

After Trickle Down, Kicking Down: On Jordan Peterson, Naturalizing Inequality, and Neofascist Indirect Apologetics

Critical Sociology

1–19

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DOI: 10.1177/08969205241284282

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Abstract

This paper argues that Jordan Peterson's enthusiastic reception, including on the neofascist Right, reflects how his discourse functions as a form of indirect capitalist apologetics, which no longer obviates how the sociopolitical system produces massive inequalities, but sanctifies inequalities as natural and eternal. Part 1 frames the contention of the paper, addressing methodological issues. Part 2 establishes the understanding of indirect apologetics, drawn from Gyorgy Lukács' account of fascist ideology as involving the following three irrationalist functions: first, ontologizing and relativizing peoples' material, socioeconomic concerns; second, positioning the in-group as privileged by nature; and third, displacing socioeconomically mediated anxieties onto designated enemies to be combatted by a revived, masculine culture. Part 3 shows how Peterson's *12 Rules for Life* proposes a social Darwinism (indirect apologetics, function 1), whose darker underside is authoritarian permission to 'kick down' on the weak, or those who would seek to ameliorate sociopolitical conditions (indirect apologetics, functions 2, 3).

Keywords

Peterson, Lukács, indirect apologetics, neofascism, inequality, capitalism

Introduction: The Fame of Jordan Peterson as Contemporary Phenomenon

Of all of the signs of our times, the ascent to celebrity status of Jungian psychologist come Rightwing 'culture warrior' Jordan Peterson's is not the least Talismanic. The story of Peterson's emergence from academic obscurity to hero status among the illiberal and neofascist Right globally – up to and including visits with Victor Orban and comments rationalizing Putin's Russia's invasion of Ukraine in light of Western 'wokeism' (French, 2022) – is by now relatively well

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known. In May 2016, the Canadian House of Commons passed bill C-16, adding gender expression and gender identity as protected grounds under the Canadian Human Rights Act. Peterson, outraged, posted on his YouTube channel ‘Professor against Political Correctness’ (27 September 2016) in which he claimed three times that he could ‘go to jail’ for failing to use the preferred non-binary pronouns of his addressees. In fact, as a University employee, Peterson had since 2012 been subject under Ontario Law to provisions against discrimination on the bases of gender. It was moreover legally disputable whether misgendering students could have amounted to ‘hate speech’ under C-16 (Van der Ven and Van Gemert, 2022: 291). Even if Peterson was to have been brought up before the Ontario Human Rights Commission for his stand against this ‘totalitarianism’, he could never have faced jail time (Burgis et al., 2020: 36–37). Nevertheless, the following day, Canada’s *National Post* picked up Peterson’s cause. His career as an international free speech, anti-‘woke’ warrior had begun. By the end of October 2016, Peterson’s YouTube channel had over 1.5 million followers, including more and more young men in the ‘Far Right “altosphere”’ (Van der Ven and Van Gemert, 2022: 290, 295–296), whose enthusiastic responses included open anti-semitism which the psychologist, to his credit, walked back from (Burgis et al., 2020: 127). As Peterson would wonder in a tweet of the following March, ‘91% of those who view my videos are male. Why? Why so few women?’¹ By 2018, the psychologist’s online videos had 100 million YouTube views, earning him a sizable income from his online followers. As of March 2020, Peterson’s channel had some 2.6 million subscribers and almost 141 million views, as well as being the subject of numerous ‘subreddits’, with the subreddit r/jordanpeterson hosting at that time 232,000 subscribers (as of August 2024, this has become c. 306,000; Van der Ven and Van Gemert, 2022: 291).

Peterson’s psychological claims and his interpretations of mythological texts from a variety of cultures, as well as the Bible, cannot be simply reduced to his work’s political content, and we will largely avoid comment upon them here. It is the political dimension of his production and persona, led by his post-2016 stance against ‘political correctness’ and the endemic ‘cultural Marxism’ of the academy that underlie his extraordinary ascent as a public intellectual in the Trump/Brexit era. Many other scholars work, after all, both in psychological studies and in fields interpreting literature, mythology, popular culture, the bible, and films. Yet, they do not attract followers whose declarations attest in many cases to ‘guru’-like adoration, despite Peterson’s professing only to teach a robust, free-thinking individualism (Robinson, 2018). While we will therefore duly note, as other critics have, the manifold inconsistencies, fallacies, and vagaries of Peterson’s positions, our interest here is primarily in this question: *why Peterson, and specifically his popular success and media celebrity, now?*

Our framing position is that Peterson’s popular reception is an historical and political datum, which requires an historical and political analysis. Our claim will be that this reception – as well as bespeaking the new forms of celebrity fostered by the social-mediatic ‘attention economy’ (Van der Ven and Van Gemert, 2022) – cannot be adequately understood outside of an account of the sociopolitical conditions of the post-Global Financial Crisis (GFC) era, with the rise of forms of Far Right or neofascist movements, such as MAGA in the United States, *Front Nationale* (now ‘National Rally’) in France, and others. It is certainly true that, from the C-16 controversy onwards, Peterson’s work has been taken up predominantly – although, of course, not exclusively – by male audiences, many in the ‘Alt-right’ and ‘manosphere’ in the United States and elsewhere.² Many of these men, including self-professed ‘lobsters’ (see Part 3), in addition form virtual armies of followers online, who loyally attack Peterson’s critics, often in highly violent rhetoric: ‘Angry Jordan Peterson TRIGGERS French Journalist’; ‘Jordan Peterson Destroys Islam in 15 Seconds’, ‘JP Calmly dismantles feminism in front [sic] of two CELEBRITY STUDIES feminists’, or ‘FUCK YOU – JORDAN PETERSON DESTROYS PANKAJ MISHRA ON TWITTER’ (Van der Ven and Van Gemert, 2022: 295–296).

To position the source of the appeal of Peterson's syncretistic mixture of self-help, depth psychology, and popular philosophizing as being 'neofascistic', as we will do here, is to unavoidably skirt several controversies. Within political science, there are ongoing debates about the possibility of any minimal definition of 'fascism', and whether new terms should be ventured to describe contemporary thinkers and political movements like MAGA – despite the latter's manifest resemblances with historical fascisms, in terms of their Leadership cult, appeals to lost national Greatness and dreams of rebirth, disrespect for constitutional governance, hostility to deracinated, urbanized, educated 'elites', and the scapegoating of minorities and immigrants. The social scientific understanding of 'fascism', 'post-fascism', or 'neofascism' has been greatly hindered by a number of factors. First, given the extent of Nazi crimes against humanity, the terms 'fascist' and 'Nazi' have become terms of polemical abuse for any form of private or public authority which is broadly dictatorial.³ After 1945, second, indubitably fascist or neo-Nazi thinkers and political agents had to conceal or repackage their aims, and distance themselves from the interwar Far Right movements. So, these thinkers developed their own Rightist criticisms of Nazism (too democratic, too contaminated by modern forces or 'technology', too Statist, or 'socialist'). They also shifted their messaging for a long time away from talk of race or biology to more acceptable appeals to culture, tradition, and particular histories (Bar-On, 2007). Third, with the structural changes associated with deindustrialization and deunionization in developed countries, as well as the political and economic collapse of the really-existing Marxist states, older forms of Leftist criticism of fascism in the West, tying it specifically to forms of capitalism, have disappeared from intellectual prominence (Losurdo, 2024). A fourth factor, connected with the latter, is the cross-pollination at the level of intellectual ideologies of Rightist and New Leftist antiliberal ideas, facilitated within the academy by post-structuralist (sometime called 'postmodernist') thought. In the same period as Hayek's (1944) neoliberal criticism of fascism as a form of 'socialism' was being accepted by the political Right, with the globalization of 'French theory' and its antecedent, reactionary thinkers from Nietzsche to Heidegger, the criticism of fascism among many in the academic Left became widely submerged under the rubrics of critiques of 'modernity', 'power', 'technology', 'totalitarianism', or 'rationality' which obscure fascism's differences from other modern political forms (Faye, 2011, 2016; Ferry and Renaut, 1990; Givsan, 2011).

