn out that the latter will be like a passive group that will be blindsided. They'll be blindsided by this. They will not see it coming, and they will not understand what it is. They will not see it coming, because they haven't thought in these terms. They haven't thought this way. They haven't really been trained to think this way. It is a training, whether they're trained in universities or they're trained in their sessions that they hold or whatever they're doing or their group meetings. And just their group behavior I think is a training ground as well. It's a way of thought, and if you don't have that way of thought, it's going to strike you as very, very obtuse. It's going to come off as, like, what are we talking about here?

Because people have thought, you know, basically racism is a matter of attitudes, right? Some people are racist, and some people aren't. And it's an unfortunate thing. Indeed it is. And it should be eradicated, but it can't be eradicated systemically without taking apart the entire system. And that's what they have in mind. And there it doesn't exist systemically, by the way. I don't believe that. So this is why even taking aim at the Constitution of the United States, the statues are a matter of taking aim at the principles underlying those statutes, like the very principles of classical liberalism are really aimed at, I think.

WOODS: I think that's what's going on, too, because for example, if a statue of Christopher Columbus is vandalized or pulled down, one thing I know for an absolute fact is it is not being pulled down because the people involved just have a very, very developed sense of morality. That they're offended by – because these are the same people, while they're doing it, they're wearing a Che Guevara shirt. Sorry, I'm not impressed by your super-sensitive sense of morality. Obviously, there's something else going on here.

RECTENWALD: Right. I mean, if we looked at their philosophical and ideological and political ancestors, I mean, these are the most destructive and totalitarian people that have ever lived. So we know what the numbers are. I mean, they've multiplied more corpses than any ideology that's ever been introduced.

WOODS: Every crime you can accuse Columbus of, they've done that on a good afternoon, all of them together.

RECTENWALD: Exactly. But it's all justified. So I'll occasionally wander into different discussion groups like on Facebook or elsewhere – I try to sort of be a fly on the wall, but it's hard to keep your mouth shut. And you just see the kinds of things that they absolutely exonerate their forebears for, like slaughtering the kulaks, for example, because well, after all, they were just bourgeois blah, blah, blah. So I talk about this in the course how they reduce individuals to abstractions, and then they can then sacrifice those people to another abstraction.

WOODS: And then in practice, what happens is the abstraction grows to the point where everybody becomes a kulak. So that when I read the Robert Conquest book *The Harvest of Sorrow* about the Ukrainian terror famine, he says that basically what happened is, if you didn't have a distended belly, if you weren't starving, that made you a kulak.

RECTENWALD: And the same thing happened in the Soviet Union in terms of what they would call the "exes," basically people who qualified for the Gulag, that category of exes; that is, they were ex-officers or something to do with the previous regime. And that just kept expanding. Or deviationists. Not to make a sort of slight segue into my newest book, but they were deviationists of some sort. And anything could be deemed a deviation. And then these people were just abstractions who could be sacrificed to the greater abstraction. And nothing scares me more than the noble-sounding phrases like the "common good." And I know this may rankle a few of your listeners, but I just find that anytime people are brandishing such noble abstractions, then I fear that totalitarianism is right around the corner, if not already there.

WOODS: Oh, I don't think that's going to offend really anybody. I feel the same way about all that, even when they come from people of goodwill. That's why I try to warn them about these abstractions, that I know that there's a fairly honorable lineage of people who have used the concept of the common good, but the problem is it's so darn slippery. What you think of as the common good is very different from what they think of. So why don't instead of trying to do that, why don't we just stick to individual rights? And the common good consists of people enjoying individual rights, how about that?

RECTENWALD: Yeah, that's right. And that's where the postmodern business comes in, because they got rid of the individual. They really said that the individual was really not – they say that it deconstructs itself, but they really deconstructed the individual. And I say in the class, they basically reduced the person to like a [inaudible] on which society writes, and they don't have any kind of notion of individual agency, individual self-determination. In fact, the self itself is a construct and the self has no volition of its own. And even though that's the case, you would think that exonerates some people from guilt, right? If you're nothing but a social construct, how can you be held responsible? Well, you aren't, but only if you're in a certain category again. Only a certain category of socially constructed people are held responsible. So it's rife with contradiction.

WOODS: There's so much great material in this course, and we're all very much in your debt for it. So I want to urge people to check it out. It's part of LibertyClassroom.com. We don't make courses available a la carte. You join Liberty Classroom, you get every single thing we have. And now we've got a lot – I've actually lost track. It's got to be 26, 27 courses. It's ridiculous all the material you get for like one third of a community college credit hour. I mean, it is absurd what we're giving away.

RECTENWALD: Yes, and you're not indoctrinating people into some nefarious ideology in the process.

WOODS: Well, and the fact is, we have discussion forums in there. And if it were an indoctrination factory, we wouldn't be discussing; we'd be just telling it to you, and that'd be the end of it. So check it out. This particular course is Critical Theory, Cultural Studies, and Postmodern Theory, taught by our guest, Michael Rectenwald, available at LibertyClassroom.com. And you can get a discount. If you're listening to this right now, I want to thank you for listening. You can get a discount at LibertyClassroom.com/coupons. You'll

find our coupon codes to get a discount on the site. Well, thank you, Michael, for this, and I look forward to when we can talk about your book.

RECTENWALD: Thank you, my pleasure. Great to be here.