‘It’s a war of ideas’

Jordan Peterson on identity politics and personal responsibility

Luka Lisjak Gabrijelčič, Jordan Peterson
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Psychologist Jordan Peterson has attracted fame and controversy with a series of YouTube lectures and interviews challenging what he calls ‘radical leftist ideological assumptions’ in the academy and elsewhere. Luka Lisjak Gabrijelčič asks him what all the fuss is about.

This is an abridged version of an interview conducted by Razpotja editor Luka Lisjak Gabrijelčič in September 2017. The full version is published (in Slovene) in the current edition of Razpotja.

Luka Lisjak Gabrijelčič: In the fall of 2016, you were propelled into the public sphere by opposing the introduction of the legally binding use of gender neutral pronouns at the University of Toronto. Can you explain the controversy?

Jordan Peterson: There’s been a series of legislative moves in Canada, purporting to add gender identity and gender expression to the list of protected groups under the various elements of the Canadian Human Rights Code, both at a provincial and the federal level. I was objecting at its extension at a federal level, for a variety of reasons. The most compelling of them was that written in the policy guidelines, there was a demand to use a set of gender neutral pronouns for transgender people, which was to become mandatory.

We are talking of provincial and federal legislation, not an internal policy of the university on how to approach transgender people?

That is right. The university of course has to abide by that legislation. The legislators were claiming that the reason these measures were being put into place was to protect vulnerable people whose identities didn’t fit easily into the standard categories of male and female. However, I read the surrounding policy guidelines and they were much more
broadly reaching and punitive than you would guess from the simplified summaries explaining the purpose of this legislation. I published a series of videos objecting to what I described as the use of compelled speech. It seemed to me that we were dealing with a case of legislative overreach. We already have the limitation of free speech in the legal code: you can’t incite to crime, for example, which is something that has been well worked out within the framework of English common law. But as far as I know, there had never been a law in a Commonwealth country that required people to use linguistic terms as the consequence of demands of other people.

**What linguistic terms are we talking about? What is, exactly, the content of the legislation you opposed?**

That’s the real question. There are lists of gender neutral or ‘non-traditional’ pronouns. Of course, in the English language, the ‘traditional’ pronouns for the third person singular are ‘she’ and ‘he’, but the legislation introduced new variations like ‘e’ and ‘ey’, ‘xe’, ‘ze’, ‘tey’, ‘per’ ... I think I have seen a list of up to 70 of these different pronouns.

**These pronouns have been mostly invented in the circles of transgender rights activists in the past decade or so, right?**

Yes, that is the thing. To me, these pronouns had virtually nothing to do with the rights of transgender people, and everything to do with the imposition of a highly questionable linguistic framework. I have seen no evidence that the introduction of these pronouns advances the interests of a representative number of transgender people. It reflects the interests of a specific sort of postmodernist neo-Marxist activism that uses issues related to sexual and ethnic minorities in order to advance a political agenda of deconstruction of long-standing modes of speech and thought. I have received a large number of letters from transgender people stating quite forthrightly that these activists don’t stand for them. Some of them have stepped forward publicly in support of my positions. The activists who have been pushing for this legislation aren’t valid representatives of any sort of transgender community. They haven’t been elected or otherwise identified by the affected parties as their genuine representatives: they are just claiming to act on behalf of a hypothetically homogenous community, which in fact doesn’t exist. First of all, transgender people are very rare, and second, the vast majority of them don’t want to be referred to by these ‘non-traditional’ personal pronouns: they just want to be referred to by the ‘opposite pronouns’. If you are a male who wishes to transition to female, then you want to be called ‘she’ instead of ‘he’ and vice-versa.

**Is this really an issue in English? Unlike in Romance or Slavic languages, you don’t have gendered verbal inflexions or adjectives in English, and we don’t refer to people in the third person when talking to them: when you talk to someone, you’d say ‘you’, not ‘he’ or ‘she’ ...**
This is what makes the guidelines so absurd. The probability that you are going to refer to someone by a third person pronoun in their presence is very rare. This is part of the incoherence of the entire set of legislation. I have read the surrounding policies, which are incredibly punitive. The refusal to use these ‘non-traditional’ pronouns can be prosecuted as a form of hate speech.

**Let me get this right: if you don’t use one of these invented pronouns chosen by the person, you can be prosecuted under federal law for hate speech?**

Yes. There were alterations to the Criminal Code, as well as to the Human Rights Act. When I pointed this out in my video, people immediately accused me of fear-mongering, saying that the legislation will never be used for those purposes. But as one of the consequences of uploading the video, the University of Toronto sent me two letters telling me that I had to abide by the relative legislation and by the university’s policies, implying strongly that it was necessary to use these pronouns if requested. The second demand was asking me to stop talking about this issue altogether. As far as I was concerned, this was immediate validation of my claim that the law had precisely the intent that I had suspected and suggested: otherwise, the university and their lawyers wouldn’t have contacted me with those requests. I had a fair deal of legal consultations since. I spoke about it in front of the Canadian Senate - it’s quite evident that the policy has the penal implications that I suggested. This was never denied by the activists who had lobbied for this legislation to pass: one of them told me on Canadian national TV that my refusal to use these pronouns was a form of hate speech. This means placing the refusal to use a certain kind of language in the same category as Holocaust denial.

