

MUNK DEBATE ON POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

Jordan Peterson, Pre-Interview

M:

Our guest now is Jordan Peterson, professor of psychology at the University of Toronto, YouTube sensation, and the author of the big, new, internationally best-selling book—What’s the title? You give it to us.

PETERSON:

12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos.

M:

Well tell us about the last little while for you. You’ve been on quite a ride these few months.

PETERSON:

Yes, since about October 2016. Well, it’s been nonstop scandal and entertainment, fundamentally. But, for me, also a tremendous amount of good. Most of this has been cast in the media as a political issue, but it’s not a political issue for me.

What I’ve been concentrating on mostly is psychological work at the level of the individual, which is the appropriate level for me, given that I am a clinical psychologist. You know, I’m out on this tour now, I think I’ve talked in 26 cities already, there’s 60 more lined up, something like that, and it’s maybe 1 person in 30 that I talk to afterwards who has anything political to say. The rest of it is all focused on my lectures essentially, and the book, but on people’s attempts to put their lives together, again, at the individual level. And that’s a really good thing as far as I am concerned.

It’s a very rare day now that I go outside, I’ll be approached by 4 or 5 people (it doesn’t really matter where I go) and they all tell me the same thing. They’re all very polite and very welcoming, I haven’t had a negative reaction with anyone in public at all, quite the contrary, and they tell me they’ve been watching my lectures, that they were unhappy in their relationships or not doing particularly well in their careers or in a dark place for one reason or another, and that watching and listening to what I’ve been saying has been very helpful to them. So that’s great, you know? That’s great.

M:

How would you say what you’ve been writing and thinking about, and people’s reaction to it, intersects with tonight’s debate? Because you’ve been quite vocal on the topic of political correctness.

PETERSON:

Yes, I'm no fan of the radical left. And people might say, "does that mean you support the radical right?" It's like, "Just because you're no fan of the radical left doesn't mean you support the radical right." That's just an absolutely preposterous proposition, but the Universities, especially the humanities and social sciences are absolutely dominated by left-wing thinking. That's well documented by people like Jonathan Haidt, it's not my imagination. I find the doctrine that unites them to be unconscionably pernicious. It's basically a collectivist doctrine, and the thing that disturbs me about it...

There's every reason to have a left-wing. The reason you need a left-wing is partly because being left-wing is partly temperamental (it's not going away), and because when our society produces hierarchies, which it will inevitably do, people tend to stack up at the bottom of hierarchies. It's in the nature of hierarchies to produce that as an outcome. What means is that the people who are dispossessed in the hierarchical arrangements need a voice, and that's the left, obviously, and fair enough.

But it's also obvious that, just as the right can go too far, the left can go too far. But when the left goes too far is something that is very ill-defined, and to me that's not acceptable, given that we know that the left can go too far, and I think they certainly have gone too far in the Universities. The post-modern, neo-Marxist pastiche that makes up the radical left philosophy that's at the bottom of the social sciences and humanities now is... there's nothing about it that's useful, as far as I'm concerned. It has nothing to do with compassion, it has nothing to do with my lack of... what would you say...

M:

Empathy?

PETERSON:

Precisely! They're completely separate issues. And that's another thing that really bothers me about political correctness is that its like, well, we have a hammerlock on empathy. Well (a) empathy is not enough, it's not even close to enough, and an excess of empathy can do terrible things. And (b) no, you don't have a hammerlock on empathy. And to ally that with a philosophy that essentially assigns people to their identity via their group membership, and then to read not only the current state of affairs, but also history itself, as a battleground between competing groups is... I think it's dangerous. I think it's obvious that it's dangerous, if you know anything about history. But...

M:

One argument you're sure to hear tonight is this idea of privilege, that certain people, [for example] you and I, by virtue of our race, our class, our gender, have enjoyed, historically, privilege in society, and it's time that that privilege be shared more equitably across groups who have been historically disadvantaged.

PETERSON:

Well, that's a good example of the conflation of empathy with ideology. First of all, the majority in any society has privilege, that's the whole point of the society, is to set up a system so that the bulk of the people in the system can do well, and then you build in protection for minorities. So, to conflate that with race is not acceptable, it's a toxic sleight of hand and it is extraordinarily dangerous. Apart from that, it's an empty claim. Some people have advantages that other people don't. Obviously. If you take apart anyone into the multitude of categories that they can be taken apart into, what you will find is that on some of those dimensions they are doing better than other people for rather arbitrary reasons sometimes, and on other dimensions they are doing worse.

And the next part of that is "historically speaking". Okay, over what span of time do you mean, precisely? So you mean, because my ancestors 150 years ago were privileged, comparatively speaking, that I should somehow pay for that now? And are you so sure that my ancestors were so privileged? As far as I can tell, my grandparents on my father's side... My father grew up in a log cabin until he was 5. It had like 3 rooms. My grandmother was a cleaning woman for farms in central Saskatchewan in the 1930s. She cooked for threshing crews, she chopped wood piles that were a big as the damn cabin to get through the winter. Where is the privilege?

I see, it accrues to me as a consequence of my race. Oh, I see, so now we are going to have a discussion about race, are we? And that's the thing about the toxic left is that everything is about group. And so let's even take the argument further though, and say, "because of my skin color I am differentially privileged, from a historical perspective". So, what? Now we're going to make everybody, on the basis of their race, pay for some historical iniquity?

