August 25, 2018

Falling out of Love with Jordan Peterson

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His vision is far darker than it first appears

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I was not the only free speech warrior to fall for Jordan Peterson, the Canadian academic who first came to international prominence after he publically opposed a bill that could potentially require people to address others by their chosen gender pronoun. Personally, I am happy to accommodate anyone’s preferences in such matters, not least because that seems to be good manners. But, like Peterson, I found repellent the illiberal idea that a law could be used to compel me one way or another.

It was on the basis of this rather thin association that I began listening to Peterson’s long interviews with some of my favourite podcaster (Sam Harris, Joe Rogan); watched, with unseemly enjoyment, a blistering encounter with an unprepared and defensive UK television journalist; and eagerly bought the audio version of his bestselling 12 Rules for Life. The title alone was almost enough to win me over: who doesn’t want someone to explain how to sort out the confusion that me over: who doesn’t want someone to explain how to sort out the confusion that is modern life in 12 easy steps?

But somewhere along the way I started to feel differently. By the time I finished the audiobook, argued with my teenage daughter about the BBC interview, and digested a few more lectures and debates, the infatuation was over. The realisation that Peterson is one angry dude, whose hardcore fan base comprises similarly furious men, played a big role in my disenchantment. But the main problem is that there are just too many holes in his story of who we are – and in his grand theory of why we have ended up in such a squabbling, sordid mess.

This is not to say he gets everything wrong. Peterson is right to be worried about the culture of intolerance that is threatening our hard-won freedoms. He is right to point out that the gender pay gap issue is more complex than many realise. He is right (if not especially original) in urging us to stand up straight; get our own house in order before criticising others; take responsibility for our actions; discipline our children; speak the truth; and be open to learning. These ‘rules for life’ are explicitly directed at unmoored young men, for whom Peterson clearly feels genuine concern and compassion.

The task of explaining exactly where and how prudent self-help veers off into the wilderness of reactionary politics is not for the faint of heart. Peterson is an obscurantist who does not wear his learning lightly – using his academic credentials and an intimidating amalgam of Jungian psychology, religion and mythology to dress up opinions as evidence-based ‘fact’. His political arguments often sound persuasive because they are so elaborate and presented with radical self-assurance. Their excavation and dismantling requires time and effort. Acceptance is the path of least resistance.

A few examples from his vast body of work might help to make this clearer. The first relates to Peterson’s conviction (shared by many conservatives and some progressives) that the bulk of our current social and political ills are the fault of ‘identity politics’: of groups organising and advocating on the basis of race, ethnicity, sex, gender orientation etc. This idea is attractive because it helps us to make sense of the sharp divisions we see everywhere in public life. It also presents the alluring prospect of a quick fix: by eliminating identity politics we can somehow make whole what is so badly broken.

But the truth is likely much messier. As one African-American debate opponent pointed out to him, racial identity was not something that black Americans happily assumed for themselves. It was imposed by force in order to separate them from the dominant identity and, through that separation, to withhold basic rights and freedoms. The same goes for women and other disempowered groups that are now using their externally imposed ‘identity’ to seek more space, more opportunities and greater power. It is those who inflicted the identity in the first place – and who sense a threat to the disproportionate space, opportunities and power they have enjoyed as a result – who are made most uncomfortable by ‘identity politics’. Peterson is right that identity politics, taken to the extreme, represent a threat to valuable liberal ideas about the primacy and sovereignty of the individual. But his unwillingness (or inability) to explore contradictions and inconsistencies, and his simmering displeasure when they are noted, is telling.

A second example relates to Peterson’s fixation on power-based hierarchies and his related world view that sees everyone as either winners or losers in the grim game of life. Peterson is right that hierarchies have been critical to the development of human society and that we should be careful before dismissing or destroying them, along with the philosophy of meritocracy they embody. But he creates a straw man by falsely equating the questioning of hierarchies with dangerous radicalism. As a criminal justice practitioner working against modern forms of enslavement, I understand all too well that hierarchies are at least as crucial to the maintenance of illegitimate power and harmful practices as they are to the conservation of what is good. A faith in the kind of human progress that is marked by greater dignity, autonomy and freedom for all requires us to resist the temptation to idolise power and the hierarchical structures that embody and preserve it.

And once we strip away the fancy scholarly wrapping, Peterson’s views on relations between men and women are unsettling – maybe even a bit creepy. At the heart of his work is a rigid attachment to the two archetypes of (masculine) order and (feminine) chaos. The reader doesn’t need to refer to the subtitle of his book (An Antidote to Chaos) or wade through endless, muddled theorising to see where this is going. Men are aggressive and authoritative, women are emotional. The threat of violence that is implicit in men – and in all interactions involving men – is necessary to keep things on an even keel, even if it might not work in all cases: ‘I don’t think that men can control crazy women.’ And don’t get Peterson started on the ‘F’-word. In his dystopian, joyless world, feminists ‘have an unconscious wish for brutal male domination’. Really? Is that what I should be telling my big-hearted, optimistic 18 year old daughters? Is that what he is telling his own young son?

Falling in and out of love with Jordan Peterson has been a bit embarrassing, but not all bad. Not least it has forced me to stop and think hard about what I believe to be important and true. For that I thank him. But next time, I’ll be much more careful.

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