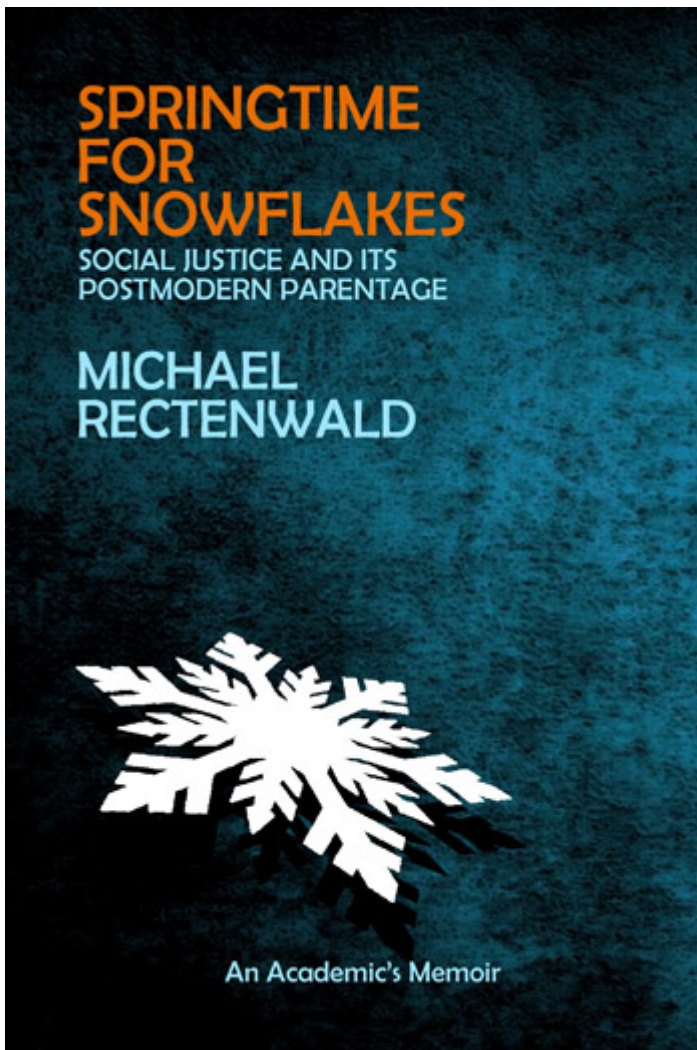


After “Social Justice”: New Paradigms for the Humanities and Social Sciences

By [Michael Rectenwald](#) (February 2019)



Dr. Michael Rectenwald, the author of [@antipcnypuf](#) Twitter handle with which he lambasted, criticized, satirized, and condemned political correctness in the university. One of the few open critics within the American academy of leftist anti-intellectualism, intolerance, and the political corruption of American higher education, Dr. Rectenwald is a scholar of note,

an insightful observer, and sharp critic of the collapse of American education into leftist indoctrination, and intellectual intolerance, shallowness and rigidity, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. In this fascinating and informative lecture Dr. Rectenwald discusses the origins of the ideology driving the so-called “social justice” movement, its authoritarianism, and anti-intellectual and intolerant essential nature.

Dr. Rectenwald’s work has appeared in [Google Archipelago: The Digital Gulag and the Simulation of Freedom](#) will be published by NER Press.

The following remarks were delivered at an event held at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, Friday, February 1st, 2019. We are happy to share Dr. Rectenwald’s lecture with our *New English Review* readers.

Abstract

Despite its loosely aggregated elements, social justice is arguably the hegemonic paradigm for teaching and research in the humanities and social sciences today. Yet, some scholars have been subjecting the “social justice university” to trenchant criticism, and Heterodox Academy, an organization of professors advocating “viewpoint diversity,” was recently established to combat the overweening influence of social justice ideology in the academy. Meanwhile, a Sokal Hoax redux recently exposed social-justice-inflected fields for political tendentiousness and absurdity, as the lampooners made a mockery of acceptable research in what they pejoratively termed “grievance studies.”

In this talk, I review critiques of social justice then point to several emergent paradigms gaining attention outside of the academy. Such alternative frameworks include neomodernism, integralism, and neoreaction, among others. I argue that these and other paradigms should be considered, at least, for what they can tell us about the assumptions and values underwriting teaching and research in the social justice university.

