

Critical Theory, Etc: An interrogation
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6,500 words (including c1000 words of Appendix)

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I want quite gently but firmly (and quite fully) to interrogate a basket of modern and postmodern ideas. They importantly include **Critical Theory (CT)** and its subsets **Colonial Theory (CTCT)** and **Post-colonial Theory (CTCT&PCT)**. **Identity Politics** is a rather peculiar hybrid ally of Critical Theory (CT). **Positive Psychology** and **Positive Parenting** have tended to be natural allies of CT but there is no formal overlap). I have badged all these as **CT Etcetera**. It should be borne in mind that to critique any of them is very far from condemning them. All these ideas have a long back-story and at least a little merit. Still, I do hope to de-fang them as over-popular modern dogmas.

My premise is that modern ideas in Theory, Identity Politics and elsewhere claim to be about liberation, kindness and fairness but fail to deliver them. CT Etcetera have demeaned history and facts, and have become engines of self-absorbed vulnerability and gullibility in adults and children alike.

This piece is an overview of Theory and two arts and cultures issues which I cover in a little detail in matching documents.

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Preface

I am one of the lucky if naïve post-WWII Baby Boomers who was brought up on a Dutch-American humanist account of history that spoke of mankind's long march toward freedom. (This was just before liberation was hijacked by *soixante-neuf* Liberation-ism. And the postmodern had not been invented.) It was written down (and illustrated) in Hendrik Van Loon's *The Liberation of Mankind*, which is very like

Thomas Macaulay's or HAL Fisher's "Whig History".¹ Its essence was the growth in appreciation of the individual person. We got the message that there was a corresponding duty of states and empires to become capable of responding to an energised citizenry, whilst persons had the duty to become more widely responsible than serfs had needed or were allowed to be.

It was very much to the point of Whig History that pressure from below gradually transformed European power structures. It wasn't exactly that progress toward democracy was inevitable. Rather it seemed simply a part of human life that the brute power, and the argumentative ploys, by which elites oppressed the weak produced a reaction in the weak. In lucky countries the elites got on board with reform, belatedly, perhaps reluctantly, and often after painful lessons.

What follows is in effect an account of how notions about human dignity became liberationist doctrines which have been turned on their head and now entrap and enfeeble millions of people who believe themselves to be virtuous and educated.

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Introduction

I am not claiming scholarly expertise in Critical Theory, Post-colonial Theory or Identity Politics, or in Positive Psychology and its offspring, Positive Parenting. (I list useful sources on all of them in an Appendix, below.)

However... If you want an explanation for how it may be wrong to assert that the British Empire was *always* deeply racist; or that the Palestinians are *obviously* innocent victims of inexcusable Israeli oppression; or that elite oppressors *inevitably* use hegemonic narratives to crush their victims; or that choosing your own pronoun *may* be more trouble than it's worth, then this may be a useful place to start.

Critical Theory (CT), Colonial Theory (CTCT) and Post-colonial Theory (CTCT&PCT) are at the top of my list. Critical Theory has many sub-divisions (dealing with class, race, gender and so on). Colonial Theory is one such sub-division addressing imperialism whilst Post-colonialism which is itself a hybrid of addressing the aftermath of empire but also the matter of attending to voices with a colonial past.

I am keen to corral this whole agglomeration of thought including **CTCT&PCT** with **Identity Politics, Positive Psychology** and **Positive Parenting** I call the whole assemblage **CT Etcetera**. It is a nexus of ideas, not a conspiracy. Its effect but not necessarily its intention is mostly malign. Most people educated in the past 50 years

¹ Thomas Babington Macaulay, "History of England", 5 vol. (1849-61); Hendrik Van Loon, "The Liberation of Mankind: The story of man's struggle for the right to think" (1926); HAL Fisher, "A History of Europe", (1938). All available at Internet Archive. HAL Fisher is doubly interesting as part of the debate about what "Whig History" means.

or so will have been taught CT Etcetera doctrines, often without knowing their name or being given the slightest invitation to interrogate their value.

