

The Rise and Whys of Grievance Studies

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Hello! Thank you all for coming. I am delighted to be here at the request of the Ramsay Centre to talk to you about “The Rise and Whys of Grievance Studies.” Before I get into what those are and why it matters, it would be useful for you to see a summary of it by my colleague and leader of the project, James Lindsay.

OK! You’ve seen what we did and some of you still might be asking yourselves ‘why?’ Why did three adults spend over a year submitting terrible papers to academic journals? It wasn’t just for fun. It’s a problem that goes deep and it matters.

Something has changed in the way we think about knowledge, in the way we think about language and in the way we think about identity. Something has changed in the way we understand society and power and equality. We all value social justice, don’t we? So why don’t the ideas we hear under that label - Social Justice - seem like the way to create a just society? Why does social justice require censorship, de-platforming and social media dogpiles? How is it socially just to ascribe collective blame to a whole sex or race? What has happened to the idea that the way to beat bad ideas is with better ones? Or that it is morally good NOT to evaluate people by their race, gender or sexuality?

And what is going on with knowledge? How do we decide what is true? Is it through evidence and reasoned argument and calling upon expertise? By giving everybody the right to question and challenge everything and letting the best ideas survive? Or is knowledge increasingly often assumed to be about lived experience, satisfying narratives, identity groups and ideology?

We are currently seeing a widespread shift from some well-established and productive ideas that can be said to underpin our modern society, to some highly inconsistent and destructive ones. A new cultural logic is emerging in the west.

Those modern ideas: reason, evidence, science, the marketplace of ideas, freedom of speech, the individual & liberal values applied consistently are the best of 500 years of intellectual and moral progress. They can be referred to as “the modernity project,” “the Enlightenment project” or simply as “liberal secular democracy.” We didn’t get here quickly, and we didn’t get here in a perfectly linear advancement of progress. But we got here. Over the modern period, roughly the last 500 years, we moved away from the premodern ethos of divine revelation and towards reason and evidence as sources of truth. Science developed and diversified. We became more liberal and more secular. We made universities the powerhouses of knowledge and advanced rapidly in understanding our world and ourselves. We began to see the

individual as the unit of society and develop universal human rights regardless of race, gender or sexuality.

What, then, are these newer ideas? What is “Social Justice?” Isn’t that a continuation of the moral progress of society that gradually unfolded during the modern period?

No.

Social Justice is postmodern. It explicitly rejects the fruits of modernity, considering them at best naïve and simplistic and at worst, patriarchal, white supremacist and imperialistic. It seeks to put the epistemology – how we know what is true – and ethics – how we determine what is right – of modernity behind us and move into a new era where science is just one way of knowing the world and it is corrupted by power. It asserts a conception of society as entirely constructed of systems of power and privilege which are upheld by discourses – ways of talking about things. It insists that multiple knowledges exist and are related to identity; that white, male, western knowledge has unfairly dominated and now it is time for it to step back and let other knowledges have priority.

Very many people see the symptoms of the problem whether they call it “identity politics” or “political correctness” but they may not understand where these ideas are coming from and how they work. They’re coming from a few very specific departments within the humanities and I am here to explain how they work!

The ideas that are troubling us now have their origins in an intellectual shift that took place in the late 1960s and was known as “postmodernism.” Postmodernism is best understood as a reaction against modernity. So what are the ideas postmodernism reacted against? To properly understand that we need to go back even further and briefly look at premodernity.

The medieval period in Europe is often referred to as the Dark Ages when in reality, there was considerable creativity, both practical and artistic going on throughout it. Nevertheless, in terms of epistemology and ethics, premodern times were pretty dark. For the pre-moderns,

- Religion is objectively true, and humans can obtain truth by adhering foremost to the word of God.
- That truth is the same for everyone and everyone must be kept to it.
- Language is inherently dangerous. Heresy damns souls. Therefore, speech must be monitored carefully and offenders punished.
- There is such a thing as a human nature but it is sinful & must be restrained.
- Individuality is not valued. Instead, people are seen as part of collectives in which they have set roles to play.

