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Jordan Peterson on Postmodernism, Truth, and Science

Panu Raatikainen

Philosophy, Tampere University
e-mail: panu.raatikainen@tuni.fi

Jordan Peterson, a Canadian professor of psychology, has quickly risen to fame over the last few years: he has been often eagerly viewed as a leading anti-leftist thinker in the West today and even “one of the great thinkers of our time.” *The New York Times* recently labelled him “the most influential public intellectual in the entire Western world right now” (Brooks 2018).

Admirers of Peterson see him as an unwavering defender of rationality and science, freedom of speech, and individual freedom, and a tireless opponent of totalitarianism, postmodernism, and political correctness. Critics accuse him of misogyny and fascism. Although Jordan Peterson is a psychologist by training, much of his output as a public intellectual is essentially philosophical. It is therefore appropriate to evaluate such ideas particularly from the viewpoint of academic philosophy.

“Postmodern neo-Marxism” and truth

Peterson’s central target of criticism is the doctrine he calls “postmodern neo-Marxism.” He contends that neo-Marxists now control Western universities, in particular the social science faculties. According to Peterson, the figurehead of postmodernism is the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, and the other key figures are Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan, also French scholars (all deceased). As Peterson describes it, postmodernism is set in motion by the idea that there are an innumerable number of possible interpretations for every phenomenon and every text. This, he says, is in itself a correct observation, and it has been made in many contexts. Peterson contends that postmodernism concludes from this that there

is no reason to consider any one interpretation to be more valid than any other. The end result, then, is overarching and radical relativism and skepticism (Peterson 2018a; cf. 2018b). According to Peterson's interpretation, postmodernism also advocates radical social constructionism according to which all of reality, even distant galaxies, are mere social constructs. Such a viewpoint is thus in conflict with realism about the external world: it denies the very existence of objective reality as something largely independent of the human mind.

According to Peterson, it is at this point that postmodernism allies with Marxism and brings in the concept of power. The following reasoning then ensues: Since no one interpretation can be elevated above the others as the correct one, it is best to interpret all the options of interpretation as a struggle of different forms of power. There is no external reality: everything is a social construction. There is nothing but power, and conflicts and struggles for power between different groups of people. Power struggles are the only motive for human action (see Kraychik 2017).

Indeed, Peterson repeatedly emphasizes that the leading postmodernist thinkers are former Marxists. However, whereas classical Marxism focused on the power struggle between social classes of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, postmodern neo-Marxism, according to Peterson, recalibrates "class struggle" to include power struggles between arbitrarily defined groups based on sex, race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation. The result is never-ending "identity politics" (see Kraychik 2017; Philipp 2017, Sovereign Nations 2018).

Peterson argues that the great error of postmodernism is to infer from the existence of innumerable possible interpretations that there must be innumerable equally *valid* interpretations. In particular, in order to oppose the latter claim and to clarify the concept of validity, Peterson makes a philosophically substantive move: he relies on *the pragmatist theory of truth*. According to his interpretation, a proposition or interpretation is valid if acting on its basis in the world ensures the desired outcome within a specific timeframe. (Peterson refers to the pragmatist philosophers William James and Charles S. Peirce; see Peterson 2018a.)

According to Peterson, in reality many things limit significantly the number of *valid* interpretations. First, validity is "constrained by the necessity for iteration." As Peterson (2018a) writes: "Your interpretations have to keep you, at minimum, alive and not suffering too badly today, tomorrow, next week, next month and next year in a context defined by you, your family, your community and the broader systems you are part of." Second, Peterson argues that another limiting factor in interpretations is our own biology: we have evolved to prefer certain types of interpretations to others as a consequence of evolutionary processes.

Will pragmatism and biology really help?

