

A Postmodern Neo-Marxist's Guide to Free Speech: On Jordan Peterson and the 'Alt-Right'

Introduction

In recent years, Jordan Peterson, an obscure Canadian academic psychologist, and publisher of self-help books, has been elevated to the level of a poster boy for the insurgent transnational far-right movement styling itself the 'alt-right'. His refusal to recognise students' non-binary and transgender identities, his patriarchal and misogynist clichés about women and men, his insistence upon the significance of 'Western civilisation' and attacks on Muslims, even his bizarre practice – in the face of rising veganism – of eating *only* meat, have all struck a chord with the various 'incels' and Islamophobes that constitute the movement.

As a key 'culture warrior', much of Peterson's influence is exercised through social media. He has 1.4 million Twitter followers at time of writing (far more than most of the world's most eminent living academics). It is on Twitter that Peterson claims and defends his right to 'free speech' – a unifying concern of the new far-right, from the AfD in Germany and Generation Identity in Italy, to the EDL and the Brexit Party in the UK, and the 'Proud Boys' in the USA. It was also on Twitter that Peterson called Indian novelist and critic Pankaj Mishra a 'racist son of a bitch', in response to a critique of his book *12 Rules for Life*. 'And you call me a fascist?' Peterson went on, in a fit of frothing 'white fragility':¹ 'You sanctimonious prick. If you were in my room at the moment, I'd slap you happily'.

This chapter uses the figure of Peterson to explore the contemporary politics of 'free speech', the rise of a transnational racist, misogynist, homophobic and transphobic far-right movement that can properly be called neo-fascist, and the inadequacy of liberalism to save us from it.

Free-speechism and (neo)liberalism in the 'culture wars'

It is no exaggeration to say that lately not a day passes without the phrase 'free speech' appearing, often many times, in Western news media – the concept sits at the heart of the so-called 'culture wars'. The far right discursively situates itself as the guardian of free speech in the face of a totalitarian 'political correctness'. The latter is the preserve of anyone the far right hates: centrist liberals; leftists; feminists; anti-racists and anti-fascists; critics of colonialism; and of course actual ethnic minority people, women, gay and lesbian people, transgender and non-binary people. Peterson's public appearances, writings, and social media posts are littered with claims that he and his

comrades are standing up for free speech, and he interprets all attempts to 'no-platform' or exclude him from events as attacks on free speech.

But it is not only the far right that has been whipping up the deafening cacophony of free-speechism in recent months. On this issue, neo-fascists find common ground with conservatives and liberals. It has become a social media in-joke that far-right figures describe themselves as 'classical liberal' in their Twitter bio. In 2017 Peterson himself tweeted, in response to an article by Inside Higher Ed: 'Inside Higher Ed also insists that I'm "right-leaning." I'm a classic [sic] liberal (now known as "far right")'. Other right-wing UK- and US-based self-identifying 'classical liberals', including Niall Ferguson, Toby Young and Maajid Nawaz, have made similar claims. Their view seems to be that recent mainstreaming of anti-racist, feminist, and transgender rights movements means that 'core enlightenment values of individual liberty and reason are under threat'.²

Self-proclaimed liberals express fears over the 'threat to free speech' from Nazi-punching Antifa activists, and black students campaigning to end the celebration of their ancestors' murder and enslavement at universities. The misogyny and racism at work in the ideas of influential 'alt-right' figures like Peterson or Steve Bannon certainly offends against the liberal conscience but, as Dawn Foster notes, political centrists are convinced that 'a smart liberal with a propensity for misquoting Voltaire can destroy their worldview'.³ The 'argument for platforming and debating fascists', she suggests, rests upon 'the flawed assumption that, when challenged, their arguments will fall to pieces'. According to the (neo)liberal creed, fascism will be cold product in the 'marketplace of ideas', and so lack of demand will eventually kill-off supply.⁴ Foster highlights the role of elite educational culture in producing this view: 'When Nick Griffin led the British National Party, university debating societies were champing at the bit to invite him [...] convinced they could crush the BNP with a sharp argument, ignoring the fact that Griffin himself had studied law at Cambridge'.⁵

The persistence of the BNP and emergence of new, arguably more successful, far-right organisations in the UK – the English Defence League (EDL), Democratic Football Lads Alliance (DFLA), Britain First, and the proscribed far-right terrorist group National Action – is evidence of the flawed logic of free-speechism. But the problem with free speech runs deeper: free speech is a pure abstraction. It does not exist.

Free speech does not exist

When Aristotle described the human condition as that of a 'political animal', he did so specifically by reference to our capacity for speech:

Nature, as we often say, makes nothing in vain, and man [sic] is the only animal whom she [sic] has endowed with the gift of speech. And whereas mere voice is but an indication of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in other animals [...],

the power of *speech* is intended to set forth the expedient and the inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust.⁶

Yet in Aristotle's ancient Greece, just as in our own time, there were prohibitions – legal, moral, and practical – on what could and could not be said, and *by whom*. In Euripedes' *The Phoenician Women*, the characters acknowledge this fact:

IOCASTA: This above all I long to know: What is an exile's life? Is it great misery?