CT Etcetera is a bundle of ideas. **CTCT&PCT** are theories about power and how it flows within and between groups. But **CT Etcetera** also includes a set of modern creeds and mantras which are prescriptions for belief about the person and personal behaviour. **Identity Politics (IP)** is an interesting hybrid in that it invites individuals to self-identify as members of victim groups.

Identity Politics (IP) has subsets or branches: there is, especially, the idea of sectionality (the name of one's over-arching group) and **inter-sectionality** (the notion that one can subscribe to various interlocking identity groups).

Modern people have been invited to believe that **Positive Psychology** is the key to psychological well-being. (It stresses the possibility of changing one's view of life as an exercise of will.) A subset is known as Positive Parenting. The latter enjoins discussion over discipline when dealing with the young. It also absurdly proposes that children are born good (as though they weren't prone to bully one another, and grab their friends' stuff when no-one's looking).

The modern morality derived from positive thinking has three main limbs. These are **kindness, fairness and empathy**. For their adherents, these have the advantage of being obviously Good Things; they are all-encompassing; and they are essentially vague. That all matters because positive psychology holds out the possibility of attaining both happiness and moral superiority but without sacrificing ambition.

The peculiarity of these trends is that we now have young people whose upbringing and education have left them diminished in their understanding of the world, and in their intellectual and emotional handling of some important realities.

It is hardly surprising that the main push-back against **CT Etcetera** so far as come from an irritated, less-educated sort of person, led by populist demagogues who for a variety of motives have taken up their cause. David Goodhart's educated "Anywheres" favour the universality of human rights and the internationalism of the EU and UN.² His "Somewheres" suspect, rightly, that the "Anywheres" seem blithely indifferent and superior to the merits of the unreconstructed - the un-Theorised - people who do factually and actually live in the harsher world around them.³ It is hardly surprising if

² David Goodhart's brilliant neologisms ("Anywheres" and "Somewheres") from his book *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (2017), and his own [Goodhart at Policy Exchange](#) are doubly valuable.

³ NB David Goodhart's "Anywheres" are prone to be called "Woke", and perjoratively. I have not inveighed against them here because I have elsewhere tackled much of their moral smugness and Puritanism as a feature of their weaponised ["totalitarian" or Bossy Liberalism](#).

the "Somewhere" sole traders, apprentices, or manual workers are more interested in old home truths than in new-fangled ideals.) The signal issue here is whether the demagoguery is more dangerous even than the mass frustration it expresses. It is a dangerous new mob rule or a necessary safety valve?

Some curiosities #1

(1) Critical Theory seldom has to explain itself: it has managed to produce the effect that its narratives about narratives are self-evident to its adherents.

(2) Only the extremes of the effects of Identity Politics are regularly interrogated, as in the case of self-identifying gender-switchers.

(3) It worries rather few people that they don't inquire into the complexity of real historical cases before accepting Critical Theory's pre-packaged version of them.

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Critical Theory, Colonial Theory and Post-colonial Theory

As we go on I shan't assume you have read much about CT Etcetera or its race, gender, sex and colonialism or other subsets. But remember, please, that it is easy to read more about them all elsewhere. (See **Appendix Research recourses**, below.)

I want to move beyond amiable descriptions of Critical Theory and its subsets to something I haven't found elsewhere. I want to offer some sharp tools by which someone might shuck open the oyster-like grip CT Etcetera wants to get on our minds.

Critical Theory assumes that in every kind of power relation the oppressors (always a group) are in the grip of a narrative that they seek to impose on their victim (always a group). There is also **gaslighting** going on: victims are fed narratives which tend to diminish their faith in older understandings and to increase their vulnerability.

In old language, Critical Theory is about powerful elites brainwashing - propagandising - firstly themselves and then their victims. It's about strength deploying suggestibility as well as muscle.

It is important that the Critical Theory (and indeed the whole gamut of the CT Etcetera agenda) believes itself to be, **emancipatory**. It was formulated by academics who conceived themselves to be campaigners for liberation. In this, they were in line with a long line of historiography, including standard Whig, or liberal, history.⁴ They were activist academics who found an easy fit with their students' nascent radicalism.

⁴ Only a stubborn conservative strand of thought dared suggest the "liberation" might be specious. Its modern voices have been Michael Oakshott, Maurice Cowling and Roger Scruton. See *Real History vs Theory* in **Appendix: Research resources**, below.