These ideas began to be overturned in the modern period. The Renaissance brought with it a form of humanism in which ideas from the ancient Hebrews and ancient

Greeks could be considered. Art expanded. The Reformation brought a greater sense of individuality and the first arguments for freedom of belief and speech in that it was each person's right to read and interpret the bible for themselves. They now had a personal relationship with God. The Enlightenment brought a greater respect for reason. The scientific revolution a greater respect for evidence and testing. Liberalism arose and with it a sense of the individual and his right to freedom and self-development. The civil rights movements expanded these liberal concepts of rights and freedom and equal opportunities to women and to ethnic and sexual minorities. The core ideas of modernity are:

- Objective truth exists, and humans can get closer to it by using evidence and reason. We call this science.
- Objective truth is, in principle, accessible to everyone and the same for everyone although different experiences of it exist.
- Language, while occasionally slippery, is generally reliable and it is how humans can communicate and advance knowledge. Thus, all ideas must be able to be discussed by anyone and challenged by anyone.
- Principles of secular, liberal democracy, human rights, freedoms and opportunity should apply universally. Human nature exists & merits human rights.
- Universality and individuality are key to a thriving and free society. That is, all rights and responsibilities must apply universally to all people and all individuals must be free to make their own choices and fulfil their own potential. They must not be constrained in any way by their identity or their collective.

Of course, it did not happen that the modern period began and all these wonderful, liberal, empirical and rational ideas popped into existence all at once and then everything was great. Postmodernists and others who like to be sceptical of progress often like to claim the defenders of modernity to think this. But we know that the modern period saw slavery, colonialism, the tyranny of monarchs and the church, war, genocide, famine, racism, sexism and homophobia. So did every other period. Modernity was the one in which we gained the capacity to realise they were wrong. Not all at once and not in a straight line. This progress took hundreds of years but in terms of human history, it was remarkably fast.

So uncommon to human societies was this, in fact, that the societies that have benefitted from it are referred to as WEIRD societies. Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic. And they are weird. But they are the reason I, an atheist woman from a working-class background, am able to read and develop my own ideas and speak and write them. They are also how I travelled across the world in a day to speak to you having not died in childbirth.

Because progress is not a myth. It is measurable in so many ways including poverty, education, fatal diseases, infant mortality as well as human rights. These are the fruits of modernity. The postmodernists do not value these fruits. They see modernity

as a time of empire and exploitation, of patriarchy and white supremacy. And they see these oppressive systems as being upheld and justified by science, by reason and by liberalism.

Postmodernism arose in the late 1960s and it emerged in several fields all at once. Jean-Francois Lyotard defined it as a scepticism towards metanarratives. By this he meant large overarching explanations of the world or society. He included Christianity in this and Marxism but also science. He argued that knowledge is constructed by language games and inextricably linked with power. For Michel Foucault, power and knowledge were so inextricably linked that he made one word of them “power-knowledge” and he argued that this existed on all levels of society and was perpetuated by discourses -ways of speaking about things.

This idea has been particularly influential so it is worth taking a minute to get our heads around it. The Marxist idea of power was that it came from above and that the rich exploited the poor in an economic hierarchy. In this conception of society power can be imagined like a weight pressing down from above.

Foucault disagreed with this. For him, power worked through everyone on all levels of society. This happened through discourses. It is not that one class of people had power and imposed it on others but that certain ways of talking about things became established as knowledge. This served the interests of powerful groups in society, usually straight white men, and these discourses are then accepted and perpetuated by everybody creating inequality. People are born as blank slates into a system of discourses and positioned by their race, gender, class & sexuality within systems of power. They then learn to perform that role and to police others in performing theirs whether they realise that that is what they are doing or not. The same discourses – say, men should be dominant and women submissive – are spoken by the most powerful and the least powerful and they do the same work of upholding power structures. In this conception of society, power can be imagined as linguistic software programmed in the service of the powerful and rolled out across culture.

For Foucault, society had not got better in the modern period. It had simply found new ways to oppress and police its citizens via discourses. According to Jacques Derrida, meaning itself was unstable. Language referred to nothing but itself and it was arranged hierarchically so that one referent was always superior to the other. Women, therefore, are understood as both not being men and being inferior to men. Therefore, we need to unpick language on the level of the word. For theorists like Deleuze, Guttiari and Baudrillard, society had entirely lost touch with the real and was descending into a capitalist, consumerist culture where nothing could be relied upon.

