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The Genesis of Critical Theory and Cancel Culture

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the genesis of Critical Theory back to the works of Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx in the nineteenth century. It will examine closely the use made of hermeneutics by those three authors and follow this legacy as it is passed down through Critical Theory to contemporary Cancel Culture. The relationship between the "hermeneutics of suspicion" and the "hermeneutics of affirmation" will be highlighted, and the part played by the Frankfurt School in developing a new focus for Marxism will be explored. The theories of Gramsci, Marcuse and Foucault will be looked at in some detail to determine their influence on the Woke Generation and Cancel Culture. The concept of Vision will be analysed in an attempt to identify the vision that drives Critical Theory and Cancel culture. Lastly an evaluation will be made of the effects that Cancel Culture makes on the life of a society.

I FIRST CONSIDERATIONS

Alan Dershowitz, the distinguished American legal scholar, in

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his book *Cancel Culture* declared that ‘Cancel Culture is the new McCarthyism of the “Woke” Generation,’ and like the old McCarthyism it ends careers, destroys legacies, breaks up families – with no semblance of due process or opportunity to disprove the often-false or exaggerated accusations.¹ As he points out, the old McCarthyism endangered constitutional rights of free speech and due process, which are the core-protectors of liberty and barriers against tyranny. The new McCarthyism – cancel culture – he writes, threatens these rights as well. Dershowitz then goes on to accuse it of being a ‘child of the current woke generation,’ and an ‘illegitimate descendent of hard-right McCarthyism and hard-right Stalinism.’²

While there is a great deal of historical truth in this claim, it must be said, that the overt tenets and methods of hard-right Stalinism have been greatly softened and camouflaged by the work of Critical Theory. Few, if any, of the proponents of Critical Theory would be willing to claim a close relationship with Stalinism, but nearly all of them have been involved in a creative dialogue with Marxism, they have also been heirs to the legacies left by Nietzsche and Freud. In this chapter I want to show firstly the origins of Critical Theory and then the decisive role that it played in the genesis and birth of Cancel Culture. I will focus firstly on the part a particular type of hermeneutics plays in Critical Theory.

¹ Alan Dershowitz, *Cancel Culture: The Latest Attack on Free Speech and Due Process* (Hot Books, 2020) 1-2.

² Ibid 3.

II THE THREE 'MASTERS OF SUSPICION' AND THE ORIGINS OF CRITICAL THEORY

Hermeneutics is the art or science of interpretation. Terry Eagleton in *After Theory* states that it is generally accepted that the German philosopher Fredrich Schleiermacher was the founding father. Schleiermacher was translating a book written by an English colonist in Australia which detailed the author's encounters with Australian Aboriginal people. Schleiermacher wrestled with the problem of how to understand and interpret the beliefs and customs of a people that seemed so alien to the European mentality. Without denying Schleiermacher the honour of being called founding father, it must be realised however that the great cultures of antiquity had sacred literature to be interpreted and re-interpreted by their priestly and royal classes, so it is only fair to say that hermeneutics has been practiced for quite a long time.³

There are different philosophies and methods of hermeneutics, but one form in particular has had a very defining impact on Critical Theory – it is called the 'hermeneutics of suspicion', and it first came to prominence in the late 19th century. Those who used this method saw myths, ideologies, beliefs and values as essentially falsifying consciousness and hiding the real meaning behind a deceptive subterfuge, so they employed the "hermeneutics of suspicion" to negatively interpret the real meaning of the discourse. Texts were read with scepticism so that the repressed or hidden meanings were exposed. Nowadays it could also be called reading against the grain or reading between the lines. The assumption underlying this approach is that texts, ideologies and myths may appear to be straight-forward

³ Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (Penguin Books, 2004) 23-46.

but that they are deceptive in that they contain deeper meanings and implications.⁴ There were three famous, outstanding practitioners of this method, and Paul Ricoeur, the French philosopher named them.⁵ He called Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud the ‘three masters of suspicion’, believing that they each shared the same view of consciousness as false and that they used the hermeneutic to unmask the real meaning concealed behind the myths. Three short examples should illustrate the way in which each of the “masters” went about their work.

Nietzsche used a genealogical hermeneutic to demonstrate how Christian myths of salvation, redemption and transcendence could be traced back to an underlying “will- to-power”, which he believed was the chief motivator in individuals and groups. Nietzsche saw the early Christians as a subservient, underprivileged people, who were dominated and persecuted by the Roman elites. Lacking the requisite power and influence, the Christians could not openly retaliate, so they repressed their resentment, and generated a new system of beliefs and values based on their actual situation. This new system emphasised the virtues of humility, submissiveness, timidity and self-denial. Thus, they gave themselves a certain power and recognition by embracing, cherishing and privileging their lowly status. Nietzsche had a very negative view of Christianity perceiving it as a religion that made a virtue out of weakness. This perception obviously influenced his hermeneutic. He also concluded that the group with the strongest “will-to-power” would be the one to establish its regime of control in society thereby ensuring its ability to declare what was the prevailing

⁴ Richard Kearney, *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture*, Ch 14 ‘Myth and the Critique of Ideology’ (Wolfhound Press, 1988) 270-277.

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Northwestern University Press, 1974).

ideology ie truth. Truth then was made relative depending on what particular regime held power.⁶ We will see later in this paper how Michel Foucault, the highly influential French philosopher, adopted Nietzsche's "will-to power" as one of the key fundamental principles of his method.

Freud used his psychoanalytical hermeneutic to investigate how myths could disguise and camouflage unconscious desires. He privileges the unconscious over the conscious, and in *Totem and Taboo* the origin of myth is seen as a form of compensation for prohibited experience. Religious myths were interpreted as neurosis which concealed repressed sexual desires. In his 'Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices' he holds that religious practice and the compulsive repetitive behaviour of the neurotic were essentially the same phenomenon. The study of taboo phenomenon and ritual practices in primitive cultures, was for Freud, an insight into the nature and origin of religion itself, which he assumed was a "natural" phenomenon capable of being explained away in psychological terms, and ultimately to be seen as an illusion.⁷ He saw belief in God arising through the projection of our infantile father-image. We need our god because our earthly father has failed us. Freud seemed to be unaware of the fact that even though two processes parallel each other you still cannot infer that they are identical. Evans-Prichard showed in his book *Witchcraft among the Azande* that the thought processes of those who practice magic and those who practice science are similar. Both involve concepts of cause and effect, both involve the logic of arguments from consequences, both involve consistence and coherence, but no one would draw the conclusion that they were the same.⁸

⁶ Kearney (n 4) 273.

⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation, Society and Religion* (Penguin, 1991) 223-228.

⁸ E F O'Doherty, *Religion and Mental Health* (Burns and Oats, 1965) ch 11.

For Marx the main dynamic in world history was the economic conflict between the working class and the wealthy business owners. The upper class unjustly exploits the lower class by profiting off the latter's labour. The lower working class (proletariat) should therefore fight their oppressors in a "class struggle". The proletarians can only be free by suppressing their adversaries with whom, by definition, they can have nothing in common. This struggle will of necessity involve violence and a large number of human beings must be eliminated if the ideal is to triumph. The ideal for Marx was a glorious vision that would see unity and equality in an earthly paradise for all of mankind. Marx used a dialectical hermeneutic of 'false consciousness' which exposed the superstructure (ideological myths, religion, art, philosophy) that concealed the exploitation and domination of the working class by the capitalist owners of the means of production (infrastructures).⁹

Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud each shared the suspicion that myth conceals the projection of false values, creating an illusion that hides its real meaning, so they use the hermeneutic to unmask what is hidden. There is a definite validity in this approach because all myths involve a conflict of interpretations and there is a genuine benefit in the purification of the myths that we live by. However, we are also entitled to ask if the critique of these myths is not itself subject to critique. Paul Ricoeur does precisely this when he looks at the Marxist rereading of history according to the model of the class struggle which champions the cause of the oppressed workers. The usual order of history is reversed and the slaves (the proletariat) become the new masters. However this ideology of liberation, of the powerless, became under Stalin an ideology which imposed a new kind of oppressive power on the proletariat. Thus the Marxist-Leninist notion of utopia

⁹ Kearney (n 4) 273-274.

became a mere alibi for the consolidation for its repressive powers, justifying the oppression of today in the name of the liberation of tomorrow.¹⁰ It can be argued of course that Stalin did not possess the authentic Marxian notion of blissful utopia but was driven rather by the Nietzschean “will-to-power” and ruthless domination.

Richard Kearney allows for the usefulness of the “hermeneutics of suspicion” but argues that it must be balanced by a “hermeneutics of affirmation,” which can lead to the recovery of lost meanings and the creation of new ones – and the opening up of “possible worlds”. Kearney goes on to say that myth, tradition and ideology can have positive functions.¹¹ ‘Myth can be seen as a story that a society tells itself about itself in order to describe itself to itself – and to others.’¹² Kearney sees a need to continually re-evaluate and critically analyse the story, but to attempt to erase it completely can be very destructive.

A country must cherish the positive heritage of its traditions. The historical past is important, and a creative reinterpretation can generate new understandings and new possibilities. Voices that have been suppressed and “erased from history” can be uncovered and as a result be incorporated into a new reading. The return of the repressed can be disconcerting but it can also be liberating and empowering.¹³ Jacques Derrida, the bete noire of certain non-continental philosophers, agrees with Kearney on this point saying that ‘every culture and society requires an internal critique or deconstruction as an essential part of its development. Every culture needs an element of self-interrogation and

¹⁰ Richard Kearney, *Dialogues With Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester University Press, 1984) 15-18, 73-75.

¹¹ Kearney (n 4) 271.

¹² Ibid 270, quoting Liam de Paor, *The Peoples of Ireland* (Rainbow Press, 1986).

¹³ Kearney (n 4) 276.

of distance to itself, if it is to transform itself.’ He will even concede that the affirmation of positive things in the heritage is important, ‘Deconstruction certainly entails a moment of affirmation. Indeed I cannot conceive of a radical critique which would not be ultimately motivated by some sort of affirmation, acknowledged or not.’¹⁴

What legacies have been passed on from our “three masters” to Critical Theory and our modern-day exponents of cancel culture? We can say with certainty that they have acquired the “hermeneutics of suspicion” but sadly not the “hermeneutics of affirmation.” The former is deployed rigorously against many facets of Western civilization, the latter is nowhere in evidence. They see themselves as engaging in a demythologizing project – a tearing down, but the impulse to deconstruct a civilization can be carried to extreme lengths. Ronald Barthes, the renowned French, literary theorist, essayist, philosopher, directly acknowledges this when he states in *Mythologies*, that the political critique of myth must be motivated by ‘acts of destruction.’ ‘The genuine demythologizer knows not what he is for but what he is against.’¹⁵ Some of the present-day practitioners of Critical Theory and cancel culture seem to have fully imbibed this attitude. We know that a certain schadenfreude can be had at the spectacle of well-know people being de-platformed and canceled in organized witch-hunts. but Jennifer Oriel, in her essay ‘Universities’, warns us of the consequences of such an approach ‘silencing opposition is far easier than listening to an opponent and learning well. The act of destruction is cheap and exciting. The act of creation is exacting.’¹⁶

¹⁴ Kearney (n 10) 73-75.

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paladin Books, 1973) 157-158.

¹⁶ Jennifer Oriel, ‘Universities’ in Kevin Donnelly (ed), *Cancel Culture and the Left’s Long March*. See also Gary Marks, ‘The Origins of Cancel Culture’ in Kevin Donnelly (ed), *Cancel Culture and the Left’s Long March* (Wilkinson Publishing, 2021).

