Maps of Meaning: Interview with Dr. Jordan Peterson[1]

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In this interview, Dr. Jordan Peterson, psychologist, professor at the University of Toronto and former Harvard professor talks about his intellectual background, his idea of maps of meaning, and explains how the sense of meaning is vital to men. Totalitarianism and individual responsibility are also important subjects in this piece. His arguments on behalf of free speech are attracting the attention of the media, and of students all over the world.

Dr. Jordan Peterson attracted the media's attention in 2016 after being one of the few who publicly denounced the authoritarianism of sensitive — yet important — topics to various North American universities' groups. Examining the meaning in their political agenda, Dr. Peterson had the chance to advance what he has been investigating for years: an understanding of how the mind operates in the search of meaning for men's wills and actions. In this interview, we talked about his point of view on how these authoritarian tendencies can become an international phenomenon. More than ever, so we believe, his work is necessary. To avoid that other limit us in our ideas, first, we must know who we are.

Interviewer: Professor Peterson, could you tell us a bit about your background and when and how your interest in psychology began?

Dr. Peterson: When I was a teenager I was already interested in politics, about 13 or 14 years of age. I worked for a socialist party in my home province of Alberta. In Alberta[,] we had a legislature that had elected members of parliament and at that time every single member of the legislative assembly was conservative (from the Conservative Party), except for one person who led the new democratic party, which was a social-democratic party. He happened to represent the district that I lived in and I got to know his wife, who was the librarian at the local Junior high-school, and she gave me a lot of sophisticated books to read: Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Desinovich* (1970), George Orwell's books, Aldous Huxley's books, and Ayn Rand's

books, surprisingly enough, because she believed that you should read widely. She was a crucial figure in the beginning of my sophisticated reading. I worked for this party for three years, going from door to door and working on campaigns and attending provincial and national conferences where they all gathered and determined policy. I also ran for an executive position at the provincial level when I was fourteen. I lost by 17 or 18 votes out of 600.

I.: Wow, it was very close...

Dr. Peterson: Very close, yes, and that meant news at that point. At the same time, I have developed an interest in the Holocaust. I've heard a bit when I was quite young and I did a class paper on it when I was about thirteen. That became, I would say, an obsession of mine. At about the same time I stopped going to church, my mother attended a mainstream protestant church and liked that — she liked to sing and to participate, and she liked us to come along. But, by the time I was 13, I could no longer reconcile the claims of religion with what I knew about evolution and science, and, like so many people, I stopped attending. That is pretty much when I got interested in socialist politics, and it was about that time that I got interested in the Holocaust as well. So when I was about 17[,] I went away to college and read George Orwell's book *Road to Wigan Pier* (1937). He has quite a profound critique of middle-class socialists in the last half of that book; he pointed out something that I had noticed at the time I was sitting on the college board of governors. A lot of the people there were conservative types, small businessman, mostly self-made people. I found them quite admirable, what they did was difficult and they seemed to be genuinely contributing to the community. One of the things I noticed when I was associating with my more leftist companions, at the conventions and so forth, is that although I found the leaders admirable — I had privileged access to the leaders because of my association with the librarian and her husband at the Alberta party — and believed they really did have the best interest of the working class and the small businessman foremost in their mind; the party hacks I really didn't care for, I found them peevish and resentful. And when I read Orwell, he pointed out something that clarified that for me — he said that, as

