Fighting Back Against an Imaginary Evil: How studying Jordan Peterson's Rhetoric Helps Us to Recognize Populism in The Digital Age

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Inception

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Abstract

In the age of networked communication, seemingly insignificant fads and idols can become hypnotic magnets for public attention. This paper shows how the Canadian public intellectual Jordan Peterson captures his audience's imagination by constructing an imaginary enemy out of the academic Left. I argue that Peterson's rhetorical strategy is based on a shaky foundation and can be analyzed using the theories of populist *equivalence* outlined by the post-Marxist scholars, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, in their 1985 text *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy.*

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In his philosophy of physics, Gottfreid Wilhelm Leibniz questioned the ontological reality of solid and distinct shapes in the natural world, preferring instead the model of a *plenum*, a single fluid substance that is moving all the time. We can understand our own electronically- mediated environment in a similar way, as a kind of "electronic plenum" involved in an alchemical sublimation of itself. In this virtual environment, fads and idols enter the collective mind and

just as quickly dissipate into irrelevancy, creating an atmosphere of uncertainty as the stable and familiar are rapidly annihilated and replaced by the latest objects in the informational cycle. In the electronic plenum, unimportant and distracting fads become hypnotic magnets for the individual attention, lulling the mind into a fantasy world of conspiracy and paranoia which always bursts at the critical moment, leaving the subject in a state of psychological whiplash as they ponder the long, strange trip they just embarked on.

Public intellectual Jordan Peterson is such a phenomenon, although he seems to be receding into the public sphere's rear-view mirror. As has been documented elsewhere, Peterson's background is in clinical psychology and after working for years as a relatively obscure professor, at the University of Toronto, he rose to prominence by criticizing amendment C-16 of the Canadian Human Rights Act, under which citizens are legally obliged to refer to each other using their preferred gender pronouns. Over the past two years, his public profile has grown exponentially. He currently boasts over 700,000 *YouTube* subscribers, 8200 independent backers on the crowd-funding platform *Patreon* (which he is considering boycotting at the time of writing) and his aforementioned book *12 Rules for Life* is topping multiple nonfiction best-seller lists. He has become a darling of the American Alt-Right and Alt-Lite movements and consequently, has been labeled a fascist, transphobe, and misogynistic bigot by voices on the left.

Fascinating as it may be, the blaze of media back and forth Peterson has generated is not my focus here. Instead, I will examine how Peterson's abstractions of Marxism and postmodernism work to interpolate his followers, using ideas from Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* as a lens for analyzing his rhetorical strategy. Specifically, I will explore the ways in which Laclau and Mouffe characterize the rhetoric of populism, and use the term equivalence to show how Jordan Peterson constructs an

imaginary enemy that his followers can define themselves against. To assess the theories of Laclau and Mouffe, I will draw on *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* itself, as well as some helpful summary provided by Jules Townshend in the article "Laclau and Mouffe's Hegemonic Project: The Story So Far." I will also be drawing on Slavoj Žižek and Jodi Dean to explain how the decline of symbolic efficiency confuses communication and enables populists like Peterson to gain traction in the age of the Internet. I will conclude by suggesting how we can recognize the structure of populist arguments and arm ourselves with perceptual tools so that we can refrain from falling under the influence of similar ideologies in the future.

The Decline of Symbolic Efficiency

The structure of *YouTube*—particularly the way in which suggested videos are directed towards individual user profiles—can overemphasize exposure to niche ideas, separating individuals into "filter-bubbles" of politics, morality, and epistemology. In the case of Jordan Peterson, who posts most of his lecture material for free on *YouTube*, this filter-bubble phenomenon can be seen operating in full swing. In fact, an outside observer's opinion of Peterson is likely to be dependent on the flows of media sources that have been algorithmically curated for them. Because there is no "universal" interpretation of Peterson, it is difficult to assess his motivations without falling into the ideological traps of tribalism and team-based thinking. Is he a rising fascist or some kind of messiah-like bastion of truth? And why is it so difficult to tell?

One reason has to do with what theorists like Jodi Dean and Slavoj Žižek refer to as "the decline of symbolic efficiency." (Dean 6) The basic idea here is that the world of networked cyberspace has impacted the binding power (or performative efficiency) of words and created an environment of ambiguity and uncertainty online. If an efficient symbol is able to effectively transmit information from one

person and/or setting to another, the decline of symbolic efficiency has jammed this transmission, making the transfer of data difficult or even impossible. (Dean 5) Ultimately, the murky environment surrounding Peterson and his pronouncements allows for the development of fantastical thinking and conspiracy theories; Žižek himself describes how discursive slippage leads to open-ended and indeterminate meanings: "when the specific dimensions of symbolic appearance start to disintegrate, imaginary and real become more and more indistinguishable." (Žižek, 485) It is this shifting environment of uncertainty that allows Peterson to make such effective use of the populist strategies described by Laclau and Mouffe.

