



HELEN HUGHES LECTURE FOR EMERGING THINKERS

Claire Lehmann

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Academic cultures and
explanatory conflict

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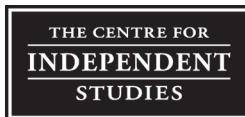
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Foreword

The Centre for Independent Studies inaugurated the Helen Hughes Lecture in 2016 to honour the memory of one of Australia's greatest economists and public intellectuals.

Professor Helen Hughes was for many years a senior fellow at the CIS who made a remarkable contribution to public policy debates in this country, especially through her ground-breaking research on the plight of Indigenous communities in rural and remote Australia.

We established an annual lecture in Professor Hughes' name not only to remember her legacy of outstanding and fearless scholarship, but also to honour her work as a mentor and adviser to many young people whom she assisted with their careers.

We thought it was appropriate to create an event to give a platform to a person we identified as an emerging thinker with something important to say about important issues.

As the following pages testify, the person chosen to deliver the 2018 Helen Hughes lecture, Claire Lehmann, is certainly qualified to do so.

As Deirdre Macken, writing in *The Weekend Australian* in July this year, has said:

She may still work from home and hold meetings in cafes, but 33-year-old Claire Lehmann has garnered a global audience, is centre stage in the culture war, and has tapped a powerful network with her online magazine, Quillette.

Claire's lecture — which explains why and how universities are fuelling the corrosive identity politics phenomena that is sweeping western countries — is an important contribution to the debate about the state of our institutions of higher learning.

With a mix of erudition and common sense, Claire unpacked complicated academic theories and drew laser-sharp attention to the impact these theories are having on contemporary society and politics.

The style and substance of the lecture shows why *The New York Times* has rightly identified Claire as one of the leading figures of the so-called 'intellectual dark web'. This is the group of international writers and thinkers (such as Jordon Petersen and Jonathan Haidt) who are pushing back against the stultifying political correctness promoted in academia, and who are defending the vital principles of freedom of speech and thought that universities used to stand for.

The CIS was proud to host Claire. We are equally delighted to republish her remarks in full here, together with the text of the conversation that also occurred with Dr Jeremy Sammut, the Director of the CIS's Culture, Prosperity, and Civil Society Program.

Tom Switzer
Executive Director
The Centre for Independent Studies

Conflict vs Mistake: Academic cultures and explanatory conflict

The speech I'm going to give tonight is broadly about how academic cultures, and the clash between two academic cultures, are affecting our political discourse and making conversations more difficult than they should be. I'm going to draw on the work of a Californian psychiatrist called Scott Alexander, who developed a model of the conflict versus mistake approach to politics. I'm also going to draw on the work of two moral sociologists called Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, who wrote *The Rise of Victimhood Culture*, which has been released this year.

I'm going to use shorthand terms that Alexander has used to describe different explanatory styles. By explanatory style, I mean the way we explain social phenomena and the way these explanations influence how we think about politics. Alexander identifies two key explanatory styles that are crucial for understanding contemporary political discourse. The first is that of a mistake theorist. A mistake theorist, according to Alexander, is someone who believes that political problems arise because there is a mistake or an error in the system. To the mistake theorists, social phenomena arise from an interplay of many different variables. To understand social phenomena we must undertake an in-depth analysis to work out what is really going on and how to fix it. Mistake theorists view politics like science or engineering, like a mechanic looking at a car.

The second explanatory style is that of the conflict theorist. A conflict theorist sees the world as being comprised of oppressor classes, and oppressed classes. Powerful groups systematically exploit disadvantaged groups. Any unequal distribution of resources, or any unequal outcomes are seen as evidence of one group exploiting another. The conflict theorist views politics as war. The mistake theorist values debate, open inquiry and free speech. There is an understanding here that we all bring different skill sets and knowledge to the table and we want to be able to get together to learn from each other, to harness our collective insights. Because free speech allows us to search for the truth and uncover our mistakes, for the mistake theorists, free speech is sacrosanct.

Conflict theorists, in contrast, are not persuaded by the need for debate. They may view debate as being a distraction, a delaying tactic, an attempt to proliferate ideas that are harmful to the disadvantaged. To the modern conflict theorist protecting the disadvantaged or the vulnerable is sacrosanct. The moral sociologists, Campbell and Manning, have theorized that within this world view, a moral hierarchy is set up according to one's status as being a member of an oppressed group. Members of less powerful groups are imbued with a special moral status. Due to this special moral status members of this less powerful group must be fiercely protected. Any criticism is described as victim blaming.

It's not just left-wingers who used conflict theory in political rhetoric. You can see that the language of oppression comes into Marine Le Pen's description of immigration, threatening the survival of the French people. The threat is organized. It's coming from a powerful class of elites. The right-wing version of conflict theory blames bankers, globalists, technocratic elites for exploiting the ordinary people. The left-wing version blames white people, straight people, men of any race, now increasingly, cis people—that is people who identify with the gender that they were born with. The conflict theorist, as I said before, sets up a moral hierarchy, and criticism is victim blaming, but to the mistake theorists, there is no moral hierarchy.