Richard Kearney also adds his warning on the dangers of the unlimited use of the “hermeneutics of suspicion” in the project of deconstruction. ‘The danger in all this is that myth, tradition, and custom can be so annihilated that nothing remains and we are left without purpose and direction. We may be able to free a country from the “false consciousness” of traditions, but we must also liberate it for something.’¹⁷

While allowing for the fact that the hermeneutics of suspicion is able to deliver valid insights and cannot be dismissed out of hand, yet it contains within itself a massive error, namely the error of reductionism. Reductionism is the fallacy of trying to explain a complex phenomenon by reducing it to one dimension. In essence it is an oversimplification. We saw it in operation when Nietzsche tried to explain the genesis of Christianity by focusing on the emotional needs of the early Christians. Freud did likewise when he assumed that religion could be explained away by psychological processes, and by his privileging of the unconscious over all other conscious factors. Marx reduced art, philosophy, religion (the superstructure) to functioning as a cover and a justification for the wealthy in the class war. The present day Neo-Marxist attacks on Western Civilization contain the same elements of reductionism. There is a prolonged assault on the historical sins and present failings of the West without any attempt to recognise its achievements and successes. The West is profiled as a ravenous, imperial, colonial, and capitalist power: its negative identity – without any dwelling on its positive attributes or its outstanding contribution to civilization.

This strategy of focusing on the negative identity has a definite affinity

¹⁷ Kearney (n 4) 274.

with the methods used by the People's Republic of China's institution of thought reform through the Revolutionary Colleges. Lifton in his *Thought Reform: and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of Brainwashing in China* gives a detailed account of the process. First came the prolonged assault on the negative identity of the person, which always contains some truth. Eventually the person will begin to see him/herself in that way, forgetting or losing sight of their positive attributes. Their former self-image, or the way they saw themselves is now drastically altered and they will begin to feel guilt and shame. The interrogator now offers hope of redemption – a rebirth through thought-reform- a new way of thinking ie Mao's way of thinking.¹⁸

Mao's way of thinking can undoubtedly be linked with the emergence of political correctness and its subsequent development into cancel culture. Mao dealt with political dissenters by cancelling their freedom of speech and imprisoning and killing large numbers of people. Those who could be trained in "correct thought" were given jobs that were useful to the party. Strict conformity to party rule was maintained by combining social pressure and re-education.¹⁹ It does not involve too great an imaginative jump to see some of the same methods at work in educational establishments in America and Australia where dissenters from established doctrine are publicly denounced and sentenced to exile from the university. This phenomenon was also present in the 1950s in America when the McCarthy witch-hunt era was at its peak. Lifton recalls that when he was researching the Chinese thought-reform in Hong Kong he heard about McCarthyism back home and its 'assaults on mind and reality.' Senator Joseph McCarthy and

¹⁸ See Robert Jay Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study in Brainwashing in China* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2012) 84-86.

¹⁹ Oriel (n 16) 56.

his followers were making wild accusations against public figures, teachers and writers. Subscribing to the wrong magazine might result in being fired from one's job. Lifton asserts that thought-reform is an extreme version of the ever present human tendency to contrast one's own purity with the impurity of all else; and on that basis to justify one's claim to the ownership of reality. A tendency that is very much in evidence in the practices and pronouncements of cancel culture.²⁰

Neo-Marxism in the form of cancel culture attacks many facets of Western civilization. One of its present day assaults involves the notion of 'historic collective guilt.'²¹ It demands that the present generation should feel guilty for the slave trade, colonialism, and other atrocities and misdemeanours committed by the West. This goes hand-in-hand with the re-writing of history by way of destroying statues, renaming buildings and cancelling historic, public figures whose records were less than pure. We have recently seen the notion of historic collective guilt being imposed on boys at a Victorian school, who were made to stand in acknowledgement for past offences against girls.²² This was imposed on the boys despite their not have anything to do individually or collectively with the abuse. The principal subsequently apologised for her actions,²³ but it goes to show how she had succumbed to the notion of historic collective guilt and how it had become part of her thinking.

²⁰ Robert Jay Lifton, *Losing Reality: On Cults, Cultism and the Mindset of Political and Religious Zealotry* (The New Press, 2019) 76-78.

²¹ Joshua Forrester, 'Cancel Culture: Concept and Countermeasures' (Presentation, The Civilisationists, 19 May 2021).

²² Anthony Piovesan, 'Brauer College in Warrnambool makes boys apologise on behalf of their gender to female peers at school assembly', *News.com.au* (Web Article, 26 March 2021).

²³ Chanel Zagon, 'Victorian schools says asking male students to 'apologise for their gender' in an assembly was wrong', *9 News* (Web Article, 26 March 2021).

III MARXISM RE-ORIENTATES – CRITICAL THEORY EMERGES

Terry Eagleton, in *After Theory* affirms that Western Marxists thinkers shift to culture was born partly out of political impotence and disenchantment. They saw little chance for a proletarian revolution in Western capitalist countries and were thoroughly disillusioned with National Socialism, Stalinism, state capitalism, and the culture industry which they saw as new forms of social domination. Classical Marxism was not the answer for the new prevailing conditions, and so Critical Theory was born.²⁴

It was given its name and was developed by the Frankfurt school. Max Horkheimer, one of its members, defined Critical Theory as a social theory whose aim was to critique and change society as a whole. It differed from traditional theory which focused only on understanding or explaining society. Critical Theory's objective was 'to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them.' Human emancipation and freedom were its key goals. Another member of the Frankfurt school, Herbert Marcuse, realized that class had outlived its usefulness as an explanatory concept and that a new strategy was needed that would engage with and change the culture that supported capitalism. So began the leftist infiltration of Western institutions, universities, schools, churches, media, business, etc – the 'long march through the institutions.'²⁵

At around the same time, another important thinker, Antonio Gramsci, the Italian communist, who was imprisoned by Mussolini for many years, also came to the conclusion that culture was the key in the fight

²⁴ Eagleton (n 3) 31.