**Did you oppose the legislation because of its ambiguous wording and penal consequences, or because you believe we shouldn’t change the way we speak in order to accommodate the experiences and identities of people who don’t fit into the gender binary?**

The reason why I objected to the whole thing had nothing to do with people with variant gender identities. My intervention was about two issues: first, the fact that the government was compelling speech, and doing so in a very incoherent way. There is absolutely no agreement about what these pronouns are, how exactly they should be used, and what would constitute a transgression. Second, people don’t use these terms. They are not part of common parlance, they haven’t been introduced in the lexicon in any manner that normal words are usually introduced. People objected to this argument by quoting the example of the term Ms., a variant of Mrs. or Miss, introduced back in the late 1960s. I don’t regard that as a comparable situation: that was a bottom-up innovation, it was not imposed by a legislative fiat, and there was no penalty for its misuse. English is a very flexible language: when there is a new word that has pragmatic utility, people will pick it up very rapidly. I was objecting to the introduction of compelled speech. I regarded this legislation as an illegitimate attempt to gain the linguistic ground as an extension of postmodern neo-Marxist agenda that is rampant in the universities, and increasingly in the broader Western culture. I don’t believe for a moment that its
proponents are working for the benefit of marginalized groups; they are using them to gain an ideological upper hand. I don’t think I should be compelled to use a lexicon constructed by a political ideology that I don’t believe in and which I regard as dangerous.

_How do you respond to those who accuse you of ‘free speech absolutism’?_

The ban on certain expressions, such as racial slurs or derogatory language, can be justified on a variety of reasonable legal grounds. Even in that case, we should proceed with caution and after a thorough debate, because such restrictive measures can backfire. It’s an entirely different thing to impose an invented terminology. That’s a line that should not be crossed.

_You used the popularity gained by your videos to intensify your opposition to ‘politically correct’ activism on campus._

More or less at the same time as the gender pronouns polemics, another issue came out, closely related to my professional expertise. I criticized the University of Toronto’s insistence that their Human Resources staff undergo a mandatory ‘unconscious bias training’ to rectify their hypothetical racism and sexism at a perceptual level. I have serious problems with the literature from which this notion of ‘unconscious bias’ emerges: I don’t think it’s scientifically powerful enough to justify ‘retraining’. I also don’t think that employers should be allowed to modify the political views of their employees, especially not on a mandatory basis. On top of that, I don’t think there is any evidence that those mandatory retraining programs have any of the effects that they purport to have. Nevertheless, those ‘unconscious bias trainings’ have become very common in the West. I find them extraordinarily dangerous: they smack of the kind of re-education that the Maoists engaged in China during the Cultural Revolution. I see them as part of this advancing postmodern neo-Marxist agenda that is emerging from the universities and spreading out into the mid-level power structures of organizations. A good example was the recent scandal with Google …

_You are referring to the case of James Damore, the engineer fired by Google for circulating an internal memo suggesting that the gender imbalance in the corporation might be the result of a different distribution of interests and abilities among men and women._

Yes … The problem is that these are very powerful corporations. They have a virtual monopoly on the access to and distribution of a vast array of information, and there is next to no transparency in regards to the policies that regulate their functioning. Google and YouTube are already using algorithms to censor videos or change the search engine algorithms based on ‘politically correct’ presuppositions. That means they are building screening technologies into processes that present information to everyone. They seem to have no sense whatsoever of the inherent dangers of their actions. They are succumbing
to the pressure of radical leftwing activist groups who are seeking to impose their partial, often unsustainable positions through coercive measures.

*Can you be more precise about the positions which you believe are being imposed under the rationale of minority rights protection?*

The legislation I was objecting to makes highly problematic normative claims about human identity: that biological sex, gender identity (how you identify), sexual proclivity (whom you are attracted to) and gender expression (how one signals one’s gender identity in dressing and acting) vary independently, with no with no causal link between those levels of analysis.

