

It's hip to be square! The myths of Jordan Peterson

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Abstract

Jordan Peterson is a psychologist at the University of Toronto, who is widely regarded as the most important public intellectual alive today. His second book, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, which is a runaway best-seller, is a rather uneven combination of things—part polemic, part self-help book, and part memoir. This paper examines the roots and ramifications of Peterson's one-sided critique of contemporary trends in academia and the culture at large.

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C. G. Jung, conservatism, J. S. Mill, liberal arts, liberalism, Marxism, political correctness, postmodernism

In 1986 a recording artist named Huey Lewis released a pop hit entitled “It's Hip to Be Square”. The short-haired, clean-shaven and presumably drug-free presentation of Lewis and his band on MTV seemed calculated to reinforce their message. And since nothing epitomises being “square” (or more precisely, conventional) than the mores and attitudes of the 1950s, the song seemed to suggest that being conventional and old-fashioned was trendy, perhaps even “counter-cultural” or, at the very least, contrarian, in that it defied the newly established mores of mainstream youth culture. This kind of cultural nostalgia seems to be making a comeback among the myriad followers of Jordan B. Peterson, who treat him like a veritable rock star.

Peterson is a clinical psychologist and Professor at the University of Toronto whose chief areas of expertise, until recently, were abnormal, social and personality psychology. However, he has longstanding interests in the fields of politics and religion, and his first book, *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief* (Peterson, 1999), was an ambitious attempt to understand the role that myth plays in human affairs by wedding Jungian psychology and modern neuroscience with lashings of anthropology, comparative religion and Biblical interpretation. The book was serialised in 13 segments that aired on TVOntario in 2004, but was only a modest seller until Peterson was catapulted to fame in 2016 because of his fierce opposition to the spread of political correctness in Canadian universities and, more specifically, to the Federal Government's Bill C-16 concerning the use of gender pronouns in the classroom; a fight which played out in an extensive series of media broadcasts and public forums that were memorable for their intensity. Whether we were taken aback or utterly enthralled by Peterson's razor-tongued rebuttals to critics, his steadfast opposition to Bill C-16—in the face of the outrage and dismay it provoked among many, if not most, of his colleagues at the University of Toronto—took considerable honesty, courage and conviction to sustain.

Unlike Peterson, who sensed a sinister left-wing conspiracy behind Bill C-16, I believe that like the proverbial road to hell, it was often paved with good intentions. And, in retrospect, I still wish that Peterson had been generous enough to acknowledge that fact. But in fairness to Peterson, his livelihood was being threatened, and very few of his critics on the left gave him any credit for good intentions. On the contrary, they frequently put words in his mouth, misrepresented his position, called him names and made him out to be a monster, rendering the whole public debate—which garnered international attention—deeply partisan and envenomed. And let's give credit where it is due. Regardless of the motives that brought it into being, Bill C-16 did have Orwellian undertones that its authors studiously overlooked. It authorising teachers and administrators to police the speech of their students (and of one another) in ways that deviate markedly from English common law and, if left unchecked, would eventually have deepened a pervasive interdiction of free thought and inquiry; a kind of state-sponsored Inquisition against students and faculty who were politically “incorrect,” including liberals and conservatives, who feel increasingly unwelcome in the university system. Poor Lindsay Shepherd's experience at Wilfred Laurier University provides ample proof of that (Brean, 2018).

With the possible exception of Québec's Bill 101, which was passed in 1977, Canadians simply aren't accustomed to seeing such passion and attention directed toward legislation on matters of language. And Peterson evidently won that fight, at least in the court of public opinion. The bitter controversies that ensued, and the fame and notoriety that accrued to him subsequently (Burston, 2017), have made him the subject of numerous newspaper articles and editorials on both sides of the Atlantic, garnering him more than 100 million YouTube views, and a monthly income of at least \$80,000 from his vast (mostly young, mostly male) online following; this in addition to his salary from the University of Toronto. Sales of his first book have also risen steadily since then.

Leaving “political correctness” aside for the moment, another one of Peterson's *bêtes noires* is postmodernism, which is really an umbrella term for a wide range of recent trends in French philosophy, including structuralism and post-structuralism, deconstructionism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and so on. Despite (or because of) their slippery and subversive qualities, their novel (but arcane) terminologies, their clever (but convoluted, and often vacuous or unpersuasive) attempts to refute the objectivity of the natural sciences, their tendencies toward ethical relativism and nihilism, etc., the various schools of thought that are grouped under the heading of “postmodernism” nowadays have had an outsize influence on academic discourse in the last half century or so.

