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## The Left is the New Right, The Right is the Old Right

by Vincent Kelley on February 13, 2018

I didn't pay much attention to Jordan Peterson when I first heard about him. The standard line on Peterson among liberals and leftists was that he is yet another right-wing hero of young, white men, but less extreme than those on the full-fledged alt-right. While this may be generally true, the fact that I personally knew a number of his followers who were, variably, old, non-white, and female was what made me start paying closer attention to Peterson.

While this observation might be insignificant to those on the left who share Peterson's commitment to percentages and distributions in understanding the world, it says something important to those of us who want to understand Peterson's popularity on a deeper level. C.L.R. James encapsulates the dialectical method when he writes that, "so often, the truth does not lie in between." In other words, Peterson's majority young, white male fan base and significant minority of fans who fall outside of this classification cannot be understood as separate realities, whose truth we must simply average out, but, rather, are part of the same truth that must be understood in its totality. It is from this dialectical understanding of Peterson's audience that I want to analyze his thought and the left's response to it.

In a lecture given in Vancouver in November 2017 titled "Identity Politics and the Marxist Lie of White Privilege," Peterson takes on the ambitious task of debunking both Marxism and postmodernism in slightly over two hours. He characterizes

postmodernism as a sublimated version of the “wrong, murderous, genocidal” ideology of Marxism. To support his polemics, Peterson combines a mix of Wikipedia-style historical anecdotes about “tens of millions” killed under communist totalitarianism with the assertions—apparently too obvious to be debated—that “the Chinese have got rich, the Indians have got rich.” Since capitalism won the Cold War and has purportedly made the Third World wealthy, Marxists have had to give up on their grandiose claims of social transformation led by the working class. In order to keep their resentful ideology alive, they have expanded the ambit of oppression beyond class and waged a new war of political correctness whose primary battleground is the college and university campus.

In response to Peterson’s scorched earth policy toward the left, philosopher Harrison Fluss compares Peterson’s politics to Richard Spencer’s “paleo-Nazism,” calls him “authoritarian,” and attempts to link him more generally to the “alt-right” in a recent *Jacobin* article entitled “Jordan Peterson’s Bullshit.” While some or all of these accusations may be true, Fluss fails to even quote Peterson beyond one and two-word snippets, instead opting for jumbled paraphrasing of a few of Peterson’s main ideas coupled with a smattering of references to European philosophers and schools of thought. Fluss gives lip service to ostensibly Marxist concepts like “dialectical logic,” but instead of elaborating on what these concepts mean, he reverts to more name-calling at the end of the article, dubbing Peterson’s politics “paranoid and conspiratorial.”

This all makes for quite entertaining political theater, but its impact stretches far beyond the auditorium walls to the tune of Peterson’s “half-million YouTube subscribers, nearly 300,000 Twitter followers, and several thousand fans who send him some \$60,000 per month,” according to the Chronicle of Higher Education. The left is clearly worried that Peterson’s “star is on the rise,” but Fluss’ article begs the question; concerned about exactly what? And if there is something to be concerned about, is Fluss’ substitution of ad hominem attacks for serious critique the best way to combat Peterson? Most important of all, what is the difference between Fluss and Peterson and, more generally, the left and the right in 2018?

## The Flustered Left

The left has a habit of misunderstanding the right of the Trump era to its own detriment. Making a fetish of demographics is one of the ways it does so. For example, Shuja Haider opens his largely compelling critique of Peterson's new book by reiterating the aforementioned one-dimensional truth that Peterson's audience is "primarily young, white, and male." Fluss goes even further than Haider by stating that Peterson's followers cannot be "normal people," but instead have a "disdain for the common struggles of the oppressed, including the struggles of racial minorities, women, and LGBTQ people." He attributes this disdain not to historical changes in the social world, but, rather, to a trans-historical rightist attraction to Nietzsche, whose own 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy merely finds its contemporary expression in Peterson and his fans.

Fluss' critique of Peterson must be read in the context of his earlier writings for *Jacobin*, namely a piece he wrote with fellow philosopher Landon Frim, playfully entitled "Aliens, Antisemitism, and Academia." In this article, Fluss and Frim attempt to explain how alt-right intellectual Jason Reza Jorjani could have gone through the same "progressive" philosophy department as they did at Stony Brook University and turn out to become the "self-appointed spokesperson for 'Aryan Imperium.'" Their basic argument is that the left's abandonment of Enlightenment values, namely "rationality," has allowed figures like Jorjani to emerge as alt-right ideologues from within the left's own territory. While there is something to Fluss and Frim's criticism of the ideological ambiguity of the postmodern left, it is uncanny just how similar their view sounds to Jordan Peterson's. In his recent book, *12 Rules for Life*, Peterson rails against postmodernism and in his talks he presents himself as a rational scholar concerned with "facts," "evidence," and "human universal[s]." It's hard to see what Fluss would take issue with in light of his own view that the alt-right finds its philosophical fodder in an embrace of postmodernism.

How, then, can Fluss go from having so much in common philosophically with Peterson, to equating him with Nazis in the very same periodical? The answer lies in Fluss' excision of the working class from his call for a return to Enlightenment values. Not once do the words "worker" or "class," let alone "working class," appear in Fluss and Frim's lengthy article on Jorjani. Even with his perfunctory nod to "class struggle" in the Peterson polemic, Fluss makes it clear that his Marxism is not about connecting revolutionary ideology to the only class that can "finally put ethics on a material basis," but, instead, invoking a "legacy of reason." While Fluss does rightly add that, "The fight against reaction does not start in the liberal editorial office but in organizing concrete struggle," at the end of the article we are left wondering what historical force is capable of connecting ideological clarity to concrete struggle. Indeed, while he strives to reclaim the "universal" of the Enlightenment, Fluss fails to mention the most important universal brought about by capitalism and the only one capable of ending it: the international working class.