Peterson's recourse to the pragmatist theory of truth is arguably a step in a very wrong direction. He advocates the pragmatist theory of truth in a quite naïve and problematic form that is liable to lead to relativism rather than avoid it. The troubles with such a straightforward view of truth are manifold (see e.g., David 2004; Raatikainen 2021a): In reality, it can sometimes be more useful or cause less suffering to believe something that is

untrue. Believing some theoretical truth can also be practically useless, yet true. Moreover, utility is often relative to the individual, culture, or circumstances. It may be useful for person *A* to believe *p*, but useful for person *B* to believe not-*p*.

The fact that some interpretations do not work in practice may preclude a few invalid interpretations, but it often leaves far too much room for relativism: numerous mutually inconsistent interpretations may work equally well on a practical level for some limited period of time. They would then all be, according to Peterson's pragmatist conception, equally true. However, this would mean that a contradiction is true, and that is an intolerable conclusion. Identifying truth and utility is thus clearly an unsustainable idea. Even if several competing theories ensured the desired outcome within a specific timeframe, at most one of them can be true.

Our biologically shaped tendencies in reasoning, which Peterson invokes, are also more problematic than he seems to recognize. They certainly limit our interpretations, but many psychological studies—of which one might expect Peterson as a psychologist to be aware—demonstrate that the intuitive “rules of thumb” we routinely use in our mundane reasoning often lead to erroneous conclusions in more complex settings. For example, the studies of Wason, Johnson-Laird, and their collaborators have demonstrated that the great majority of us perform quite badly in a rather simple logical task. Similarly, Tversky, Kahneman, Slovic, and their colleagues have in turn shown with various experiments that people regularly violate basic rules of probabilistic reasoning, when they assess the relative probability of compound events. (For a brief overview, see Stich 1985.) Our biologically evolved reasoning dispositions are thus no guarantee of truth.

Contemporary philosophy and radical postmodernism

Given how much Peterson likes to talk about contemporary philosophy, it is disconcerting to find that in dealing with this vastly broad and multifaceted field, he seems to be drawing (in addition to a seemingly sporadic reading of a few individual philosophers, namely, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Popper) only from one short overview: *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault* by Stephen Hicks (2004). The book is very concise, but in addition it contains, to say the least, some quite controversial interpretations (cf. e.g., McManus 2018). It is a pity that a commentator of contemporary philosophy as influential as Peterson has built his analysis on such a scant basis.

Peterson presents Derrida as a leading representative of postmodernism. Now Derrida is well known as a difficult and controversial philosopher, and I am happy to leave the judgment of his enduring significance to philosophy and the possible problems of his thought to history. All the same, Peterson's straightforward interpretations of Derrida seem questionable: Derrida apparently never used the term “postmodernism” to describe his own philosophy, nor did he participate in debates on that theme. Derrida also explicitly denied he would advocate radical relativism, and he refuted that his critical scrutiny of the metaphysical basis of truth was intended to be hostile towards truth and science. It seems that Peterson's “Derrida” is largely a fictional character he has created.

Actual radical postmodernism, such as that of Jean-François Lyotard (1979), certainly deserves to be criticized. Peterson is, of course, quite right to regard radical relativism and steep and over-arching social constructionism as implausible and even potentially harmful. However, his recurring claim that such extreme views dominate Western universities is difficult to believe, and it is arguably largely a “straw man” stood up by Peterson himself. In fact, it is quite implausible that the diverse academic world would be ideologically as homogeneous as Peterson’s straightforward description suggests. While some individuals, among millions of academics, may have on some occasions put forward problematic ideas, it is a completely different matter to claim that such views are the prevalent ones. It is actually quite difficult to find thinkers who would really unreservedly advocate the extreme position described by Peterson. In some circles, of course, mere belief in evolution and climate change and respect of everyone’s human rights is inherently leftist. In the minds of such people, Marxism no doubt abounds at universities. However, that does not justify the sort of strong characterization that Peterson presents.