And you're going to view the history of the relationships between men and women as one fundamentally of oppression? That's the way we're going to play this? It wasn't that men and women fundamentally cooperated throughout history to bring themselves out of the fundamental catastrophe that history has always been? That isn't what it was? Despite the fact that in 1895 the typical person in the western world lived on less than a dollar a day, by today's standards, which today is far below the UN's guidelines for abject poverty, we're going to revisit that and we're going to say that "no, really, the fundamental reality of the world was that men oppressed women".

M:

So that brings me to a second argument, that you're no doubt going to hear tonight, which is that men need to check their privilege. There's an idea here that women in particular, with the #MeToo movement, there's been an awareness, an awakening of the power of women in society, and it's time that be acknowledged. What would be your response to that?

PETERSON:

First of all, when the discussion is about power, that sends a shudder up my spine immediately, because part of the post-modern doctrine, especially in its alliance with neo-Marxism, (which is the strangest alliance, by my estimates) is that everything is about power, and I don't believe that, I think that hierarchies are only about power

when they've already transformed themselves into tyrannies. I don't think that the fundamental hierarchies that characterize the West are tyrannical, comparatively speaking. Compared to the heavenly hierarchy in near Utopian imagination, they're no doubt exemplars of pure hell, but compared to everywhere else in the world right now and every other hierarchy throughout history, we're doing pretty damn well.

The fact is that once we had reliable birth control, which really only happened in the 1960s, women were welcomed, most fundamentally, but also opposed, but most fundamentally welcomed into every position of authority and competence that could possibly be laid open to them, to the point where now they make up something like damn near three-quarters of humanities and social sciences students, they dominate the health care field, so how fast do you expect the transformation to take place?

The argument is "well, it would have never happened without political pressure". No, sorry. What triggered it was reliable birth control, that made it possible. It was reliable birth control and reliable menstrual sanitation and all of those things that no one ever takes into account what made the playing field open. It's transformed utterly in about 50 years. How fast do you think these things can happen?

M:

Good point.

PETERSON:

And I'm certainly not against equality of opportunity. You have to be... I don't know what has to be wrong with you to be against equality of opportunity, even if you're selfish. If you're not absolutely out for destruction, and you're only selfish, anybody with any sense would go for equality of opportunity, at least because it gives you the possibility of exploiting the maximum number of qualified and talented people. And equality of outcome, well...

M:

We'll save that for the debate tonight, I'm sure it will come up. Final question I'm asking all of you pre-debate, where do you think this debate is going to go from here? Do you think we're in a kind of cultural spasm, or do you think there is something more fundamental happening in our culture, a new tribalism, a new set of antagonisms that are going to take much longer to work out?

PETERSON:

I think it will depend on how well we each behave in the next ten years, because I think things could get way better everywhere, really fast, or we could degenerate back into our idiot 20th century tribalisms. And I would say, if I had to bet, well, it's—

M:

What are you seeing? You're out there in public.

PETERSON:

I really... I would say that... There's plenty of pressure in both directions. I'm heartened by the fact that so many people have been taking the psychological material that I've been providing online to heart, and doing what they can to put themselves together. I'm disheartened by the fact that virtually everything now is transformed into a polarized political argument, and there seems to be no understanding of the fact that not everything is actually political.

I actually don't think that the discussion about political correctness is political. I think it's both theological and philosophical, but it's often presented in politicized terms, not least because if you're influenced by the radical leftist collectivist ideology, that is the only playing field, it's all hierarchies at each other's throats playing power games.

The free speech thing is really interesting because on the radical left end of things there is no debate about free speech, you can't have a debate about free speech from that ideological position, because there isn't any such thing. All there is, is those who are maneuvering for power within their respective groups making claims that benefit from them. That's the basic axiom of the interpretive system. So the reason free speech has become politicized is because if you adopt the collectivist viewpoint it's a shibboleth, it's a fantasy. You might think you're speaking freely, but you're not. You're just expressing your privilege.

M:

Speaking on behalf of my gender, my class, my race.

PETERSON:

One of the things that's funny about the post-modern insistence on identity (I think it's absolutely comical in a very, very dark way) is the emergence of intersectionality, because the intersectional theorists actually identified the Achilles heel of the collectivist perspective, because what they pointed out was, let's say we covered the standard groups (I don't know why these are the standard groups) but let's say sex, ethnicity, and race, for the sake of argument. What about how they interact?

Yeah, what about that? What about the fact that gender is infinitely differentiable, not least from the left-wing perspective? And what about the fact that there are endless numbers of ethnic variants? And what are you going to do? Are you going to control for the interaction between all of those? And the answer is, "yes, that's what we'll try to do before we give up our ideology".

But the fact of the matter is that the reason the West decided on a radical individualist perspective to begin with is because we figured out 2000 years ago, at least at the origins of this type of thinking, that everyone is so unique that you can fractionate their group identity right down to the level of the individual. I don't know what's going to

happen. I think the Universities, for example, I think they've done themselves in. I don't think they can escape because I've watched large organizations crumble, and that can happen very often, and one serious error will do it. I've tried to lay it out, I think the universities have made 7 serious errors.

M:

You know what, we're going to have to save those for the stage tonight, and universities will absolutely be a topic of our discussion. But, a real pleasure to get a taste for your remarks, and I appreciate your passion, and your willingness to step onto this stage and engage with other people's ideas in a spirit of free and open exchange, that's admirable.

PETERSON:

And hopefully it will go well, and it will be an intelligent discussion, and we will get somewhere.