Laclau and Mouffe's Theories of Populism

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe challenged the essentialist nature of orthodox Marxism (specifically the base-superstructure model of ideology, based on the notion of a systemically reinforced "false consciousness" which hides from capitalist subjects, the reality of their class position) and focused instead on the Gramscian concept of hegemony and the ways in which a dominant culture convinces a society to consent to its value system. (7) Laclau and Mouffe viewed political discourse not as the "epiphenomena of production relations" but as a symptom of the hegemonic struggle found at the root of all human social interactions. (Townshend, 270) That is to say, in advanced industrial societies the hegemonic reality manifests itself as a field of different forces competing to make their own ideology or discourse speak on behalf of "the people." Put simply, it is the psychological desire for fullness and reconciliation with the "other" (that which is symbolically defined as "not me") which forms the fundamental antagonism lying at the root of our identities. (Townshend, 271) This dynamic can play itself out through two competing logics. The first is the logic of *equivalence*: discourses that stress a sameness of identity in the face of a perceived common threat/enemy, the second being the

logic of *difference*: discourses where identities are constructed through "positive" or non-adversarial distinctions between self and other. (Townshend, 271) A populist movement gains support by imposing its agenda on both "floating and empty signifiers" which either have loosely defined meanings (like freedom, equality, or free speech) or no inherent content at all (two of Peterson's favourite are chaos and order) which is why they can be used to unite many disparate streams of people. (Laclau and Mouffe, 127-134)

Peterson directs a large part of his antagonism towards a force that he considers pernicious and labels *postmodern neo-Marxism*. In Peterson's eyes, the left-wing intelligentsia act as a kind of hegemonic and dominant force whose postmodernist ideology views the world as nothing more than a battleground of power games. The fact that postmodernists—many of them critical of Marx's dialectical model of history—and orthodox Marxists disagree on fundamental epistemological issues is rarely mentioned by Peterson. In his view, the majority of left wing values—whether they fall under the umbrella of Marxism or postmodernism— resemble the same master-slave morality outlined by Nietzsche in texts like *Beyond Good and Evil* and *The Genealogy of Morals*. The left wing "slave" screams a resentful "no" towards everything outside themselves, directing their vengeance and spite towards the societal "masters" whose livelihood they are too weak to model. (Nietzsche, 61) As Peterson sees it, the goal of this postmodernist scourge is to destroy Western civilization as we know it by framing things like science, logic, and enlightenment ideals, as nothing more than a vehicle for oppressive and patriarchal Eurocentric culture. In Peterson's eyes, the only way to suture this perceived societal wound is by reassuming the old-fashioned, common sense values he outlines in *12 Rules for Life*. However, when we look closely for the enemy that Peterson and his followers are angrily shaking their fists at, it becomes clear that it is a mere figment of imagination.

Peterson and Equivalence: Constructing an imaginary enemy

In *A Culture of Conspiracy* American political scientist Michael Barkun defines a conspiracy belief as the idea that "an organization made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end." (3) According to Barkun, a conspiracist worldview is first and foremost, based on design rather then randomness and virtually all of them contain three basic elements: nothing happens by accident; everything is connected; and perhaps most importantly, nothing is as it seems. (3-4)

By this definition, a good number of Jordan Peterson's arguments resemble the structure of a classic conspiracy theory. In Peterson's framework, the postmodern neo-Marxists have taken control of our universities and media institutions and are indoctrinating a naïve and gullible generation into a nihilistic ideology of power-games and identity politics that elevates group identity over the sacred purity of the disciplined and passionate individual. Interestingly, this is one of the main criticisms of Peterson that Žižek brings up in a 2018 piece for *The Independent*, where he criticizes Peterson for equivocating the separate spheres of classic and cultural Marxism:

> I do wholeheartedly disagree with Peterson when he enters the domain of conspiracy theories…the claim that both classic Marxism and its 'cultural' version were somehow controlled by the same central agent has to rely on the very suspicious notion of a hidden Master who secretly pulls the strings. (Žižek, 2018)