*A claim which you object to?*

It’s simply wrong. The vast majority of people who are biologically male have a male gender identity, express themselves accordingly and are heterosexual. That’s the case for around 98% of people. The idea that there is no causal relation between those phenomena, and no underlying biology, is preposterous. It has no basis in the relevant literature. Nevertheless, it is widely accepted in the social sciences and humanities, due to the influence exercised by ideologically-rife and methodologically questionable fields such as Women Studies or Gender Studies. I debated an adjunct professor at the University of Toronto on Canadian national TV, who said there’s no such thing as biological sex. That is the sort of mentality driving this legislation. I believe that under the current circumstances, many of the opinions of mainstream biologists could be challenged on legal grounds. A new term has emerged to describe people who have a more biologically oriented viewpoint: they have been called ‘biological essentialists’, which is increasingly being identified as an intolerably rightwing position. Everything outside the confines of a narrow social constructivist view is denounced as beyond the pale.

*Wouldn’t you say this is a symptom of a great divergence between social constructivism, prevalent in the humanities and social sciences, and a very different consensus in the natural sciences, which has been moving towards the opposite pole, indeed quite close to a sort of biological determinism? It seems to me that the politically more radicalized people from the social sciences are trying to use a legislative edge to secure their victory in a battle of polarized ideas, the outcome of which is anything but certain.*

That is exactly what they are doing. They have lost the battle on conceptual and methodological grounds, and are turning to legislative and administrative domains to impose their ideology. They have also overwhelmingly occupied the educational field and are foisting their views on children, from a very young age. This is because the education faculties have become corrupted by an activist mentality and produce ideologues rather
than pedagogues. They are trying to teach their scientifically flawed doctrines to children, also by using graphic images, like the infamous ‘gender bread man’. It’s a cute animated figure, structured in the form of a questionnaire asking children to indicate their biological sex and sexual identity, gender expression and sexual proclivity on a scale between male and female. The implicit message being of course that these things are all independent. Pointing out the obvious fact that these are all highly correlated phenomena and their divergence is a matter of small minorities is being demonized as a manifestation of a ‘cis-normative bias’. The underlying idea is that the basic norms that have governed society for the past millennia, and are based on an essentially correct understanding of biological reality, are intrinsically oppressive and need to be demolished, together with most of western culture, which is viewed as nothing but an oppressive patriarchy. These radical leftist ideological assumptions have now made their way into legislation and even the Criminal Code.

The rationale behind these measures is the protection of the rights and legitimate interests of a minority of people who don’t fit in the prevalent gender categories, and whose sensibilities and realities have been woefully neglected until very recently.

I have never suggested that people who do not fit into standard sexual categories or traditional categories of gender identification don’t face all sorts of problems. I don’t think that introducing a long list of alternative gender pronouns is a good way to fix them. I don’t think that at the most fundamental level, the people who are advancing these measures have at heart the interests of sexual minorities. A better way of thinking about it is to say that a system of ideas is being advanced under the camouflage of minority rights. It’s a war of ideas. Ideas possess people. They are being acted out by people who do not fully understand their scope. Ideology cares about transgender people in the least respect. It isn’t obvious to me that all the genuine care and compassion is on the side of the people who are hypothetically agitating for the oppressed minorities. I don’t see any evidence for that. What I see is an activism that tries to use the identities of victimized groups as a way to advance an egalitarian utopia. It’s the re-enactment of the struggle between what is an essentially Marxist position and the classic values of the West which make the autonomous individual the supreme force. An optimist would have hoped that this struggle ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall. A utopian scheme that makes all groups equal sounds good in principle. But the history of the Soviet Union teaches us that once enacted, the consequences of utopian egalitarianism are insufferable. A postmodern version of an obnoxious radical egalitarianism has managed to marginalize the classical humanities, and now sits at the heart of the western university.

The political scientist Charles Murray pointed out that the classical American view of democracy did not presuppose that people must be equal in order to enjoy the same rights. They were equal insofar as they were bearers of the same unalienable rights, despite differences in skills, wealth etc. The same view was shared by Hannah Arendt who stressed that people are born unequal, become
even more unequal through socialization, and that the political sphere and legal structures are artificial spaces created precisely in order to enable people to come together as equals. It was already Arendt who noted how progressives reverse the problem, trying to find equality in nature and society. As a result, they think that in order to advance equality, they have to deny the existence of fundamental or meaningful inherent differences between people …

Which is strange, given how much emphasis there is, on the left, on diversity …

How one can reconcile this stress on diversity with the denial of meaningful inherent differences? After all, hasn’t the central argument for gay rights been ‘born this way’? In the defence of transgender rights, we can see a contradictory cohabitation of determinism (‘they are born with a gender identity different from their biological sex’) and radical social constructivism (‘there is no such thing as fixed gender identity, gender is a social construction that can be moulded at will’). How can these two be reconciled?