People possess equal moral worth. A member of an oppressor group is deserving of the same process and method as a member of an oppressed group. So, to a mistake theorist, process and method are essential. A mistake theorist is likely to advocate for principles such as the presumption of innocence, procedural fairness, due process. Mistake theorists are therefore suspicious of passion and emotion when it comes to answering complex political problems. The book that most represents this attitude to me is this book by the Yale psychologist, Paul Bloom. His book, *Against Empathy*, argues that empathy leads to irrational decision making and that a cool, detached and more statistical approach leads us to fairer, and more moral, that is, utilitarian to him, outcomes. So, this is the apotheosis of the mistake theorist's worldview.

By contrast, the conflict theorist is suspicious of methodological purity and the cool rationality that process demands. Hot emotions are seen as assets, not weaknesses. To get anything done in the political sphere the conflict theorist views spirit and passion as being the most important component. Now, both explanatory styles have their uses. I'm not trying to argue that there is absolutely no use for conflict theorists, or that this explanatory style of the world is completely wrong. I think it's probably been quite useful in a lot of important contexts.

However, a training in the sciences will most often lead one to be a mistake theorist, particularly in the context of very sensitive social political problems that we have today. A student who has undertaken several years of coursework in statistics will know that any social phenomena has a multiplicity of causes. She will know that correlation does not imply causation. She will know that if we want to talk about causality, we need to control for extraneous variables. She will know that all scientific findings are provisional and that theories are always going to be updated when new data comes in.

A conflict theorist, on the other hand, does not see problems as having a multiplicity of causes. If there is a gender pay gap then this is because men are oppressing women. If there is a gap between the earnings of immigrants and a native population, then this is because

the native population is oppressing the immigrant group. If there are health discrepancies between LGBTI people and heterosexual people, then this is because of discrimination.

This simple formula gets repeated over and over and over again. You can see in Table 1 how it's just a simple framework and it's easy to reproduce with different groups being the oppressor class, and different groups being the oppressed class, but it's essentially the same formula.

Table 1

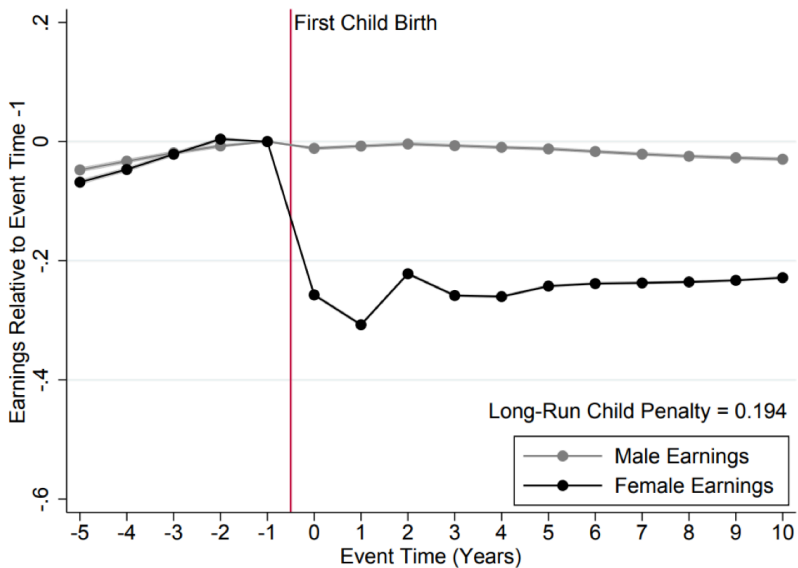
Approach	Oppressors	Oppressed	Structure
Marxist	Bourgeoisie	Proletariat	Capitalism
Feminist	Men	Women	Patriarchy
Postcolonial Theory	Coloniser	Colonised	Power
Race Theory	White people	People of colour	White supremacy
Queer Theory	Straight people	Gay people	Heteronormativity

Mistake theorists will look at the same problems and agree that discrimination is likely to be a factor. But the crucial difference is that the mistake theorists see it as one factor among many. Understanding that correlation does not immediately imply causation or lead one to a place of epistemological humility. A mistake theorist will suggest that when looking at the gender pay gap, it's important to check out what other factors might be going on.

One must look at the difference between earnings of women who have children, and women who do not have children. Graph 1, published by Danish researchers, compared the earnings of women who have children to men. The red line is the birth of the first child. So you can see how dramatically earnings drop after

the birth of her first child. So, if you don't control for things like having children, and all you see is an equal and unequal outcome of earnings between men and women, you're going to come to the wrong conclusions. And a conclusion that is repeated over and over again is that the gender pay gap is caused by sexism and oppression, not because women have children.