Not interested in trying to increase our understanding of the world, they preferred to deliver pre-packed (hyper-processed) way of transforming it.

A few homely thoughts to begin with

Firstly, Critical Theory would be defunct if it was frank and robust in subjecting itself to its own analysis. A "physician heal thyself..", or a "what's sauce for the goose..." approach would have aborted it. That is: Theory describes all elite narratives as being hegemonic, but overlooks that CT Etcetera is now the hegemonic narrative of an academic elite which now influences the media and the creative industries. As victims, students and audiences are expected to be obedient consumers of these narratives, and they largely concur.

Secondly, Critical Theory, like any theory, can only increase its credibility - can only pass muster - if it is good as an account, explanation, or rationale of the facts which come under its purview. Critical Theory isn't that entity. Time and again we find examples which disprove great chunks of the oppressor/victim narrative. It is hardly surprising that many classes of victim and individual victims have, as a matter of historical fact, shrugged off their oppressors' power. (For example: Feminism has achieved something for women if not yet the total overthrow of the patriarchy's hegemony.) It is even more interesting that erstwhile oppressors have often seen the light and shrugged off the powerful narratives which had previously sustained them in the abuse of their power. (It must be accepted that economic convenience, political pressure and the dictates of conscience will have played their part in most cases.) Partly, this was because the oppressor class usually includes members who do not partake wholly of its nastiness. (This confounds the **essentialism** which Critical Theory has developed as a theme. See below.)

Let's look at an example.

One of Critical Theory's great successes was the promulgation of **CTCT&PCT (or Critical Theory's Colonial Theory and Post-colonial Theory.)**

A star CTCT&PCT case has been Britain's pernicious imperial slave trade. CTCT&PCT reminds us (unnecessarily) that the trade was morally wrong and that its perpetrators, from the government down, tried to defend it with racist arguments which were mostly wrong-headed. The tricky fact that CTCT&PCT can't accommodate (even if it tried) is that the British Empire volunteered to give up its slave trade (as a matter of conscience and, increasingly, of convenience). In short, the imperial hegemonic narrative wasn't all that hegemonic. The imperial elite (first a few people within it, then many) lost faith in its essential creeds, and their slaves (taught by the lash and Christianity) probably never believed it at all.

CTCT&PCT's best, largest, simplest single example was very late out of the gate. CTCT&PCT narrates and analyses the British Empire in India as being in the grip of a hegemonic narrative that it sought to impose on its subject peoples. Actually, the historical record shows that before CTCT&PCT had been invented and even before

their progenitors had put together their proto-versions of their doctrines, large sections of the British Imperial elite were aware that its thinking about the Empire was flawed and probably unsustainable.

The theories behind Critical Theory

Critical Theory is a born-again and revved-up view of historical processes with a crucial overlay of 19th and 20th Century modernist and mid-20th Century postmodern thinking.

For working purposes we can stress that Critical Theory foundational texts borrow some of Marxism's capitalist/worker relations. Modern iterations applies these to whites/blacks, men/women, straights/queers, colonialists/colonised, cis-gendered/trans-gendered. These cloned Marxian views read-across to race war, or the war of the sexes and genders, or nationalism' struggle against imperialism or any other power struggles in the world.

Something odd happened with the advent and development of Marxist thought. The track from Nietzsche, Hegel and others, was bent into new directions by new thinking from Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Lévi-Strauss and Foucault. A relatively small number of academic philosophical minds produced such powerfully influential theories about the power of narrative.

The 19th Century Continental and US Transcendentalist thinking on the power of narrative was a powerful version of what had been in plain sight for millennia. Most leadership of any sort had always been understood to be about brute power combined and augmented by story-telling. Religions and political systems (democratic or undemocratic) depended on what is pejoratively called propaganda, whether of ceremony or symbols and stories. There now were lines of argument that there was great power within certain -perhaps all - human being to shape their own minds and exert power in the world. This was narrative power.

The Foucauldians asserted something utterly opposed to personal free-thinking. They proposed that elites had the power to hijack lines of argument for their own purposes. (Quite how they did this other than by the exercise of their wills is a muddle which shoots Foucauldianism in the foot, but it limped on to dire effect anyway.