However, Peterson himself (and his followers, see above) has taken umbrage at being labeled a fascist thinker, when this was suggested by Pankaj Mishra (2018) in early 2018. The psychologist has avowed that he understands his political position as 'classically liberal', invoking the figure of John Stewart Mill – albeit without acknowledging Mill's works on the subjection of women and on forms of 19th-century socialism (Burston, 2018: 6). Some commentators suggest that Peterson is a traditionalist conservative, another contested category (Burston, 2018: 4–5). Some associates attest that Peterson, offline and off the page, is far less belligerent than he appears, especially on social media (Bowles, 2020). There is little doubt, moreover, that many of Peterson's readers have little historical understanding of regimes like Hitler's Germany, their differences from Stalin's Russia and other tyrannical regimes, and would have little sympathy with Nazi terror and crimes against humanity. (Peterson himself has spoken of his horror at the crimes of the Shoah, which he aligns closely with those of the Gulag; Peterson, 2018: 147, 155, 309–310) Many Peterson admirers report that their attraction speaks solely to the level of personal experience, resonating with his appeals to take on personal responsibility ('(i)t's heartbreaking to finally see the light and look back at 41 years of suffering . . .'; Van der Ven and Van Gemert, 2022: 296).

Nevertheless, drawing notably on the work of William L. Robinson on the psychosocial appeal of neofascist ideologies to the cohorts which form its recognized 'base' today in Northern nations like America, Canada, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia, this article aims to critically situate and comprehend the phenomenon of Peterson's popular, highly politicized reception

since 2016. This means locating his appeal particularly – but again, not exclusively – to men from the historically privileged, usually white elements of the threatened middle classes of the Northern countries (Part 2). Part 3 will then examine Peterson’s thought directly, focusing on his bestselling *12 Rules for Life*. In line with critics such as Fluss (2018), Mishra (2018), Brooker (2019) and Burgis et al. (2020), we will contend that, far from being novel, Peterson’s work represents a syncretic, 21st-century instance of the kinds of irrationalism that Gyorgy Lukács, Aurel Kolnai and others document as underlying interwar fascist ideologies (Kolnai, 1939 [1938]; Lukács, 1980). We will contend that Peterson’s idiosyncratic blend of social Darwinism, Jungian psychology, and appeals to esoteric ancient wisdom, speaks to the growing contemporary ideological devolution on the political Right, from forms of direct apologetics for ‘deregulated’ capitalism (‘trickle down’) to indirect apologetics which naturalize and sanctify the steepening inequalities produced by the political-economic reforms associated with neoliberalism, globalization, and financialization since the 1970s. Peterson’s (2018) anticritical, ‘toughen up, weasel’ (p. 329) individualism in *12 Rules*, we will show, lends the sanctioning authority of his paternal and professorial persona (Van de Ven and Van Gemert, 2022: 296–297) to an authoritarian permission to ‘kick down’ at vulnerable individuals and marginal groups, to whose status many in the threatened middle classes fear they are themselves being reduced in the post-neoliberal dispensation. As such, Peterson’s work forms one influential ideological relay serving to redirect the real rage and anxiety experienced by many in contemporary societies away from the structural, economic, and political causes of their distresses onto the foreign and most vulnerable: ‘to re-establish the faltering rule of monopoly capitalism by exploiting and whipping up this mass sentiment, while their “opponents” tried to contain, hold back, and put back in their place this anti-capitalist mass mood . . .’ (Lukács, 1933).

Capitalism, Deracination, and Fascist Ideology as Indirect Apologetics

It is deeply significant that the global rise of forms of Rightwing authoritarian regimes in the 21st century, sometimes with openly neo-Nazi elements, has followed upon over four decades of neoliberal reforms. The devolution toward forms of openly authoritarian, ethnonationalist governments is unfolding on the basis, not of the hypertrophy of a bloated administrative state, as Friedrich Hayek and neoliberal wisdom, in line with some critical theory, would contend (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2001; Hayek, 1944; Pollock, 1990). It is emerging on the back of a concerted, international attack, backed by elements in the business elites (or ‘1%’), on the progressive functions of the state secured by the post-depression compacts between states, business, and unionized labor in Northern nations (Galbraith, 2008). The components of this unilateral break-away from the mid-century tripartite compacts on the part of business are well known (Streeck, 2017). ‘Neoliberalism’, as it has become called, involves the internationalization of production and supply chains, facilitating the deindustrialization and deunionization of developed nations and hyper-exploitation of ununionized labor in the global South; the internationalization and deregulation of finance and money flows, facilitated by new information technologies; the precaritization through casualization and contractualizing of waged work, including in the global North; the selling off and divestment of public assets, public education, welfare and health insurance provision, including through the creation of quasi-markets for private providers; the rolling back of anti-trust legislation enabling the increasing oligopolization in key industries led by banking and ITS; and more and more since the 1990s, the maintenance of flagging consumer demand in the resulting conditions of falling real wages through the proliferation of forms of private indebtedness as well as, in countries like the author’s own, soaring nonproductive real estate markets which entrench growing intergenerational inequities (i.e. ‘financialization’).

One thing that is striking about the context of these enormous structural changes is that they have been contemporary not with heated disputes about the political-economic policies which have made them possible, but ‘culture wars’ about issues around identity, warmly embraced by the Right. The last decades have seen a ‘cultural turn’ (Jameson, 1998) on the Left as well as the Right; first within Western Marxism, and then in postmodernist or post-structuralist theorizing. This critical turn has largely insulated the last half century’s radical economic changes from direct criticism, in a way that unwittingly unites postmodernist or post-structuralist theorizing with figures like Jordan Peterson (part 2), and the many other syndicated ‘cultural warriors’ of today’s global Right. The hegemony of what Peterson and others inaccurately call ‘cultural Marxism’ (or ‘neo-Marxism’, ‘postmodern neo-Marxism’, ‘meta-Marxism’), in reality, reflects the turn away among many New Leftist thinkers from concerns about the distribution (and tendencies toward concentration) of economic wealth in marketized societies, the crisis tendencies of capitalism (over-accumulation, tendency of rates of profit to fall, mass alienation), and the politics of class, toward ‘cultural’ concerns: the politics of representation, identity, creative expressivity, and difference (Smulewicz-Zucker and Thompson, 2015).

On the basis of this cultural turn, these critics can and have expressed outrage at the increasingly open expressions of racist, sexist, ableist, and transphobic prejudices by Far Right Leaders like Mr Trump – but, necessarily, in largely moral or cultural terms. To be clear, the barbarization of public discourse at issue surely does reflect the protagonists’ fearful hostility to difference, not to say a scuttling of the liberal consensus which prevailed after World War II about the bounds of civility and acceptable public rhetoric. Mr. Trump and other Rightwing ‘populists’ proselytize a myopic nostalgia that harkens back to an idealized, tacitly racialized vision of the 1950s – albeit a vision which excludes any return to the levels of unionization, progressive taxation, business regulations, and social protections which had been won by the New Deal, and comparable labor-capital-state compromises elsewhere. But ‘new Left’ criticisms of the authoritarian Right which remain at this level of culture and moralizing censure (up to and including deplatforming), as well as being ineffective in speaking to the Right’s ‘base’, have no explanations as to why forces among the ruling groups in society, from business to the corporate media, have come *only in the last decade* to accept, normalize, and even celebrate this new brutalization of public discourse. Critical culturalist approaches also cannot explain the ability of such ideologues and ideologies after the GFC to *capture popular support*, only at this historical moment. This appeal in the United States has extended to the formation of private militia like the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and 3-percenters, as well as enthusiastic networks of online ‘trolls’ and activists (Niewert, 2023). But *why only now Trump and such neofascism*, if some groups, if not Western thinking (‘logocentrism’, all progressive ‘grand narratives’) itself, are putatively always inclined to such brazen hostility to Otherness?