Graph 1



Children and Gender Inequality: Evidence from Denmark. Henrik Kleven, Camille Landais, Jakob Egholt Søgaard

Likewise when looking at an earnings gap between migrants and a native population, one might want to control for prior education levels. If we don't control for such data points, then we're missing out on important pieces of the puzzle. If there are health discrepancies between heterosexual people and LGBTI people, then we might want to have a look at discrimination, but we might want

to look at many other variables. A narrative that is becoming increasingly common is the idea or is the claim that because transgender youth have very high rates of suicide, or attempted suicide, therefore they need to transition quicker, and they need to have more access to invasive medical procedures.

So the activists push a line that because there's an unequal outcome in mental health between transgender individuals and non-transgender, this is because of discrimination, and therefore society has to change and transgender people need to have quicker access to treatment.

Anyone with training in sciences knows that there's going to be a lot more going on other than discrimination in this particular case. Understanding that many variables impact outcomes allows one to better appreciate that equality of outcomes isn't an unrealistic aim. One of the reasons I started *Quillette* is that I increasingly came to perceive that many political problems are discussed and presented through the media and are couched in a conflict theorist framework, that is, through an oppressive class versus an oppressed class narrative. Political discourse becomes very difficult when problems are presented in this way.

As I mentioned before, conflict theorists view debate as a distraction from the real issues on the ground. What is the point of debating when women are only earning 70 cents in the dollar? Why conduct another study into the impact of immigration on the local economy when people are escaping persecution, and are simply trying to find a better life? Treating people as if they were statistical units is inhumane. By the time one collects the data and runs the analyses people will have died. How can one think about these issues with cool rationality, when what one really needs is compassion and feeling? That's the conflict theorist view. That's not my view.

Now, here's the key difference. If you are a mistake theorist, you will view conflict theorists as simply lacking in information. A conflict theorist has simply not read enough. He or she has not read enough literature in economics or psychology or history. If they were exposed to the relevant information, they might change

their minds. Mistake theorists believe that we can improve the world through increasing education and reducing cognitive biases. They believe that we can reduce bias by being exposed to a range of different viewpoints, even those which are objectively bad, because then we can refine our own arguments.

This attitude is summed up with a quote from John Stuart Mill.

He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side, if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion.

Mill basically accepts and expresses his own fallibility. He might be wrong; therefore he would never prevent another person from speaking, less they have information that he might not have. The exchange of information helps us move towards a better understanding of the truth. Conflict Theorists, on the other hand, do not see the point in debating with one sworn enemy. If you are a conflict theorist, you are very clear about who is your enemy and you view mistake theorists as enemies in your conflict.

In trying to be objective, the mistake theorist effectively defends the status quo. Now this is the scary part of the conflict theorist's worldview, there is no legitimate space for neutrality, or objectivity, you must pick a side. Herbert Marcuse, a prominent figure of the Frankfurt School and pioneer of the new left, argued for liberating tolerance which is an Orwellian description of intolerance of anything that the right does, and tolerance for anything that the left does. This intolerance of intolerance, which is how it's described, is arguably behind the rise of speech codes, de-platforming on American college campuses, and reduced support for free speech held by my generation and younger.

One of the reasons the conflict theorist perspective is gaining prominence is because it's very popular within our institutions of higher education. The methodology through which conflict theory

is taught is known as critical theory. I suspect one of the reasons why critical theory has been so powerful and has become so popular within academia is because of its unassuming name. Who can possibly argue with critical theory? Isn't being critical the reason why we go to university in the first place? What's not to like about critical theory?

Well critical theory is not the same thing as critical thinking. So what is it exactly? Well, to understand what it is, we have to go back to Marx and his observation that philosophers have hitherto merely interpreted the world but the point is to change it. Now in understanding critical theory there are two jargon words that are quite useful, descriptive and prescriptive. What scientists generally do is they describe the world as it is. Whenever something is prescriptive, it's telling other people what to do. Scientists, or anyone trying to be objective at all times, try not to be prescriptive. However, critical theory collapses descriptive and prescriptive in together. They describe the world while preaching what the world should look like.

Critical theorists of the Frankfurt School argued that traditional theory had served the interests of the powerful because traditional inquiry, all traditional philosophy and science was uncritical towards power. It automatically served the powerful while critical theory in unmasking powerful interests helped serve the powerless. They said that all theory is political, and by choosing critical theory over traditional theory, one could then challenge the status quo.

Now back when the Frankfurt School were developing this theory, this approach was new and fresh, and was, I have no doubt, very useful in mobilizing emancipatory civil rights movements across the world. But as with all revolutions, as soon as the revolutionaries gain power, they institutionalize their political goals, and the spirit of liberation quickly ossifies into orthodoxy. On campus, at least in the humanities, critical theory is the new orthodoxy. In critical legal theory taught at ANU, the focus first is on politicising the law by claiming that the law reflects political values.