The Foucauldians and structuralists then made a new move, which seemed contradictory, but that sort of thing never bothered them). They introduced the idea that narratives had their own autonomy by which they could overpower the autonomy of persons, even those who thought they were deploying ideas of their own devising.

The main upshot has been the dominance of Critical Theory and Identity Politics. This is not a Jeremiad against the times we live in. My general proposition is that our adventurous species has always explored the limits of its physical (ecological) role but

also of its consciousness. We are spreading consciousness globally with the internet (as we once did with the printing press) and we are personalising it with the exploration of personhood of which we have a record going back a few thousand years. Our current predicaments are recognisable to us.

Artificial Intelligence is taking into new territory, of course.

The fact is, we moderns and postmoderns have to factor-in developments from all these lines of descent. For my money, I think we should look out for lines of argument which bolster a humanist determination to both develop personal thought and will, and develop moral frameworks which work. I find it handy to remember how powerful I find the clearly conflicted thought of William James (himself a descendent of American Transcendentalism). We see James in Positive Psychology and Positive Parenting, and various allies of these ideas, and for all sorts of other reasons as well, I am comforted by holding him in mind.

Much of Critical Theory's general apparatus is not particularly or necessarily socialist, but it is all badged as emancipatory, progressive, and - latterly - "positive". Only its opponents (including me) characterise it as Woke or even "liberationist". Critical Theory and its allied Identity Politics, have surprising opponents amongst, for instance, some feminists and a strand of minority conservatives thought. But many others, including most socialists or leftist people, seem to endorse its general premises - and even its sense of moral superiority - with surprisingly little anxiety.

So the conundrum -and the battle - is to get intelligent and educated people to wonder why they have swallowed CT Etc without noticing that their acquiescence involves them in switching off their critical faculties and even their moral courage.

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Identity Politics

CT Etcetera has a sort of club franchise in Identity Politics. These clubs extend an offer of a tricky sort. Each invites persons to join a victimhood group within which to identify and narrativise themselves as such. This matters in a self-obsessed age in which persons are seeking to declare a close, personal, lived-experience, shared vulnerability which offers both to shelter and weaponise their victimhood.

The difficulty is that such persons risk submerging the real, conflicted, multiple strands of their identity. As much as they gain a class or group (a gang or team) identity, they cease to focus on - to work out or live out - the more subtle matter of their individuality. What's more, they are invited to see power advantage in their vulnerabilities rather than seeking to overcome them. (This ties in with and yet contradicts what is often their concomitant interest in Positive Psychology.)

IP victimhood clubs are often discussed under the label of sectionality, which is mostly of interest because it has generated the contradictory idea of inter-

sectionality. As much as IP or sectionality invites a person to identify as, for instance, black, it equally endorses the inter-sectionality of black females identifying as such, or even as a black, female, working-class victim of empire. Anyone seeking clarity in IP or sectionality is looking for trouble. They are also confounding the mantra of essentialism which is often key to CT Etcetera and Identity Politics thinking.

After all, inter-sectionality invites a great deal of slicing and dicing. By adding the idea of intersectionality, it allows a person to add as many split identities as they like: they can claim non-binary gender identities; mixed ethnicity; and multiple psychological conditions. As these heartfelt multiple subdivisions pile up, so too the core weakness of the CT Etcetera class relation model is exposed. Persons are not permanently or simply classifiable under a few essential characteristics. Their internal and external relations multiply and shift. Besides, groups are exposed as being infinitely divisible and thus not great building blocks for our thinking. There is no working class, for instance.

Essentialism has been a curse for centuries, of course. It is the meat and drink of how groups talk about each other. It now says that a group can be described quite firmly, and that any member of the group will manifest the same characteristics. Thus a worker will be worker-like (whatever that means) and an imperialist will be racist (that much is designed-in in CT Etcetera-land). And so on.