Noting this state of affairs, Peterson often complains that postmodernism and/or cultural Marxism have completely colonised the humanities and social sciences—the liberal arts—in North American universities. And rightly so, in some respects. Recent studies of this issue indicate that the vast majority of tenured faculty nowadays have strong leftist biases, rendering many disciplines and departments in the liberal arts completely inhospitable environments for classical liberals and conservative faculty members (Shields & Dunn, 2016). Despite the increasingly clichéd (and often ineffectual) policies promoting diversity on campus, the push to recruit members of racial, religious and gender minorities into the faculty body does not often encompass, or in some instances, really allow for, the recruitment of a politically diverse faculty. This is seldom, if ever, a matter of deliberate policy, but the result of a kind of collective bias or “group think” which prompts left-leaning faculty to hire only like-minded people, stacking the deck against those whose perspectives on politics they do not share, and deliberately (but not always consciously) acting in concert to exclude those whose views they consider suspect, or not sufficiently “progressive,” regardless of their levels of scholarly achievement. This worrisome trend—which is morally reprehensible, as well as stunningly short-sighted, from both a scholarly and pragmatic point of view—has been well documented and has been gaining steam steadily over the past four decades.

As a result, oddly enough, the ascendancy of postmodernism in the humanities and social sciences has contributed mightily to the accelerating decline of the liberal arts in universities all across North America. To say that postmodernism caused the current decline of the liberal arts would be an exaggeration, of course, because many other factors were also in play, among them the availability of jobs, the shifting priorities of students, and an increasingly instrumental view of higher education, which sees it simply as a stepping stone to a better career,

rather than a passionate (and yet dispassionate) search for truth. Nevertheless, the liberal arts, which were once considered the heart of the academic enterprise, have become almost completely peripheral to the concerns of university administrators, who gleefully shrink or close down entire departments and programmes once deemed vital to the functioning of the universities—languages, classics, sociology, anthropology. University administrators do this in various ways—by hiring increasing numbers of contingent (adjunct) faculty, by freezing tenured faculty's salaries, by slashing their department's overall operating budgets, and by diminishing the sources of internal funding available to faculty (as individuals) for their ongoing research. And these are only the most obvious and time-honoured methods.

Of course, if you listen to the administrators' rhetoric, these “cost-cutting” steps are vital to the continued viability of the university as a whole, and are therefore in everyone's collective interest, in the long run. But follow the money and it invariably transpires that the revenues diverted away from the humanities and social sciences (and the fine arts) end up in the budgets of departments in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) disciplines, or the salaries of the rapidly multiplying cohort of junior, assistant and associate administrators whose job it is to police and instruct actual teachers on how to do their jobs, and sports coaches, publicity and public relations professionals who do no teaching whatsoever, but exist to boost the university's “brand,” and so on.

Though he claims to be a fan of multivariate analysis, thus far, to my knowledge, Peterson has been happy to attribute the decline of the liberal arts solely to the advent of postmodernism and political correctness, remaining utterly oblivious to the ways in which the crisis of the liberal arts reflects larger cultural trends, buttressing the STEM disciplines and the obscene and unnecessary growth of the administrative class, which increasingly deprives faculty of a meaningful role in the governance of their own universities. Nor has he acknowledged the ways in which the excesses of postmodernism and political correctness actually facilitate the ongoing impoverishment of the liberal arts and, indirectly, abet a neo-liberal economic and political agenda. However, his fiery invective—however one-sided—has struck a chord, and as a result of all the (good and bad) publicity that followed in the wake of these controversies, Peterson's second book, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (Peterson, 2018), quickly topped the best-seller list on Amazon in Canada and the United States, and ranked fourth in the United Kingdom.

Unlike his first book, which is difficult to follow, highly speculative in places, and deeply infused with Jungian motifs and ideas, this volume reads a little more like a self-help book. Though there is a lot less Jung, it contains some inspiring quotes from (and references to) Jesus, Socrates, Milton, Goethe, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Nietzsche and Yeats, among others. But these are interspersed with folksy flourishes like the occasional smiley face or a corny joke. On p. 1, for example, we read: “Lobsters have more in common with you than you may think, (particularly when you are feeling crabby—ha ha)”. Yes, indeed. Ha ha. And many passages in this book are densely repetitive, sounding more like a Sunday sermon than a learned treatise or a conventional self-help book.