²⁵ Ibid.

against capitalism.²⁶ He too realised that the Marxist concept of class struggle was futile in bringing about change in the West. The key was cultural change. He saw that culture in the West supported capitalism, and capitalism supported a broad middle class. The ideology, the values, the beliefs of western society had to be challenged, deconstructed and changed. All the cultural institutions that supported capitalism would have to be overcome. Before communism could take hold politically and economically it had to take hold culturally.²⁷ Gramsci's idea was to refocus Marxism on cultural institutions, and so begin the already mentioned 'long march through the institutions' (a phrase invented by Rudi Dutschke in 1967).²⁸ The aim was to gradually colonise and gain control of key social institutions.²⁹

Gramsci also developed Lenin's concept of hegemony which the latter had used to control society after the revolution. Hegemony means that the ruling party uses ideology, values, beliefs and practices to enshrine a world-view that is all-embracing and that leaves no room for alternative viewpoints. It was the birth of cultural politics where political change had to be cultural to be effective.³⁰ To paraphrase Eagleton's words, any political change that does not embed itself in people's feelings and perceptions or does not secure their consent, engage their desires and weave its way into their sense of identity will not prove enduring.³¹

²⁶ Michael Walsh, *The Devil's Pleasure Palace: The Cult of Critical Theory and the Subversion of the West*, (Encounter Books, 2017) 23, 72.

²⁷ Ibid 167

²⁸ Angela Kolling, 'Literature and Politics in Joschka Fischer's *Mein Langer Lauf Zu Mir Selbst*: A Negotiation of *Wirklichkeit* (Credibility) and *Wirksamkeit* (Effect)', Peter Marks (ed.) *Literature and Politics: Pushing the World in Certain Directions* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011) 191.

²⁹ Walsh (n 26) 108.

³⁰ Ibid 167.

³¹ Eagleton (n 3) 46.

Herbert Marcuse gave what was perhaps the clearest definition of what the Marxist utopia would entail. In his dialogue with Richard Kearney, he argues that Marx did not fully realise that a purely economic resolution of the problem can never be enough, and so lacked the insight that a 'twentieth-century revolution would require a different type of human being and that such a revolution would have to aim at, and, if successful, implement, an entirely new set of personal and sexual relationships, a new morality, a new sensibility and a total reconstruction of the environment.'³²

Marcuse had argued in *Eros and Civilization* that people should abandon traditional repressive morality in favour of sexual liberation. The aim here was not just sexual liberation but that the repressive institutions of family and marriage would be abandoned. He understood that these two institutions were supportive of the capitalist system and therefore needed to be undermined if a new unrepressed civilization was to be created.³³ Unlike Freud, he did not believe that there need exist a permanent contradiction between primary instinctual satisfaction (the pleasure principle) and repressed secondary satisfactions (the reality principle). For Marcuse the repression of **Eros** calls up the very destructive forces that repression was meant to quell, while Freud had maintained that repression was necessary for the development of civilization.³⁴

IV MARCUSE'S IMPACT ON AMERICAN INSTITUTIONS

³² Kearney (n 10) 74.

³³ Andrew Feenberg and William Leiss (eds.), *The Essential Marcuse: Selected Writings of Philosopher and Social Critic Herbert Marcuse* (Beacon Press Books, 2007) 176-182.

³⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization, Society and Religion*, (Penguin, 1991) 315-326.

Marcuse was a professor at several American universities. He taught at Columbia, Harvard, Brandeis and the University of California at San Diego. He became well known in the 1960s as the official ideologue of “campus revolutions” in the USA and Europe. His effect on the humanity faculties of American Universities, their students, and certain sections of the general population, has been traced in detail by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt in their book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*. Marcuse’ lectures and publications were especially influential in the 1960s and 1970s when the American left was moving away from its focus on workers versus capital to become the “New Left” which focused civil rights, women’s rights and other social movements promoting equality and social justice. The left saw themselves as progressives wanting social change and saw the right as conservative wanting to preserve the existing order. Marcuse analysed the conflict between the left and right in Marxist terms.³⁵

In his 1965 essay titled ‘Repressive Tolerance’, Marcuse argued that tolerance and free speech is beneficial in society only when there is absolute equality in that society. If there are power differentials between groups then tolerance only benefits the already powerful enabling them to dominate institutions like media, education and politics. Indiscriminative tolerance is unfair – what is needed is a form of tolerance that discriminates. A truly “liberating tolerance” would be one that favours the weak and restrains the strong.³⁶ In 1960s America, the weak for Marcuse were the left – students, intellectuals, and minorities. The Right was the military-industrial complex, the wealthy, and other vested interests that blocked change, and in his view

³⁵ Greg Lukianoff and Johnathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind* (Penguin, 2018) 54-77.

³⁶ Feenberg and Leiss (n 33) 32-55.

‘liberating tolerance’ would mean intolerance against movements from the Right, and tolerance of movements from the Left.³⁷

For Marcuse when the majority in a society is being repressed, it is justifiable to use ‘repression and indoctrination’ to allow the ‘subversive majority’ to achieve the power that it deserves.³⁸ He goes on to argue that true democracy might require denying basic rights to people who advocate for conservative causes, or for policies he viewed as aggressive or discriminatory, and that true freedom of thought might require professors to indoctrinate their students. The ultimate goal is not equality but a reversal of power.³⁹

It should be evident by now that the exercise of civil rights by those who don’t have them presupposes the withdrawal of civil rights from those who prevent their exercise, and that liberation of the Dammed of the Earth presupposes suppression not only of their old but also of their new masters.⁴⁰

Marcuse’s view of the world has had a profound impact on American universities since those words were written in 1965. His philosophy has engendered a particular mind-set among staff and students, giving rise to common-enemy identity politics with its corresponding ‘cancel culture’. ‘Common-enemy identity politics’ should not be confused with ‘common-humanity identity politics’, this latter form does not denigrate or de-humanise its opponents but rather appeals to their humanity while also applying political pressure in other ways. Common-enemy identity politics on the other hand uses the Marxist

³⁷ Lukianoff and Haidt (n 35)

³⁸ Feenberg and Leiss (n 33) 32-55.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore and Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Beacon Press, 1969), quoted in Lukianoff and Johnathan Haidt (n 35) 65.