For the postmodernists, then, knowledge was simply a construct of language – of dominant discourses – and it operated in the service of power. Society was comprised of systems of power and privilege which operated to keep some groups dominant and some marginalised and powerless. Is this sounding familiar? Smaller but consistent themes arose from this postmodern conception of the world. Language is inherently dangerous again, just as it was in the premodern times and it must be monitored again and transgressions punished. The categories by which we

understand our world are all inherently unstable and oppressive. Reason and emotion. Facts and fiction. Male and female. Cultural relativism is the inevitable result of this belief that both knowledge and ethics are oppressive constructs of power. To say that scientific ways of gathering knowledge are better than religious/cultural or traditional beliefs is just to assert one's own superiority. It is imperialistic. To say that cultures in which women and LGBT people are given equal rights and freedoms are better than ones in which they are not is imperialistic. And it stems from a cultural bias which fails to recognise the inherent oppression in western systems. To think in terms of a universal human nature or the individual as one who develops his or her own abilities and makes his or her own choices and evaluations of the world is simply to try to impose an oppressive system which privileges straight white men on everybody else. .

The original postmodernism – what I call the deconstructive phase of postmodernism – burnt itself out fairly quickly. It was too deconstructive. There was really nothing that could be done with it if language was so radically unreliable and knowledge about society so impossible to obtain. By the mid 1980s, the immensely prolific stream of postmodern writing began to dry up.

But postmodernism did not die. Some academics would like to tell you that it did, but it was the contention of my group that these core ideas had, in fact, simply evolved and become more user-friendly. We called the next phase “Applied Postmodernism” because of this. In the same way that the original postmodernism had sprung up from various disciplines all at once at the end of the 1960s, so the next wave did so at the end of the 1980s. They came from postcolonial theory, critical race theory, intersectional feminism and queer theory.

By this time – on a societal level - the rapid stream of progress that had been coming from the Civil Rights Movement, liberal feminism and Gay Pride was starting to show diminishing returns. With racial and gendered discrimination criminalised in employment, with homosexuality decriminalised, legal equality was largely won. But prejudice doesn't simply go away. What remained was to tackle attitudes and expectations and what people believed about the world. It was time to tackle discourses. Of course, postmodernism was perfect for this.

From various parts of the humanities which looked at social justice issues, scholars began to write about the need to adapt postmodernism. It was useful, they felt, in that it regarded knowledge as a social construct, but no progress could be made unless some things were objectively true. They couldn't address, say, racism unless it is true that the perception of races exist and some of them commonly experience prejudice on the grounds of it. Therefore, what became objectively true was the conception of systems of power and privilege that oppressed women, people of colour and the LGBT. We can know they are there even when we can't see them so now we need to analyse discourses so we can see them.

Postcolonial theory arose first and took on the beliefs of postmodernism wholesale. However, it had a purpose now. Its purpose was to deconstruct colonial narratives of the east being superstitious, irrational and violent in contrast to a reasoning, scientific and liberal west. However, post-colonialists did not point out that science, reason and liberalism belong to everyone and that scientists, secularists and liberals exist everywhere. It perpetuated the idea that science, reason and liberalism were western but now they were bad. Or at least, traditional and religious ways of knowing were just as good and had been unfairly devalued so western values need to get out of the way now. From postcolonialism, we get the idea that everything from curricula to hairstyles needs to be decolonised. This is where we learn that adopting the best of other cultures is cultural appropriation.

From within queer theory, scholars looked at how we arrived at the categories of male and female, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual. They asked why we think it is normal for men to be masculine and attracted to women or for women to be feminine and attracted to men. These, they decided, ignoring the fact that we're a sexually reproducing species, are entirely social constructs and they are oppressive ones brought about by an over-reliance on science. Foucault called this 'biopower.' It is not only gender that is a social construct. Biological sex is too.

