

The Flawed Premises of “Critical Theories” and the Risks for U.S. Foreign Policy

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Introduction

U.S. foreign policy practitioners, as a rule, focus on pressing issues: geopolitical rivalries, military deployments, the possible use of force, civil wars abroad, serious trade conflicts, and similar highly tangible events and developments. Theories are sometimes of interest to foreign policy analysts if they can credibly explain, or possibly predict, the behavior of certain foreign leaders, but such theories—in part because of their abstraction—are rarely at the forefront of the mind of foreign policy analysts. Day-to-day developments are frequently of more interest and concern.

Nevertheless, the new book *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything About Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody* by British author Helen Pluckrose and American mathematician James Lindsay shows that it has become important for foreign policy practitioners to devote attention to a wide range of “critical theories.”

In their book, Pluckrose and Lindsay explore the intellectual roots of a range of critical theories, each of which is committed to one specific type of “social justice.”

Critical Theories

These critical theories are based on a mixture of postmodernism and post-colonial premises—some have a direct lineage to the Frankfurt School and French deconstructionists. The analytical premises and assumptions of critical theories are far-reaching. For the sake of brevity, I will list just a few:

- The Western world, through imperialism and colonialism, is responsible for the major problems of the developing world, and it is to be morally condemned. (“Imperialist” behavior by non-Western civilizations or intense tribal warfare among non-Western peoples tends to simply be ignored.)¹
- Adherents of critical theory hold that concepts such as “objective knowledge,” “reason,” and “science” reproduce systemic inequality and systematically unequal power structures. These notions are dismissed as naïve myths (much like the Enlightenment’s broader premises) because they are the result of “Eurocentric” or “white supremacist” cultures and therefore morally suspect and biased.
- White racism is one of the most pressing human rights problems—perhaps the most pressing—in the United States and other Western democracies. Society, politics, and the economy all rest on systemic White racism.
- White racism is systemic, omnipresent, and frequently unconscious. White children are guilty of it, too. (Non-White people cannot be racist because they are not privileged.)
- Capitalism is to be rejected both for its unequal concentrations of power and for (allegedly) its intricate relationship to White racism. Capitalism is not to be celebrated for the power to lift large numbers out of poverty or for its ability to afford opportunity to inventive individuals hailing from humble backgrounds.

- Indigenous cultures and tribes have access to “lived knowledge” and “experiential knowledge” that is frequently superior to “objective” knowledge because it does not stem from racism.
- Pursuing “universal individual human rights” ignores systemic power imbalances and disregards group identities. Oppressed groups need to be privileged to redress power imbalances.²

In a relatively short historical period, analytical assumptions stemming from critical theory have made deep inroads into the Democratic Party, academia (law schools, the humanities, the social sciences, and now even the natural sciences and mathematics, particularly at elite institutions), think tanks, grant-making foundations, and (most surprisingly) large corporations, not only in the technology industry.³

Critical race theory spread in American law schools and humanities from the late 1980s onward. The adoption of critical theories expanded rapidly from the early 2010s onward. Critical theories have now captured large portions of the American intellectual elite and a considerable number of grassroots activists.

The question is: What type of foreign policy will the U.S. craft if many of the “movers and shakers” in the American cultural and political elite share the above assumptions?

I argue that the premises listed above are highly contestable and frequently inaccurate; they make objective analysis impossible. The theories also limit facts and historical accuracy. For example, a researcher committed to “post-colonial” theory will find evidence of colonial abuses but will not find (or uncover) acts of cruelty of indigenous tribes toward one another.

Adherents of the theories are “critical” but are, in a strange twist, not willing to examine critically their own premises. The premises (some of which are listed above) are the starting point. They are orthodoxy: all research proceeds from them and cannot contradict them.

Foreign Policy Implications of Critical Theories

Consider some of the implications of these critical theories on our foreign policy. If there is no such thing as objective knowledge—if American “knowledge” simply reflects oppressive power structures—on what basis can U.S. foreign officials gather and assess information on what happens in the world? Or, if capitalism is to be condemned for its inherent White racism, how can the opportunities of free enterprise be extended to individuals in poor countries seeking access to markets, international trade, and the global financial system?

Further, if a U.S. foreign policy official proceeds from the assumption that the major problems in the developing world are caused by the legacy of Western imperialism and colonialism, how can he explore local causes of problems or the role of certain ideologies that are not Western in origin that may produce instability, conflict, or tumult? Or if that official is convinced that the U.S. is racist beyond redemption, how can any human rights leadership be provided to other countries? How could other countries ever be criticized on human rights grounds?

If the U.S. sits at the apex of an immoral and oppressive global power structure, how could the Chinese Communist Party ever be criticized on human rights grounds? If our foreign policy official is convinced that cruelty is the exclusive domain of the Western world, how can he assess intra-tribal warfare in parts of Africa?