POLYNEICES: The greatest; worse in reality than in report.

IOCASTA: Worse in what way? What chiefly galls an exile's heart?

POLYNEICES: The worst is this: right of free speech does not exist.

IOCASTA: That's a slave's life – to be forbidden to speak one's mind.⁷

A slave's life indeed; but in ancient Athens, Euripedes' home, where tens of thousands were enslaved, not an uncommon one. The 'slave's life' here operates not as the sort of overblown analogy made by liberals and conservatives who accuse leftists of 'Stalinist' political correctness, but rather a literal statement in a context where slavery thrived. The freedom to 'speak one's mind' was limited to those who would say the right sorts of things, and excluded those, like slaves, who might say things that endanger the social order. Only much later, with the 'Enlightenment' and the dawn of liberalism, did it become normal to present rights like freedom of speech as universals.

While mass, institutionalised slavery no longer persists in Western societies, its legacy in systems of neo-colonialism and racialized citizenship ensures that dangerous, dissenting and minority voices are still suppressed. Today's liberal-democratic, rights-based regimes, rooted in Enlightenment universalism, maintain exclusive forms of 'free speech', and not only with regard to hate crime and speech in support of political violence. When, for example, politically radical women of colour speak publicly about structural inequalities, they are hounded for failing to maintain standards of 'civility' ('uncivilised' is avoided, but implied). 'Free speech', *in practice*, is not for such people. It remains primarily the right of white men to publicly speak their racism, sexism, and all of the other ideas that reinscribe and reproduce their own social supremacy.

In 2018 *The Economist* invited white supremacist and former Trump aide Steve Bannon to speak at their 'Open Festival'. Responding to critics of this decision, 'the most sober, the most rational, the most moderate organ of the industrial Bourgeoisie', as Marx called the magazine,⁸ declared that:

Our premise has been that progress is best achieved when ideas are tested in open debate [...] Mr Bannon stands for a world view that is antithetical to the liberal values *The Economist* has always espoused [...] The future of open societies will [...] be secured [...] by subjecting ideas and individuals from all

sides to rigorous questioning and debate. This will expose bigotry and prejudice [...] That is the premise *The Economist* was founded on.⁹

And so the Oxbridge debating club clique hands a megaphone to a crypto-fascist in the name of an abstract ideal. It is hard to recall *The Economist* being so generous to communist or antifascist agitators. The political naivety of liberals is apparent to the far right, who delight in having their voices amplified by platforms that think their worldview 'antithetical'. Winning over some liberals to some parts of their cause will be necessary for neo-fascists to triumph, whereas the left is irredeemable to them – what today's neo-fascists accurately perceive and exploit is the opposition common to their 'leftist' enemies to abstract universals like free speech.

Postmodern neo-Marxist anti-racist feminists of the world, unite!

Peterson's bigotry is openly expressed, and his misogynist anti-feminism is a case in point. Peterson makes frequent negative references to feminism and feminists. He sometimes refers angrily to 'leftist feminists', and clearly has a special loathing for Judith Butler, whom he variously regards as a 'queer studies feminist', a 'star among postmodern neomarxists', and 'Jacques Derrida's female doppelganger' (as a woman, of course, Butler's theory can only imitate a man's). Often, his anti-feminism manifests closely woven into racism. He asks his followers 'Do feminists avoid criticizing Islam because they unconsciously long for masculine dominance?', blending misogynist anti-feminism (wherein women, including feminists, 'long for masculine dominance') with a popular trope in Islamophobic racism (wherein 'Islam' denotes an intrinsically sexist endeavour that is always about 'masculine dominance' and female submissiveness; an old orientalist trope).

The nebulous, sometimes contradictory nature of Peterson's 'insights' and terminology are characteristic of the thrust of fascist thought, as I will show later, but for now, it is worth focusing on what he *correctly* identifies: a degree of unity among diverse 'critical' and left wing traditions of theory and activism that otherwise exist in a state of tension with one another. The source of this unity is shared opposition to social orders based on abstract universalism. It is the insistence that how we explain, theorise, and change our world should stem from actual social practices. While 'postmodern neo-Marxist' is an ostensibly contradictory far-right construction, it is worth unpacking.

Marx was hostile to whole notion of 'so-called human rights' for precisely the reason that they are abstract universal principles that treat the human being 'as an isolated monad',¹⁰ and do not reflect context-bound and inescapably *social* nature of actual human life. True political emancipation was not, for Marx and Engels, to be found in the institutionalisation of rights through 'bourgeois revolutions', but rather in concrete struggles rooted in the material social conditions of labour relations. 'Postmodernism' (or poststructuralism), meanwhile, emerged precisely in critical opposition to Marxism.

For poststructuralists taking their cues from Foucault, the Marxist conceptual vocabulary of 'ideology' and 'mystification' is at best problematic and condescending, at worst totalitarian.