far as he was concerned, the typical socialist wasn't someone who liked the poor or liked the working class, but someone who just hated the rich and successful, and used their compassion for the downtrodden as a disguise for their resentment about the fact that everything in this world is unequally distributed. That really hit home for me, and it was at the same time too that I started to question the idea that the fundamental solution to the human problems was the State. I still had the Holocaust issue in the back of my mind and that issue for me was how was it possible that human beings who were apparently normal could do the things that the Nazis did, could [service] serve as concentration camp guards[,] and could do all the terrible things that happened in those places in the Second World War. I also started to read Alexander Solzhenitsyn and to learn about the Soviet Union under Lenin and Stalin, and came to realize that there were untold horrors lurking in that part of history, as well as in China, and under both those systems tens of millions of people died. At the same time, of course, the Cold War was raging, and that seemed to me to be the height of insanity. I couldn't understand why people's belief systems were so important to them that they would put everything at risk; there were tens of thousands nuclear bombs pointed at the US and the USSR respectively. So, it seemed that people were so committed to their belief systems that they were willing to risk the destruction of everything to maintain them; so then my mystery doubled. I would say I had the mystery of intense belief and the mystery of the human capacity for atrocity, and I was studying political science at that point. I got my first three-year degree in political science and English, and I worked for a year and went back to the university, deciding that the answers that I've been getting in my later political science classes, which were mostly economic in nature, describing human motivation primarily in terms of materialist economics — I didn't believe [that] in, because it is the fact that someone values something that is a mystery, why do people value what they value, and the economist just took it for granted that people value whatever they value and they trade and interact on that basis; but I was interested in the process of value in itself, which was also integrally associated with belief. So I went back to the university and took a full year of undergraduate psychology courses, and did sufficiently well so that I was encouraged to apply to graduate school. I didn't know

anyone who had gone to graduate school — at that point I was ignorant of the higher reaches of the university —, so I applied and then I worked a year as a consultant for the Alberta government in social services, designed day-care regulations, and learned how the bureaucracy worked.

I.: Ok, so did you start researching about the Holocaust and other belief systems while you were in graduate school?

Dr. Peterson: I started reading intensely in the year that I took my full year of psychology. I've read Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and *Jung's Archetype of the Collective Unconscious* (1969), and a bunch of difficult classic works in psychology, partly preparing to become a clinical psychologist, because I had applied to become a clinical psychologist in Montreal. I started to write at that point. The first thing I wrote was a long poem — it is often the case that when you are generating new knowledge that it emerges on the border between the unknown self and the fully articulated conscious knowledge, on that border is where dreams, fantasies, art, literature and poetry exists, so inspiration can manifest itself in poetic form. That doesn't make me a poet with any stretch of the imagination, but I wrote probably a twenty-page poem trying to express what I have learned and what I felt about the psychology of human beings and the predicament we appeared to be in.

I.: I think it is a very humane thing to do, to try to explain things by imagination and fiction and myths.

Dr. Peterson: Exactly, exactly. That is the birthplace of knowledge; that is how we start to think about something. It's based on action and imagination and drama, and we tend to portrait things in narrative form, deep narrative form or in inspired form before... As part of the process by which new knowledge emerges out of the unknown and becomes fully articulate.
So, I went off to graduate school in Montreal when I split my work into two components: one, I studied alcoholism, the biological predisposition to alcoholism, and I learned a lot about neuropsychology and brain function doing that, because the alcohol affects every neurological system, and to understand its rewarding properties you need to know a fair bit about brain function. So I've read books like Jeffrey Gray's *Neuropsychology of Anxiety*