Finally, if Whites are subconsciously racist and reproduce an oppressive systemic power structure, how can White people ethically be entrusted with formulating U.S. foreign policy?

The implications of critical theories are broad. After studying the premises of these theories, I have concluded that the vulnerable and marginalized individuals of the world will be severely hurt—not helped—by the flawed premises and cynical conclusions of critical theorists.

In viewing large portions of the world as perpetual victims, critical theories undermine and devalue individual agency. In rejecting capitalism, critical theories reject a path out of poverty for the masses in developing countries. In policing language, critical theories make having normal conversations impossible; they restrict freedom of thought and human expression and foster paranoia. In limiting racism to Caucasians, critical theories risk inflaming racial

tensions and ignore long-standing indigenous (non-White) intra-tribal tensions. In limiting academic study to Western imperialism, critical theories ignore human rights abuses committed by non-Western civilizations, cultures, and groups and the relevance of those abuses to contemporary conflicts.

Moreover, in blaming the Western world, and America in particular, for the contemporary problems of developing countries, critical theories encourage a mindset of victimhood that undermines the willingness of non-Western peoples and countries to pursue domestic reforms and improvements, instead fostering bitterness and deep resentment toward the Western world. Finally, in promoting the notion of reparations from the Western world, critical theories encourage non-Western countries to remain mired in a spirit of victimhood as well as dependency.

Large corporations, grant-making foundations, and universities that embrace the flawed premises of critical theories are not helping the downtrodden peoples of this world—quite the contrary. They sustain the victimhood narrative, trapping thousands in poverty without the tools or support to lift themselves out.

What Would a Good Foreign Policy Look Like?

Unlike a foreign policy based on “critical” premises, a good U.S. foreign policy would take note of the recently released *Report of the Commission on Unalienable Rights*. The report provides a critical reflection of both domestic and foreign sins of the United States, but also highlights the commitments we have made toward a more just and equal world.

The report focuses on unalienable rights, as opposed to the broader and constantly expanding human rights. These are rights inseparable from humanity that apply universally (although not all nations respect this). Our foreign policy should focus on leading by example and supporting other countries in their pursuit of protecting these freedoms for their citizenry.

If we want to be a beacon of hope for the rest of the world, then we also must address our own inequalities and disparities. These issues are complex and require genuine critical thinking, not to be confused with critical theories, to develop successful solutions.

A Tangible Example

After the George Floyd killing, I took a deep dive into the state of racial inequalities in the U.S. I concluded that, above all, stronger educational opportunities for Black, minority, or poor children would significantly benefit these populations.

I decided to look into a school in Nairobi, Kenya, that my brother attended but unfortunately dropped out of in the 1980s, the Starehe Boys’ Centre. I vividly remember being jealous of my brother because he could attend this school, but I could not (Starehe has since remedied this situation by opening a Girls’ Centre). There is a very old documentary online called the *Starehe Boys’ Centre Documentary* that examines the philosophy of the school, which in many ways is the antithesis of critical race theory. I urge every reader to give twenty minutes of their time to this short piece.

The school was founded in 1959 with a goal to create opportunity. It admits a mixture of low-income and even homeless boys on full or partial scholarships, and many of them grow into brilliant and high-achieving professionals. In return, former pupils voluntarily sponsor other students. This has created a self-sustaining system that has lifted thousands of boys out of poverty and hopelessness. In a country as poor and struggling as Kenya, with hostile neighbors, it is a wonder that such a school can exist, much less flourish. More recently, Abaarso School of Science and Technology in Somaliland has taken a similar approach.

This approach to education could not only be applied domestically in cities like Chicago, Detroit, and St. Louis, but could also inform our foreign policy agenda. The United States could encourage countries, like those in the Middle East or Africa, to use this proven model. We could have done this in Afghanistan. We should do this in countries today that are in danger of falling under the influence of China or Russia.

Critical theories, by post-modernist extremists, should not inform our foreign policy. These doctrines are a threat to our society and to the millions of people around the world living in poverty. The United States should base its foreign policy on unalienable rights, secured through proven, successful solutions. We should find other models like the Starehe Boys' Centre and Abaarso School and support foreign nations (as well as our own) in implementing these examples.

Let us not fall prey to the lure of critical theories but remain true to our foundational principles and spirit, both at home and abroad.

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¹ This is a tenet of post-colonial theory, to which Edward Said contributed heavily.

² I have paraphrased these from the book *Cynical Theories*, but it is possible to list many other premises.

³ Some companies, in embracing what I have called "wokeism," may simply be attempting to divert attention away from popular economic grievances, but some executives do appear to believe "woke" premises. Grant-making foundations, such as the Ford Foundation and the Open Society Foundations, have launched a dizzying array of measures committed to "social justice" and "equity"—though they accept only *one type* of social justice as valid, namely, that based on critical theory.