dialectic to focus hostility on a particular group.⁴¹ The Left will focus on the Right as a bastion of privilege and oppression. Its psychology will advocate an ‘us-versus- them’ mentality- which can easily slide into aggressive tribalism. In aggressive tribalism there is no room for dialogue between people or groups or for any attempt at mutual understanding, one’s opponent must be denigrated – it is all-out confrontation, a clear win or lose situation. Saul Alinsky, the Marxist community organizer in his famous *Rules for Radicals* stated in Rule No 12: ‘Pick the target, personalise it, and polarize it.’⁴²

Students entering college in some American educational institutions undergo orientation programmes that will teach them to evaluate their own and others’ level of privilege, recognise distinct identity groups, and see more differences between people. They will also learn to associate aggression, domination, and oppression with privileged groups. This type of training coupled with common-enemy identity politics will easily enhance the emergence of a “call-out culture,” where students are credited for identifying offences by members of their community and calling-them-out. Social media undoubtedly exacerbates the cruelty and “virtue signalling” that is part of this call-out culture. It is easy to hide behind an alias and join in the chorus of shaming and denouncing as anonymity lessens the need for self-restraint and makes it easier to follow the mob.⁴³

It is not surprising that a call-out culture promotes feelings of paranoia and distrust among students fearful of saying the wrong thing, liking the wrong post, or coming to the defence of someone whom they know to be innocent, knowing that they themselves could become the victim of

⁴¹ Lukianoff and Haidt (n 35) 62-65.

⁴² Walsh (n 26) 85.

⁴³ Lukianoff and Haidt (n 35) 72-73.

the mob on social media. Instead they must practice constant vigilance and self-censorship. This in its turn inevitably leads to a disintegration of college spirit and the fracture of campus life. Lukianoff and Haidt quote the experiences of students who endured the hardships of college life dominated by cancel culture. They identified four features of the culture: dogmatism, groupthink, a crusader mentality, and anti-intellectualism. These features would hardly qualify as staple diet for the intellectual freedom and the capacity for open and vigorous debate that one would expect to be at the centre of university life.⁴⁴

V FOUCAULT'S INFLUENCE

Michel Foucault, the French, post-modernist, philosopher, has been a very influential figure in the development of cancel culture in the sense that significant elements of his theories have been incorporated into it. The first element is the notion of discourse which refers to a type of language associated with an institution (legal, medical, religious, political, economic etc). It includes also the ideas and statements which express an institution's values, meanings and ideals.⁴⁵ Foucault would argue that we are controlled to a certain extent by the discourses we employ, and an interesting example of this can be seen in the manoeuvrings of the character Hamlet who oscillated between different discourses in the play – Renaissance discourse, Calvinist predestination discourse and the discourse of Seneca's revenge tragedies. We also know that certain historical events may not be recognised until they enter a relevant discourse. In the 1980s Professor Anita Hill claimed that she had been sexually harassed, years earlier, by Judge Clarence

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Geoff Danaher, *Understanding Foucault* (Allen & Unwin, 2000).

Thomas, who was about to be appointed to the US Supreme Court. When asked why she hadn't reported this earlier, she said that sexual harassment didn't actually 'exist' (in a legal sense) at the time she was working for Thomas. In other words it was not recognised until it entered a legal discourse.⁴⁶

Discourses can be elevated to positions of enormous prestige and status under certain conditions. Foucault's notions of power, knowledge and truth are keys to understanding the ways in which they may happen.⁴⁷ He perceived a complex relationship between the three. Power could be used at times to declare what truth is ("It is the victors who write history"). Possession of knowledge can create power and ideology (the cherished beliefs and ideas that the dominant group has about itself) will dictate which stories and discourses are put into circulation and which are not. The elites of the dominant groups or institutions have the ability to declare what bodies of knowledge are to be approved and circulated, consequently they have the power to enforce their version of the truth. As time passes this 'truth' is regarded as the most natural thing in the world and when this stage is reached a hegemony has been successfully established.⁴⁸ We can observe the ways in which certain universities and other institutions use this power. We see in Australia the academic censure of protest against Chinese Communist Party influence in higher education,⁴⁹ the prosecution of a well respected professor who questioned climate science,⁵⁰ as well as the cancellation of speakers and publications that

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ David Couzens, *Foucault: A Critical Reader* (Basil Blackwood Ltd, 1989) 123-140.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Matthew Lesh, 'Australia's universities are failing to protect free speech', *ABC News* (Web Article, 3 October 2017).

⁵⁰ Jennifer Oriel, 'Universities' in Kevin Donnelly (ed) *Cancel Culture and the Left's Long March* (Wilkinson, 2021) 60.

were to present politically incorrect views on controversial matters such as race, climate change and transgender politics.⁵¹ We can also witness some of the phrases and words that enter and make up the cancel culture discourse eg. “systemic racism”, “de-platforming”, “cancelling”, “I feel unsafe”, “I am offended”, “microaggressions”, “gender fluidity”, “disinvitation”, are just a few examples.

Foucault was postmodern in his conviction that there were no truly grand narratives so he was deeply suspicious of global totalitarian theories which claim to offer the solution to our ills.⁵² He held that there can be no such thing as a truth independent of its regime, unless it be that of another. So that liberation in the name of “truth” can only be the substitution of another system of power for this one. The “truth” manufactured by power also turns out to be its “masks” or disguises of hence untruth.⁵³ Foucault’s refusal of “truth” and “liberation” seems to be a Nietzschean one. In *Frohliche Wissenschaft*, Nietzsche declares that “there is no order of human life, or the way we are, or human nature, that one can appeal to in order to judge or evaluate between ways of life. There are only different orders imposed by men on primal chaos, following their will-to-power.”⁵⁴

Since the regime is entirely identified with its imposed truth unmasking can only destabilise it; it cannot bring about a new, stable, freer form. For Foucault, unmasking can only be the basis for a kind of local

⁵¹ Glyn Davis, ‘Special pleading: free speech and Australian universities’, *The Conversation* (Web Article, 4 December 2018) and Hugh Breakey, ‘Is “cancel culture” silencing open debate? The perils of shutting down disagreeable opinions and arguments’ *ABC Religion & Ethics* (Web Article, 13 July 2020).