(1982), which is a real classic, and started to understand how the brain responded to novel information to the unknown. It partly does that by manifesting an anxiety response. In parallel with all that scientific investigation, I was reading as much as I could. At that point, it was primarily Carl Jung and Mircea Eliade, the historian of religions, and Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and Nietzsche. I started to understand Jung — that his claim that we are all encapsulated in a mythos of some sort, and which he was trying to explain, and he analyzed religious thinking in a lot of detail and Christian thinking, but not only that... What I came to realize was that religious belief was inevitable. Now, of course, it depends on how you define religious belief, but you can think about it this way: what we don't know you can say is infinite and what we do know is finite, and we have to grapple with the dichotomy between that finite knowledge and that infinite knowledge. And the way we do that is by establishing axioms for our belief systems. An axiom is a presumption, it is a world simplifying presumption and it contains many things and hides many things, it hides many questions — and it is on that basis of presumptions that we erect our systems of practical belief, so those core assumptions must be accepted on faith fundamentally, because you can't know everything. You should take some things for granted, you must act as if some things are true, and those axioms you might not be aware of, they may be in some sense built so deeply in your nervous system that they constitute the structures through which you look the world, they constitute your value system — and you need to have a value system because, otherwise, you can't act. Because to act, one thing should be better than another, and so you are acting out a moral scheme, there is no way around it. So, what I realized was that part of the reason people were willing to cling so desperately to their beliefs is because their beliefs were part of what shielded them from untrammeled exposure to the infinite unknown. And that works in a complex way because it is not only an internal structure, it is a social structure. So, let's say it's a shared belief system, so you can think of that as partly internal, partly as a perceptual structure and a platform for action, but it is also manifested in the social world. Let's say that everyone in a given culture plays by the same rules. Well, what that means is that you know how to act if you are a part of that culture, you know how to act based on your set of values, the ones you share with the other people in your culture, you know how to act so that the outcome is

what you want, and you partially know that because you can partially do that, because other people are acting the same way. If people don't share a belief system, then they are psychologically chaotic, they don't know up from down, they're swamped by anxiety, and furthermore, they can't coordinate their actions with other people in the group, so that is just a catastrophe, it is a descent into the Hobbesian nightmare where everyone is against everyone else.

I.: No one can speak to one another and everyone is an enemy to one another.

Dr. Peterson: That is exactly right! It's like a failed State. So, I would say, that is a nihilistic catastrophe and these catastrophes must befall societies many times. And what comes from a nihilistic catastrophe is a very strong cry for order – so that is the other problem, you ought to have a structure because if you don't, it is chaos. This is what I came to understand and it really was very, very painful, because I also came to understand that having organized yourself into a group and having established a shared set of presumptions and axioms about the world which everyone is willing to act out, which I would say it's the act of faith. I think of belief as the willingness to act out, not the holding of a set of facts. Everyone in each society is acting out a set axiomatic presuppositions, and that keeps the society orderly and productive, but when a group meets another group then the potential – especially if the other group is predicated in slightly different axioms or maybe radically different axioms – for conflict is extraordinarily high. Of course, that was the case of the USSR and the US which were predicated in very different axioms. The USSR in more rational axioms derived purely from rationally organized thought, and the US and the West based on a mythos that held the idea of individual rights as a truth, the value of the individual as a truth. To me that is a religious truth, because it is an axiomatic presupposition, and as far as I am concerned that axiomatic presupposition is nested inside the Christian claim, the essentially Judeo-Christian claim that there is a divine element in the human being that has to be respected even by the law. In our society, if you are accused of murder, and even if you are a murderer, your being in some sense is still sacrosanct, still worthy of the protection of the law, and that is because we act out the metaphysical assumption that there is something intrinsically valuable about

the individual and it is on that ground that the idea of natural rights rests, and all of that is built deeply into our expectations, desires and understanding. But the problem now is that, when groups come into conflict, we are so technologically powerful that the conflict itself could pose an ultimate threat. Of course, that is what happened in the Cold War, we were very close to launching the nuclear missiles at least twice – in fact the keys were in that missile for all of the Cuban Missile Crisis, so it seemed to me that we were at a real crisis point and I couldn't see any way out of it. On the one hand, people have to organize into groups, they have to do that using sets of metaphysical assumptions, some of which are more functional than others, but because they organized themselves into different groups, conflict appeared inevitable. I was stuck for months trying to sort that out and I actually got way out of that, I suppose, in the same way that Nietzsche posited it. When Nietzsche was trying to work this out, he posited that human beings must become a new form of entity as they have transcended their archaic religious presuppositions.

I.: They must build new values.