To understand the mobilization of this ‘base’ requires an account of distinct forms of neofascist ideology, and the psychosocial bases for the attractions of these ideologies, awake to today’s increasingly inegalitarian and divided socioeconomic contexts. William Robinson notes that one contrast between today’s neofascisms and the interwar forms of fascism, is that the latter still promoted forms of employment, albeit under deunionized conditions – and albeit at the price of increasing mobilization for war and the vicious sidelining of targeted minorities. By contrast, in today’s emerging constellation of movements like MAGA in the United States – whose Leader in 2024 is promising anew to further slash corporate taxes and gut the social State if he regains power (Chapman, 2024) – the ‘wages of fascism’ have become more opaque:

In the regard, the ideology of 21st-century fascism rests on irrationality – a promise to deliver security and restore stability that is emotive, not rational. It is a project that does not and need not distinguish between the truth and the lie. (Robinson, 2019b: 171)

There is nevertheless a principal ‘base’ or addressee for this irrationalist appeal, as Robinson continues. The changes associated with neo-liberalization, with its de-democratizing of decision-making, and the greater power afforded to transnational capital through globalization, have led to levels of social inequalities and alienation which are by now well-known, and the hollowing out of the middle classes, including organized labor, in Northern nations. A world in which, by 2015, according to OXFAM, ‘just one percent of humanity owned over half of the world’s wealth and the top 20% owned 94.5% of that wealth, while the remaining 80% must make do with just 4.5%’ presents foreseeable risks of instability and social revolt (Robinson, 2019b: 158). This is a situation in which, even leaving aside projected effects of climate change in coming decades, entire sectors of populations – hundreds of millions of people, not simply, but primarily in the global South – are being, or have been rendered ‘surplus’ to capital:

Dominant groups face the challenge of how to contain both the real and potential rebellion of surplus humanity. As world capitalism reaches the limits of its extensive expansion, new spaces have to be violently cracked open and the peoples in these spaces must be repressed . . . (Robinson, 2019b: 166)

Accompanying the deracination of the old Northern middle classes, including forms of skilled, organized labor, there is also the phenomenon of what Samir Amin has called the ‘Third-worldization’ of significant sectors of the First World’s populations under neoliberal economic governance (Robinson, 2019a: 1089). From a position of relative historical privilege, these cohorts have come more and more to face the possibility of falling into the precarious conditions of the global *lumpenproletariat* or ‘planet of slums’ (Davis, 2006): that of refugees, new migrants, and undocumented workers. And it is this situation, that of actual and threatened Third-World-ization in nations like the United States, that makes these cohorts susceptible to capture by forms of ‘neofascism’, ‘authoritarian ethnonationalism’, or Rightwing ‘populism’.

Neofascist ideologies, like their interwar forbears, use invocations of lost ethnonational ‘Greatness’ to promise to re-differentiate these threatened cohorts from groups traditionally beneath them. These subaltern groups include, on one hand, the women who have since the First World War been increasingly integrated into the workforce, to compete for labor with males; but on the other hand, the foreign Others and migrants whom white Europeans had mostly dominated globally since the age of colonization. It is this context of neoliberal economic globalization which, following Robinson (2019b), allows us to explain the seemingly rapid rise of forms of Far Right ‘populist’ movements in the global North, following the GFC:

This proto-fascist Right seeks to fuse reactionary political power with transnational capital *and* to organise a mass base among historically privileged sectors of the global working class, such as white workers in the North and middle layers in the South that are now experiencing heightened insecurity and the spectre of downward mobility. The proto-fascist response to the crisis involves militarism, extreme masculinisation, racism, the search for scapegoats (such as immigrant workers and Muslims in the US and Europe) and mystifying ideologies. (p. 168)

Any ruling group that wishes to remain in power needs to secure popular legitimacy. At the same time, neo-liberalization makes nation-states into competitors in a ‘race to the bottom’ to facilitate, advertise, and sell favorable conditions for investment by highly mobile transnational capital. This economic demand pulls against the bases of rational democratic legitimation; that is, political leaders’ capabilities to actually provide the infrastructural, educational, economic, and regulatory preconditions for everyone within their populations to live meaningful lives, not wholly caught up in the permanent emergency of securing material necessities for themselves and their loved ones.⁴

The forms of neofascism or Rightwing ‘populism’ which have gone from the margins to the center of political life in nations led by the United States since 2008, we would contend, represent what Gyorgy Lukács (1980: 202–203) calls ‘indirect apologetics’ for deregulated capitalism in conditions of increasing economic, as well as legitimation, crises. Direct capitalist apologetics posit that unshackled ‘free markets’ will at once maximize the social product, as well as distributing it most justly. At the same time, or ‘in the long run’, this wealth and the opportunities it can purchase will ‘trickle down’. In a rising tide, all the boats will be lifted, so deep inequalities would represent a passing hardship. Following the GFC, with government bailouts of private investment banks while millions lost their homes, and then with the ensuing sovereign debt crisis, in which states like Greece became effectively beholden to international banks – experiencing the kinds of ‘austerity’ the World Bank had long imposed on nations of the South in exchange for continuing liquidity – these forms of direct apologetics have been shown up as literally bankrupt and derisory, for more and more people internationally.

‘Indirect apologetics’ by contrast are forms of ideology which, under these conditions, serve to justify the new, increasingly inhumane political-economic realities through other intellectual means than trickle-down economics. They venture this justification of the increasingly unjustifiable by embracing forms of tendentially fascist, antiliberal ‘irrationalism’ (Lukács, 1980: 8–11) and appeal to the threatened middle strata of populations, through at least three intersecting functions.

First, these ideologies redirect growing anti-capitalist sentiment away from real social, material factors, at just the moments when capitalism’s continual tendency to crises and inability to provide the conditions for more and more people to live unshackled to material necessity, is nakedly revealed. They do this by forms of what we could term ‘ontologization’: claiming that considerations about material factors (labor and access to the means of education, medicinal care, housing, insurance . . .) are hopelessly ‘shallow’, soulless and ‘materialistic’, missing the deeper truths of nature or Being (Lukács, 1980: 295–296, 301–302, 438, 501–502). The natural and social sciences, which would try to rationally explain experiential data without disclosing their extrarational causes or grounds, are relativized (and selectively poached from (Mishra, 2018)). Underlying the ‘merely materialistic’ data scientific analyses can discern, fascist ideologemes claim, there are extrarational forces which at once explain and sanctify the inevitability of human sufferings and inequality. Their recognition will (as such) disabuse those capable of seeing these bracing Truths of all Judeo-Christian and modern ideas about human equality or intrinsic dignity. In place of social scientific analyses of historical conditions, fascisms instead explain these conditions as epiphenomena of posited quasi-metaphysical realities like Nietzsche’s will to power (‘the triumph of the will’), to, at a more popular level, the ‘race’ of the racial theorists, the ‘natural selection’ of the social Darwinists, the ‘blood’ of the eugenicists, and today, Alt-Right appeals to ‘biodiversity’ and ‘differential IQ’ (Lukács, 1980: 8–11).