All these views are often wrongly ascribed to Edward Said, whose *Orientalism* (1978 and 1995) and its **Foucauldianism** is the mothership of CT's **Colonial Theory** and **Post-colonial Theory**. Whatever impression readers might have picked up from the book's first edition in 1978, the author explicitly denies ever espousing essentialism in an Afterword to the 1995 edition. Actually, Edward was an admirably conflicted writer. But he was his own worst enemy in having erected a thesis that all thinking by white people about the "Orient" was necessarily racist when that proposition was only true of many people for much of the time, never for all them, always.)

Identity Politics and Pronoun Proliferation

An illuminating peculiarity of Identity Politics is its invitation (it amounts to an injunction) to abandon the old biology-based "he" or "she" given identities and pronouns. It prefers that one see "he" or "she" as voluntary self-descriptions and pronouns, and augments them with a catch-all "them" to handle (corral, include) any self-identity one might prefer.

This idea seems feeble. It plays havoc with the grammar of sentences. It disrespects the quite possibly noble and very various identities individuals might choose - after all, it dumps them in a catch-all near dustbin of plurality. It imposes on young, uncertain and developing people the requirement that they fret over the naming of whatever identities are emerging within them. And it trashes and traduces the quite useful old, basic biological-sex organising of pronouns (which had the advantage of factuality and simplicity) and privileges instead a new, picky, rag-bag of self-chosen identities which may be heartfelt and useful but don't gain by being paraded in the

omnibus "they".

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CT Etcetera: Liberation and Positivity

I use **CT Etcetera** as a catchall for Critical Theory and Identity Politics and its allies, **Positive Psychology** and **Positive Parenting**. The latter pair have delivered a generation of parents and young people who are attuned to be vulnerable: the spectre of mental weakness lurks just beyond their ability to exert the autonomy of their minds and feelings.

CT Etcetera has an emancipatory and liberationist agenda. After all, especially in the 1960s when Critical Theory was in its youth, freedom fighters seemed to be a Good Thing, just as Women's Liberation was. The end of the white, male patriarchy seemed to corral most of these ambitions, whether imperial or marital.

Critical Theory does not much bother to think prescriptively beyond the obvious merits of liberationism. But its creeds do fit with the Positive Psychology agenda, not least because the majority of consumers for CT Etcetera have been formed within positivity, and especially within child-centred (not to say, infantilist) pedagogy and child-rearing. These have pathologised the quite ordinary, normal and various troubles of a generation or two of young people. They have been turned into a vast class or group who exhibit, claim and fear their propensity to be vulnerable, not least to beyond-the-pale ideas. In particular, they have been taught permissive intellectual relativism (but give CT Etcetera's certainties a free ride to trustworthiness). The curious result is an adamant and illiberal puritanism.

The young are, in short, schooled in being "progressive" and are ready to adopt CT Etcetera as The Grand Theory of Everything as soon as they consider power relations. CT Etcetera explains perfectly how the young ought to be freedom fighters against the binary, white, male patriarchy. Since (like all young educated people throughout history) they believe they must change the world for the better, though they know little of the world, our teenagers are fertile ground for CT Etcetera's progressive radicalism. It is often noted that people start left and grow right. Or that they espouse liberalism until they are mugged by reality. It is a feature of modern life that the pseudo-liberal leftism of the young is either planted deeper, or that they delay growing up until later in life: in Britain, the age at which people switch to become even slightly reactionary is increasingly delayed.

Religions used to provide a mission with which people could frame their personal and societal aims and reassure themselves that they might be quite good (at least within the limits of having been born with Original Sin). As religion weakened, substitute secular moralities generally largely borrowed its mantles and mantras. (That is especially true of Kantian developments of Christ's "do as you would be done by" Golden Rule.) Freudian and other psychological understandings re-introduced, not sin,

but other lurking "demons", many of them in line with pre-Christian foundational myths.

Positive Psychology is a little different in that it has a tendency to strip out the difficult bits. Religion and its secular successors tended to allow that one's obligations are as burdensome as one's rights are delightful. They insisted that pain and discipline are part of life and that they require the difficult business of becoming increasingly stalwart, from infancy onward. Positivity takes a more feebly infantile view. It assumes that inherent - inherited, not earned - qualities, especially goodness, kindness and fairness, can work wonders. They erase the stubborn edges - the conflicts- which arise when people explore their personal ambitions within structured societies in which liberty is perceived as being freedom disciplined by order.