The book itself consists of twelve chapters, ostensibly devoted to twelve “rules.” But these are not really rules; they are actually somewhat vague precepts meant to guide and inspire, in aid of which Peterson offers us copious autobiographical reflections spanning his childhood, adolescence and early adulthood, and all kinds of cultural commentary and psychological theory. Among the more confusing bits, we find that Rule 9 is “Assume that the person you are listening to might know something you don't.” This sounds like a call for common courtesy and open-mindedness in everyday conversation, but begins, oddly enough, as a reflection on the role of listening in psychotherapy. While Peterson discusses Sigmund Freud and Carl Rogers in this context, anyone who is deeply versed in their work will acknowledge that his treatment of them is quite superficial, and that his own reflections on this subject do not hold a candle to the more probing and nuanced discussions of the proper mode of listening in psychotherapy from Martin Buber, C. G. Jung, Theodor Reik, Medard Boss, R. D. Laing, Robert Langs, and others. Things would be puzzling enough if Peterson just stopped there. But he doesn't. Instead, he shifts his focus to other kinds of conversation—those intended to establish dominance (where listening is basically absent), “genuine” conversation, the lecture format, and so on, but without saying why, specifically, much less offering a coherent summation of his ideas. In retrospect, one wonders—what was the central theme or focus of this chapter, precisely?

Less confusing is the chapter devoted to Rule 5: "Do not let your children do anything that makes you dislike them." He describes a patient, whose intractable conflicts with his son are undermining his health, income and peace of mind, and asks: "How are such situations to be understood? Where does the fault lie? In the child or the parent? In nature or society?" (p. 118). He then goes on to note that:

Some localize all such problems in the adult, whether in the parent or in the broader society. "There are no bad children," such people think, "only bad parents." When the idealized image of the unsullied child is brought to mind, this notion appears fully justified. The beauty, openness, trust, joy and capacity for love characterizing children makes it easy to attribute full culpability to the adults on the scene. But such an attitude is dangerously and naively romantic. It's too one-sided, in the case of parents granted a particularly difficult son or daughter. (p. 118)

Further, he continues:

More often than not, modern parents are simply paralyzed by the fear that they will no longer be liked or even loved by their children if they chastise them for any reason. They want their children's friendship above all, and are willing to sacrifice respect to get it. This is not good. A child will have many friends, but only two parents—if that—and parents are more, not less than friends. Friends have a very limited authority to correct. Every parent therefore needs to tolerate the momentary anger or even hatred directed toward them by their children, after necessary corrective action has been taken, as the capacity of children to perceive or care about long term consequences is very limited. Parents are the arbiters of society. They teach children how to behave so that other people will be able to interact meaningfully and productively with them. (p. 123)

So, how did we get to this cultural state of affairs, where parents fear the loss of their children's love—(rather than vice versa?)—and fail to teach them "how to behave"? According to Peterson, it was the malign influence of the 1960s. He writes that parents like these:

dwell uncomfortably and self-consciously in the all too powerful shadow of the adolescent ethos of the 1960s, a decade whose excesses led to a general denigration of adulthood, an unthinking disbelief in the existence of competent power, and the inability to distinguish between the chaos of immaturity and responsible freedom. (p. 119)

Instead of the permissiveness and anomie encouraged by the adolescent ethos of the sixties, Peterson evidently yearns for a return to an earlier, more mature ethos, and to disciplinary measures that, if circumstances warrant, may even include spanking our wayward progeny. And as Nellie Bowles wrote in "The Prophet of the Patriarchs,"

Peterson fills huge lecture halls and tells his audiences there's no shame in looking backward to a model of how the world should be arranged. Look back to the 1950s, he says, and back even further. He is bringing them knowledge, he says, but it is knowledge that they already know and feel in their bones. He casts this as ancient wisdom, delivered through religious allegories and fairy tales containing truth, he says, that modern society has forgotten. (Bowles, 2018, p. 1)

Looking to the past for sound precedent, for models of the good life, a sane society, or examples of a life well lived is one of the hallmarks of traditionalist conservative ideology. And I use the word "ideology" quite deliberately here, because Peterson's popularity hinges in part on his carefully crafted pose as a post-ideological or non-ideological thinker. Norman Doidge, a psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and best-selling author in his own right, wrote the foreword to *12 Rules for Life*, and described Peterson as an expert on the subject of ideologies, which he defines as "substitutes for true knowledge" (p. xiv), and as

simple ideas, disguised as science or philosophy that purport to explain the complexity of the world and offer remedies that perfect it. Ideologues are people who pretend they know how "to make the world a better place" before they've taken care of their own chaos within. (p. xiv)