Second, neofascist irrationalist claims capture the ‘hearts and minds’ of those cadres from the middle and working classes, neglected by the mainstream political parties, with the prospect of their falling into the ranks of ‘surplus humanity’ (Robinson, 2019b: 166–168). They do this by promising that it is not these cadres who will go under – into the morass of the global surplus lumpenproletariat and the shanty towns or slums. For the ideologies promise these cohorts that they belong, by nature and hence by right, to groups (and a gender, male) which is and ought to be a ruling elite: the Aryan race, ‘the West’, the French, the Christians, whichever.⁵ Lukács called this ideological mechanism of assigning a naturalized privilege to some groups, and not others, ‘aristocratic epistemology’. For it involves the notion that only some individuals, groups, and men (as against women), through their extrarational qualities (birth, race, faith, strength, intuition, insight, ability, rank, initiative, hardness, spirit, or *elan*) have access to the deepest truths and the highest values, including ‘civilization’, so they can rightly claim rule over others (Lukács, 1980: 10, 120, 148–150, 163, 191, 209, 231, 274, 277, 295, 342, 350, 415–416).

Third, on the flipside of this ‘upgrade’ of the socially declining middle strata into a natural would-be aristocracy of race, gender, religion, or culture, fascist ideologies posit inner and external ‘enemies’ who are scapegoated and blamed for the felt miseries afflicting ‘the People’ or the Nation. The prominent, but by no means solitary, exponent of this illiberal wisdom was authoritarian-come-Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt, who aimed to elevate the friend-enemy opposition into the universal, unavoidable principle of ‘the political’.⁶ The enemies, in their ‘essence’, cannot grasp what ‘we’ do and how we live. They are always threatening, hostile, ‘existentially alien’, and ripe to be positioned as the visible and invisible instigators and beneficiaries of the Peoples’ confusions and sufferings (Schmitt, 1996: 33). From these naturalized enemies, all moral consideration can thus rightfully be withdrawn. The subjects of fascist and neofascist movements, at least the males, are enjoined by such ‘creative enmity’ (Kolnai, 1939 [1938]: 141) to cultivate a proto-military ‘hardness’ which rechannels their anomie and rage away from social or political issues, into the heroic work of defending the People against their supposed enemies, and their treasonous domestic advocates (Bellassai, 2005; Perdue, 2022).

Peterson’s Neofascist Irrationalism

How though could a reading of Jordan Peterson, and an understanding of his rise to celebrity intellectual status since September 2016, be aligned with this analysis of the psychosocial bases and functions of fascist ideology, in securing constituents among those displaced or destabilized by radical capitalist reforms – remembering, once more, that the psychologist has himself at times reacted angrily to any suggestion that his work is sympathetic to the Far Right?

Peterson’s (1998) first book, *Maps of Meaning*, was a ponderous academic tome which only became widely known after C-16, YouTube, and Peterson’s popularisation (Burgis et al., 2020: 36–37). His best-seller *12 Rules for Life* (Peterson, 2018) represents the attempt to translate his project of grounding Jungian psychology in forms of neurobiology and evolutionary Darwinism, into a more popularly accessible genre. In doing so, it has to be said, Peterson allows himself to comment ‘on a broad range of topics that surpass his disciplinary background, including religion, economics, and political philosophy’ (Van de Ven and Van Gemert, 2022: 293). It also needs to be said that tensions always attended Peterson’s project, and not simply because of Carl Jung’s own ambivalent relationship with Nazism, set alongside Peterson’s vocal ‘anti-totalitarianism’ (Frosh, 2005). Peterson’s (2018) position is professedly informed by Fyodor Dostoevsky’s and Friedrich Nietzsche’s reactions against the post-traditional world in which ‘God is dead’ (pp. 185–195), as well as reactionary thinker (and supporter of the Romanian Iron Guard), Marcia Eliade (Petree, 2006). For all of Peterson’s professed allegiance to Millean ‘classical liberalism’, this means, he also presents a broadly traditionalist-reactionary criticism of the modern scientific culture with which liberalism is closely historically associated. The modern sciences explain how the world works and cannot simply be written off, Peterson admits. But echoing classic forms of reactionary anti-liberalism (Holmes, 1996 [1994]: 114, 23–25, 83, 97–98, 104, 122–124, 127, 135–142, 250–252), they rob it of the meaning which human beings find, and can only find, in myth and religion. As such, the modern sciences tear at the foundations of older, religious traditions, ushering in the specter of nihilism in which, per Nietzsche, the question ‘why?’ can find no ready answer (Burgis et al., 2020: 41–48; Peterson, 2018: 185–195).

First, in Peterson’s view, the ‘totalitarian’ movements of Left and Right would have sought to fill the cultural void thereby created with their utopian, genocidal projects (Burgis et al., 2020: 48–51). Then, so Peterson breezily argues, postmodernism and identity politics succeeded these totalitarianisms. Despite leading authors’ statements to the contrary, and indeed, despite the vocal positioning of ‘French theory’ in reaction against both Marxism’s and fascism’s ‘metanarratives’

alike, Peterson dragoons ‘postmodern neoMarxism’ into being an effective continuation of the Nazi and Stalinist disasters in rainbow clothing.⁷ Peterson’s (2018: 306–307) principal reason for this unlikely claim, beyond an almost-conspiratorial claim that academic ‘Marxists’ all became followers of Jacques Derrida (positioned as a theorist of ‘power’!) in the 1970s to 1980s when they realized they had lost the economic argument (Burgis et al., 2020: 14, 19, 220), is this.⁸ ‘Postmodernists’ putatively all prioritize group over individual identity (Burgis et al, 2020: 41–51)—and this, despite both ‘postmodernist’ theorists’ libertarian and anarchistic celebrations of difference (Žižek, 2020: 19); as well as the very checkered record of ‘totalitarian’ regimes’ stances toward LGBTQ+ and alternative lifestyles. The mostly-unnamed postmodernists’/cultural Marxists’ ‘totalitarian’ collectivism destroys any sense of individual responsibility, instead bespeaking a deepset ‘resentment’, a Nietzschean word especially close to Peterson’s heart which is used 48 times in *12 Rules* (Fluss, 2018). At an even more profound, quasi-ontological level, such progressive *ressentiment* reflects what Peterson tells us is a will to ‘revenge against Being’ (capital B, in invocation of Martin Heidegger; Burgis et al., 2020: 70, 86). Peterson (2018) sees this resentment writ large in the Columbine shooters, whom he suggestively calls the ‘ultimate critics’ (p. 147)—misrepresenting these pre-university teens’ explicit invocations, not of forms of anything like postmodern cultural criticism, but of Timothy McVeigh’s Rightwing terrorism and ‘NATURAL SELECTION’ (caps in original) conversant with the domination-driven lobsters of Peterson’s ‘Rule 1’ (see below; Cullen, 2004; Peterson, 2018: 12).⁹ In the resulting Petersonian night in which all forms of progressive thought appear black (or, rather, red), everyone from transactivists to Maoists can equally be condemned, since ‘the philosophy which guides their utterances is the same’ (Peterson, at Burgis et al., 2020: 73).