Dr. Peterson: They had to build new values, yes. Carl Jung was a very astute student of Nietzsche, although people don't generally recognize that he was influenced at least as much by Nietzsche as he was by Freud. He and the other psychoanalysts took a slightly different tack than Nietzsche, but were attempting in some sense to solve the same problem. Freud considered the unconscious to find what people might be avoiding or missing or had misplaced, that they needed to bring to the surface to become more fully developed beings. He thought of the unconscious at least in part as primarily the personal repository of repressed negative experiences, and of negative proclivities that couldn't easily be integrated into the personality, and those proclivities would be the sexual proclivities and the aggressive proclivities.

I: It took you about fifteen years of thinking and writing in the making of *Maps of Meaning* (1999). Could you tell us why you wrote that book and what is the main idea which the book conveys?

Dr. Peterson: What I just talked about is a partial answer to that. I was writing while I was reading Jung and Dostoyevsky and all those people. While I was writing *Maps*

of Meaning, I've encountered this fundamental paradox: the paradox of dissolution on one hand and conflict on the other. Going along with that was the fact that group identity would become hyper rigid and totalitarian, which would be the opposite of nihilism. It seemed to me that, roughly speaking, since the death of God, in the Nietzschean sense, our societies have been oscillating in some ways out of control between the twin poles of nihilism and totalitarianism. One of the things which Nietzsche said is that, when you pull the cornerstone out from underneath a building, the building will fall. The death of God, destroyed by rationality and science, would destabilize us badly enough that our political systems would pathologize. He believed that the primary means of pathologizing would be communism, and he said, I believe it was in the *Will of Power* (1901), that millions of people would die in the 20th century. Well, that idea played itself out, and Dostoyevsky made very similar predictions especially in his book *The Demons* (1871-72), which is all a piece with his great works including *Crime and Punishment* (1860). *Crime and Punishment* is about someone which in some sense tries to act out the Nietzschean superman, and presuming there are no real values, he proceeds to murder someone, who is by no means a positive character, on a rationale that there is no ultimate forbidding of such things and that the world would be a better place in her absence. He has his reasons; he is trying to save his sister from a terrible marriage that she was going to enter to save him. Anyways, *Crime and Punishment* is an examination of the consequences of acting as if there [are] is no intrinsic morality, and Dostoyevsky explored the idea of the consequences of the dissolution of faith and the transcendent.

I.: But I think that this book has a very redemptive ending, do you agree?

Dr. Peterson: Yes! What I eventually figured out as an answer to the problems of group identity, which are rigidity and conflict, and problems of the absence of group identity, which are nihilistic dissolution and conflict. The idea first emerged to me in a dream. I dreamed that – I haven't had a dream for months while I was obsessed with this paradox, this apparently insoluble paradox. I've dreamt that I was in the middle of a huge cathedral hanging from the chandelier right in the center beneath the dome, so the dream placed me at the point of the cross – because a cathedral is, of course, designed in

the shape of the cross – and it put me right at the center and I didn't want that, so I got down, I don't remember how. I returned to my bed – this was all in the dream – and I tried to sleep again, but the wind came and dissolved me, and I knew it was going to take me back and put me right where I've just escaped from, so that position was inescapable. I woke up and was very shocked by the dream for a variety of reasons. It took me a long time to figure it out, but what it was essentially trying to convey was the idea that the individual is at the center of being, at the center of the cosmos, we each inhabit a center of the cosmos where is the locus of experience. We have the capacity to determine the course of that experience for better or worse, assuming you believe in such a thing as free will. Of course, our whole society is predicated on the assumption of its existence, and that the proper medicament for pathological or disintegrating group identity was the adoption of individual responsibility and the reconciliation of the individual with the traditions, with the great history of human tradition – and that is equivalent in some sense to going into the underworld of confusion and rescuing your dead father, which is a very old story, a very old idea. So I wrote *Maps of Meaning* to convey the notion that we each bear, especially in the modern age of overwhelming technological power, a very heavy responsibility and that is the responsibility of proper truthful being, and truth is the antidote to nihilism and totalitarianism. It's not just me that has come to that conclusion. I would say that embedded in Christianity is that idea the word is the holiest of entities, it's the world creating force. I think that the word is essentially equivalent to consciousness as far as I've been able to tell. We are all co-creators of the world and if we speak properly and attempt to face our responsibilities honorably, then we can keep our societies ordered but flexible, and we can continue on our way. So I concluded *Maps of Meaning* with a call to the individual to be truthful, which is the primary thing of import, but to be truthful in relationship to an ideal. I've tried to conceptualize the ideal because that is not an easy thing, and I was guided in that by my readings of Piaget, a developmental psychologist who was trying to reconcile science and religion. Well, he posited the existence of something he called an equilibrated state, and you can image that a family is in an equilibrated state when everyone has a role to play; they all understand the role and assume the responsibilities voluntarily, without compulsion. Piaget regarded

