

A discussion with Helen Pluckrose, co-author of “Grievance Studies” hoax article

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On October 2, Helen Pluckrose, James A. Lindsay and Peter Boghossian published an article titled “Academic Grievance Studies and the Corruption of Scholarship,” which detailed the results of a year-long effort to publish false hoax articles, deliberately comprised of made-up data and bogus, reactionary conclusions, in academic journals associated with gender, race, and sexual orientation studies.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with Helen Pluckrose about the study and its political and intellectual significance.

Eric London, WSW: How did this article come about? Was there a straw that broke the camel’s back that made the three of you realize you had to launch this project?

HP: I think we each had different straws break our backs. We were looking at terrible epistemology and the way that postmodernism and identitarianism enabled inconsistent ethics. The ethical problem is basically the rejection of objective knowledge. They believe that knowledge is constructed in the service of power and perpetuated through language, and the inconsistent ethics that are inevitable when you think this way. Looking through identity, we are told it is okay to be prejudiced against some people, for example. It is a mess.

WSWS: The fact that the postmodernist nonsense you wrote has been published says a lot about the pseudo-intellectual atmosphere at American universities. How toxic is the culture in these circles?

HP: I’ll give you an example. We went to Portland State University, where Peter [Boghossian] teaches, to explore the argument that men and women may have different interests on average, that this might explain different uptakes of jobs, and that if we want to get more women into tech, then perhaps jobs should be made more attractive to the things women are interested in. It was never suggested that women can’t do tech, but this was how it was interpreted because of this idea that knowledge is a construct and that therefore if you acknowledge differences between men and women you are saying women are inferior.

We received threats, some of which were bluster, but some of which were serious. They ranged from threats to throw dirty diapers at us to using grenades at our meeting. We had to arrive early and hide. We engaged bodyguards. Some protesters got up and walked out and physically damaged the sound system. We needed a police escort off the premises. This is just because we wanted to talk about the significant amount of scientific evidence

that there actually are biological differences between women and men.

This is not just a question of a few mad students. This is a broader social problem. I am a historian, and I am interested in women’s issues and gender equality. And I can be threatened and dismissed for saying that men and women might not be psychologically identical? That is dangerous.

WSWS: Can you describe the types of pressures academics are under to conform to this hysteria over identity and postmodernism?

HP: We are hearing a lot from academics. There has been a surge of letters to us since we revealed ourselves. The pressure of course depends on what field you are in, but you are likely to come against constraints about the way in which you are allowed to do your work no matter what. I have so many emails saying things like, “well done,” they wish they could speak out, but they cannot lose their jobs. One person wrote saying something to the effect of, “I know it seems cowardly, but teaching is my life.” There are so many who would like to speak out, but they are afraid of being dogpiled.

WSWS: What about the response has surprised you? Has it been what you expected?

HP: I’m getting some nastiness, obviously. People are accusing us of being fascists and Nazis and generally evil, but I can ignore that. What tends to be coming from the left-wing academics who are postmodernists is confirming what we’ve said. They’re defending the papers as good scholarship! They are saying the only thing wrong is that we invented names and supplied false data on occasion.

This is a norm now. We were often accused of straw-manning when we said this problem was happening. But this proves that the problem in these circles is not just a few outliers of crazy identitarians; it is common in the identity-based studies, what we call grievances studies.

And another thing: Someone actually wrote to us saying we were paying “too much attention to white people” when we argued white children should be put in chains on the floor of the classroom. This was a sign we were white-centric or something.

WSWS: The video you published is hilarious, and I applaud you for finding the element of humor in this, but when I got to the part where you describe having your re-write of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* get accepted in an academic journal, that was where the smile left my face. Can you tell us about that?

HP: You know, even after we revealed ourselves as hoaxers, we've found it strange. Some people are still defending that article, saying it was a good part of *Mein Kampf*! In both the identitarian grievance studies and fascism you still get totalitarianism, militancy, and grievances, even though identity people are coming from a left perspective.