Peterson declares that postmodernist philosophy, which is a part of the so-called “continental tradition” of philosophy, dominates Western universities. Thus, in practice, he denies—among other things—the obvious fact that the philosophy departments of many Anglo-American and Nordic universities have long been dominated by the so-called “analytical tradition,” which draws heavily on the philosophy of science and logic. Drawing himself on psychoanalysis, Heidegger, and Nietzsche, Peterson is in many ways much closer to the “continental tradition” of philosophy (Nietzsche, Heidegger, and psychoanalysis were also central to Derrida and Foucault), one of the branches of which he attacks, than many more scientifically oriented philosophers who have criticized him.

At least in the case of academic philosophers, we have relatively good data: Via the popular *PhilPapers* database, David Bourget and David Chalmers have conducted a massive *survey* of the views of professional philosophers on thirty central philosophical issues (see Bourget & Chalmers 2014). They chose as a special target group all regular faculty members in 99 “leading” departments of philosophy: 92 departments in English-speaking countries and 7 departments from continental Europe (1,972 philosophers in total). To be sure, the survey did not include questions with terms such as “postmodernism” or “social constructionism,” but the following results should give some indication.

Only 1.6% of the target group straightforwardly accepted idealism concerning the external world, while an additional 2.7% said they “leaned towards it.” (These answers were more common among theists than atheists.) Some 3.0% leaned toward skepticism, while only 1.8% unconditionally accepted it. No less than 81.6% accepted or leaned towards non-skeptical realism, 75% accepted scientific realism or leaned towards it (i.e., realism with respect to the non-observable entities postulated in science), and only 3.3 % unreservedly accepted scientific anti-realism. (For the varieties of “realism”, see e.g. Raatikainen 2014.) As to knowledge claims, 1.7% leaned toward relativism, and only 1.2% unconditionally accepted it (*ibid.*). A new survey was conducted in 2020; its analysis is still in the making, but the preliminary results suggest that there are no significant changes in these numbers. If “postmodern neo-Marxism” with extreme relativism or skepticism and radical social constructionism with its denial of the objective external world were even half as dominant as Peterson suggests they are, surely these numbers would have been very different.

Neo-Marxist academia: Fact or fiction?

The picture of “neo-Marxist postmodernists” controlling Western universities that Peterson propagates is in many ways only an updated variant of a conspiracy theory associated with so-called “Cultural Marxism” (see e.g., Jamin 2014, Woods 2019, Busbridge et al. 2020). This theory, which is not without antisemitic aspects, has been popular among the far-right and extreme conservatives since the early 1990s.

The narrative goes roughly as follows: When the communist revolution did not take place in the West, the “Jewish intellectuals” of the so-called Frankfurt School, the “Cultural Marxists,” devised a new strategy. So, the story continues, the goal was to destroy the West “from within” by subverting its traditional culture, values, and institutions, and thus break the moral backbone of the West. Marxists have therefore infiltrated the media, educational institutions, and even churches, and they now dominate them. Among other things, feminism, the sexual revolution, and the defense of the rights of sexual and ethnic minorities are all part of Cultural Marxism’s cunning plan. The picture suggested is a fantastic conspiracy theory that credits amazing things to a few not-quite-easy-to-understand philosophers. It is, in turn, a modification of the older, openly antisemitic “Cultural Bolshevism” or “Judeo-Bolshevism” conspiracy theory of the Nazis, which obviously has an abhorrent track record (*ibid.*). In Peterson’s slightly reformed story, classic Marxism, which revolved around the economy, had been so thoroughly discredited by the 1970s that no one could support it publicly. Therefore, communism is no longer spread openly under the direct banner of “communism,” but instead under the disguise of “postmodernism” (see e.g., Philipp 2017). The Frankfurt school has now been replaced by Derrida and a few other French thinkers, and Peterson’s picture has no apparent antisemitic tone; otherwise, the story is quite similar.