that as an ideal state because each person could get what they wanted and needed in a manner that will help all the other people get what they wanted and needed, so it is a dynamic balance. You can image that in an equilibrated society, I suppose that would be a free society, free of everything but necessity, because you can't get free of necessity and so to pursue the ideal would be to try to work towards the world where you are acting properly and benefiting from that, but at the same time you are trying to act properly in a way that would benefit your family and the State, and then also benefit all of those now, and a week from now, and a month from now, and also in the forthcoming decades. So, you can image the ideal as a balance across levels of society and different frames of time.

I.: So, the individual holds responsibility not only to their children and their peers but also to the dead and to tradition, to his belief system, I think.

Dr. Peterson: Yes, because you own allegiance to that whether you know it or not. The shared belief system you inhabit has a mythological foundation, it's that mythological foundation that mediates between explored territories of the explicit belief system, say the body of laws, and the absolute unknown as if your rationality is embedded in a dream, which it is! Our rationality is embedded in a dream and the dream manifests itself in myth and revelation, in poetry and art, and in culture – in all those things that buffers, that soften the edges between our ignorance and the infinite unknown, and it is necessary for people to sustain their cultures, but also increasingly for modern people to understand them consciously because we are no longer capable of, or most of us aren't, or enough of us aren't capable of mere unconscious and uncritical participation in the rituals like the religious rituals our culture.

I.: You received quite a lot of attention because of your defense of free speech. Do you think that free speech is not only a ground for democracy but an essential tool which enables people to communicate effectively and help them to navigate through adult life? To put it simply, is free speech essential to a sane society?

Dr. Peterson: Yes, it is essential because it's how our society thinks. So, you might say, that role could be played by individual thought. But the problem is that the individual speaks from a biased and ignorant viewpoint, necessarily. The individual,

when formulating an idea, is going to be blind to what they can't see, so their ideas are going to be incomplete. Now, if you're a good thinker, you formulate an idea and have the opposition inside your head, which is really your conception of other people's opinions; you allow them to attack and critique what you've written and try to fend off alternative arguments. So, what you're doing there is, by thinking critically, you're having a discussion between different fictional people in your imagination. It's like an argument and it's very difficult to do that. Generally, what happens is that people just think something and then they just assume that it is correct. You must be quite trained before you can have an argumentative dialogue in your own imagination and you can do that more easily, I would say, when you're writing. Because you can write something down and then you can criticize it. Under normal circumstances you formulate an idea, which is a representation of the world – how the world is and perhaps your representation of how it should be –, so you're clarifying some disorder, you're trying to encapsulate it with a conceptional system and you offer that as a hypothesis when you talk to people, when you discuss politics, when you discuss virtually anything, and then it's up to the other people to separate the wheat from the chaff and argue with you. At all levels, they might criticize your character, they might criticize your arguments, they might criticize your implicit motives, they're going to go after you and they may also cooperate with you. It doesn't have to be just a full-frontal attack. If you pay attention to that criticism, then you'll reformulate your ideas, and, as we do that collectively, we frame problems. We identify and frame problems because a problem doesn't really exist until someone has formulated it. It only exists implicitly as a vague source of suffering, so you use your free speech to identify problems, and then you use your free speech to communicate about the problems and their potential solution, and then you use your free speech to discuss the emergent ideas, and then you use it to provisionally establish a consensus so that people can move collectively forward, address the problem, and maintain the stability of their society. So, it's for that reason that the eons-long process produced the central idea of the word in Christianity, the *Logos*. That idea emerged over untold periods of time as human beings came to recognize what should be sovereign in a society. What sovereign is, of course, the highest value. In an Old Mesopotamian story called "Enûma Eliš"[2] ,