There is a great deal to be said for Positive Psychology. It does from the outset posit the humanist view that persons have agency (a view which Critical Theory disparages and Identity Politics struggles with). But Positive Psychology's Positive Parenting, not least because it perceives children as bundles of vulnerability, produces the anxiety that contradicting the child may drive it toward mental unwellness. Thus, an infant's encounters with hardship must be avoided and delayed for as long as possible. Positive Psychology insists that people should accentuate the positive (for instance in pursuing their ambitions) and can deploy Positive Parenting at home to produce delightful children. Older lurking insights remind us that people can't wisely forget that framing one's ambitions is as important as furthering them and that love is tough and tough love is vital, not least when it is parental.

CT Etcetera's main battleground is pedagogical: it operates in the schoolroom and the university. People who are 50 years younger than I am will have wide experience of what those environments are like (whilst I only have hearsay to go on). There does seem to be good evidence that it does not go easily for academics who dispute CT Etcetera's dictates and mantras.

The curiosity is, surely, in plain sight. Young people claim they are simply too vulnerable to be able to survive unharmed any exposure to ideas which are not in accord with their CT Etcetera and postmodern indoctrinations. And isn't it as obvious that the young have an essentially blinkered approach to those who dissent from their half-baked opinions? The young hug to themselves their own certainties and righteousness and condemn to outer darkness those who don't share their view. Unlike a centuries' old tradition of liberalism, they do not bother to consider the views of those who beg to differ.

These processes have ancient roots and long lineages. The Protestant Reformation was born out of the Renaissance's rational and humanist desire for freedom of thought and expression. But no sooner were the Protestants free of Roman Catholic superstitions and disciplines than they fell upon one another with new internecine oppressions of their own devising. Rather similarly, CT Etcetera's adherents have produced new vulnerabilities and new violence.

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CT Etcetera, the Palestinians, and the Israelis

I want to present a historical vignette that shows some of the history of the evolution of the easy certainties which developed into Critical Theory. It concerns the track by which the Palestinian cause has been totemic as the first and continuing *casus belli* adopted by Critical Theory's Colonial Theory and Post-colonial departments.

In the mid-1960s the cause of Palestinian resistance fighters was taken up by the "progressive", "liberal", "revolutionary", and "radical" tendencies which saw them as "freedom fighters" rather than "terrorists". These mantras were most famously heard in Paris in 1968, but they were soon widespread, partly as the result of a highly intelligent propaganda effort by Palestinians, who saw that their cause could gain traction in Western radical circles and in the United Nations nexus. (See the Appendix below.) Solidarity with the Palestinians was, as it were, the main foreign policy of the revolutionary virtual global state the late-1960s Western radicals posited. The Palestinian cause was a good fit with Critical Theory's reading of colonialism's effects, but also with Identity Politics and the hunt by privileged students for victimhood causes to identify with. (Indeed, Radical Chic was and remains symbolised by westerners affecting the Palestinian keffiyeh headscarf.)

These processes do not lead the "radical" or "progressive" Westerners to admire Iran and its genocidal leaders. (Which leaves open whatever their opinion might be on Iran's insurgency-by-proxy within and against Israel.) Indeed, it is not easy to quantify or calibrate - to weigh up - the effects of this "progressive" pro-Palestinian" bias.

All that is above my pay grade. I hope it is useful, though, to simply assert that much fashionable, commonplace, pro-Palestinian opinion is simply thoughtless.

The success of Critical Theory and Identity Politics (and Positive Psychology and Positive Parenting, too) has been comprehensive within very large numbers of people. These trends have delivered a rock-solid set of pre-cooked assumptions over several generations. Many and perhaps most young people, and precisely those with the most years of state-sponsored education (or indoctrination), share a viewpoint which is unbalanced, narrow-minded, and puritanical.

This is not just about whether the young are picking the right or wrong side to endorse (and about which opinion is bound to be various and nuanced). It matters that too many of them feel no need at all to interrogate the complexity of the issue before making their pick. They have sought what they imagine to be liberation and independence of mind, but instead have been robotised by Theory and dogma. They support, inter alia, "Palestinian liberation" without having to think about it. They compound this knee-jerk response by feeling threatened by any view which challenges it. They may be dimly aware that thinking about the issue - let alone publicly changing their minds - would take more moral courage - more character - than they

possess.