In other words, according to Peterson, ideology is a malign force that fosters arrogance, immaturity and massive cognitive distortions; an unwillingness to face reality, or a desire to bend it arbitrarily to one's own will. By this account, ideology is something that must be seen through, transcended and outgrown if the person ever hopes to become an authentically grounded individual in their own right. Unlike Dr. Doidge and Professor Peterson, I follow sociologist Karl Mannheim, and define ideology as a (relatively) coherent pattern of attitudes and beliefs that shape a person's political outlook. Considered in this light, traditionalists like Peterson share an ideology that values cultural cohesion and continuity over change. Whether they are Jewish, Christian or Muslim, conservative traditionalists tend to be religious, to romanticise the past, and to have a rather gloomy view of human nature and the whole human condition, emphasising the need for robust constraints to contain our innate depravity. By contrast with traditionalists, progressives often belittle, ignore or misunderstand the past. They look to it with pity or contempt rather than nostalgia. Even if they are spiritually inclined or actual believers, in many cases progressives tend to mistrust much of organised religion, which they generally regard as resistant to change, and believe in the basic goodness and potential perfectibility of our species, looking to the future rather than the past for the realisation of their hopes for humanity.

Needless to say, as long as he defines ideology as a collective delusion, or a "substitute for true knowledge," rather than a more global and encompassing philosophy of history that people are wedded to, Peterson can always accuse his adversaries—neo-Marxists, feminists, postmodernists, queer theorists—of acting in bad faith, of deceiving themselves (as well as others), becoming conscious or unwitting agents of harm and misdirection to the young and gullible. The same holds true for his attitudes toward collectivism and individualism. If ideology is something only collectivists indulge in or produce, radical individualists (like Peterson) are free of these presumed pathologies. And that would appear to imply that people who identify as individualists do not share an ideology—by definition, no doubt, because they are individualists, right?

Unfortunately, this kind of self-serving logic enables radical individualists like Peterson to see the mote in others' eyes, but not the beam in their own. Nevertheless, we have to concede that Peterson's critique of the left has some merit. After all, when taken to extremes and shorn of every humane and judicious scruple, the progressivist outlook often fosters a naïve belief in the value of change for its own sake, a starry-eyed utopianism that can be harnessed in the service of a totalitarian agenda and a self-deluding faith in the "goodness" of ruthless, self-aggrandising, power-hungry leaders, for example, the cults of Stalin, Mao or Hugo Chavez. But, as history repeatedly attests, the problem with framing the issue in this stark, Manichean and bluntly adversarial manner is that much the same is true, albeit in a different way, for the conservative traditionalist ideology. Taken to extremes and freed from its more humane and judicious attributes, the traditionalist conservative outlook shades imperceptibly into fanaticism and fascism, where ultra-nationalism, religious extremism, racism and xenophobia co-mingle and reinforce one another in the collective psyche.

So, despite claims to the contrary, traditionalist conservatism is not free from value-delusions or a propensity to self-deception. But, as long as you define the word "ideology" as Peterson does, it is relatively easy, rhetorically speaking, to seize the moral high ground by defining ideology as something that only other people do or have, embrace or espouse, and not as a kind of cultural medium in which we all live and breathe and have our being—authentic or otherwise. In this way it becomes easy to portray oneself as a prophet or hero who has seen through the pernicious mythologies that prompt the masses to distort reality, preventing people whose whole lives have been thwarted or derailed by false loyalties and ideals from becoming robust and ethically grounded individuals who can play a useful role in society and raise their children to a wholesome maturity. Which is precisely what Peterson does in *12 Rules for Life*.

Of course, with all that said, Peterson does not actually think of himself as a traditionalist conservative, despite his tendency to idealise the past and his fervent embrace of radical individualism. On the contrary, he claims to be a

classical liberal. Indeed, in the wake of the Unite the Right rally led by White Supremacist Richard Spencer in Charlottesville, Virginia on 13 May, 2017, Peterson vigorously rebuked journalists and bloggers who referred to him as an alt-right supporter, threatening to sue anyone—on the left or the right—who maintained that he was. And since then he has stated repeatedly that he abhors the identitarian politics of the left and the right equally.