Lecture

Thank you for the very generous introduction, Martha. Of course, everyone else here knows that I don't deserve it. So, as part of the introduction that I do deserve, I'll remind the overflowing crowd that I'm an avowed and convicted thought criminal. My book, [*Springtime for Snowflakes: "Social Justice" and Its Postmodern Parentage*](#), chronicles the capers undertaken during my latest academic career stage, when I became notorious for the @antipcnypuf Twitter account and began tweeting trenchant, slightly ribald, and sometimes over-the-top criticisms of what I see as the domination of "social justice ideology" in the academy.

The book begins with the tension surrounding the disclosure of my identity in connection with this formerly anonymous Twitter handle. Then, after tallying the consequences to that point, the memoir travels back to find the lead of the thread that led me to graduate studies and a career as a professor in the first place. The retrospective narration is undertaken in order to locate and follow in my graduate school education the roots of what I began objecting to much later, the point at which point the narrative begins.

To be perfectly honest, I owe something for the plan and ultimate design of the book to the recommendations of Adam Bellow, an editor with his own imprint at St. Martin's Press and the son of the Nobel Prize winning novelist, Saul Bellow. A brilliant guy, who, having grown up in the Upper East Side among the intelligentsia with whom his father cavorted, Adam is an unlikely conservative. Adam suggested that I write a memoir about my graduate school education. But I soon found that he wanted me to recount in literary prose what he regarded quite literally as "the history of your brainwashing" and later debriefing.

I wanted the book to appear with Adam's imprimatur, All Points Books. So, I worked through seven months of revisions. But when the moment of truth arrived, Adam decided that the book wasn't doing it for him. It was too academic. He wanted a narration of my academic preparation, but not an academic rendering thereof. During the long process of revision after revision, I sensed that he resented academia and academics and seemed hell-bent on extracting from my academic autobiography a total send-up, an entirely jocular romp, and an ultimate dismissal of the entire enterprise as a farce—a genre that I had heard about but that I had never actually read.

Anyway, I didn't think of my graduate school education as a joke that I got twenty-five years later. I thought of it as a serious cultural and intellectual engagement with sometimes bewildering but always significant ideas and issues. Further, the requirement that I render the content and context of literary and cultural theory in jargon-free prose struck me as wrong-headed. While I don't mean to go full-Derrida here, I found that when I attempted to extirpate all novel and arcane theoretical terms and phrases from the text, I lost much of what made the experience distinctive. There were exceptions,

of course, as I believe the following passage attests. In it, I narrate the day that I first set foot on the campus of Case Western, in the fall of 1993. I hope it gives a sense of the book's content and texture—its attempts at dealing with ideas, people, events, and institutional conditions, sometimes all at once:

In mid-August, I met with my adviser, Professor Roger Salomon. An early septuagenarian, Professor Salomon matched most peoples' image of an English professor: tweed blazer with elbow patches over a wool sweater, thick-wale corduroy pants. He offered me a chair, not across from his desk, but beside his own. I sensed the spiritual community that abided in his office, an ongoing séance between himself and the living, breathing books—a communication with great authors, who were supposedly dead. Salomon recommended that I start by taking only one course per semester for the first year. He felt confident that I might be very interested in a course called "Cultural Criticism," taught by Professor Martha Woodmansee. He read the course description aloud, which included the neologism "McDonaldization." The syllabus seemed to smirk with a sense of subversive glee at the prospect of roasting the field itself, with an attitude that might be described as a peppy nihilism. This was certainly not a path that Roger Solomon had taken or would ever have taken. The syllabus mocked the very values that he held dear. He knew that once put on the path trodden by Martha Woodmansee, I might never turn back. Yet noble soul that he was, he passed the torch, and me with it, to Martha Woodmansee.

I tried to get a grip on Woodmansee before the start of the semester. The precise name for her own approach is called new historicism. New historicism holds that our only access

to the past is through “texts,” broadly construed as any carrier of signification or meaning-making. But contrary to an “old historicism” as it were, texts don’t exist in a vacuum handed down to us through literary history but rather in conversation with other texts, including “non-literary” texts, all of which are involved in ongoing discourses. Texts are not mere reflections of the past but interventions into ongoing conversations of their era—rhetorical structures that have to be read closely in order to discern and then excavate their meaning and import in connection with the conversations within which they intervened.

The passage relates a common theme, the passing of the institutional baton or torch from one generation to the next, while giving a slight glimpse of some of the broad changes that had taken place within academia during the nine years that I spent working in advertising between the end of my undergraduate studies in 1983 and the beginning of my graduate work in 1993. We all know what this period in English Studies entailed: the “invasion” of theory, the canon wars, the struggles over multiculturalism, and so on and so forth.