⁵² Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge University Press, 1992) 160-166.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

resistance within the regime. He speaks of rehabilitating subjugated and local knowledges against the established and dominant truth. He uses the expression ‘insurrection of subjugated knowledges’ and talks of resistance movements that are always local and specific.⁵⁵

It is significant that critical theory no longer speak of a grand narrative – a utopian vision that addresses itself to the world at large. Instead it adopts the Foucauldian strategy of attacking local and specific issues – a kind of guerilla war on a wide front against many different targets – Feminism, Queer Theory, Critical Race Theory, Post-Colonial Studies, Whiteness Studies, Gender, Ethnicity, and Class.

VI WHAT VISION DRIVES CRITICAL THEORY?

Although woke/critical theory/cultural Marxist ideology no longer speak of a grand narrative and focus their attention on multiple issues, we must still ask the critical question about the motivation that lies behind their project. What is their final goal or vision when they have finished with their demythologising and deconstruction? Is there a destructive rage behind their endeavours and will they be content with destroying capitalism and emaciating Western cultural values? What type of world do they want us to inhabit? Do they still hold to some sort of Marxian utopia and if they do what sort of utopia will it be? To try and engage with these questions we must look more closely at the notion of vision. What is a vision and what are its powers? How do we go about evaluating it. Can there be a destructive vision or is it always a source of good?

⁵⁵ Ibid.

In his book *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles*, Thomas Sowell analyses the power of visions to shape political reality. He likens visions to maps that ‘guide us through a tangle of bewildering complexities, and like maps will have to leave out many details in order to let us focus on a few key items that lead to our goals.’⁵⁶ They are prior to theory in that we sense and feel how things should be before we do any systematic thinking that would lead to the construction of a theory. Marx may have started with his vision of utopia – a blissful state where people would live in equality and harmony without the irritation of restricting laws and stifling customs (the state would have withered away – it would be an earthly paradise – a return to the Garden of Eden. He then would have started to theorize on how to get there – the destruction of capitalism being a necessary first step. Visions can be very powerful as they set the agenda for both thought and action. They are both indispensable and dangerous.⁵⁷

Visions rest ultimately on some sense of the nature of man – not simply his existing practices but his ultimate potential and ultimate limitations.⁵⁸ Sowell makes two main divisions: one he calls the constrained vision and the other the unconstrained vision.⁵⁹ The constrained vision emphasizes the weakness and limitations of human nature and consequently the need for institutions and laws to ensure justice, peace and harmony.⁶⁰ He quotes various philosophers, economists and political writers to illustrate this view. For example, Adam Smith, the economist, praises the workings of the market to

⁵⁶ Thomas Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles* (Basic Books, 2007) 6.

⁵⁷ Ibid 3-34.

⁵⁸ Ibid 30.

⁵⁹ Ibid 31-32.

⁶⁰ Ibid 33.

appeal to the self-interest of men, while at the same time delivering benefits to the community. Smith also saw government as ‘an imperfect remedy’ for the deficiency of ‘wisdom and virtue’ in man.⁶¹ The *Federalist Papers* note: ‘Why has government been instituted at all? Because the passions of men will not conform to the dictates of reason and justice without constraint.’⁶²

The American Constitution’s checks and balances clearly imply that no one was to be completely trusted with power.⁶³ Edmund Burke, the British statesman, declared: ‘We cannot change the nature of things and of men – but must act upon them as best we can,’⁶⁴ and that there is ‘a radical infirmity in all human contrivances,’ an infirmity inherent in the very nature of things.⁶⁵ And of course, we must add Immanuel Kant’s famous dictum, ‘Out of timber so crooked as that from which man is made nothing entirely straight can be built.’⁶⁶

In contrast, the unconstrained vision of human nature saw enormous potential that could be developed. William Godwin, the moral philosopher, (anticipating Marx and Marcuse) in 1793 refers to ‘men as they hereafter may be made.’⁶⁷ He was highly critical of Smith’s ideas that advocated incentives and prohibitions to be used in the public forum. For Godwin the ‘hope of reward’ and the ‘fear of punishment’ were in his vision ‘wrong in themselves’ and ‘inimical to the improvement of the mind.’⁶⁸ Instead, Godwin argued, efforts should

⁶¹ Ibid 26.

⁶² Ibid 27.

⁶³ Ibid 23.

⁶⁴ Ibid 16.

⁶⁵ Ibid 23.

⁶⁶ Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (Pimlico, 2003) quoting Kant’s *gesammelte Schriften* (1900) vol 8, 23.

⁶⁷ Sowell (n 56) 16.

⁶⁸ Ibid 17.

be devoted to ‘stimulate the generous and magnanimous sentiments of our nature.’⁶⁹ The unconstrained vision promotes pursuit of the highest ideals and the best solutions and it treats process cost as secondary. The French Revolution is a good example of this – defenders of the revolution will say “You cannot make omelettes without breaking eggs.” In contrast the constrained vision deals in trade-offs rather than solutions, and in regard to process costs Adam Smith was quite definite: ‘The peace and order of society is of more importance than even the relief of the miserable.’⁷⁰

When Jean Jacques Rousseau said that ‘man is born free’ but ‘Is everywhere in chains,’ he expressed the essence of the unconstrained vision, in which the fundamental problem is not in nature or man, but in institutions. According to Rousseau ‘men are not naturally enemies.’ The opposite vision is presented in Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* where the power of a strong sovereign is needed to prevent the war of each against all. Life in the natural state would otherwise be ‘nasty, brutal and short.’⁷¹ Which vision contains the truth?

Aristotle would have said that the truth must lie somewhere in the middle a combination of both. Human nature is mixed and so are institutions. The paradox of human development is that we cannot develop into mature individuals without the connection with other people and society. We are social animals, and so are not self-sufficient. We need human interaction, we exist in relationships, and must have them to become free, responsible, human beings.⁷² There is no such a being as natural man running around freely – he is an abstraction – a logical fiction. But Rousseau has a point in that our development as

⁶⁹ Ibid 18.