Within critical race theory, the postmodern scholars accepted Foucault's concept of unacknowledged discourses of power and privilege that permeated everything and they set out to look for them and find them. White people, we are told, are inherently racist. Black people, we are told, cannot be. Because of the way power works. Racism is prejudice plus power. A power imbalance must be present in any interaction between white people and non-white people and the key is to find it. To disagree with any identification of racism is to be wilfully ignorant and fragile.

Intersectional feminism arose out of critical race theory and swallowed up all other forms of feminism. Now all analyses must include race, gender identity, sexuality, physical ability, religion, immigration status and weight. From within intersectionality, we get the kind of diversity which is all about identity features and nothing to do with diversity of ideas. We get the kind of inclusion which excludes all ideas and people who do not agree with intersectionality. Again, it is entirely cultural constructivist. Biological differences between men and women cannot be accepted to exist.

More recently we have seen the rise of critical studies of ableism and Fat studies. These draw to a great extent on queer theory. They ask themselves why we think it is better for body parts to work normally and for people not to be morbidly obese. They answer themselves that it is because science, that false authority that seeks to police and oppress people, has declared it to be so due to underlying hatred of disabled and fat people. They advocate a different form of knowledge. One that relies on the lived experience of disabled and fat people. Unless disabled and fat

people would prefer not to be disabled or fat is that in which case they have internalised this medicalised oppression and need to be reprimanded or ignored.

This entire mess of ideologically motivated, science-denying woo comes under the banner of what is known as Social Justice scholarship or what my colleagues and I called “grievance studies.” We called it this because it begins from the assumption of a grievance and then it bends the available theories to confirm it. It is utterly committed to the postmodern conception of society as a grid of power and privilege. It does not seek disconfirming evidence or leave open the possibility that a situation can be explained in any other way. There is no methodology apart from reading situations through these theories and when you have found a way to detect the presence of racism or sexism, you have succeeded. This cannot be considered knowledge production.

Because of the radical scepticism of science or objective truth and the commitment to the belief that all imbalances are socially constructed, grievance studies closes down the possibility of finding truth. This is particularly a problem within gender studies. Biological explanations for why men and women may make different choices, display different degrees of psychological traits, have different interests or exhibit different sexual behaviours cannot be included in analyses. The explanation must be the effects of dominant discourses that disadvantage women. Because of this, language is analysed in a highly paranoid and offence-seeking way. Micro-aggressions are detected, racism and sexism identified. Heteronormativity – acting as though heterosexuality is the default sexuality – is called out. Cisnormativity – acting as though people usually identify with the sex their reproductive systems indicate is condemned.

Freedom of speech and viewpoint diversity are not valued within this system. Within the traditionally liberal concept of the marketplace of ideas, it is believed that all ideas can be spoken. They can be discussed and challenged and refuted and the best ones will win. This is rejected by the postmodern conception of society. In that, it is assumed that dominant discourses are constructs of power and dominant groups in society are committed to ensuring that they maintain their power. The *knowledges* of marginalised groups are neglected and may not even be recognised to exist.

From this we get the rapidly growing field of Social Justice epistemology. Recall that epistemology is how we decide what is true. In the premodern period, it was the word of God, then in the modern period, it gradually became science and reason. In the postmodern period, there are multiple truths and multiple knowledges but white, male western ones win out and this needs to be remedied. There is a moral imperative to achieve justice for other ways of knowing believed to belong to women and people of colour and trans people. An enormous body of work has built up around this and a whole new vocabulary.

Knowledge is visualised as a kind of web within which categories and truth claims and values have been deeply embedded. It all hangs together coherently and people simply assume it is true. It is the job of the social justice epistemologists to break into that and restore justice. Epistemic injustice and epistemic oppression are when people are outside of this white, male, western system and so they cannot fully engage with it. Epistemic violence is committed when the ideas of minority groups are dismissed. However epistemic exploitation occurs when members of minority groups are asked to explain their ideas. To disagree with this is privilege-preserving epistemic pushback. To ignore it is epistemic ignorance. There simply is no legitimate way to criticise this field or work in any other way within it.