So far, these urgent and angry disclaimers haven't deterred his alt-right admirers from citing him favourably or his opponents on the left from portraying him as a poster-boy for the alt-right. Why? Well, perhaps it is because by claiming "classical liberalism" as the standard he bears, the ideal (rather than the ideology) that he aspires and adheres to, Peterson invites comparisons between himself and the archetypal representative of classical liberalism, John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). As Peterson frequently reminds his students and YouTube followers, Mill's defence of individual liberty and freedom of speech (Mill, 1859/2002a) made him one of Peterson's heroes. Along with Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Nietzsche, Orwell and Solzhenitsyn, Peterson praises Mill's clarity and moral courage often. And yet, oddly enough, Peterson always neglects to inform his readers (and YouTube followers) that Mill wrote a passionate and articulate book on the injustices of patriarchy, published in 1869, and a (comparatively) sympathetic study of socialist thought, which was published a decade later in 1879.

Though he is sometimes credited with sole authorship, *The Subjection of Women* (1869/2002b) is a book that Mill co-authored with his wife, Harriet Taylor Mill. For future reference, please note that it was published one decade after Darwin's masterpiece, *On the Origin of Species* (1859/1964), and two years before Darwin's next book *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871/2004). In *The Subjection of Women* Mill argued that the traits that conventional wisdom deems to be essentially masculine or feminine are not really natural, as Darwin said, but the historical artefact of oppressive social relations that are deeply akin or actually equivalent, in many cases, to slavery. In short, though they seldom used the term patriarchy per se, the Mills were among the first to argue forcefully that gender roles and sexual traits are really social constructions that have been used historically to oppress one half of humanity for the benefit of the other. Which prompts the following questions: was Mill himself already under the influence of the malign neo-Marxist postmodern sensibilities that, according to Peterson, have done such deep and perhaps irreparable harm to our universities? And, if so, who put these strange ideas in his head? Or was Mill actually an independent thinker, light years ahead of his contemporaries, a bold contrarian who challenged the conventional wisdom of his time in the hopes of being vindicated in the future?

Similar sorts of questions arise swiftly in connection with the book entitled *Socialism* (Mill, 1879/2003), published a decade after *The Subjection of Women*. Mill's book was far more sympathetic and even-handed in its treatment of "utopian socialists" like Robert Owen, Charles Fourier and others than Marx and Engels ever were. But, even so, Mill's own critique of early industrial capitalism would shock and dismay many contemporary admirers, including Peterson and his followers, because Mill openly acknowledges the merits of many of their central arguments, and because many of the critical things Mill himself said about capitalism then are still manifestly true today. (Oh, dear!). Moreover, Mill readily acknowledged that, theoretically at least, Communism just might succeed in addressing the manifold injustices of capitalism if—and only if—those in charge, the leaders of the movement, were people of very high moral calibre. (Prophetic words indeed!).

What a confusing state of affairs for today's "classical liberals," who succumb to a kind of social amnesia that renders it expedient, and even necessary in some circles, to cherry-pick Mill's ideas and utterances in defence of what is usually a very conservative political agenda. In this respect, they are not entirely different from today's social justice warriors, who are just as oblivious to Mill's critiques of capitalism and patriarchy, perhaps because he was white, male and privileged, and not radical enough for their taste, or because they cannot abide his views on freedom of speech, which have become anathema on many college campuses, despite their widespread popularity among students in the sixties, the decade that Peterson abhors. Ironies abound here. But whereas conservatives invoke Mill selectively, when it suits their political agenda, the social justice warriors of today just ignore him completely. Poor Mill. A true prodigy of the nineteenth century! But one wonders how—or even if—he will still be remembered a century from now.

Speaking for myself, I am saddened by the way Mill's intellectual legacy is trifled with or ignored nowadays, because, like Peterson, I admire Mill's views on freedom of speech exceedingly. But I also think that his critiques of capitalism and patriarchy made him a better liberal than many of those who embrace that label today, Hayek and Popper notwithstanding. In the wake of the Russian Revolution, liberalism, like conservatism, has morphed into many new forms, including an utterly ahistorical free-market fundamentalism and a sweeping intolerance of anything that smacks of collectivist solutions to what are manifestly systemic (if not planetary) social-environmental problems. And, to be fair, these are problems that cry out for urgent and concerted political action, not the quietist, inward-looking, individualist mindset embodied in Peterson's rule 6: "Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world." Indeed, on reflection, the phrase "perfect order" is a bit vague, and a little chilling, if not somewhat anal and compulsive, in Freudian terminology. Why? Because judging from experience, our lives, families and households can hum along nicely for extended periods of time, even if they are seldom in "perfect order"—an elusive ideal at the best of times (some of us even prefer it that way!). But life can also be extremely messy and unpredictable, leaving us breathless, baffled and uncertain what to do next. As Robert Burns observed: "The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry". If we spent all our time seeking, or seeking to maintain, "perfect order," we'd never get around to trying to change the world for the better. (Though perhaps that's the point, hmmm?).