When we look at the way that Peterson frames "the enemy" in his writing, the holes in his logic become clear. In *12 Rules*, Peterson argues that the basis for most of the contemporary theories being circulated in humanities and social sciences departments (including the much derided identity politics movement) are motivated but what by Nietzsche termed *ressentiment*—a psychological state in which the attraction to things like equality and justice are motivated not by

virtue, but by a veiled impulse towards tyranny and enacting revenge upon the world. (Peterson, 261) He then goes on to describe the influence of Frankfurt School intellectuals like Adorno and Horkheimer whose position he summarizes as the belief that "Western principles of individual freedom or the free market were merely masks that served to disguise the true conditions of the West: inequality, domination and exploitation." (Peterson, 276) But Peterson's primary enemy—the chaotic "long arm of Marx"—is the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida. His central criticism of Derrida, and the one most relevant to this discussion is summed up as follows:

> Derrida, famously said (although he denied it, later): 'Il n'y a pas de hors-texte'—often translated as 'there is nothing outside the text.'… His supporters say that is a mistranslation…It remains difficult, either way, to read the statement as saying anything other than 'everything is interpretation.'(Peterson, 279)

Here we can see one of Peterson's most glaring misunderstandings. The so-called "postmodernists," influenced by Derridian thought, are not out there making simple blanket statements like "everything is socially constructed, and therefore, all truth is merely subjective and open to interpretation." These theories are actually pointing out an *objective* barrier that separates every thinker and/or text from the "whole truth" of their current historical situation. That barrier is the *objective* informational content or "datum" that their life experience makes accessible to them, which is intimately tied up with their subjective positioning in the social structure and includes, but is not limited to, things like, socioeconomic class, access to education and information, and overarching social discourses—all resources that make up the reservoir from which thought is produced.

One of Peterson's favorite ways to go about criticizing the nihilistic Derridian worldview he has constructed is by railing against postmodern neo-Marxists for rejecting the truths of biology and science, as they relate to things like sex, gender, and the hardwired

human potential for evil and conquest—the psychological shadow, which according to Jung, is projected on the world if it is not recognized as part of the self. (Jung, 26) Most deconstructivist theory of this kind is not critical of science *per se*, only the many discourses as that work as a heuristic lenses for interpreting and "naturalizing" scientific data, which often subtly or overtly support dominant interests— by privileging research that falls in line with corporate and governmental funding structures, for example.

Historian Yuval Noah Harari examines this issue in his book *Sapiens*, published in English in 2014. In chapter eight, he addresses the tricky subject of differentiating what is actually "biologically determined" by nature from what is merely justified by biological myths. He sums it up with a simple rule of thumb "Biology enables, culture forbids." (Harari, 146) Harari amusingly points out that there has never been a human culture that has prohibited what is truly unnatural; no state has ever forbidden women to run faster than the speed of light, or for two negatively charged electrons to be attracted to one another. (Harari, 147) If we look at the history of life on earth, we can see that biology acts as an open-ended "novelty generator," that creates new arenas of morphogenetic differentiation and possibility. At the risk of making my own reductive blanket statement, if biology has any purpose at all, it is nothing other than this.

What Derrida was trying to address in his work was the tendency for philosophers to naturalize their philosophy—part of his notion of logocentrism—and frame their interpretations of reality as being ordained by nature, when in fact, they are constantly being interpreted through the lens of the social discourses contemporary to their writing. (Derrida, 73) Derrida is not saying that since there is no "grand and ultimate interpretation" all interpretations are either equally true or equally untrue; he is simply noting the need to update said interpretations as discourses evolve and new evidence comes in. This is actually an attitude of pure empiricism totally compatible

with the Enlightenment values Peterson deems as essential; the idea that what we understand to be true in the present is limited and open to being expanded upon. This is a far cry from the nihilistic chaos that Peterson blames the postmodernists for preaching. To be fair, because Peterson is addressing a mass audience who may not be interested in these academic nuances, it is understandable why he feels the need to simplify these ideas. But when your simplification leads to a misconstrual of your opponent's position, and when you construct a straw-man out of what is actually a nuanced and multifaceted intellectual terrain, it could be argued that you are failing in your role as a teacher.

It is likely that the Jordan Peterson phenomenon will eventually fizzle out entirely, for all media events in the electronic plenum—no matter how, shocking, profound, or controversial they happen to be—are bound to fade from the collective memory. But even if Peterson is just another passing fad, his time in the public eye teaches us a valuable lesson about how quickly populist movements can spread in cyberspace and how the murky atmosphere of our current media environment blurs the lines between reality and fantasy. When we are hypnotized by figures like Peterson—ultimately insignificant in the context of the earth's history—we might gain a tangible sense of agency and control, but we risk becoming blind to issues that we cannot alter by sanctimoniously pointing our fingers. By examining Peterson's rhetorical strategy and paying close attention to the way he uses equivalence to conjure an imaginary enemy, we arm ourselves with an awareness that can prevent us from "taking the bait" of the populist movements that await us in the future, keeping us focused on issues which truly make a difference for the fate of our planet.

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