The opening sentence of their course description is that the law reflects political values. Then it moves into what the subject is going to teach students, and that is thinking about the law through the

prism of gender, sexuality, race, the environment, and economics. Presumably some form of watered down Marxist economics.

At the end of the description, it says the thinkers that influence the course are Karl Marx, Graham, Foucault, and Derrida. Now, this is not unique to ANU. You will find a critical legal theory course at all higher education institutions around the country; in many law subjects it's compulsory. Critical theory now dominates the study of literature, other humanity subjects also increasingly influenced by the spectre of this methodology. So that's an art subject. This is international relations.

In the study of geopolitics, one might wonder what your politics has to do with Marxist critical theory, but the academic explains in the abstract saying that they want to move international relations away from the positivist approach, which is objective and neutral and empirical, towards a more prescriptive approach. He includes the quote from Marx that philosophers have hitherto only described the world and the point is to change it.

So what we have is activism, sneaking in through the disguise of scholarship. Another one is critical plant studies. The dichotomy of an oppressed group, oppressed class versus an oppressor class is set up with humans occupying a privileged space in relation to plants.

My personal favourite is critical theory applied to outer space. There is an anthropologist who I've had arguments with on Twitter who argues that outer space needs to be made more queer. That is, there should be fewer white capitalist and male individuals going into outer space. Another one of his papers argues for environmentalism on Mars. That is, we shouldn't be drilling holes into Mars, in case we damage the environment there, and in case there is indigenous life in the solar system. These are real papers. Now, more seriously, critical theory has proven as a methodology, to be quite capable of critiquing dominant power structures that existed in the mid-20th century. But the thing is that times have changed. Now critical theorists are themselves in a position of dominance. Theirs is the dominant ideology. In the humanities, feminists, queer and postcolonial approaches of interpretation are the status quo.

This reality opens up a challenging and paradoxical situation, because as critical theory becomes more widespread, and its adherence more powerful, then critical theory must be turned on itself. But as yet critical theorists have not shown themselves to be capable of self-critique. When they are in positions of power in universities around the world, there appears to be little self-awareness that they even possess power and exercise it. Foucault is the most cited scholar of all time. He has 873,000 citations according to Google Scholar. Judith Butler's influential book, *Gender Trouble*, which gave rise to queer theory and argued that gender is performance and not a biological reality, has been cited over 51,000 times alone. That's just one book.

So the problem as I see it, is that critical theory is the status quo within the humanities. But critical theorists cannot apply the theory to themselves. This means that their narratives of power and oppression cannot be falsified. Many of our youth are being educated into believing unfalsifiable narratives and this is spilling out into our political discourse. Thank you.

Claire Lehmann in conversation with Dr Jeremy Sammut

Jeremy: Thank you Claire. The issues you've been discussing tonight about the state of the universities and the broader political implications are really important, particularly with what's happening in the university today. This is an issue that can really divide people on left and right lines. And I think there's a certain validity to that, indeed. However, I think the real issue here is that although the universities are owned and funded by the whole community, they don't seem to be fulfilling their traditional role by allowing full and frank debate, and discussion of ideas.

What your speech has really given us, and congratulations for it, is an intellectual framework to help us understand the background to that, and explain why too often the response to these difficult issues is to shout, shout up and worse, not to debate and discuss them. As you explained this has promoted this really conflicting style of politics. It also means that we lose, as you pointed out, the rational way to address real social problems. That's the real point, the universities are losing their key cultural role. So what I thought we might do tonight is focus initially on the role of the universities, what's happening in them and why. Then we'll turn to what we might be able to do about it, and particularly talk about *Quillette*.

I've noticed a number of reactions to the current controversies that have swirled around universities. One reaction is that people simply can't believe what you're saying because they, simply can't believe the universities have given up the impartial scholarly pursuit of truth. Another reaction is that people say 'yeah, but...', and they say the problems are exaggerated, and 'haven't university's always been about pushing the boundaries and hotbeds of radicalism?'. Third reaction is that people lament what's going on, but they're at a loss to explain

where all this political correctness and anti-free speech culture has come from, and they're looking for answers and explanations. Now, I'm sure that you often get that question asked to you and you might be almost door-stopped in those circumstances. So what's your explanation? Why have universities come to this?

Claire: I think it's important to point out that we're not talking about the entire university, and the entire higher education system. I would separate the humanities out from the rest of the university. I don't think these issues affect technical fields, engineering, most of the sciences. I mean, I've heard some rumblings about law.

But I think if we just stick to the humanities, it's a better focus. We shouldn't be complacent about the humanities. I mean if we want to have an educated population who understand history and have an intellectual tool kit with which to navigate the world, the humanities are vitally important. So it's not a trivial thing that the humanities have been corrupted by these fashionable theories. So I think we should definitely be concerned. However, we can't just describe it as the entire university.