I liked what I had written and took the book to another, smaller press, and this publisher, New English Review Press, accepted the manuscript without delay. Some may find the title offensive or off-putting. Allow me to explain. For various reasons, I *really needed* to sell books and a

memorable, even provocative title would help to attract buyers. It worked, although I'd like to think that content of the interior pages has something to do with the book's relative success. At several points since its official release in late July, *Springtime for Snowflakes* has broken into the top 75 out of all 15 million books for sale on Amazon.com. I'm sure that the title has likely alienated potential readers, who, could they get past the title, might actually enjoy or at least appreciate it. But I understand. I did what I had to do, which was to write a compelling book and to find a memorable title. And they did what they had to do, which was nothing.

Allow me now to voice the main thrust of my criticism as delivered in the book. In parts of what follows, I will be revisiting the book, while in others I draw on more recent experience, including the circumstances surrounding this talk itself, because they illustrate so well my purpose for writing the book in the first place.

First, I must address the elephant in the room—or rather the elephant *not* in the room. I know that my talk is actually being actively boycotted by a plurality of the members of the English department. Has anyone come up with more inclusive, less heteronormative, masculinist language for a such standard consumerist political activity. How about people-cotted? Rather, let's just call it "shunned."

I wrote *Springtime for Snowflakes* precisely to counter the assumption of an official, exclusive ideology within academia, one that precludes the expression of views at odds with it. I find in this development a failure of the left and a great bane to academic culture and the culture at large. As I see it, today's social justice left represents the early-21st

century equivalent of the 1980s moral majority, no less bent on prohibition and censorship, only far more influential culturally. As I wrote in the Preface:

Having gone so far as to officially adopt a particularly censorious subset of contemporary leftist ideology, colleges and universities have tragically abdicated their roles as politically impartial and intellectually independent institutions for the advancement and transmission of knowledge and wisdom.

Meanwhile, since expressing views at odds with the official social justice ideology, I've learned a bit about shunning over the past two years, but I won't say how. I've learned that shunning is an ancestral behavioral pattern. Directed at the deviant individual, shunning is the means by which the herd ejects the stray and reinforces herd coalescence and mutual self-protection. The herd is the Leviathan in the demos of the decentered Cathedral, the papacy with millions of popes, as I'll discuss later.

For individual herd members, meanwhile, herd compulsion is experienced as a yearning for collective protection and the fear of the herd itself. This double compulsion ensures that compliance is the rule rather than the exception. And it almost all but guarantees that only deviants can see the herd's methods of superintendence, which are therefore incommunicable to herd members. Further, fear of the herd is based on the herd's history of terror, which all cognizant members have witnessed being applied to others, the deviants that everyone must avoid and avoid becoming.

Foucault was right about panopticism and its coercive and productive power. It both produces and is produced by the subject under its subjection. But Foucault accorded too much of that power to structural determinants and not enough to the biopolitics of the herd, which makes power most effective and when intent on barring escape obviates the building of walls. Panopticism becomes even more light-weight. Herd mentality is both coercive and productive. Inscribed indelibly on the individual subject, it produces the subject as a herd being, while the herd is produced by the activation of the herd mentality of individuals.

Meanwhile, as Foucault [argued](#), power works by engaging the active participation of the subject on which the power is imposed.

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection.

Under social justice ideology participation in the power of the academy involves the subject assuring herself—by virtue of avowing the dominant ideology to herself and others—of her indubitably superior social justice probity and intellectual capacities, which serve to obscure power's determinations over conscious choice. The banishment of deviants reinforces belief in one's own superiority and the rightness of the terms of one's belief. The deviant must not be considered "a real academic," must be dubbed beyond the pale—or, to use Pierre Bourdieu's notion of a "political field," must be figured as occupying an illegitimate position precluded by the field

itself. The deviant must not be drawn as a courageous or gifted figure with peculiar insights. Rather, he is deemed infirmed, "idiotic," morally depraved, or so intellectually maladroit as to render him incapable of grasping the natural superiority of the herd's positions and pronouncements. The herd rewards conformists with such mutually self-and-other-congratulatory beliefs as these. And in addition to these carrots, the herd has its sticks as well. Historically, the alternative to conformity has been death.