Meanwhile, in the absence of collective political action, privatisation and deregulation reign supreme, and the vanishing commons yield their last riches to the shareholders of vast multinational corporations, while the planet burns, or drowns—or does both, actually, depending on the time of year and where you live. And where does Peterson stand in all this? As a big fan of Solzhenitsyn and an enemy of collectivism of any kind, Peterson simply cannot bring himself to address this dire state of affairs in a meaningful or consequential way. Instead he focuses all the blame for our collective ills on the left. And with the notable exception of George Orwell, whom he cites often (but selectively), Peterson wilfully ignores the existence of many democratic socialists in the twentieth century—Ignazio Silone, Irving Howe, Michael Harrington, Erich Fromm, E. P. Thompson and Canada's own Tommy Douglas and Karl Polanyi, to name a few—who were severely critical of Lenin, Stalin and the whole Soviet Empire in the twentieth century.

So, let us pose a hypothetical question. If he were to address them directly, how would Peterson react to Mill's ideas about feminism and socialism today? We can only speculate. But, if pressed, I suspect Peterson might say that when Mill wrote his eloquent defence of feminism, women really were deprived of basic human rights—the right to vote, equal access to education and jobs, etc. But that, he might argue, is no longer the case. Moreover, Peterson might say, Mill hadn't had the benefit of reading Darwin's second book, *The Descent of Man*, which only appeared two years later. Had he considered all the evidence on male and female traits that Darwin then presented, and considered the subsequent work of his followers, Peterson might add, Mill would have changed his mind, and given strong priority to evolutionary explanations for human behaviour.

Admittedly, to make my point, I am disputing a hypothetical answer to a hypothetical question. In truth, I don't really know how Peterson would respond to this question. But, for the sake of argument, let me state that, if he was presented with all the evidence currently available on gender and sex-specific traits or abilities in evolutionary biology, psychology, modern neuroscience, etc., a man as judicious as Mill would probably seek some sort of integration between the two positions, gender essentialism and the constructivist critique. The suggestion that Mill would have abandoned his initial position completely, had he only lived long enough, is unrealistic and, in fact, insulting. Why? Because *The Subjection of Women* is more than merely a critique of nineteenth-century patriarchy. It is a remarkably sensitive and astute study of the formation (and deformation) of human character, of the psychology of power and powerlessness—more valuable (by far) than, say, Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* (1887/1964) which, despite its undoubted popularity among postmodern thinkers (and not a few Petersonians, I'll wager), is riddled with racist rhetoric throughout.

But seeking a judicious integration or *Aufhebung* among these diametrically opposed positions—social constructivism and queer theory versus evolutionary biology and psychology—appears to be the last thing on Peterson's

agenda. On the contrary, he is as intransigent on this score as the queer theorists and social constructivists whose wilful blindness he ridicules so forcefully. Meanwhile he maintains, against considerable evidence, that the injustices of the past are no longer relevant today; that male privilege no longer exists in the West. In fact, he seems to feel that change has gone too far already and that, as a consequence, “The masculine spirit is under assault” (Bowles, 2018, p. 1). I don’t wish to be cheeky, but, quite honestly, when I hear remarks like this, they always remind me of a quip from a character in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, who invoked the memory of good old days, “When men were men and women were grateful!” (And knew their place, perhaps?).

Along the same lines, in conversation with Nellie Bowles of *The New York Times*, Peterson declared openly that “The people who hold that our culture is an oppressive patriarchy, they don’t want to admit that the current hierarchy might be predicated on competence” (p. 7). Predicated on competence? Really? Unfortunately, it is not clear from context precisely what Peterson means by “the current hierarchy”, because society actually consists of a complexly interdigitated plurality of hierarchies—political, economic, governmental, juridical, military, ecclesiastical, racial, academic and sexual—each with their own distinctive histories and characteristics. Granted, these hierarchies are intricately intertwined. They converge and overlap in various ways. But they also change at different rates, in different ways and for different reasons. That is why we should be wary of catch-all phrases like “the current hierarchy.” Meanwhile, on the face of it at least, this last remark discourages careful reflection and invites misinterpretation. Indeed, it sounds suspiciously like a fifties-style, pre-feminist defence of the status quo.