Yet poststructuralists, many of whom (Foucault and Derrida included) started out as Marxists, do share with Marxists the philosophical conviction that social theory and ideas are inseparable from social practice. Foucault argued that social thought is not something 'to be sought only in theoretical formulations such as those of philosophy or science; it can and must be analysed in every manner of speaking, doing, or behaving in which the individual appears and acts as subject of learning, as ethical or juridical subject, as subject conscious of himself and others'. The study and theorisation of the social, he infers from this, 'can thus proceed from an analysis of "practices" – discursive or not'.¹¹ Foucault's practice-focused, 'genealogical' method rests upon an injunction to 'suppose that universals do not exist'.¹²

Similarly, the emphasis on *lived experience* as an engine of theory and practice is central to many varieties of feminism, including the 'standpoint' methodology embraced by radical (but largely 'white') feminisms of the Second Wave, and the black and intersectional feminisms that rose to challenge them.¹³ Kimberlé Crenshaw recently noted that '[i]ntersectionality was a lived reality before it became a term',¹⁴ emphasising, as in her earlier work that coined and developed the concept, the centrality of *experience* – in opposition to the abstract or universal principles informing some white, liberal feminism – to the insight that 'the intersection of racism and sexism factors into black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately'.¹⁵ Living and knowing intersecting inequalities is, on this view, the basis for theorising and challenging them.

Finally, the 'queer studies feminism' Peterson identifies with Judith Butler, by which he seemingly means contemporary gender theory itself, is grounded in actual social practice too. Butler's most well-known theoretical contribution, that gender is 'performatively produced' rests on a deeper insight that builds on earlier waves of feminist thought:

If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing [...] an ongoing discursive practice [...] open to intervention and resignification.¹⁶

Indeed, a primary contribution of gender theorists has been to undermine essentialist universalism and draw attention to the fact that, *in practice*, gender and sexuality are both culturally (re)produced and exist as *spectrums* rather than conceptually neat but abstract binaries.

Jordan B Peterson: Postmodern Neo-Fascist?

Contrary to free-speechists, we must refuse a 'right' to be publicly racist, misogynist, homophobic, or transphobic. This is precisely what the current far-right movement – enabled by liberals – seeks to (re)produce. Speech is the currency of politics and, as Aristotle saw, the horizons politically possibility are negotiated through it. Centrist liberals, who pride themselves on their superior reasoning and pragmatic nous, have become the useful idiots of the far right, as they strive to re-define social norms in fascistic ways.

Peterson exists as part of a symbolic political network on the new far right, calling itself the 'alt-right'. As an academic, he fulfils a crucial function: validating far-right knowledge of the world, and offering intellectual support for the 'boots on the ground' of street-fighting fascists. In this sense, Peterson fulfils a parallel function to allegedly 'mainstream' right-wing politicians, including Donald Trump and Boris Johnson, who publicly disseminate more-or-less explicit signals of their misogyny, homophobia, Islamophobia and racism to the far right, saying "we are on your side". The 'alt-right' accuses its enemies of 'virtue signalling'. What Peterson and other professedly 'liberal' right-wingers do can, conversely, be described as neo-fascist 'hate signalling'. Such signalling is essential to the dynamic of emergent fascism, as one its key architects, Alfredo Rocco, noted in 1926:

[T]here are many in our ranks [...] who know Fascism as action and feeling but not yet as thought, who therefore have an intuition but no comprehension of it. It is true that Fascism is, above all, action and sentiment and that such it must continue to be [...] Only because it is feeling and sentiment [...] has it the force to stir the soul of the people [...] Only because it is action, and as such actualizes itself in a vast organisation and in a huge movement, has it the conditions for determining the historical course of contemporary Italy.

This vision of fascism from its heyday is not an aberration but typical of accounts of those who lived through it. Alberto Moravia's 1951 novel *The Conformist* details the process by which a bullied and disturbed young boy grows up to become a fascist:

[T]he chain was unbroken, all its links well soldered by his *simpatia*, felt before any reflection, to the knowledge that this feeling was shared by millions of other people in just the same way; from this knowledge to the conviction of being in the right; from the conviction of being in the right to action.¹⁷

The passage from an intuition arriving as if 'from the air'¹⁸ to a belief in universality, and then an imperative to take (violent) action is a continuum that requires the hate signalling of free-speechists. It is therefore no exaggeration to describe Peterson – or Trump, Johnson, and Farage – as leading enablers of a neo-fascist movement.

Conclusion

Liberalism, as I have sought to show here, is fundamentally inadequate to guard against this insurgent fascist tendency. The fascist appropriation of liberal rights-talk on free speech is emblematic of the deep contradictions of liberal ideology; a rights-based politics fails in the face of authoritarianism and hate because rights are universal abstractions that do not, and cannot, exist in practice. The basis for our opposition to Peterson and the crypto-fascist vanguard of the 'alt-right' must be more substantial, more genuinely *political*. We must show that a viable alternative to liberalism is possible, desirable, and essential; the gains of democratic socialists in the US and UK in recent years may be the first step to doing so.

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