I don’t think that the identity politics of postmodern neo-Marxism cares one whit for logical coherence. Part of the postmodern doctrine is that the idea of logical coherence is just another game in the power struggle. There is a strong tendency to deny the existence of the real world, among the postmodernists: there is an unlimited number of interpretations and they are all linguistically grounded. If you say, ‘If you try to hold two contradicting propositions simultaneously and try to act them out in the world, you are going to run into a conflict’, the postmodern answer would be something like: ‘Because the world is amenable to an infinite number of interpretations, there is no fundamental reality that is going to get in the way’. I see this doctrine as almost entirely destructive. Logical coherence is necessary in order to construct a valid argument only if you care about constructing valid arguments – it’s not relevant at all if you only care about tearing things down, in order to reconstitute a hypothetical utopia.

This is characteristic of rightwing extremism, as well. After all, it is fascism that denies the existence of reality as separated from will and vital interests, while appealing to the resentments of a group presented as the victim of history. That’s why phenomena like Trumpism and the alt-right look so familiar to Europeans. This is not true of the type of leftwing radicalism you are describing. The radicalization on North American campuses in the past years looks confusingly unfamiliar to an observer from continental Europe. It’s not that we don’t have any experience with radicalism and violence on European universities: what looks bizarre is this combination of a doctrinaire reading of postmodern theory and its political application to sexual identities and power relations in a multicultural society. What I find interesting is that in your professional career, you have tackled those same issues - inequality of outcomes among different ethnic, social and sexual groups - but you tried to address them from a very different paradigm. I am thinking of your Future Authorship Program …
My constant idea is that the antidote to ideological possession, whether on the right or the left, is the supremacy of the individual. My colleagues and I have built a program that helps people to write about their past, present and future. The Past Authoring Program helps them to write an autobiography, breaking down their life into epochs and asking them to decompose them into events that were emotionally significant and transformative, and then to write a coherent narrative across the years, so they can figure out where they are. There is good evidence that this kind of writing, which is tantamount to psychotherapy, helps people shed the emotional weight of quasi-traumatic experiences in the past that they’ve never built a causal narrative for. The purpose of memory is to construct a causal narrative. If something bad happens to you, what you need to know is what circumstances led up to that and what role did your perceptions and actions play in bringing that about. And then you need to modify them, so that you are unlikely to encounter the same negative thing in the future. Memory isn’t designed to be a veridical representation of the past. It’s designed to be a mining process whereby you extract causally relevant information so you can use that to guide yourself more carefully in the future. If things happened to you in the past that weren’t good or you don’t understand, those things are marked by emotional systems that paint that part of reality as threatening. The more of reality is painted as threatening, the higher your chronic levels of stress. This is because your brain responds to the world as a balance between opportunity and danger. If you do a careful causal analysis, you can transform more and more of the threatening and unexplored territory into safe and habitable territory. We can also think of it as a heroic venture. The classical mythological hero is the one who transforms chaos and transforms it into habitable order. In the West, this is associated with the idea of the logos. The logos is the transcendent conscious force that continually transforms chaos into habitable order. This is the heroic destiny of the individual. It is through this effort that society is rejuvenated and renovated.

The Present Authorship Program helps people to identify their faults and virtues, so they can rectify their faults and capitalize on their virtues. The Future Authoring program asks people to lay out a vision of 3-5 years into the future what their life could be like if they got their friendships, intimate relationships, their career, their education in order, as well as the time they spent outside of work, their use of drugs and alcohol and their care for their mental and physical health. First of all, to imagine and write about what their life could be like if those things were optimized. Then, to imagine and write about what life would be like if all of their bad habits, nihilistic and depressive tendencies and hopeless thoughts got the upper hand and drove them into the ground. You can say that lays out a quasi-mythological landscape for people, so that they have a heaven to work for and a hell to avoid. That is maximally motivating: people are often afraid to advance into the future because their anxiety cripples them with regards to potential choices. We say is ‘put your devil behind them so that it chases you’: so that you are more afraid of not acting than you are of acting. Then you build a plan to implement that positive vision.

You have been able to test the efficiency of your program in practice, with special regard to young people from minority groups, right?

We experimented the plan with around 7,000 university students, mostly in Holland, at the School of Management at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam. Students who do our
program are about 25% more likely to stay in school and show an academic improvement of approximately the same magnitude. The largest effects occur for the people who are doing the worst. In the Rotterdam situation, those who do best are the Dutch national women, followed by the Dutch national men, the third are non-western ethnic minority women; the worse are non-western ethnic minority men. After they do the Future Authoring Program, the non-Western ethnic minority men catch up to the Dutch women, and those results seem to be stable across a couple of years. A highly individualized psychological intervention seems to be able to eliminate the consequences of what is always taken to be a sociological problem.

**Have you been able to replicate the results elsewhere?**

We have. Most recently, we have replicated them at a small college here in Canada. This time not with the visible minorities: the program worked best for the men who had done the worst in high school and were on non-career oriented tracks, that is to say, they were not as focused in regard to where their future was headed.

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