Besides, let’s be real, shall we? In our present cultural climate, genuine competence is often menaced, eroded or frankly discredited by political machinations and large-scale economic interests and market forces operating quietly behind the scenes—more so, indeed, than by the left-wing ideologues that provoke Peterson and his followers so. Nowhere is this state of affairs more evident than in our universities and public schools. But, on a larger societal scale, this state of affairs has been “politics as usual” for a long time and has worsened considerably in the twenty-first century—especially in the US under President Trump. And anyone who doubts this is hopelessly naïve; far more naïve than Jordan Peterson, I suspect.

Finally, Peterson’s persistent complaints about the spiritual assault on masculinity, etc., might raise fewer eyebrows or elicit fewer laughs if he did not go out on a limb, telling Nellie Bowles of *The New York Times* that, contrary to prevailing wisdom, witches and dragons really do exist. In his own words:

Yeah, they (witches) do (exist). They just don't exist in the way you think they exist. They certainly exist. You may say, well dragons don't exist. It's like, yes, they do—the category predator and the category dragon are the same category. It absolutely exists. It's a superordinate category. It absolutely exists more than anything else. In fact, it really exists. What exists is not obvious. (p. 7)

Granted, what exists is not always obvious. Magic and science agree wholeheartedly on this point, though they differ markedly about the status of the supernatural. And therein lies the problem, you see. Witches may “exist,” in some dubious fashion. Many of our ancestors acted as if they do, and many women still believe that they themselves are witches, even if they lack the abilities usually attributed to women so designated. But, when all is said and done, witches are the stuff of folklore and mythology. Their ontological status is shaky at best, because “the witch” is largely a cultural construction, which may (or may not) derive from some universal (Jungian) archetype (e.g. the destructive mother, the evil crone, etc.). To say that witches “absolutely exist more than anything else” is manifestly absurd.

Similarly, the existence of the category “predator” is not particularly controversial. But neither is it relevant, because categories are ways of classifying (real and imaginary) objects according to some real or perceived similarities, like mammals, arachnids, or elves, for example. But most categories of real entities refer to a finite series of things, and the assertion that the existence of dragons follows *logically* from the existence of an abstract category (or even a Jungian archetype) for predators is utter nonsense. There are—and were—only a finite number of real predatory species during the time we and our remote ancestors have inhabited this earth. And dragons weren’t among them. Not only do they not exist, they never existed, except in the collective imagination.

So, perhaps fame is going to Peterson's head. After all, people who indulge in reckless and alogical generalisations like these generally have a very high opinion of themselves, a low opinion of their listeners' intelligence, a very loose grip on reality, or perhaps, indeed, all three. But sometimes the tone of a remark is more revealing than its content, especially when it is nestled in the larger context of the person's overall world view. People who strenuously resist social change, yearn for the good old days, admonish children to respect their elders, and elders to discipline their young; who conjure with myths and fairy tales, serving them up as distillations of ancient wisdom long forgotten by our spiritually impoverished contemporaries, but which are vital to our own spiritual emancipation from the heavy shackles of modernity (and postmodernity); people like these are traditionalist conservatives, no matter how often (or in what circumstances) they cite John Stuart Mill.

With that said, however, it is unfair to characterise Peterson as a fascist, as many of his left-wing critics do. Why? Is it because he is an individualist, while fascism is collectivist? No, that is the easy answer, and completely beside the point here. The real reason to differentiate clearly between traditionalist conservatives and fascists is that traditionalist conservatives have genuine principles and deep moral convictions that may place them in conflict with fascist or incipiently fascist political movements. Of course, the claim that traditionalist conservatives actively resist the rising tide of fascism seems profoundly counter-intuitive to most progressives. But that is because, in Peterson's idiom, they are not "paying attention."

By way of illustration, consider the very public conflicts between Donald J. Trump and the previous and current directors of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, James Comey and Robert Mueller. Unlike their Commander-in-Chief, who has switched his party allegiance multiple times since the eighties, Comey and Mueller are both life-long Republicans. They are also traditionalist conservatives who firmly believe in the rule of law, value a truth-loving disposition, and shun the kind of raw racism and bigotry radiating steadily from the current White House administration. Unfortunately, their conflicts with Trump—which are completely unprecedented, from a purely legal and legislative standpoint, and make new headlines daily—were long in the making, and are indicative of deeper, systemic contradictions in American conservatism which were documented with devastating candour in John W. Dean's disturbing book *Conservatives Without Conscience* (Dean, 2006).