Jeremy: Sure. But as you say, if it's in the humanities department—and if we're not going to be able to discuss difficult issues fully and frankly within the university department—how are we going to learn those skills that we need as citizens in a democracy to address the real issues?

Claire: Well that's the question. Another concerning question is what happens when the young crop of graduates who have never been exposed to countervailing ideas, graduate into the professions, graduate into and occupy spaces in media and law and so on, and politics. If debate, and being exposed to ideas that you're uncomfortable with, hasn't been an integral part of their education, then that's a real concern.

Jeremy: Because what you said in the profile—what Tom talked about in *The Australian*—you said that there are simply issues that are not up for debate or discussion if what people want to say doesn't conform to the progressive narrative.

Claire: Yes. So I think we could probably see a rise in litigation. So people making complaints, for instance if you're in a workplace people making complaints to their bosses or some kind of complaints officer, rather than people working out conflicts between each other. So that's something that's predicted in the rise of victimhood culture, that the authors of that book foresee a lot more sort of sexual harassment, complaints about race discrimination, all of these complaints coming into the workplace after kids graduate from university.

Jeremy: Now, you said it's concentrated in the humanities, and we shouldn't underestimate the scale of that. There are people like the American social psychologist, Jonathan Haidt, who's so concerned about polarization, and its impact on the university that he set up what's known as the Heterodox Academy. Which is tellingly, and I think incredibly, promoting the idea that universities should be open to a diversity of perspectives and viewpoints, based on civil and evidence-based arguments. But this sort of shutting down of debate, it's not just happening in the social sciences — although it is obviously concentrated in sociology and history, the disciplines most connected to politics. It's now also extending to the hard sciences as well, in relation to the current debates about biology and gender difference.

Claire: Some of these debates have been going on for decades. They're not really very new, but there's been a long contest within biology and psychology over nature/nurture debates. So any scientists who have come up against progressive orthodoxies around differences between the sexes, and differences between the races, have gotten into a lot of trouble, and had their careers damaged or destroyed. So the issue in the sciences of coming into taboo areas, and then just touching the third rail, that's not particularly new. That's been going on for a long time

Jeremy: What about the “yeah, but...” argument? Why is it different this time?

Claire: I'm convinced by an argument that one of my writers has put forth on *Quillette*; that the humanities and the social sciences are

undergoing a purity spiral. So even 10, 15, 20 years ago you would have some conservatives and moderates within the departments, balancing it out somewhat. But in recent years moderates and conservatives have left, and it's increasingly moving towards left, hard left. So there's this purity spiral where moderates and conservative graduate students feel unwelcome, that it's not for them, and they're deselected out at the grad student level. They're choosing not to go into post-doc or PhD, and they're removing themselves from the pool. I think that's a pretty persuasive argument.

There's been quite a lot of research done in America which shows that social science academics, actually all academics across the board, are engaged in discrimination against conservatives. There's a famous study which showed that if someone advertised their political stance as being conservative then academics wouldn't hire them. They feel that's completely natural, and legitimate not to hire people based on their political stance.

Jeremy: So the echo chamber is becoming even more tightly constrained.

Claire: Yes.

Jeremy: There's a lot of people who may observe universities from the outside, and they still might be unconvinced about the phenomenon that we're talking about today. Let's try and drill down to a little bit of the detail. One of the key things that I think marks the difference between the universities that people may have been familiar with and now, is the jargon and the writing and the language.

It's dense, and hard to read. To most observers it's almost impenetrable. And if it is penetrable, it tends to make these very simplistic political claims. Why isn't that called out more, even within the academy?

Claire: I don't have a very clear answer, but I suspect it's got something to do with occupying a privileged status. Think about priests, who delivered their sermons in Latin. When new technology arrived which could print Bibles in the dialects of the ordinary people, they resisted it, because they wanted their knowledge to be of a special high status.

I suspect that a lot of this jargon is just in-group signalling. They're signalling to one another that they're members of a special group, a special caste, and that they're elite and they're more important than the ordinary people who can't understand the jargon.

Jeremy: But it's even affected disciplines that we think by nature would prefer to be able to communicate. So for many people who've been through literary studies in universities, a decade, or more, today it would completely unrecognizable because the critical theory has taken over. Instead of focusing on literary merit and how form and meaning express ideas about human nature, and all the rest, it's all about identity politics, class, gender, race.

Claire: It's just a case of motivated individuals at some point in the '80s, '90s, and 2000, who'd take this approach to scholarship, capturing the institutions. So when they get on boards who approve the promotion of their colleagues, then a lot of academia becomes this social game, this social power game, where to gain promotion, or to gain the good graces of a PhD supervisor whom you want, you have to fit in with the ideology. A lot of this can be explained through the fact that motivated individuals have gotten into positions of power, and therefore the ideology trickles down because everyone has to funnel through them to get promotions, to get grants, things like that.