The judgment of the progressive herd, meanwhile, is always right, because the herd's values are obvious, transparent, "natural," and clearly "on the right side of history"—or as French structuralist Marxist Louis Althusser wrote, they are ideological. As Althusser suggested, it is precisely when one imagines that one is outside of ideology (on the right side of history, etc.) that one is actually in ideology. Likewise, it is when one knows that one is in ideology, paradoxically, that one is not in ideology. Adherents to the dominant ideology may *never* see that they are in ideology as such, because the dominant ideology is the ideology of the dominant, and powerful forces are at work to ensure that the dominant ideology appears as anything but ideological, and instead as inevitable, "just so," obvious, right.

At this historical juncture, paradoxical as it must sound, I'm here to tell you that a new leftism is the dominant ideology—in the academy of course but also in the broader social order. In my next book, *Google Archipelago: The Digital Gulag and the Simulation of Freedom*, I am calling this dominant form of leftism, "corporate leftism." At this point, although I've been working on the problem for two years, I can only conjecture about why leftism is dominant, while pointing to how.

As for the how: the primary means of ideological and thus also political production is the academy, and the primary owners of the means of ideological and political production are, as Marx referred to academics, the shopkeepers of intellectual life, the professoriate—you and people in your roles in colleges and universities everywhere. Although sometimes dubbed “the ivory tower,” the academy is anything but a quaint exception to or ancillary adjunct of the “real world.” Quite otherwise, academia is an ideological state apparatus (ISA), to use Althusser’s term. I maintain that it is *the* dominant ideological state apparatus. Or, to borrow a more precise formulation, the academy is best understood as “the Cathedral,” the contemporary equivalent of the medieval papacy in our “progressive,” postmodern times.

The received notion of the academy’s irrelevance is a guise that has allowed it to hide its ideological dominance in plain sight. Yet the Cathedral does generate the dominant ideology, although time is required for it to metastasize to the broader social body, and only after having been digested and excreted by the media, the interchange between the Cathedral and the unwashed.

I must say now that one “[Mencius Moldbug](#),” the abhorrent pseudonymous neoreactionary, is the author of the Cathedral theory. His explanation of the academy-in-the-world is the best that I’ve encountered. Yes, I’ve encountered many others. My preference for the Cathedral theory has nothing to do with any allegiance to Moldbug’s political orientation, which I don’t even take seriously. He’s a monarchist! It is based strictly on the cohesiveness, simplicity, and explanatory power of the theory itself. By the way, I encountered

Moldbug's Cathedral idea while still a Marxist, and only because I ignored the warning signs posted by academic and media gatekeepers, and instead read his actual writing. The role of such functionaries is to preclude all modes of explanation except those that are in accord with the dominant theoretical (and ideological) paradigm. I would say that alternatives are precluded "in advance"—if I wasn't for the fact that I'm speaking to a room empty of English Professors, whose very presence-in-absence provokes me to imagine that they are judging me. Actually, I am not imagining it. They are judging me. They just aren't here.

I think that Moldbug's political recommendations are extraneous and irrelevant to his analyses of the academy in particular, and rather than deeming his entire corpus inadmissible, as if reading him might turn me or anyone else into a neoreactionary over night, I found what I read and read what I found illuminating. I do the same with Marx on occasion. Although I ceased being a Marxist well over two years ago, I continue to employ Marxist methods and modes of analysis, while scrupulously ignoring his recommendations—especially since the Marxist experiment has been run several times and in several places, with the same results—instead of the "universal human emancipation" promised, a monopoly of the state over the political, economic, cultural, educational and private spheres, limiting workers to a choice of one employer, voters to a choice of one party, consumers to a choice of one brand, and the "democratic" process to a choice between tyranny and tyranny, to say nothing for now about political crimes. That the left maintains belief in the irrefragability of its political prescriptions despite the abysmal record of the left in power is a topic worthy of several volumes, volumes that will not be written under the auspices of the university, because the university would no more finance and reward such heresies than

the medieval Church did in its heyday.

The analogy that Moldbug draws between monolithic Medieval Catholicism and monolithic postmodern liberalism is not exact. Moldbug compares the decentralized, postmodern Cathedral with its millions of popes, and the univocal authority of the singular Pope within Medieval Catholicism. The postmodern Cathedral is a disorganized Church and most of its priestly caste members do not cooperate with each other. They do not constitute a conspiracy. The cohesion is provided by the dominant ideology, which both produces and is produced by the priestly caste within it. Like the Medieval Catholic Church, the postmodern Church also issues pronouncements *ex cathedra*. As long as they do not contradict the Church doctrine of progress, etc., such pronouncements are disseminated broadly and carry the authority of the papal seal.