What then is the ground of ‘Being’ which the ‘postmodern neoMarxists’ and their resentful feminist allies would hatefully deny? The opening ‘Rule’ of *12 Rules of Life* straight up presents Peterson’s (2018) putatively deep disclosure of the essence of human being and ‘the nature of nature’ (p. 11): an exact example of the kinds of ontologization of social data Lukács identified as a first function of indirect fascist apologetics. It does so by way of his extraordinary exposition of the behavior of lobsters—in an intellectual episode which future historians will surely present as emblematic of a culture in increasingly complete confusion. ‘Lobsters live on the ocean floor’, Peterson observes, amid what he calls a ‘continual chaos of carnage and death’ (Peterson, 2018: 1).¹⁰ Nature is no plentiful paradise for Rousseauian ‘noble savages’ (Peterson, 2018: 119–123). It is associated in Peterson’s larger Jungian schemata with the ‘eternal feminine’ (Peterson, 2018: 38–44), and the ‘devouring Mother’ (Peterson, 2018: 320–326; Burgis et al., 2020: 141–44). In this dim, clouded, unchanging world, the lobsters endlessly struggle, both against predators and against other lobsters, for each place on the seabed, and a burrow of one’s own to raise baby lobsters, to repeat the cycle. Peterson explains how things therefore timelessly play out:

. . . lobsters often encounter one another when out exploring . . . even a lobster raised in isolation knows what to do when such a thing happens. It has complex defensive and aggressive behaviours built right into its nervous system. It begins to dance around, like a boxer, opening and raising its claws, moving backward, forward, and side to side, mirroring its opponent . . . At the same time, it employs special jets under its eyes to direct streams of liquid at its opponent. The liquid spray contains a mix of chemicals that tell the other lobster about its size, sex, health, and mood. (Peterson, 2018: 5)

If this exchange of sub-ocular identification sprays does not lead one male to submit to the other (in fact, as becomes clear, it is the males Peterson is primarily talking of), there is nothing for it. The lobster-males move to ‘level 2’, that of threatening display to get the other lobster to back down and acknowledge who is boss, ‘with antennae whipping madly and claws folded downward’

(Peterson, 2018: 6). And what happens if neither lobster accepts that the other lobster ‘owns’ them, as they say in the gangster movies? There is then, inevitably, level 3, a violent contest to flip the other lobster over, after which the loser ‘generally gives up and leaves (although it harbours intense resentment and gossips endlessly about the victor behind its back)’ (Peterson, 2018: 6).

Unhappily, after this, however, there is a possible ‘level 4’. For some whiny, quasi-progressive lobsters never learn. This level kicks in whenever the defeated ‘gossiping’ lobsters (yes, Peterson really writes that (Peterson, 2018: 6)) decides that it still wants to defend itself. At this point, there is a fight to the death. In the obstinate proto-leftist lobsters’ defense, the prize looks pretty good, at least as Peterson presents things. For the victorious lobster becomes the alpha. Then ‘all the girls’ (Peterson’s colloquialism) really value him. ‘The female lobsters . . . identify the top guy quickly and become irresistibly attracted to him’ (p. 9), a move Peterson approves of as very smart. What ensues looks almost like an adult lobster movie, under Peterson’s pen:

When the females are ready to shed their shells and soften up a bit, they become interested in mating. They start hanging around the dominant lobster’s pad, spraying attractive scents and aphrodisiacs towards him, trying to seduce him. His aggression has made him successful, so he’s likely to react in a dominant, irritable manner. Furthermore, he’s large, healthy and powerful. It’s no easy task to switch his attention from fighting to mating . . . Once the Beast [capital B] has been successfully charmed, the successful female (lobster) will disrobe, shedding her shell, making herself dangerously soft, vulnerable, and ready to mate . . . The dominant male, with his upright and confident posture, not only gets the prime real estate and easiest access to the best hunting grounds. He also gets all the girls. It is exponentially more worthwhile to be successful, if you are a lobster, and male. (Peterson, 2018: 10)

So, *why is Peterson telling his readers this, and what are they supposed to take from it?* Peterson’s pseudo-profound add-ins, in which he effortlessly leaps over millions of years of evolution to assign human attributes to the crustaceans, give the game away. This is not a ‘parable’, but intended as an edifying discourse, drawing on the authority of Darwinian biology, and citing scientific sources (Peterson, 2018: 371–372). The psychologist wants to suggest that ‘human beings’ are decisively the same as lobsters. We are back in Petersonianism, after everything the 20th century brought (and wrought), with a grim form of social Darwinism.

The lobsters have been around for 350 million years. Life is and can only be about survival and reproduction. Ergo, human beings both just are, and so should be, like the evolutionarily successful lobsters (Peterson, 2018: 11). But these fabulously archaic lobsters form steep hierarchies based on male force. We humans therefore, leaping from fact to value, should accept such hierarchies, and accept that inequality is everywhere and inescapable. Despite all relevant differences which 350 million years of evolution might be supposed to have introduced, and all the riches of the cultural traditions which Peterson in other places proposes to unravel for his readers, humans for Peterson have a ‘pre-reptilian’ part in our brains which unites us with the crustaceans (Peterson, 2018: 17). This part of our brain is always on the lookout for who can control, dominate or potentially overpower others, in competition for scarce status, sexual, and survival goods (p. 15) – in a way which Peterson can be presumed to know, as a clinical psychologist, closely echoes descriptions of human sociopathy: ‘It monitors exactly where you are positioned in society—on a scale of one to ten, for the sake of argument’ (Peterson, 2018: 15).

What follows is not that human beings, since we are at a higher evolutionary level involving language and the capacity for self-reflection, should challenge the sufficiency and wisdom of this ‘unspeakably primordial calculator’ (Peterson, 2018: 15). Peterson instead urges his readers *to embrace their pre-reptilian*. Once the sentimental veils of effeminizing modern society have been ripped away, we are meant to accept that life is just struggle for survival and dominance. And

everything is presented to Peterson's readers as if this idea was new or revelatory, and had not been previously tried politically in the 20th century.¹¹ Everyone should try to be what Peterson calls a 'one' on the dominance hierarchy, at the same time as rightly—that is, by Darwinian nature—only a few can reach the heights of the alpha lobsters.

So, at this point, Peterson's enthusiastic support from the *National Post* to *Sky News Australia* as a voice of forgotten 'common sense' in world gone woke-crazy ceases to be esoteric. In a way that renders the present global metastases of economic inequality and social divisions timeless and inevitable, a kind of restoration of Natural Order, Peterson expresses indirect apologetics with remarkable bluntness:

It's winner-take-all in the lobster world, just as it is in human societies, where the top 1 percent have as much loot as the bottom 50 percent – and where the richest eighty-five people have as much as the bottom three and a half billion. That same brutal principle of unequal distribution applies outside the financial domain – indeed, anywhere that creative production is required. The majority of scientific papers are published by a very small group of scientists. A tiny proportion of musicians produces almost all the recorded commercial music . . . This principle is sometimes known as Price's law, after Derek J. de Solla Price, the researcher who discovered its application in science in 1963 . . . (Peterson, 2018: 6)

The at times almost unreadable shoddiness of Peterson's argumentation, here and elsewhere,¹² can disorient people with an academic training in the social sciences he reviles. Today's inequality, inconceivable in the developed nations as recently as the early 1970s, is presented by the psychologist as a timeless deliverance of fate, based in a statistic rule discovered by a figure most of Peterson's readers will never have heard of, and would not think to look up. This rule, moreover, would putatively govern everything in the universe, from music and art (as he continues) to the behavior of primitive crustaceans, to the masses of heavenly bodies, and even word-use frequency in natural languages (where words like 'the' are used a great deal more than words like 'sophomore', for example)!¹³ However, Peterson's willingness to engage in *ex cathedra*, untethered generalizations and stereotypy (Daham and Muzhir, 2023), the loosest analogies, the most extraordinary 'evolutionary' leaps, and the most eclectic cherry-picking from different disciplines to produce what we can call 'profundity effects' have proven well sufficient for his mass readership, and media celebrity (Robinson, 2011; Van de Ven and Van Gemert, 2022: 11–13).