Marduk, who is the world creating a hero, a new kind of god, has eyes all the way around his head and can speak magic words so to command the night sky to appear and the day sky to appear. It is in his ability to speak that he has that power; it is the magic of speech, because it can transform the world. And so it is him that fights the dragon of chaos, which is the unknown, and makes the world out of her pieces and that is what we all do. We face the unknown, the predatory, terrifying, transforming unknown, we face it and with our attention and our speech we burst it apart and we make the world out of it. That is the highest of values, the ability of the individual to do that, because it is that ability that the stability and the transformation of the state are predicated, it is the transforming agent because the State is just old and dead, it is always anachronistic and blind. The living must provide it with vision and modify it, but to do that you must understand the tradition, you must have respect and gratitude for it [,] and you must attentively and carefully tweak it and alter it with all respect so that it can live again and guide the people into the future.

I.: Professor Peterson, did you notice [if] whether there are people inside academia that share your views and made the same stance in defense of free thought and expression? How about your colleagues and their support?

Dr. Peterson: I would say that the response from my colleagues was deafeningly silent, with very few exceptions. There is a small society for academic freedom in Canada [SAFS], and they wrote a letter in my defense. There are a couple of professors who are doing the same thing that I'm doing, Jonathan Haidt is one of them, at New York University, he has established something called the Heterodox Academy and I would say people there hold positions that are perhaps roughly like mine. There is a professor at Concordia University named Gad Saad who has a quite popular podcast and he interviewed me very quickly after the events unfolded, and he was very positive. There is a woman at the University of Ottawa, Professor Janice Fiamengo, she wrote and did a video in support of me. My colleagues, some of them would come and tell me that they supported what I was doing but wished that I could have been nicer about everything. They felt that I was too harsh, and perhaps that is true, but I did what I could do.

I do believe that the threat to the universities is dire mostly because of the postmodernism

that is nested inside Marxism, which dominates the discourse in the Humanities and to some degree in the Social Sciences. That is the real issue, it is not those pronouns. I think you must account for why did we received so much attention — because it is absurd, there are 180 newspaper articles published separately and these are the ones we could count, and millions of people have been following these events online, and you must ask yourself *why*? Because all I did was to make a video in my office objecting to a new piece of legislation. I think it is because I drew a line and said that there was actually something I wouldn't do that I was been propelled to do, which was to use, in particular, these made out pronouns *ze* and *zir* and so forth, which aren't part of common parlance and which I believe are part of the vanguard of the postmodern/Marxist ideology — they're constructs of that coterie and I don't want to use those words because I don't agree with that philosophy. I think it is dangerous, I think that the universities hurt the students, who are pulled into them [postmodernism] now in an almost cult-like manner. Because postmodernism is very nihilistic and very divisive, it leaves you with nothing except, paradoxically enough, your biological group identity, even though the postmodernists claim not to believe in such things as biology and they view the world as a war of power between different groups of interest. It is like the Hobbesian view, except the elements are identity groups instead of individuals. They don't believe in dialogue because they don't believe that different groups that have different interests can really engage in productive dialogue, they believe that it is just inevitably a power struggle and are very much opposed to the West.

I.: The legislation you mentioned is Bill C-16, I think.