But what we mainly wanted to do with that article was to show that this feminist and postmodernist theory can be manipulated to support anything. We found a text which is the opposite of social justice and we managed to make the theory work for it.

WSWS: Many of these people call themselves “left-wing”—do you think that is a fair label?

HP: Well, it was initially taken up by people with the same kind of aims to equalize society, to help the marginalized. I don't doubt some of their motives. But one thing is, they have always been very opposed to the socialist left. When they say oppressive forces are being maintained by discourse, they mention white supremacy, the patriarchy, etc., but the class analysis was completely lacking from the start. There is almost no attention paid to working class issues.

WSWS: Your study is about “grievance studies”—why did you choose this word in particular?

HP: We're trying to define what we're looking at. It isn't everyone in the humanities. It is a specific approach which is a kind of Social Justice approach with capital “S” and capital “J.” It is this approach where people are seeking to uncover prejudice and bias and oppressive language which is keeping people down. Grievance studies sets out to “problematize” everything.

WSWS: But when you use the word “grievance,” it seems to raise the fact that there are social grievances underlying the identity politics milieu.

HP: Well, I think one of the reasons that class is such a neglected issue for them is because they can't mention class because to do so would include them in the category of the oppressor. They are writing identity and postmodernist literature about themselves.

It is interesting that postmodernist ideas are strongest in the most elite universities. There was a study which argued that at community colleges and colleges with the highest proportion of students who work while they study—that there is much less attention paid to this grievance culture.

In other words, it is rising in an elite context. It isn't a coincidence that most of the academics who address grievance studies neglect class, because it would not only complicate their narrative; it would also implicate them as not oppressed but as the dominant, powerful group.

WSWS: And inequality within racial groups is growing astronomically. Among African-Americans and Latinos in the US, for example, inequality is now greater than among whites.

HP: About a year ago there was a study that showed class divisions among African Americans are high and that prejudices against them were much more based on class than race. The study showed that people who had African names and were conceived of as upper class immigrants were getting many more call backs for jobs than people with African-American names who were perceived to be poorer. The study argued it wasn't about skin color but about class and culture.

WSWS: Should your article provide us with hope that there are more like you hiding out in academia?

HP: I'm sure there is good work getting done by smart people, but it is just difficult to get it published. Mostly, the serious work comes from outside academia. I'm currently looking at the differences between materialism and postmodernism, for example, in post-colonial studies. This debate does seem to be taking place in that field. The self-described materialist or Marxist academics who are critical of the postmodernists do tend to be a minority themselves. They have pointed out that the postmodernists are in elite institutions in the west, while the materialist academics are predominantly in previously colonized countries.

This type of philosophy does only support the wealthy. The people who are taking on these ideas of identity do tend to be middle class, who either have the time to study this or who are actually at an elite university.

WSWS: Do you think there's any significance to the fact that you have published your article in the midst of a growth of the extreme-right in countries across Europe and the Americas? What do you think accounts for this process?

HP: The main left parties, by abandoning their liberal commitments and their economic base in the working class, have dropped the ball. They have become less credible, and they are losing elections. They are intensifying fears going on about Islamism, they are fanning racial divisions, gender divisions, and in the process they are pushing people to the right.

Yes, awful things are happening on the right, and that is the clearest danger. But we need to focus on the left, on our side, too, to make us credible so that we can appeal to the average working human being. This is a serious problem.

WSWS: And the Democrats are doing further damage by attacking the presumption of innocence and by claiming through the #MeToo campaign that all accusers should be believed, no matter what.

HP: The left, by moving away from objective reality, by moving away from truth, has fed into this abandonment of the notion of due process. Essentially by prioritizing identities, the whole “believe women” thing has caught on in these layers.

It may be well intended, and it is awful when women aren't believed, but by advocating for blind belief on the grounds of the accusers' identity as women rather than individual action and the underlying facts is undermining confidence in the “left.” It is a Kafka trap, it is totalitarian. What we need is a strong, rational, objective left to oppose this type of politics.



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