Fortunately, Comey and Mueller do have some support among American conservatives, many of whom show up occasionally as critics and commentators in "liberal" media outlets, purveyors of what Trump derisively refers to now as "fake news." The problem is that there are not enough of them to stem the tide, which seems likely to lead to an even more regressive and conscience-free conservative consensus, one which is already teetering dangerously close to fascism. And the irony here—which is delicious or disturbing, depending on your point of view—is that in the absence of more robust support from conservatives, many progressives are now rallying vigorously to their defence, praying—sometimes literally, as well as figuratively—that Comey and Mueller will prevail. Why? Because despite their deep political differences with Directors Comey and Mueller, many progressives see them as the last hope for salvaging what little is left of American democracy from the wreckage being wrought by the ruthless, bigoted and mendacious people who currently control the Republican party.

Will they prevail? It is too soon to say. Meanwhile, this troubling and unprecedented state of affairs plays into the Trumpist narrative that the Russia investigation, led by Director Mueller, is really a partisan conspiracy driven by Democrats (despite abundant evidence to the contrary). So, if we are really paying attention to the mind-boggling developments unfolding before us, what our current political reality demonstrates is that conservatives with strong ethical principles can play a pivotal role in resisting fascism. Moreover, it is curious to note that, in our current crisis, progressive people's reflexive (and ideologically rooted) mistrust of FBI directors vanishes, as progressives find common cause with them, even viewing them as their champions.

While the situation in Canada is not nearly as dire (for now), similar trends are emerging among Canadian conservatives. Conservatives are trending farther and farther to the right, and increasingly embracing the kinds of hateful, racist rhetoric that their American counterparts do. And where does Peterson stand in the midst of these ominous trends? Over there, on the sidelines, twiddling his thumbs. With his vast online following and his ever-growing media presence, he is now perfectly positioned to take on a leadership role, galvanising people to resist right-wing tyranny.

But, judging from recent events, he'd rather spend his time excoriating the left or debating the (non)existence of White privilege (and/or male privilege) than rallying conservatives to their senses. And this is due largely to the quality of his religiosity. Peterson's second book is filled with reflections on the Biblical narratives concerning Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Abraham and Isaac, and the themes of suffering and sacrifice. But when Peterson talks about theological issues, he invariably invokes what Paul Tillich called the vertical or transcendental dimension of faith, the piety of transcendent and inner-worldly concerns (Tillich, 1957). The idea that religious faith must also be lived out in the horizontal dimension, the pursuit of social justice, never seems to cross his mind. The same must be said of his favourite psychologist, Carl Jung, who never seriously addressed the Prophetic sensibility in Christian teaching. Is this because, like Jung, Peterson is an "introvert"? Possibly so. But then again, a one-sided or exclusive emphasis on the vertical or transcendent dimension of religious belief and experience, of internal or innerworldly transformation, is another hallmark of the traditionalist conservative mindset.

Nevertheless, as any serious student of religion knows, the Prophetic call for justice is integral to the Biblical tradition, and the deliberate neglect of it by anyone intent on carrying this tradition forward is an omission that calls for serious reflection. The Prophetic dimension of Biblical faith inspired Adam Clayton Powell Sr. to preach the Gospel of Social Justice, inspiring Dietrich Bonhoeffer to stiffen his resistance to Hitler's racism. It is what inspired Karl Barth to found the Confessing Church as Germany hurtled toward the Holocaust. It is what inspired the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. to rally people of conscience to abolish segregation and dismantle Jim Crow in the civil rights movement. It is what inspired Catholic activists, like Dorothy Day, the Berrigan brothers, and many, many others to courageous acts of resistance to war and violence during the Vietnam war era.

Sadly, Peterson seems temperamentally incapable of engaging with this dimension of religious faith. Indeed, by counselling his followers to "Put your house in perfect order before you criticize the world," he is sending them on a fool's errand. In the Biblical idiom, given our fallen condition, no one is free of sin or the temptation to sin. "Perfect order" is not merely elusive, it is completely unattainable, at least in this world. And yet, when all is said and done, God has no other hands but ours, and we have to do the best with what we have, and who we are. And we have to move swiftly to resist tyranny. Otherwise, it will be too late.

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