⁷⁰ Ibid 29.

⁷¹ Ibid 30.

⁷² Taylor (n 51) 189-192.

human beings is greatly affected by the upbringing we received, and the type of society and state we live in. We know that the organisations that we work in and societies that we live in can have profoundly damaging effects on us. Elliot Jaques, the Canadian psychoanalyst, who spent a large part of his life studying organizations states that ‘it is badly organized social systems that arouse psychotic anxieties and lead to their disturbing acting out and expression in working relationships.’⁷³

For Jaques, organisations are formed primarily to get a job done, but if they are badly organized they will inevitably generate anxiety and stress; if well-organized they will promote mutual trust and security and consequently reduce anxiety and disturbed acting out.⁷⁴ This view was substantiated by Douglas Kirsner’s in-depth study of four American Psychoanalytic Institutes. Because all the members of these institutes were trained analysts who had themselves undergone personal analysis for several years, it is reasonable to assume that they were all optimally functioning human beings, yet Kirsner found that the institutes were highly dysfunctional. Instead of operating with a culture of open, critical inquiry they behaved rather like religious sects guarding their revealed dogma.⁷⁵ Their organization was ecclesiastical in nature with a small coterie of select individuals, ‘the keepers of the flame’, holding the key positions. The lack of proper organizational structure generated feelings of paranoia, suspicion and produced bitter in-fighting over power.⁷⁶ From this analysis we could conclude that

⁷³ Elliott Jaques, ‘Why the Psychoanalytic Approach to Understanding Organizations is Dysfunctional’ (1995) 48 *Human Relations* 343.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Douglas Kirsner, *Unfree Associations: Inside Psychoanalytic Institutes* (Process Press, 2000).

⁷⁶ Ibid.

a society or state with good laws and institutions would be able to promote and encourage what is finest in human nature while at the same time restraining and curtailing its darker elements.⁷⁷

We can now ask the question where does Critical Theory and Cancel Culture stand on the question of vision? If we go back to the three ‘masters of suspicion’ we can see first of all that Freud’s vision involved individuals gaining some liberation through the process of psychoanalysis but that did not entail any great plans for change in society. In fact in his *Civilization and its Discontents* he maintained that a certain amount of repression would have to be retained for civilization to function. His was a constrained vision. Nietzsche’s vision centered on his “will-to-power,” which he saw as a dark, powerful, irrational force in our human nature that could be destructive, but could also be harnessed by the individual into something good. However, with the “Death of God”, Nietzsche feared that the world would fall into either nihilism or destructive totalitarianism unless the *Übermensch* (the higher person) arrived with a new set of values. This is also a very constrained vision. Marx’s utopian vision after the state has withered away and capitalism with its supporting superstructure destroyed, is very much an unconstrained one. But it sounds very much like Rousseau’s innocent man before society put him “into chains”. The trouble here is that Marx assumes that if we can destroy Capitalism and its false ideology then we will be liberated and free. He does not give us any idea of what the new ideology will be like or how society will function. He also assumes that human beings will behave and that there will be no deviancy. His assumed vision has a striking similarity to that of Zeno the Stoic, one of the first utopians, who conceived of an anarchist society in which all rational beings live in perfect peace,

⁷⁷ Ibid.

equality and happiness without the benefits of institutions. No need for control, no need for a state, no need for law courts, or for any organized , institutional life.⁷⁸ This is a good example of an extreme, unconstrained vision of human nature.

We saw earlier that the Critical Theorists of the Frankfurt School and Antonio Gramsci had the liberation of people as their goal and they saw this coming about when capitalism and its ideologies were destroyed. Again like Marx there is no account of what liberation will be like when it is achieved. From our analysis of the two visions earlier we concluded that good laws and good institutions are needed to promote human flourishing, but Critical Theory and Cancel Culture give us no idea what laws or institutions we are likely to have when the deconstruction and cancelling come to an end. All we have is the assumption that Rousseau's innocent, perfect man will magically appear when the 'false' ideologies are finally demolished.

Given the attitudes and tactics of the Woke generation with their hostility, deplatforming and cancelling, it is very difficult to imagine their bearing any resemblance to Rousseau 'natural man', when utopia finally arrives, after the eclipse of western civilization. We would be more likely to end up with Hobbes' "war of each against all" and today's equivalent of life being "brutal, nasty, and short".

VII FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

We would do well to meditate on the words of Edmund Burke written in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* concerning the Versatility of Evil. He argues that we do not always learn correctly the real lessons of history because we focus on the pretexts rather than the causes.

⁷⁸ Berlin, n.66, 22.

‘History consists, for the greater part, of the miseries brought upon the world by pride, ambition, avarice, revenge, lust, sedition, hypocrisy, ungoverned zeal, and all the train of disorderly appetites.’⁷⁹ These vices are the real cause of disturbance and disorder. ‘Religion, morals, laws, privileges liberties, rights of men, are the pretexts. The pretexts are always found in some specious appearance of a real good.’⁸⁰ Burke goes on to say that you will not eradicate evil by wholesale changes to the pretexts:

Wise men will apply their remedies to vices, not to names, to the causes of evil which are permanent, not to the occasional organs by which they act, and the transitory modes in which they appear. Seldom have two ages the same fashion in their pretexts and the same modes of mischief. Wickedness is a little more inventive. Whilst you are discussing fashion, the fashion is gone by. The same vice assumes a new body.⁸¹

Wokeism and Cancel Culture cloth themselves in the garments of anti-racism and social justice both worthy objectives in themselves, but the manner in which they promote them calls to mind Burke’s distinction between causes and pretexts. With “ungoverned zeal” and not a little “pride” they adopt the methods of common-enemy identity politics to pursue their ends. It is the old Marxist dialectic at work – attack an opposite group or class – hold them up to ridicule – disempower them – cancel them. Pride also dictates that they see themselves as the “Anointed ones,” the “Elect” and the sole occupants of the moral high ground- untroubled by any thoughts of humility or self-doubt. Dershowitz claims the “Anointed” are possessed of “moral