We may be reminded, reading Peterson, of how Lukács (1980: 8, 11, 811) in *The Destruction of Reason* had underscored that the decline in intellectual standards is built-in to the forms of irrationalism hailing in modern thought from Schopenhauer, Schelling, and Nietzsche. The decline follows, intellectually, from forms of anti-realist skepticism concerning scientific rationality, in which science is positioned as one more discourse which, in contrast to prescientific forms of narrational thinking like revealed religions, cannot meet man's 'search for meaning'. Why then abide by fallibilistic rational norms, which are complicit in modern 'nihilism', decline, feminization, and so on, and moreover, propagated by interested elites? Why also communicate clearly, rather than in a way which, by evoking esoteric authorities and indulging in portentous double-meanings, leaves readers to suppose that the author must be in possession of an unfathomable wisdom that is up to them to comprehend? (Robinson, 2011; Van der Ven and Van Gemert, 2022: 11–13).

However, the intellectual decline to which Peterson's work attests, and to which his followers and supporters are blind, follows ideologically from the growing pressures involved in dehistoricizing and naturalizing increasingly inhumane and unstable sociopolitical conditions. As we argued in Part 2, to the extent that today's highly monopolized, financialized capitalism goes deeper and deeper into crises, and more and more people – indeed, entire nations – are threatened with being rendered superfluous or marginal, less exotic means of liberal ideological legitimation for this

socioeconomic order cease to cut through with increasing numbers of people (see Part 2). Inequality can no longer be presented as a passing moment, whilst we await for all boats to rise; it must be repackaged as fated, unchanging, eternal, and effectively only questionable by people suffering from *ressentiment* or some other species of psychological flaw or natural deficiency. The present conjuncture, we can accordingly anticipate, is going to see the mainstreaming of blunter and blunter intellectual weapons sanctifying inequality as the contemporary crises of capitalism continue in the United States and elsewhere. As we might put it, our Hayek has and will give way to our Nietzsche, and our Nietzsche or Jung, soon enough, to Aleksandr Dugin, Jason Jorjani, Nick Land, and the pseudo-Darwinism and appeals to ‘differential IQs’ that are already all over the Internet (Lukács, 1980: 202–203).

What Peterson wants his readers, those who ‘get it’, to accept is clear, in the second function of indirect apologetics. If the entire universe is structured according to the extreme inegalitarianism of Price’s Law, there is nothing reasonably to be done about today’s increasingly brutal and insecure realities. It should be accepted under the sign of fate. Social inequality, all inequality, is ‘not even a human creation’, declaims this robust defender of individual agency and responsibility, without any sense of irony (p. 14). As Lukács (1980) explains such ‘indirect apologetics’:

Whereas direct apologetics was at pains to depict capitalism as the best of all orders, as the last, outstanding peak in mankind’s evolution, indirect apologetics crudely elaborated the bad sides, the atrocities of capitalism, but explained them as attributes not of capitalism but of all human existence and existence in general. From this it necessarily follows that a struggle against these atrocities not only appears doomed from the start but signifies an absurdity, viz., a self-dissolution of the essentially human. (pp. 202–203)

As for what all this means for the ‘eights’ to ‘tens’, on the bottom of Peterson’s human/lobster-dominance scale? They have always been with us, and they have always had it bad. From biblical Babylon to the contemporary big apple, let alone the global South since European colonization – at the least, by implication. As Peterson writes, in a passage of startling inhumanity:

If you are a low-status ten, by contrast, male or female, you have nowhere to live (or nowhere good). Your food is terrible, when you’re not going hungry. You’re in poor physical and mental condition. You’re of minimal romantic interest to anyone, unless they are as desperate as you. You are more likely to fall ill, age rapidly, and die young, with few, if any, to mourn you. (Peterson, 2018: 16)

Shouldn’t these ‘tens’ then look around and see that there are many more ‘eights’, ‘nines’, and ‘tens’ out there – and far less ‘sevens’ through ‘threes’ than three decades ago – and try to organize these people who, like them, are shut out of the glittering towers, the gated communities, the property markets, the good schools, the possibilities of secure employment, the realistic sense that their kids will have better lives than they have had? Not for the psychologist from Toronto. Such social activism would, within Petersonian irrationalism, not just be a politically contestable move. It would be an ontological Sin (sin being one Augustinian idea Peterson wishes to secularize (Peterson, 2018: 54)): denying individual responsibility and indulging in resentment and being-hatred (the first function of indirect apologetics). One of Peterson’s ‘rules for life’ is of course that no one should ever blame ‘the military-industrial complex’ or ‘patriarchy’, or anything outside themselves, before achieving the kinds of well-healed personal development which he extols and embodies (Peterson, 2018: 16).

As far as Peterson is concerned, in a better possible world, the socioeconomic settings which abide today would and should continue indefinitely. Indeed, there could be no limit on the ‘natural’ inequality in distributions of goods and honors. No one could criticize any of them, unless their

own house was ‘perfectly’ in order (Peterson, 2018: 147ff.). As critics have pointed out, given human fallibility, what this ‘rule’ effectively means is that no social criticism could be legitimate at all (Burgis et al., 2020: 26–27, 77, 85, 87–88)—excepting, we are left to suppose, when it is criticism of the ‘postmodern neoMarxist Left’ and their allies, or of measures to promote forms of social equity, such as those of the Trudeau government in Canada (Peterson, 2023a, 2023b), carried out by naturally dominant ‘ones’ or ‘twos’ (Burston, 2018: 7).

Peterson is honest to use the adjective ‘brutal’ to encapsulate his *Weltanschauung* (Peterson, 2018: 8). It is just that, for him, in another marker of his perhaps unknowing proximity to historical fascist discourses, naming this ‘brutality’ serves not to sanction, but to sanctify it, as a deliverance of Nature or Being. Full stop, suck it up: ‘men have to toughen up’ (Peterson, 2018: 329). To get a vivid insight into just how brutal Peterson’s *12 Rules* supposes things are (and thus ought to be) for the ‘eights’ and below in the dominance hierarchy, and how the ‘ones’ and ‘twos’ would be licensed to treat these failures (indirect apologetics, function 3), let us look at one of his more disturbing anecdotes from growing up in *12 Rules for Life*, with the astonishing heading: ‘Toughen up, Weasel’ (Peterson, 2018: 328). It concerns a manual laborer nicknamed by his coworkers, or at least by Peterson, ‘Lunchbucket’, apparently without his consent (Peterson, 2018: 328). This young man’s mother foolishly gave him a lunch container to take to work on the rail line where Peterson was – a sure sign, for the canny psychologist, that he was a feminized mommy’s boy who needed to be taught a lesson in manliness. Here is what happened, according to Peterson:

Lunchbucket couldn’t accept his name or settle into his job. He adopted an attitude of condescending irritation when addressed and reacted to the work in the same manner . . . After about three days of carrying on with his ill-humour and general air of hard-done-by superiority, Lunchbucket started to experience harassment extending well beyond his nickname. He would be peevishly working away on the line, surrounded by about seventy men, spread out over a quarter mile. Suddenly a pebble would appear out of nowhere, flying through the air, aimed at his hardhat. A direct hit would produce a thunking sound, deeply satisfying to all the quietly attending onlookers. Even this failed to improve his humour. So, the pebbles got larger. Lunchbucket would involve himself in something and forget to pay attention. Then, ‘thunk!’—a well-aimed stone would nail him on the noggin, producing a burst of irritated and ineffectual fury. Quiet amusement would ripple down the rail line. After a few days of this, no wiser, and carrying a few bruises, Lunchbucket vanished. (Peterson, 2018: 328)