Jeremy: A key aspect of that as well would be the peer review process.

Claire: Exactly.

Jeremy: Which is often the argument that is always used, that 'this must be true, because it's been peer reviewed'. But the peers are part of the echo chamber.

Claire: Yeah, so there are citation rings. If you publish a paper on the queer theory of outer space, and there's someone in Canada who publishes on the queer theory of Antarctica, he or she's going to review your paper, and approve it for journal publication. They'll then cite it, and then you'll do the same for him. So we get these citation rings where these delusional ideas become reinforced because people are sharing them and citing each other.

Jeremy: It's the same process around grants for say the Australian Research Council as well.

Claire: The further you get away from having your theory or idea tested by reality, the more delusional it could become. So I mean you don't get this happening in engineering, or the hard sciences, where you have to do an experiment and your idea has to correspond with reality. As soon as you start moving away from that, I'm not saying it's always going to be delusional, but you can get these pockets of just complete group think, and madness of crowds.

Jeremy: One of the words that we haven't used tonight is post-modernism. It's something that I always default back to when I'm trying to think about these issues. It's a very hard phenomenon to explain, but it's basically the view that there is no truth, all truth is relative. All truth is socially constructed. To me, what that theory in the academy has done is basically given people the sort of license that you're talking about to completely untether their approach to any of these issues, not even rationality, but even the rules of their own disciplines. So they think they are, as you said in your talk, creating social reality by simply playing language games half the time.

Claire: It's hard to disentangle the Marxist influence from the post-structuralist influence. Jordan Peterson uses the term post-modern neo-Marxism, because he recognizes that these approaches have sort of collapsed into each other. Foucault and Butler are post-structuralists, but they also developed the critical theory that the Frankfurt School created. So it's very slippery, it's like a sleight of hand where you're going from the Marxist analysis of the bourgeoisie oppressing the proletariat, and then there's a sleight of hand and suddenly it's men oppressing women.

Jeremy: Yeah, and because the role of language plays such a key role in this, it also becomes a license to attack free speech. Because just like traditional Marxists, or 'parliamentary democracy is just a front for oppression', people see what they call the dominant discourse as a front for oppression. So to violate other people's rights to free speech, it's not an issue, because it's just another form of oppression that they're fighting back against.

Claire: And back to your point about post-modernism, one of the key ideas of Foucault's was that language creates reality. So if someone's giving a talk about the biology of sex differences, and you're an activist, you will be justified in shutting that down, because just the mere fact of a talk being held on the topic is going to create that reality. So there's the idea that discourse in the community then goes on to shape reality, which is ridiculous. The causal effect is the other way around, you know?

Jeremy: Sure. A couple of weeks ago we hosted former Prime Minister John Howard and held another conversation, a conversation about culture where he was launching our Culture Prosperity and Civil Society program. Mr Howard is the Chairman, as you would know, of the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation. In the audience that night was the Chancellor of Sydney University, Belinda Hutchinson who's a great friend and supporter of the CIS. She was making the point that basically a lot of the troubles, to put it in those terms, at the university can be put down to basically a few radical activists who are well-known. But we're not overstating the problem, it's not just a noisy minority.

Claire: It's very true that most students are probably politically apathetic, and are moderate, so there's not a real problem with the average student. The problem becomes what is called preference falsification. So when you have a very noisy and motivated group of activists who intimidate everybody else, the moderates stay silent. That gives the impression that the more extreme view is held by everybody, because no one's countering it. That, unfortunately, drives polarization. If you've got these nutty radicals expressing these extreme views, and then no one's countering it, then it's easy for people to go in and say all students believe that — because they're not resisting it.

Jeremy: Or all academics.

Claire: Exactly. But I personally think that in many humanities departments the noisy activists have gotten into positions of power. It has created this feedback loop where the moderate and conservative academics have been sort of filtered out. So it's always just a minority,

but that doesn't mean that it's not a dangerous phenomenon, doesn't mean we shouldn't be talking about it. The majority is always generally silent, and they're always generally cowardly, so ...

Jeremy: Well they can, but there is a social and professional price to pay for it, particularly when the terms that are thrown around are so pejorative and derogatory. If you question — if you don't support the biological science around gender — you're transphobic, or any other of those epitaphs that get attached to you.

Claire: There's certainly a price to pay, but the more people stay silent, the higher the cost for those few individuals. We need to share the risk. The more people who speak out and voice their honest opinions, the more moderates who speak up and who normalize the moderate point of view, the more that we can diffuse some of these really hot debates.

Jeremy: The point you raised before, that one of the consequences of this will be more claims of gender discrimination in the workplace, is fascinating. I guess what we're looking at there, is we used to think of universities as ivory towers which are sort of detached from society. But as higher education has become more important, particularly around credentials and getting a job, the cultural power of these institutions has really been revealed. As you also said, whether we like it or not, basically at least one generation of students has been exposed to this identity politics view of the world, divided on gender, race, and sexuality lines.