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The future of CT Etcetera and its allies

CT Etcetera, comprising Critical Theory and its sub-sets, Identity Politics, and other allies such as Positive Psychology and Parenting, all have very old roots and are only the present manifestation of very old approaches. They have come into vogue and will sooner or later become old hat. Any or all of them may evolve. They will develop flavours suitable to different cultures. Amongst these: Germany has a darker - because more mystical - heart than most of Western Europe; France has a great taste for theories of any sort; America likes its Gotham City darkness and Manifest Destiny lightness and puts them in a Manichaeian tension. England can't believe anything very ardently for very long. It isn't exactly lackadaisical, but it finds being commonsensical a fairly decent alternative to getting too serious about anything.

My main feeling is that the West has powered its defences (as in my post: [Against threats from within and without](#)). But it is likely that the notion that being stalwart (and even staunch occasionally) will make a comeback. The tinpot dictatorship of Theory will, with luck, be vanquished by its own inconsistencies. Besides, its erstwhile adherents may develop a preference for thinking for themselves.

Baudelaire and others of the mid-19th Century are of vital interest in building on the cult of self-absorption, neurosis, and hysteria which were the legacy of the Enlightenment and Romantic view of the human person's right to think and feel for themselves. The mid-19th Century Aesthetes built Modernity with a capital "M", and a proto-postmodern, and did so mostly out of their dislike of Victorianism. Now that the full-on postmodern has released our coevals and contemporaries from fact and truth, these various liberations had marched them further, not only into vulnerability but also into a new vacuous gullibility.

I don't believe that there is much new under the sun, intellectually, morally or psychologically. Class relations have been discussed in much the same terms in England since at least the 14th Century. The Bible tells us that Christ enjoins us to love all men equally because God does. 15thC Imitation of Christ is a proto-exercise of CBT positive thinking (I mean that it included devotion to useful rituals as windows to spiritual improvement). Positive Parenting has been an element of child-rearing mantras since at least the 17th Century. Nineteen-twenty is a much better date than 2020 for dating our recognisable modernity and its disquiets or even postmodernity. We can see the disquiets of modernity in the earliest written accounts of people's interiority. We know far more, have greater material well-being, and better social safety nets than the ancients or our grandparents: and yet ancient quandaries remain.

Of course, none of this was the intention of the Reformation, the Renaissance, The Age of Reason, or even the age of the Romantics. But all the 20thC and 21stC trends were lurking in the underskirts of earlier movements, for good and ill. Our

consciousness is not profoundly different from that of the last two millennia. We are the inheritors of all that went before, and have now to pick our way through it all, including modern developments, and manage it all, as best we may.

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Appendix: Research resources

A catch-all ideas guide

Stanford University's Plato philosophy website
Includes Critical Theory, Colonial Theory, Identity Politics, Free Will, Compatibilism (between determinism and free will) and much more.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/>

Palestinian Solidarity

The UN weighs in:
<https://www.un.org/en/observances/International-day-of-solidarity-with-the-palestinian-people>

and:
<https://online.flippingbook.com/view/46073526/>

and:
Journal of Palestine Studies Volume 51, 2022
Palestine Solidarity Conferences in the Global Sixties
By: SORCHA THOMSON, PELLE VALENTIN OLSEN, SUNE HAUGBOLLE
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0377919X.2021.1978271>

and:
Journal of Palestine Studies Volume 50, 2021 - Issue 1
Palestine Comes to Paris: The Global Sixties and the Making of a Universal Cause
By: YOAV DI-CAPUA
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0377919X.2020.1861906>

Positive Psychology, Positive Parenting

Happiness, positive psychology, etc
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-character-empirical/#Bib>

and:

Froh on the History of Positive Psychology
<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2004-14661-005>

and:

Positive Parenting
https://www.representingchildhood.pitt.edu/eighteencent_child.htm

Lévi-Strauss and anthropology

<https://anthropologyreview.org/influential-anthropologists/claude-levi-strauss-structuralism-and-its-influence-on-anthropological-thought/>

Real History vs Theory

These tend to be accounts which either seem or really are “conservative”. I claim that all of them are just as important to non-conservative readers.