Peterson has earlier told us that bullying is a thing that courageous individuals should stand up to: it is another of his seeming inconsistencies, led by the rather gaping tension between upholding both collective archetypes of entire genders, and a would-be liberal individualism (Peterson, 2018: 24).¹⁴ In ‘Toughen Up, Weasel’, the parodic, insecure and boorish school bully, Nelson, in *The Simpsons* is instead celebrated as a necessary agent of Order:

Without Nelson, King of the Bullies, the school would soon be overrun by resentful, touchy Milhouses, narcissistic, intellectual Martin Princes, soft, chocolate-gorging German children, and infantile Ralph Wiggums. Muntz is a corrective, a tough, self-sufficient kid who uses his own capacity for contempt to decide what line of immature and pathetic behaviour simply cannot be crossed. (Peterson, 2018: 330)¹⁵

The psychologist’s welling pathos toward incels aside (SBS News, 2019), when it comes to kicking down on—or ‘harassing’, to use Peterson’s own, more blunt word—someone below him in the pecking order, Peterson has no hesitation. He ties the ‘quiet amusement’ he imputes to others in the line for the violence against Lunchbucket to his own ontologized declamations on masculinity:

Men enforce a code of behaviour on each other, when working together. Do your work. Pull your weight. Stay awake and pay attention. Don't whine or be touchy. Stand up for your friends. Don't suck up and don't snitch. Don't be a slave to stupid rules. Don't, in the immortal words of Arnold Schwarzenegger, be a girlie man. Don't be dependent. At all. Ever. Period. The harassment that is part of acceptance on a working crew is a test: are you tough, entertaining, competent and reliable? If not, go away. Simple as that. We don't need to feel sorry for you. We don't want to put up with your narcissism, and we don't want to do your work. (Peterson, 2018: 328)

It is difficult to know where to start with this ugly statement about what 'men'—supposedly all men everywhere, in a typically untenable Petersonian generalization—always have supposedly done, and so should do to each other. (Petersonism certainly won't lead to more enlightened labor laws for the 8s, 9s, and 10s, let alone their increased ability to take on more active responsibility in their work roles). What concerns us here is the open rationalization of violence against 'girlie men', and by extension, any outgroup Peterson or his readers' position as 'dependent' or insufficiently 'tough', so they dare to protest their treatment by members of the in-group. With that said, how actual women or 'girls' figure in this profoundly regressive figuring of masculinity is worth considering.¹⁶

In short, everything is present in such Petersonian passages which studies of the authoritarian personality have documented for seven decades: the 'anti-intracception' (hostility to emotion), the definitively proto-sociopathic absence of empathy, the hyper-masculine dream of phallic invulnerability, the projection of an aggrieved sense of narcissism onto the target (Adorno et al., 1950: esp. 228)—and it is clear, amazingly, that Peterson or his followers will have no idea of how uncannily 'ill-humor and [a] general air of hard-done-by superiority' (Peterson, 2018: 328) describes their own well-dressed personages—and the indirect but clear call this barbarous 'life lesson' sends to readers. As 'men', males should be able to act 'beyond good and evil' when it comes to others they deem weak. 'We don't need to feel sorry for you', he snidely intones (Peterson, 2018: 328).

Beyond its self-presentation as a tough-minded individualism consistent with 'classical liberalism', we hence see that the darker underside of Peterson's homely ethics promotes the authoritarian, sanctioned release of exclusionary aggression against stigmatized outgroups. Yet, as an advertised student of the totalitarian disasters of the last century (Doidge, 2018: xv), Peterson arguably should not have needed reminding of the most extreme historical expressions of such ideation: 'go away. As simple as that' (Peterson, 2018: 328). In Peterson's thinking, however, the others, the losers like Lunchbucket, will have deserved their oppression, through their protesting, whining, and manifest inability to win big in the eternally recurrent sociobiological contest for 'selection' (Peterson, 2018: 12). Above all, and here is the key point in terms of seeing how Peterson's discourse at times conveys pure indirect apologetics for capitalist inequality, these acceptable targets will precisely include those more vulnerable than Peterson's audiences—in Peterson's texts, principally, they are women, transpeople, and the 'postmodern neoMarxists' who would promote 'equity tyranny' (Peterson, 2023a; Power, 2023; Webster, 2018). Looking for guidance in a world where they find themselves threatened by the radical disruptions caused by the sociopolitical forces which their master asks them to celebrate as Being itself, Peterson assures his readers that, if they take responsibility for themselves in a brutal world, they will have the right to kick down at others, less worthy than themselves. It is in this way, against the Darwinistic background of eternalized sociopolitical inequalities that Peterson's work lurches in its darker moments into indirect neofascistic apologetics. As Robinson (2019a) has cogently explained such indirect neofascist apologetics for the contemporary global capitalism:

As with its 20th-century predecessor, the project hinges on the psychosocial mechanism of displacing mass fear and anxiety at a time of acute capitalist crisis towards scapegoated communities . . . Far-right forces pursue this project through a discursive repertoire of xenophobia, mystifying ideologies that involve race/

culture supremacy, an idealized and mythical past, millennialism, a militaristic and masculinist culture that normalizes, even glamorizes war, social violence and domination, and contempt toward rather than empathy for those most vulnerable. The key to this neo-fascist appeal is the promise to avert or reverse downward mobility and social destabilization; to restore some sense of stability and security. (Robinson, 2019a: 168)

Concluding Remarks: Petersonism as Indirect Apologetics

As we have commented, the object of this paper has not been Jordan Peterson's (2024) subjective self-interpretations—albeit that, despite earlier demurring about Rightwing identitarianism and commitment to freedom of speech, he has in 2024 come out in favor of Trump and De Santis. This article has instead been interested to inquire what could have drawn such a wide popular audience, in the late 20-teens and early 2020s, to a syncretic, often unclearly presented discourse spanning psychology, history, the interpretation of myth, and idiosyncratic takes on the Bible—hardly standard ingredients for making a best-seller and multi-media personality and commentator. Taking our lead from the political circumstances of Peterson's ascent to popular awareness, our contention has been that it is the authoritarian parameters of his 'rules for life', and how they speak to the deep crises not simply of 'meaning'¹⁷ but of basic existential security felt by many people in the post-GFC world, that underlies the Canadian psychologist's unlikely celebrity, principally including on the illiberal political Right. As we have shown, Peterson's message in the darker moments of his *12 Rules for Life*, to readers looking for a 'father, leader, martyr' figure (Van der Ven and Van Gemert, 2022: 296–299), verges into the undeniably neofascistic. Whatever his own sense of them, his calls to 'toughen up, weasel' and see 'compassion as a vice' (p. 318),¹⁸ as well as his inflammatory social media posts and claims like that one should not respect any man whom you would not want to physically fight (Peterson, 2017)—sees Peterson's discourse lurch easily and unevenly from 'alt-lite' into 'alt-Right', just as the algorithms attending his YouTube presentations shunt their audiences farther Rightwards into outraged conspiratorial illiberalism (Van der Ven and Van Gemert, 2022: 295–296). Peterson at times enjoins his readers to even eschew pity (Peterson, 2018: 76–79, 318), and everywhere to stop criticizing or being concerned for any social change which exceeds their own personal development. The meaning of life is to competitively claim the material, sexual, and status goods which the naturally dominant rightfully command, in a dystopian, naturalized social order characterized by the Darwinian struggle of winners and losers.