I suspect that a lightbulb moment for many people, about these sort of identity politics issues going mainstream, was the sacking by Google of the engineer James Damore. This was certainly an important moment for you and for *Quillette* — because in that Deidre Macken piece on the weekend she said it brought you to the centre stage in the culture war. Now for those who don't know, Damore had written an internal memo criticising Google's push for gender diversity among software engineers. He accused the company of operating an ideological echo chamber. And, as if to prove his point, he was promptly sacked by Google. *Quillette* asked four scientists to review Damore's comments based on facts, logic, and evidence, and

this is really the classic example of discussing issues that are taboo in the universities, yes?

Claire: Yeah, I imagine that a lot of people have not been exposed to the ideas that were presented in his memo, or the evidence basically that we presented in our response to the memo. He critiqued how the diversity policies were being implemented—he had alternative ideas. He didn't say that diversity was bad, or that Google shouldn't be aiming for it, he just had other ideas. I think he may have suggested that 50/50 parity might not happen.

Jeremy: Really, *Quillette* was setup to have these sort of discussions that are taboo.

Claire: Absolutely, yeah.

So like I mentioned, any social phenomena where unequal outcomes is presented as evidence of unfair treatment, that's where we need people to step in who have some understanding of the empirical literature on these topics, and who can say actually these problems are really complicated; that it's not simply due to oppression or discrimination, it's not so simplistic. So moving away from this black and white view where claims about the world can never be falsified and promulgated by op ed writers in the *New York Times*, of all places. Getting back to the grey space where complex issues are dealt with fearlessly, but with the nuance they deserve. That's what we're aiming for at *Quillette*, and we've been successful so far.

Jeremy: I have to say, you definitely have. That leads to my next question, without giving away any trade secrets, how have you done it? More to the point what have you tapped into out there to have this remarkable growth from running an office out of a café, by the sounds of it?

Claire: Out of my house, out of my living room. I think people respect our courage and our fearlessness, more than anything. We publish on the most difficult of topics, and we publish very long essays, where people go over every detail. I think people just respect the intellectual honesty of that.

Jeremy: To me, you seem to have tapped into the themes and are filling the same sort of needs that another international phenomenon, Jordan Peterson, has tapped into. He's obviously a big fan and supporter of yours and *Quillette's*. What's interesting—and you sort of raise this issue about being moderate, and trying to have debate—is that both *Quillette* and Peterson aren't tapping into the sort of fringe sentiments that we see on the alt right; which is often the polar opposite of Leftists identity politics; and it's one of the points you made in your talk. Or as the *New York Times* put it, sometimes the alt right, in that piece that Tom mentioned, is interested in violating taboos for its own sake.

What you both seem to have tapped into is a deeper hunger for an antidote to the polarization that we see, but just basically restating some fundamentally important principles. In your case, in *Quillette's* case, rational discussion and debate of ideas.

Claire: I think there's been an underestimation of how much hunger there is for discussion, because there are so many difficult issues that people know they don't have the answers for, and are looking for brave individuals to go in and have discussions and have debates. We're living in a time of ideological flux.

A lot of my readers are disillusioned leftists. So they're a bit older, older than the millennial generation, but they're put off by identity politics and they're searching. They don't have a label to attach to themselves, and they're just searching. I think that's a big proportion of Jordan Peterson's fanbase as well. It's a similar demographic. So there's definitely a hunger for something new that isn't attached to old dogmas, and this new identity politics fanaticism.

Jeremy: What you're really describing there is we don't have a shared rationality, which is really what's at stake. How can we have a functioning, democratic society when there's a cultural gap. I think what the identity politics people want is to have raw power. That's a style of politics that you would have thought—if you knew anything about the 20th century—you would want to shy away from.

Claire: Precisely. I think people are afraid of some of this fanaticism. It's quite apparent that it's existing on the fringes, and they want to

bring back the norms of civil discourse and debate and being able to respect people with whos you might not agree with everything on. To respect people across the aisle.

Jeremy: It's called a free society.

Claire: Yes.

Jeremy: You raised something there that I want to pick up on. What I think people are reacting against is that—around all these issues of race, gender, and sexuality—they're accused of holding positions they may not actually have. In a sense, they're being treated in the same way that the kulaks were treated under communism. Everyone who doesn't subscribe to the program is a problem and is an enemy. I think that is what people resent.

You also touched on this in your talk, a lot of this identity politics acts as if we're still stuck in the 1950s, and women are still chained to the sink, and coloured people still sit at the back of the bus. There's no way under this critical theory model you talk about, of explaining all the progress that society has made. Actually, to return to the point, of having a rational discussion about what the real issues are today.