History Reclaimed is a useful loose association of about 50 (27/11/24) distinguished mostly British historians, with a shared ambition of pushing-back against fashionable more or less leftish distortions of the historical record.
<https://historyreclaimed.co.uk/>

Nigel Biggar (Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology, Oxford) is an important networking figure in the wider movement. Here's an account of his career:
<https://thecritic.co.uk/light-in-the-darkness/>

Jonathan [JCD] Clark, (Hall Distinguished Professor of British History Emeritus at the University of Kansas) writes elegantly on Identity Politics and its being the child of the fashion for self-identification of varieties of the group politics of class, race, gender, and sex with a side-order of the redundancy of much Marxist and post-Marxist analysis. See, for example: “Bonfire of the verities: Plotting a path through the new politics”, *The Critic*, at <https://thecritic.co.uk/bonfire-of-the-verityies/>

Dan Hitchens in *The Critic* is especially useful on the thought of Michael Oakeshott (1901-90), Maurice Cowling (1926-05), and Roger Scruton (1944-2020) as they reframed the historical conservative idea that throughout British society (perhaps all societies) there are deeper cohesive bonds that were persistent and capable of usefully withstanding the gales of illiberal liberalism and unkind socialism.

Personal Agency, Autonomy and Freewill

Naturally, thinking about personal agency and self-identification have a long track record. The power of the personal will is distinctly nuanced. It helps a little, but not much, to say that it is an aspiration or an ideal. It is also what I have called a Necessary Fiction.

Like many, I allow a good deal to the power of narrative over human actions (Round One to the Narrativists of Theory and their hegemonies). But I also insist that the idea of free will is a powerful one. As a narrative, socially and personally, it has at least some actual power. (So Round Two to the humanists. I am not looking for a knockout, but for a draw on points.)

I think this is the point of religious ritual and habits, for instance, as in Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*. One can't be more than a pale shadow of Christ, but in imitation one may achieve something like a simulacrum. Or one might take the idea of "channelling" any other sort of hero (my personal one is almost any character played by Steve McQueen though Teresa of Ávila runs him a decent second).

Naturally, I also claim that the choices here are between narratives (which then inform one's actions, as in PF Strawson's account of free will). It is great fun to see Edward Said admiring Gerald Manley Hopkins's idea that human thought is capable of being "original" as in *Orientalism* (1978 and 1995), p 340) I think the humanist narrative rings truer than the Theory one, so I will get back to discussing that proposition.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/personal-autonomy/>

CP Etcetera and Textual Analysis

Alongside Foucauldian thought the 1960s brought a side order of a school of **textual analysis** which allowed a sort of subversive inner power to language that even its users are not aware of (unless they are cognoscenti textual analysts). Associated with Jacques Derrida, these new ways of examining text gave us (they invented) **Deconstructionist**, **Structuralist**, and **Post-structural** thinking. (See Appendix.) Put very briefly, these all insisted that one could not usefully interrogate a text by knowing or divining its author's intention. Indeed, the text's ostensible meaning often obscured the text's real message over which the author had no control. A text's meanings were somewhere interred within its grammar and other linguistic magic. (All this thinking became important in the quite new academic disciplines espoused in English Literature departments in Western universities.)

Textual analysis is nearly as incomprehensible as relativity theory and we only need to refer to it here because **structuralism** was bolted on to Foucauldianism to develop postmodern thought. (Most middlebrow people in the hotbed 1960s and 1970s had only a glancing experience of this thinking as they heard about the anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss.) Foucauldianism intensified various tendencies under which it became the academic religion of **relativism** whose faith was that truth had no anchor and that facts were only opinions and opinions were not capable of being validated by facts. Naturally, it left teachers with nothing to teach, except the verities of Critical Thought, which they found to be an easy fit with the radicalism of the young.

This in one sense is only to state the modern obvious. Einstein and Baudelaire, the one speaking for science and the other for culture, could have agreed that very much in life depends on one's point of view.

ends

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