This is a problem. On the surface, it appears like real scholarship. Papers get written and deemed sound by peer review. Other scholars build on it and so knowledge grows. Except in this case, it does not. It is unevidenced and ideologically motivated ideas which are being built up. It is not the peer review system which has failed. That is only as good as the criteria on which it is based and those in grievance studies are based on postmodernism.

The process of knowledge production is a complicated one but we, in modern universities developed one which has served us extremely well. Jonathan Rauch called this system 'liberal science.' Someone writes a paper. They make as sure as they can that it is well-evidenced and well-reasoned and then they submit it for peer review. Expert reviewers then go through it and if they also think it is well-evidenced and well-reasoned, it published. Then comes the real test. Other people try to tear this idea apart. They pore over it for holes and alternative explanations. They try to replicate it if appropriate. If they think they see a problem, they write their own paper. Yours could be discredited. This isn't pleasant but it is how we progress.

This is not happening in grievance studies. There are firmly set ideas which can be accepted and they work on this postmodern conception of the world. You must operate within this system. You must not criticise this system. You can problematise other people's ideas according to the system but you cannot suggest the system is wrong. You can't suggest that gender differences actually exist between men and women and this is rooted in biology. You can't suggest that Social constructivism does not account for every imbalance. You cannot point out that the concept of white fragility is unfalsifiable and rooted in logical fallacies. Well, you can, but you cannot do so within academia and expect to get published.

For a long time, my colleagues and I had been trying to raise this as a problem among leftist academics. We ourselves are left-wing liberal sceptics and we met in the New Atheist moment. We argued against faith-based epistemology and illiberal ethics associated with religion. James Lindsay is a mathematician who has written much on the psychology of religion and advised on ideological extremism. Peter Boghossian is a Socratic philosopher dealing with epistemology and justifications for

truth claims. I am a literature and history student who studied the ways in which women negotiated the Christian narrative between 1300 and 1700. But I have found this more and more difficult because of the increasing requirement for social constructivism and ideological –anachronistic – readings of history.

James, Peter and I spent much time trying to show the problem of postmodernism in identity studies to well-meaning liberals. We did so straightforwardly. We wrote about the problem, broke it down, showed how it worked, showed how it affected society. People could see the problem on campuses. They knew some truly mad papers were getting published. They saw the excesses of some of the activists. And yet they thought we were overstating the problem. They did not accept that there was a significant problem with epistemology and ethics in some fields of the humanities. My colleagues and I then dedicated a year to showing that there was. Along the way, we were joined by Mike Nayna, an Australian filmmaker who stumbled on us while investigating what he saw as a new form of authoritarian activism.

We set ourselves to the task of writing grievance studies papers. These were real papers. Some people have misunderstood our project to be one in which we wrote nonsense and showed that journals would accept anything. No. They only accept a very specific type of nonsense. The reason we got seven papers accepted is because our papers were indistinguishable from genuine ones. Ones that influence social justice activism, politics and culture today. We had seven more papers in progress when we were forced to call a halt.

We used two methods to write our papers. Sometimes we looked at some of the worst ideas coming out of a field and then put them together and expanded on them. This is how we ended up with our paper arguing that only marginalised groups are allowed to use humour and mocking or criticising social justice scholarship is completely unacceptable and must be punished. That one was called an excellent contribution to feminist philosophy. This also produced our paper arguing that astronomy should include feminist and queer astrology and the one arguing that white students should be chained to the floor in classrooms. Reviewers were very positive about both of these and they were progressing well through the system.

Sometimes we just thought up something really awful and found a way to make the scholarship fit it. This is how we ended up publishing a paper on how unwanted dog humping in dog parks demonstrated that nightclubs were rape-condoning spaces and that men should be trained like dogs. It's also how we published a piece arguing that society only values bodies built with muscle rather than with fat because of fatphobia and advocating a form of non-competitive fat bodybuilding. It also how we published a rewrite of a section of Mein Kampf as intersectional feminism.

All this involved becoming very familiar with the scholarship and reading an enormous number of books and papers. We are legitimate grievance scholars. Our papers averaged 30 citations, all of them real. But we still turned out a paper every two weeks by essentially recycling and repurposing the same set of theories. This is not scholarship. It wasn't scholarship when we did it to show the problem and it isn't when it is done absolutely sincerely.