Claire: That's exactly right. That's something that Steven Pinker has been pointing out. That we are living in a time of remarkable progress, all of these amazing gains have been made in longevity, education, lifting people out of global poverty. Because of these dogmas within universities, people are not being exposed to these historical facts.

I think what I have found through operating *Quillette* is that the best people to smash some of these dogmas are minority individuals themselves. So if you're going to criticize feminism, it's better if you're a woman. If you're going to criticize orthodoxies and taboos around race, the individuals who are of colour are the most effective. It shouldn't be that way—and I wish it wasn't—but I'm discovering that there are so many individuals from minority backgrounds who have interesting, fresh things to say, and who are pushing back against these dogmas. I think those individuals are going to be really successful in the short and long-term.

Jeremy: It's a double-edged sword though as well, because the other side says unless you're a member of those groups, you can't talk about those issues. I don't think we should actually ... We should definitely be careful of not seeding in that ground.

Claire: No, I agree, I agree, but interestingly, there's a backlash even if you're woman and you criticise feminism—you'll get a backlash. If you're person of colour who criticises orthodoxy around race issues, you'll get a huge backlash, and that's something we've discovered recently on *Quillette*. We have a young writer who's going to be a superstar, and he's been writing really brave, and eloquent essays. He's just getting hit by a ton of bricks, even though he's a minority person and he's entitled to his opinion. So it's really interesting to see the dynamics at play, but I think these individuals will be the ones who are successful in pushing through.

Jeremy: The question of reaction to *Quillette* is my next question. One of the things I've noticed, is that you seem to have a particularly hard time convincing those who—maybe incorrectly—we thought would be your core audience: academics. You're very active on Twitter, and you seem to particularly raise the ire of academics. They are outraged, I think, not only by what *Quillette* says, but almost by having the temerity to publish it. To go back to your earlier point about the jargon, it's almost as if it's treated as heresy, what you said. Has this reaction—when people are confronted by interesting, topical, challenging, evidence-based material—surprised you, or is it really what you expected?

Claire: No, it hasn't surprised me, and we welcome it, because it means that we stand for something. It's not like all of our critics are academics, most of our writers are academics. They would call themselves dissident academics. We've become a community for dissidents, to come together and meet one another.

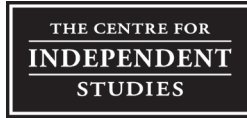
Several collaborations have arisen from people meeting via *Quillette*. Conservative philosophy students, for example, now have a group—and they write and publish papers together. We will get pushback from critical race studies academics, but of course that's going to happen. It's more worrying if we're not getting criticism.

Jeremy: Yeah, I was going to say, in one sense the hostile, censorious reaction underlines the need for what you're doing. But just to return to the original starting point of the conversation—and this will be my last question before we throw it open to the audience—this is about the future of the universities. Do you think the universities can be saved? Because, some people I've talked to think they're basically too far gone. That's also why some people say we should start seriously thinking about alternatives, such as founding new private universities or educational colleges. So this will be my last question, do we need a *Quillette* U as the antidote to Unlearn U?

Claire: Yes, I think private liberal arts colleges are probably a good idea for the future. I don't think the universities are too far gone. I think the sciences and most of the universities are in good shape, but the humanities I think have destroyed themselves, and I don't see them recovering. I can't see how they can recover, because no one's coming through being trained. Students are getting filtered out at the undergrad or honours, or post-grad level. If kids aren't being trained to be academics, how can there be a renewal?

Jeremy: We should seriously ponder, that we are losing the Enlightenment foundations that have built our culture.

Claire: Well, it's not like people haven't warned about this. Allan Bloom wrote *The Closing of the American Mind* a couple of decades ago. Camille Paglia has been warning about this since the '90s. There have been a lot of people warning, and I feel disappointed as a younger person, because by the time I got to university it was already gone. It was already all post structuralist. I missed out on a proper liberal arts education because of it. So I feel let down by my elder generation, but I think it's up to us to create new institutions. Whether they have to be online, whether they have to be private colleges, in whatever form they come in, we have to take on the duty of preserving the liberal arts. I believe that.



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Conflict vs Mistake: Academic cultures and explanatory conflict

The 2018 Helen Hughes Lecture explains why and how universities are fuelling the corrosive identity politics phenomena that is sweeping western countries.

With a mix of erudition and common sense, Claire Lehmann – the founder and Editor-in-Chief of renowned online magazine *Quillette* - unpacked complicated academic theories and drew laser-sharp attention to the impact these theories have on contemporary society and politics.

This important contribution to the debate about the state of our institutions of higher learning shows why *The New York Times* has rightly identified Claire as one of the leading figures of the so-called 'intellectual dark web' – which is pushing back against the stultifying political correctness promoted in academia, and who are defending the vital principles of freedom of speech and thought that universities used to stand for.



Claire Lehmann is the Editor-in-Chief of *Quillette*.



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