Peterson's uncanny resonance in the contemporary moment hence comes from how his distinct form of post-Jungian irrationalism functions as indirect apologetics for a socioeconomic system which is increasingly inequitable, inhumane, and crisis-ridden. This is a world in which increasing cohorts of people globally, including in the North, can no longer accept the ideological promises of the 'trickle down' of wealth and opportunity; inequality now needs to be sanctified as unchangeable, if social dissent is to remain in check. Peterson was hurled into the public sphere after September 2016, and his vision of a heartless world in which unlimited inequality is inevitable speaks to the lived experience and humiliations of millions of people in the United States and elsewhere, in ways it almost certainly would not have done, as recently as the 1990s. However, the psychologist-public intellectual also tells at least the males in his audiences that, if they can gird themselves to accept the pitiless inevitability of the individual struggle for existence, and stop listening to the effeminate siren songs of critics who dream of ameliorative social reform, then they will rightfully win respect, status, and economic plenty. As for the others, led by the ubiquitous 'cultural neoMarxists' and misguided feminists who would protest this natural order: by recourse to august psychological and philosophical authorities, these cohorts are positioned by Peterson's (2023b) discourse as motivated by being-hating *ressentiment*, as being agents of chaos, and their concerns for anything like equity or social justice are accused of shunting us alarmingly down a

slippery sociopolitical slope to totalitarian nightmare. Accordingly, Peterson's discourse sanctions the denigration of their needs and demands, as both necessary and virtuous; a reinstating of the hierarchized Order which is according to nature.

As we opened by saying, we repeat in closing that there is at least a relative separation between Peterson's readings of particular figures and texts, and the political dimensions of his popular moment and persona. We have also noted that his positions also often seem to contradict each other in ways he clearly does not register. There can only be benefit wherever Peterson's texts prompt people to investigate the writings that he examines, from George Orwell to the *New Testament*, and to form their own informed opinions, including by engaging genuinely with the myriad commentators who will qualify, balance, or contest the psychologist's claims. Again, we would literally have no argument here, if Peterson had somehow achieved his popular reception by being the deliverer of such homiletic ethical advice as: that it is good to stand up for yourself; that it is good not to compare yourself always with others, but with who you were yesterday (however uneasily this sits with his advice to become like the lobsters with their domination 'counters' in 'Rule 1'); that it is good for parents to establish and enforce certain boundaries for their children; that it is good to be honest with yourself, including your capacities for aggression; or that you should cultivate friendships with people which will make you a better version of yourself . . . Yet Peterson, since 2016, has gone far beyond this scope. His uniqueness in the continuing history of modern reaction against the forces favoring social progress and equality perhaps comes from how he has sutured such self-help—this quintessentially contemporary consumerist preoccupation—with forms of irrationalism which serve as powerful indirect apologetics for contemporary capitalism and the social distresses it continues to cause.

Acknowledgements

The author wants to thank Dr Benjamin Walters and Narelle Robertson for comments on the revised draft of this paper.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. Cf. Peterson's 17 December 2016 tweet: 'Women: if you usurp men they will rebel and fail and you will have to jail or enslave them' (at Burgis et al., 2020: 127). On Peterson's stereotype of women by discursive exclusion, backgrounding, passivation, aggregation, and categorization, see Daham and Muzhir (2023).
2. It is impossible wholly to quantify what percentage of Peterson's audience, for books in particular, is male. He has himself in 2018 opined that upward of 80% of his audience is male. See SBS News (2019) and Bowles (2020).
3. There has been in the last decades a multiplication of terms that are used, with overlapping significations, to describe Orban's, Putin's, Le Pen's, Trump's, Deterte's, Meloni's . . . ambitions and actions: from 'ethnonationalist' or 'authoritarian' to 'populist' to 'neofascist' to 'far right', 'radical right' to 'extreme right'. Here, we will accept that regimes which extol leadership by a Strong Man (or Woman) who presents himself and his partisans as willing to suspend democratic norms in order to make a nation 'Great again' (in a heroic palingenesis, rebirth), notably through targeting immigrants (to remove rights, and ultimately for deportation or elimination) and an allegedly captive, treasonous 'elite' who would control the mass media and modern state and have under-minded national traditions, customs, and mores, can recognizably be called 'neofascist'. As per the 'neo' prefix, such a view does not imply a commitment to

the absurd idea that ‘history is repeating’. For a comparable working definition, see Robinson (2011).

4. See, for instance, the harrowing biographies in Hedges (2019).
5. On this logic in the subject position of the antisemite, who is positioned as intrinsically belonging to the entitled in-group against these foreigners, see Sartre (1948).
6. For other (proto-)Nazi exponents, see Kolnai (1939 [1938]: 141–149).
7. Cf. Žižek (2020): ‘The very term “postmodern neo-Marxism” reminds me of the typical totalitarian procedure of combining the two opposite trends into one figure of the enemy (like the “Judeo-Bolshevik plot” in fascism)’ (p. 22). See Burgis et al. (2020: 73).
8. On Peterson as someone who does not misread Derrida, but irresponsibly comments on him without having read him, see Van de Ven and Van Gemert (2022: 293–294).
9. ‘Nature “selects”’, Peterson (2018: 12) instructs at.
10. Due to frequency of citation, all subsequent references to Peterson (2018) will be unmarked in brackets in the text.
11. See

History itself represents the progression of a people’s struggle for existence. I use the phrase ‘struggle for existence’ intentionally here, because in reality that struggle for daily bread, whether in peace or war, is a never-ending battle against thousands and thousands of obstacles, just as life itself is an eternal struggle against death. For human beings know no more than any other in the world why they live, but life is filled with the longing to preserve it. The most primitive creature knows only the instinct of the self-preservation of its own ‘I’; for higher beings this carries over to wife and child, and for those higher still to the entire species . . .

Adolf Hitler, *Second Book*, at Gregor (2005: 40–41). Not everyone who believes life is essentially struggle will accord with all of Hitler’s views. But Hitler’s views are based on the supposition that individual and collective existence is a permanent and inescapable struggle for self-preservation and domination, despite what ‘fleshless aesthetes’ (Hitler) imagine.

12. Here (4–5), despite Peterson’s advertised reading into the prehistory of fascism (see Doidge, 2018: xv), he invokes Pareto (an ‘Italian polymath’), as an authority supporting Price’s Law. On Pareto’s irrationalism and embrace of fascism, see Cirillo (1983: 235–237).
13. Then there is this biblically grounded assertion:

Sometimes [this] is known as the Matthew Principle (Matthew 25:29), derived from what might be the harshest statement ever attributed to Christ: ‘to those who have everything, more will be given; from those who have nothing, everything will be taken’. You truly know you are the Son of God when your dicta apply even to crustaceans. (Peterson, 2018: 9)

14. Peterson’s (2018: 24) example at is administrators making mean-spirited rules, so one imagines he is intending cases like his own perceived oppression at the hands of the C-16 regulation.
15. The weirdness of this position on *The Simpsons* is noted in Mishra (2018).
16. For a referenced list, with links, of Peterson’s most controversial comments concerning women and feminism, see Webster (2018).
17. On Peterson’s inability to provide a clear definition of ‘meaning’ and other key, portentous terms, see Van de Ven and Van Gemert (2022: 301).
18. For Peterson, we should not help people in apparent need, without first assuming that they are doing what is easiest, and are perhaps ‘utterly irresponsible’, so that our ‘contempt’ would be ‘more salutary’ than ‘our pity’, at 76–79; cf. Mishra (2018) on the historical echoes.

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