We had to conclude our probe early but it was not the reviewers of grievance journals who caught us. They did not see our claim to have examined 10,000 dog genitals and analysed this according to black feminist criminology as a bit fishy. It was journalists. They saw the problem with it. The public saw the problem with it. The system supposed to root it out did not. That is a problem.

How big a problem is this though, really? What percentage of the population reads academic journals? Who knows what postmodernism is or what queer theory is or critical race theory? Isn't this just a local problem within the ivory towers of academia?

The problem with that is that these ideas don't stay in the universities. And they're not meant to. Universities are there to produce knowledge and disseminate it throughout the population. For centuries now, they have led the search for truth and countered reactionary usually right-wing elements who were motivated to deny it. They have been forward-thinking and scientific and they have provided us with the best resources for discovering what is true. They've done this regardless of what powerful elements in society wanted to be true. They have upheld expectations that truth claims will have evidence, arguments will be reasoned and everything can be challenged by everyone. Most departments still work this way, but some have dropped the ball.

This is not a problem confined to esoteric arguments between intellectuals. Liberal academia has great cultural power and historically this has served us well. Now, infected by postmodernism, this epistemic and moral relativism has seeped into mainstream liberal culture. It has done so through politics, philosophy, media, art and social justice movements. A whole generation of students were exposed to these ideas and went on to become leaders of various industries. These key ideas were distilled into bite-sized, user-friendly chunks for activists and passed into the social conscience of mainstream society. They traded on the good name of the civil rights movement, second wave liberal feminism, and Gay Pride.

They turn out the teachers of our children and the heads of our industries. The ideas are popularised and made graspable by activists who make their feelings known. The book *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo is a best seller and she was right here at the University of Sydney talking about it at the end of last year. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality is now everywhere. There are now people who make it their job to problematize things and companies need to forestall being accused of racism or sexism by being seen to be committed to this ideologically-specific conception of diversity and inclusion. The US saw James Damore fired from Google

for saying men and women have different interests on average. The BBC just fired Danny Baker for not realising a picture of a chimp could be construed as racist. Medical organisations are trying to find ways to avoid associating female reproductive systems with women. Cancer research organisations face difficulties trying to say that obesity is a significant factor. So far from true is it that society is underlain by discourses of patriarchy and white supremacy that accusations of sexism, racism and homophobia, even if unwarranted, can end careers and destroy reputations.

The symptoms of this problem are seen even by those who don't fully understand how this all works. They feel that political correctness has gone mad or that identity politics have taken over. This assists the reactionary surge to the right. Because this problem is not just on the left. With the universities having seemingly abdicated their role as rigorous, evidence-based producers of knowledge the door has been opened to postmodernism and post-truth. We are now seeing so many forms of personal and cultural narrative, motivated reasoning, confirmation bias and flat-out lies and fabrications. Narratives are back. Group perceptions have validity again.

Postmodernism did not create the problem of humans undervaluing evidence, reason, individuality and liberal universalism. This is a timeless human problem. It's what we foolish apes do. We form tribes around shared stories and prefer them over the more difficult task of seeking to discover what is true. But over the last 500 years we formed a system to mitigate this – the university and an expectation for evidence, reason and vigorous peer review – and we have achieved wonderful things. We have still always had irrationalism and tribalism among us, but the dominant understanding of knowledge was that it is not served by this. People who really wanted to know what was true and not go along with group narratives could call upon scholarship coming out of universities for the most objective and evidenced answers available.

We must insist the universities take up this role again throughout all of its fields and disciplines. We cannot condone them continuing to contribute to an era in which truth is understood to be anything that feels right to a favoured group. The university is already vulnerable to premodernists who'd like to take us backwards and this only strengthens them. We need to counter this by reinstalling an expectation that truth claims will make sense, be presented in the form of a reasoned argument and accompanied by evidence. We need to insist that even the most sacred cows can be criticised, questioned and challenged in universities. We must get the universities to prioritise this again because without it, we risk a thoroughly pre-modern or postmodern world. We don't want that.