My recommendation of neoreaction as an alternative paradigm was meant as a heuristic for examining and putting pressure on the dominant paradigm, not as a replacement of it. I should have made this clear. Similarly, integral theory and neo-modernism were suggested primarily for their heuristic value. Given that these three paradigms are so different, not only in terms of their political valences (neoreaction is rightist; integral theory claims to transcend left-right binaries, and neo-modernism is an updated modernism based on lessons taken from postmodern theory), it should be clear that I showed no preference to rightwing politics.

Instead of neoreaction, had I mentioned in my abstract Heidegger's notion of "Being-in-the-World," I wonder whether it would have elicited similarly blistering emails that circulated about me, which found me guilty by association. Or

does being a dead Nazi render a philosopher harmless? That's a real question. I don't understand the social justice rules, just as they say. But maybe that is because they don't make sense.

Even the three peddlers of the parodied "grievance studies" articles—James A. Lindsay, Peter Boghossian, and Helen Pluckrose—would not have been given the same treatment, although their serial Sokal Hoax Squared has diminished the grievance studies fields and thereby may have lessened real grievances, thus doing a terrible disservice to the aggrieved as the aggrieved. Their Sokal hoax redux even included a paper that fobbed off on the editors of the esteemed feminist journal *Affilia* excerpts of *Mein Kampf* as feminist criticism. Meanwhile, Peter Boghossian and Helen Pluckrose are friends of mine on Facebook, which makes me a Nazi. Retaining the line of argument and merely swapping the agents of Nazism with those of feminism, they proved Rush Limbaugh right. After all these years, we now know that femi-Nazis are a reality.

Such a conflation is no worse than mistaking a civil and cultural libertarian NYU professor and scholar of nineteenth-century British freethought for an "alt-right provocateur." But never mind such fine distinctions! Reflexively smearing every critic of social justice ideology and the academic left with the alt-right label is not at all like failing to distinguish between Nazism and feminism. No, these two samples of inapt and inept false equivalence could not possibly be part of the same problem.

So, what is the problem?

At the moment postmodern theory lay dying in the academy, it bore a child, namely, "social justice." Social justice gestated within the university as postmodern theory ruled the roost. It was nursed during the Occupy movement and the Obama era. The financial crisis left its hapless followers in search of empowerment. It took root on the Internet on social media. But because its parent had taught it that the object world is not real, or else that the world at large was beyond one's purview, the child of postmodern theory could only change itself, as well as, so it imagined, those who bore signs of its oppressors. Although political correctness has enjoyed a much longer, although intermittent sway over academia, social justice as such debuted in full regalia in higher education in the fall of 2016—when it emerged and occupied campuses to avenge its monster-mother's death and wreak havoc upon its enemies.

One of the great ironies of Western political history involves this term "social justice." Although a core idea within liberalism and socialism for at least 175 years, the background and origin of "social justice" is cultural and political conservatism. The irony of the "cultural appropriation" of social justice by liberalism and socialism has recently redoubled. Suggestive of a seemingly undeniably intangible good—that is, of just, fair social relations—social justice is now implicated in fierce and sometimes violent antagonisms, as well as the humiliating intellectual scandals I've mentioned. Social justice crystallizes in two words some of the most contentious issues roiling North American politics today.

The phrase "social justice" recalls movements of the recent past that used the same political terminology. But contemporary social justice bears little resemblance to the

original social justice or even more recent movements that have gone by the same name. Contemporary social justice embodies postmodern theoretical notions as well as the latter's adoption of Maoist and Stalinist disciplinary methods. As I argue in *Springtime for Snowflakes*, contemporary "social Justice" is an ideological and epistemological framework derived from New Left politics and postmodern theory. Examples of the postmodern theoretical provenance of social justice ideas are legion, but one extended example must suffice for today. It begins in arcane Soviet theory and ends up in the nonsense of "muh knowledge," that is, with everyone having their "own truth."

In [*Genealogy of Morals*](#), under such inversion ideologies as Christianity, socialism, and, I would add, social justice ideology:

Only those who suffer are good, only the poor, the powerless, the lowly are good; the suffering, the deprived, the sick, the ugly, are the only pious people, the only ones saved, salvation is for them alone, whereas you rich, the noble and powerful, you are eternally wicked, cruel, lustful, insatiate, godless, you will also be eternally wretched, cursed and damned!'