⁷⁹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* quoted in Connor Cruise O’Brien, *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography of Edmund Burke* (The University of Chicago Press, 1992) 603-604.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

clarity” ie “The Truth”, which means that there is only one correct way to see things, and that anyone who disagrees with these views is racist, morally inferior, or politically incorrect.⁸² Free speech and due process are just delaying barriers to their utopia. There is no attempt at discussion, dialogue or compromise you either agree with their vision or are cast into “outer darkness” to become the benighted.⁸³

The neo-Marxist inspired Cancel Culture has an aura of religious fundamentalism about it. Totally convinced of its own rectitude it combines in Dershowitz’s words the ‘worst elements of self-righteousness and judgementalism.’⁸⁴ Thomas Sowell describes the behaviour and attitude of elites who pursue their vision of what they deem good for country, cause or institution. Their vision (often faulty) is the driving force behind their rhetoric, actions and policy decisions.⁸⁵ In Sowell’s book, *The Vision of the Anointed*, he asserts that underlying the vision is a framework of assumptions within which social and political discourse takes place in the media, academia, and in politics. Any empirical evidence that might contradict the vision is either ignored, suppressed or dismissed.⁸⁶ The vision of the anointed is not just a vision of the world and its functioning but is also a vision of themselves and of their moral role in the world. Those who believe in the vision are in a special state of grace and consequently elevated to a higher moral plane. Should you disagree with the prevailing vision you would be seen as not merely in error, but in sin.⁸⁷ Thus, we have the sharp division into the anointed and the benighted. If you are in the

⁸² Dershowitz (n 1) 8.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Sowell (n 56) 4.

⁸⁶ Thomas Sowell, *The Vision of the Anointed: Self-Congratulations as a Basis Social Policy* (Basic Books, 1995) 186-189.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 105-116.

ranks of the benighted then you are to be made “aware,” to have your “consciousness raised,” in the hope that you will “grow.” Should you resist this re-education process then you will be dismissed as perverse, malignant or meanspirited, and efforts will be made to expose the “real reasons” behind your arguments and actions.⁸⁸ Albert Camus’ famous statement from *The Fall* comes readily to mind to describe their attitude:

How intoxicating to feel like God the Father and to hand out definitive testimonials of bad character and habits.⁸⁹

Isaiah Berlin, the political philosopher, believes that some moral, social, and political values conflict. There are, he says, ‘some ultimate values by which men live that cannot be reconciled or combined.’ You cannot combine full liberty with full equality – ‘full liberty for the wolves cannot be combined with full liberty for the sheep.’⁹⁰ Mercy and justice, knowledge and happiness can collide. Utopian solutions are unworkable because they try to combine the uncombinable. In a pluralist, liberal society hard choices have to be made, there is no avoiding compromises and trade-offs. “How much equality, how much liberty? How much justice, how much mercy?” This doesn’t sit well for believers in the unconstrained vision, because they believe that no sacrifice is too great in establishing the ideal society. If blood has to be shed to create the perfect world then let it be shed. “You have to break eggs to make the splendid omelette.” The danger is that once people get into the habit of breaking eggs they rarely stop – “the eggs are broken but the omelette is not made.”⁹¹ Berlin warns that ‘fanatical belief

⁸⁸ Sowell (n 86) chs 1, 5.

⁸⁹ Albert Camus, *The Fall* (Penguin Books, 2020).

⁹⁰ Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (Haliban Publishers, 2007) 47.

⁹¹ Ibid 143.

in a perfect solution, even if demanded by the sincerest of idealists, the purest of heart, cannot but lead to suffering, misery, blood, and terrible repression.⁹² The Great Terror, the Great Purge, the Cultural Revolution, are compelling evidence of this. Humanity is not built for such totalitarian schemes.

We have seen that Marxist ideology strongly informs the values and practices of the Woke generation and Cancel Culture. There is no thought of reasoned debate or compromise, it is a battle between two ideologies with only one winner. Some worthy causes are espoused and supported but they are hijacked in the form of common-enemy identity politics. There is even a weaponising of the justice system to further their ideological goals. Dershowitz accurately describes the dominant facets of their modus operandi. He shows how they simplify complex issues and swiftly punish any opposing views by shaming and ostracising those who oppose them.

It is a cancer on American democracy, meritocracy, due process, and freedom of expression ... it endangers basic liberties, miseducates students, erases history, empowers extremists, destroys hard-earned legacies, - all without accountability and transparency ... It must be contested in the market place of ideas.⁹³

Michael Walsh in his polemical *The Devil's Pleasure Palace: The Cult of Critical Theory and the Subversion of the West*, uses religious, apocalyptic, and literary discourses to depict the evil of Critical Theory. Walsh believes that gullible Americans have been seduced by the “siren song” of European theory. They have succumbed to that ‘hateful ideology’ which tries to save humanity while despising people

⁹² Ibid 142-143.

⁹³ Ibid 123-124.

– its philosophical essence – ‘creation is a bore annihilation is a joy.’⁹⁴

In Milton’s *Paradise Lost* Satan has been expelled from heaven and his first desire is revenge. He cannot attack heaven but he can go after “God’s new toy”, humanity. Walsh describes Critical Theory thus:

In its purest form, which is to say its most malevolent form, Critical Theory is the very essence of Satanism: rebellion for the sake of rebellion against an established order that has obtained for eons, and with no greater promise for the future than destruction. We must use the word ‘satanic,’ which means the desire to tear down a longstanding, even elemental, order and replace it with ... nothing ... Like Satan, the Left must always have something to ‘fight,’ lest it be rendered impotent, because its driving force, as we have seen, stems not from philosophy but emotion – hatred, resentment, envy, and malcontentment.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Walsh (n 26) 141

⁹⁵ Ibid 50, 83, 193.