It is certainly true that when the social sciences struggled to develop their philosophical self-understanding and looked for alternatives to austere positivism, the philosophy of the social sciences included some “stabbing in the dark,” and sometimes, in hindsight, unclear and problematic philosophical theories, including relativist views of varying degrees. However, this was not some novelty brought about by “neo-Marxism” in the 1970s: the groping attempts of the social sciences to position themselves in relation to the natural sciences have continued at least since the 19th century. The romanticization and even mystification of the human mind and, consequently, the social sciences has often drawn from the traditions of German idealism and the Counter-Enlightenment, which were more traditionalist and conservative rather than progressive social movements. Relativist views first became popular in connection to such traditions already in the 19th century. (For the history of relativism, see e.g., Baghramian 2004, 2010.) To the extent that relativism or social constructionism have actually gained a foothold in the social sciences at universities, this has been just one phase in a long tradition: It is not due to recent leftist indoctrination.

Peterson, science, and pseudo-science

Peterson and his admirers like to portray him as an uncompromising defender of rationality and the scientific worldview against postmodernist irrationalism. However, Peterson has, as a matter of fact, shown a tendency towards advocating pseudo-scientific ideas.

For example, in August 2018, Peterson shared on Twitter a video titled “Climate Change: What Do Scientists Say?” with his own comment: “Something for the anticapitalist environmentalists to hate.” In the video, Richard Lindzen, a notorious climate change denialist who is known to have received money from fossil fuel interests, speaks as the only “scientist” (Herzog 2018). This is not the only time Peterson has downplayed climate change and promoted a denialist message. Peterson seems to be open to pseudo-scientific propaganda if it can be used as a weapon against “the left.”

In one of his lectures, Peterson discusses ancient fine art from China and the aboriginals of Australia, among others. He notes that there is ancient art around the world that repeatedly depicts intertwined snake-like figures, and that they are used as healing symbols. Peterson states that he believes these ancient paintings represent the double helix of DNA (see Genetically Modified Skeptic, 2018). According to the established history of science, the double helix nature of DNA was not revealed until 1953 by Watson, Crick, Franklin, and Wilkins. The discovery required, among other things, X-rays. When asked about the matter, Peterson explains that “we do not know the limits of observation, especially in certain circumstances.” He says he believes that humans have always (i.e., for millennia) had “hints” about DNA (*ibid.*). Peterson then cites the book *The Cosmic Serpent* by Jeremy Narby as his source (Narby 1998). In the book, Narby contends that already thousands of years ago, Peruvian shamans using hallucinogenic drugs achieved information about DNA that was then encoded into the brains of their offspring as innate information. This is pseudo-scientific hokey so thick that Peterson’s appeals to it are utterly embarrassing.

Peterson has also made gestures towards advanced mathematical logic, namely, Gödel’s famous incompleteness theorem (cf. Raatikainen 2021b). In his *Maps of Meaning*, he writes:

A moral system—a system of culture—necessarily shares features in common with other systems. The most fundamental of the shared features of systems was identified by Kurt Godel. Godel’s Incompleteness Theorem demonstrated that any internally consistent and logical system of propositions must necessarily be predicated upon assumptions that cannot be proved from within the confines of that system. (Peterson 1999, p. 189)

This is baffling. First, Gödel’s incompleteness theorem only applies to a certain specific class of formalized *mathematical* theories. It has nothing to do with moral or cultural systems, nor with features shared by such systems. Second, the theorem does not say anything about some assumptions external to the system on which the system should be grounded. It only states that there are sentences in the language of the theory which are neither provable nor refutable in that theory. (For such philosophical misinterpretations of Gödel’s theorem, and why they are problematic, see Raatikainen 2005, Franzén 2007.) This is a sad example of how Peterson tends to talk confidently about issues of which he clearly does not have even an elementary understanding.

To summarize, whatever Peterson’s academic merits in clinical psychology may be, his philosophical output is arguably overly simplistic and in a lot of ways problematic. He does not seem to have anything useful to offer philosophical discussions on truth. It is doubtful how well his quick analyses of contemporary Western society and academia in fact correspond to reality. His visible affinity to all sorts of pseudo-science makes him more of an enemy of the scientific worldview than its defender.

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