It is only through an understanding of Fluss' petite bourgeois socialism—a socialism that cherishes Enlightenment universality, but not the universality of the working class—that we can make sense of his philosophical alignment with Peterson. "Jordan Peterson's Bullshit" can only be understood as a (conscious or unconscious) realization of this alignment and Fluss' last ditch effort to save face and protect his leftist credentials.

## **Peterson and the Darker Nations: Science in Service of the Color Line**

Fluss may be relatively easy to figure out, but Peterson takes a bit more unpacking. While the left response to Peterson has focused primarily on his critique of gender identity politics, feminism, and Marxism, his popularity cannot be understood purely in terms of these hot button culture war issues. A brief chat with many Peterson followers reveals that much of his appeal is often linked to his ostensibly "apolitical" work. As one fan told me:

“ *He does tend to get political for sure, I just see that as one facet of who he is. I actually don't have too much of an opinion on that side of him—I take it with a grain of salt to some degree . . . I guess I'm just not sold on the fact that all of his claims are founded on his opinion of postmodernism—he talks plenty about how to lead a good life, engage with others, adopt responsibility, etc. They're literally the chapter names of his book too.* ”

One of Peterson's major “apolitical” attractions is his engagement with both science and religion. As one of the few contemporary public intellectuals speaking to a general audience on both of these topics—often in the same lecture—Peterson is the quintessential child of the Enlightenment. He wants to put discussion of the universals of science and religion back on the table, and has found a much larger and more diverse audience—hungry to hear his pontifications on these topics—than he had dreamed of. In this way, Peterson has attacked postmodernism more effectively than Fluss could ever imagine doing.

Peterson's growing number of followers are a testament to a desire for a serious engagement with science and religion in a generation raised on the postmodern assumption that, “Social systems (totalities) . . . [are] merely discredited metanarratives rather than social ‘realities’ to be contested.” This is not simply a “young, white, male” desire, but a desire for the permission to seek the truth and access to the tools to help find it. But does Peterson's frequent invocation of science and religion actually help us, as Frantz Fanon put it in *Black Skin, White Masks*, “to reach out for the universal”? Despite inflecting his lectures with an air of objective universalism, Peterson is preoccupied with defending what, as he says himself, “Western culture has discovered.” The superiority of “Western culture” is then proved by the fact that “you don't see immigration going there [the non-West], that's for sure.” For it is only “the West” that has “functioning societies.” Peterson goes on to tell us what that means:

“ We know from the psychological literature that the best predictors of long-term life success are intelligence and conscientiousness, in Western countries at least, and that’s what you’d hope for, right? Even if you weren’t particularly smart or hard-working, you might want to set up a society where intelligence and hard work were good predictors of success because then the people who were smart and hard-working would produce a bunch of things that you could have, if you could trade for them. And, of course, that is actually the situation that most of us are in.”

As we can see, Peterson’s “functioning society” is simply a reductive, fact-bereft description of capitalism in Europe and North America, that is, “the situation that most of us are in.” What we are not told about is the exploitation that this fantastical status quo—which Peterson is so intent on defending—is based on. This exploitation takes the form of imperialism that is suffocating what W.E.B. Du Bois referred to as “the darker nations of the world” in Africa, Asia, and anywhere else not blessed with the European fruits of a “functioning society.” This is an imperialism that has helped India continue to top the world hunger list with 194 million hungry people. Meanwhile, in his characteristically deadpan tone, Peterson informs us that, “It’s not such a bad thing that the Indians aren’t starving—hooray for that.”

Not only is Peterson intellectually dishonest, but the “science” at the root of his claims is nothing but a defense of European colonial science, whose “every device was used . . . to prove the unfitness of most human beings for self-rule and self-expression,” as Du Bois eloquently wrote in *The World and Africa* in 1946. What Peterson’s politically naïve fans do not understand is that his “apolitical” references to objective science and Bible stories are, in fact, political through and through. They represent the politics of European imperialism to preserve the global color line as Europe and its progeny across the Atlantic find themselves in collapse.

## The New Right, the Old Right, Or Humanity?

Harrison Fluss and his ilk at *Jacobin* are utterly incapable of countering Jordan Peterson's rising star. What's more, their own analysis is eerily similar to that of Peterson. As Kevin Hornbuckle has argued, much of "the left is the new right." This is a left that has ceded its philosophical and moral ground to the right through the abandonment of working class and anti-imperialist struggle, instead opting to peddle a faux socialism palatable to the Western petite bourgeoisie.

While the left may be the new right, Peterson also reminds us that the right is the old right. Behind his angry centrist facade, Peterson's politics has at its core a strident anti-communism and, as always follows, a scorn for the struggles of the world's darker nations, the part they have played in world history, and their pivotal role on the path to humanity's liberation from capital and empire.

In the end, Fluss fails to mention perhaps the most terrifying thing Peterson has said: "North Korea could still destroy us all." Only occasionally is truth turned so squarely on its head as it is in this statement, which is undoubtedly applauded by growing numbers of adoring fans (not to mention all mainstream media and discourse) in the only country to have ever used nuclear weapons in history. As humanity accelerates toward ecological and nuclear oblivion—with the United States of America in the driver's seat—it is worth asking who will prevent us all from being destroyed. If one thing is for certain, it won't be the Harrison Fluxes or Jordan Petersons of the world. Will it be you?

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