Lest quoting Nietzsche should confirm my "alt-right" identity at Case Western, which would come as a great surprise to my former classmates here, as it does to me, I should say that I regard reading Nietzsche merely as a necessary inoculation against the contemporary social justice contagion. But I would never adopt the lunacy of Nietzsche's philosophy in its entirety. I can say the same about the loathsome neoreaction, which amounts to the fantasies of roughly five people, who,

unlike the epigones of Marx, haven't killed anyone, let alone 94 million people.

Meanwhile, in [op-ed](#) entitled, "How Ta-Nehisi Coates Gives Whiteness Power," Thomas Chatterton Williams discusses what I am calling epistemological solipsism, which he calls "knowing-through-being" and "identity epistemology." Williams laments identity epistemology or knowing-through-being because it limits knowledge to members of particular identity categories and it slides seamlessly into "identity ethics" or "morality-through-being." Morality-through-being is believed to follow from knowing-through-being as the subordinated assumes the moral high ground on the basis of a superior knowledge standpoint deriving from subordinated status. Morality-through-being or identity-ethics results in a moral ranking in which the lowest on the totem pole is deemed a moral superior by virtue of her (previous) subordination. Through the kind of hierarchical inversion that Friedrich Nietzsche saw in Christianity and socialism, low status becomes high status.

How did Lukács's proletariat standpoint epistemology become an epistemological solipsism resulting in an inverted moral hierarchy of the contemporary social justice movement? While Lukács argued that the proletariat's material standpoint yielded the class unique access to objective truth, by the time it reached contemporary social justice, standpoint epistemology had already been stripped of any pretense to objective truth by postmodern theory. According to postmodern theory, the very idea of "objective truth" is a master narrative. Under social justice ideology, objective truth is a legacy of patriarchal white supremacy.

In addition to its theoretical importance, standpoint

epistemology has produced pedagogical offspring as well. A hallmark of social justice pedagogy is "progressive stacking," a method for ordering student class participation based the inverted social justice hierarchy. This form of academic priori-tarianism, or putting the worst-off first, became a topic of national controversy when a graduate student made a public declaration of the technique. It never seems to occur to the advocates of progressive stacking that such preferential treatment or prioritizing of supposed social subordinates might reify the very hierarchy that it is supposed to reverse, patronizing some while handicapping others based on a presupposed social superiority, however it may have been produced or reproduced.

In case I haven't made it obvious by now, I have mostly examined problems with social justice as a paradigm, while discussing only the Molodtsov's notion of the academy as the Cathedral. I found that in a talk of such length I wouldn't be able to do justice to discussion of integral theory and neo-modernism.

As for the Cathedral theory of the academy, it helps to underscore the religious character of the dominant ideology, social justice ideology, and perhaps most of the paradigms that could, theoretically, replace it. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a paradigm for the humanities and social sciences that might elude ideology. Even those claiming to be based on strictly scientific bases will import ideological germs that in the context of the humanities will find hosts and multiply.

This is not to suggest that one paradigm is as good as another. The grounding of social justice in identity and identity politics is as shaky as a foundation as one can

imagine. The ontologies of social identity are mutable, uncertain, and sometimes utterly meaningless. Further, subordinated identity categories arguably should be dismantled rather than being used as anchors for knowledge claims. To what extent, one wonders, do the various “studies” devoted to this or that subordinated identity category actually contribute to the reification of the category and thus to the containment and subordination of members therein? This is what seems to be suggested by calling these identity-based studies “grievance studies.” Where would they be without legitimate grievances and thus what incentive do they have to dismantle the categorical containment of the subjects whose interests they putatively represent and advocate for?

Michael Rectenwald is a Professor of Liberal Studies at New York University, where he has taught cultural and social history as well as academic writing since 2008. He is the author of eight books, including [*Springtime for Snowflakes: “Social Justice” and Its Postmodern Parentage*](#) (New English Review Press, 2018), [*Nineteenth-Century British Secularism: Science, Religion and Literature*](#) (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), [*Academic Writing, Real World Topics*](#) (Broadview Press, 2015), and [*Global Secularisms in A Post-Secular Age*](#) (De Gruyter, 2015). His academic essays have appeared in the *British Journal for the History of Science*, *Endeavour*, and the Cambridge University Press anthology *George Eliot In Context*,

among others. Michael is a prominent spokesperson for academic freedom and free speech and an expert on the history and character of the “social justice” movement. He has published articles and essays on these topics in several periodicals and news outlets and has appeared regularly on national television, as well as on numerous radio and Internet shows. He holds a Ph.D. in Literary and Cultural Studies from Carnegie Mellon University.

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