Dr. Peterson: Yes, it looks innocuous enough, but it's nested inside a set of policies that I believe make it far from innocuous. It is part of Canadian Law now that human gender and sexual identity, let's say gender identity and even sexual preference are nothing but social constructs; that is in the law. I think that is a very bad idea even for the people who are arguing in favor of those particular laws, because many of their arguments are predicated on the idea that biology is actually a determinate force, so, for example, the idea that a man can be born in a woman's body is a deeply biological argument and the idea that sexual preference cannot be altered, that it is fixed, is also biological, that is a

cornerstone of the gay communities platform for requesting equal treatment; so I think the law is very poorly thought through. I think it is designed in some sense to cause trouble.

I.: It is very strange because they are trying to legislate language and matters of science.

Dr. Peterson: Well, the real postmodernists aren't admirers of science. They just consider it another kind of power game and don't really believe that science gives you privileged access to an objective world. They view science as part of western hegemony, so they would just assume that science came under the assault of postmodernism. Already one of our education institutions here, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), has an anti-psychiatry scholarship established and a Social Justice Ph.D. program put it in place. So as far as I can tell the psychiatrists and biologists are next, and it isn't even clear to me that if in Canada now it is legal to claim — I mean this is all untested, but the law is very murky —, it is not obvious if it is legal to claim that there are biological differences between men and women, so that seems to me to be pernicious legislation. They accused me of exaggerating the seriousness of this legislation, but I've talked to a variety of lawyers and the deeper they consider it, the more sympathy, let's say, they have for my viewpoint.

I.: Just the fact that the law is murky is something very dangerous because the judges can interpret the way they want and if they agree with postmodernism, so what are you going to do about it, how can you defend yourself?

Dr. Peterson: Yes, well, the thing is the Human Rights Tribunals – the so-called Human Rights Tribunals, which we now call Social Justice Tribunals – in Alberta are in my opinion not much better than a kangaroo court. They pay the expense of complainants but not of defendants, so to be taken in front of the Human Rights Tribunal is to be subjected to financial ruin as well as reputational destruction. Those administrative boards have judicial power and they are postmodern right to the core. The problem with identity politics now includes the desire for equity, which is equality of outcome. Well, equality of outcome is impossible to define, let alone attain, because group identity is indefinitely indivisible. Let's say that you mandated that the average salary of black people and white people was to be

the same, but then what is going to happen immediately after that is that within the white community and the black community there will be new groups formed based on important subdivisions within those groups. For example, perhaps there are classes of immigrants among the white community or the black community that are doing worse than other members of their hypothetically homogenous community. Well, they are going to raise the clarion call for that to be rectified and that the average salary of blacks be the same and still be distribution. People on the lower end of the distribution are going to talk about why they are on the lower end of the distribution and seek that to be rectified. It is infinitely divisible. And the other problem is, who decides which identities take precedent?

I.: Identity is a very difficult subject and most people are not very comfortable with who they are, don't even know who they are, so how can you legislate about identity and make policies about it...

Dr. Peterson: That's it, I mean, price is supposed to take care of that fundamentally, because you offer me something at a certain price and that is the price you can afford to offer it. I get to choose whether I take it, and in that price is nested everything about your life that was related to that object. Price simplifies all that, because otherwise, let's say, two people offer me the same good, I would have to analyze each of them to figure out who is more oppressed and unfortunate – which is impossible under most circumstances, because people's lives are difficult in many ways and how do you calculate all those ways is impossible. You just can't do it, it is too complicated. If my daughter needs to go to University because she is a genius, and your father has Alzheimer's and you need the money, how am I supposed to determine which of you has the greater need? It is for those sorts of reason that the systems put in place especially in the USSR and China, before they switched to a weird capitalism-communist hybrid, didn't work. You were asking the system to do an impossible calculation.

I.: Here in Brazil, we are most of the time a little late. The trends and fashions of foreign academia do not immediately hit our shores, which is not totally unfortunate. In the light of your experience with political correctness, what can other countries, such as Brazil, do to avoid or mitigate the corruption of language and symbols?

Dr. Peterson: Well, I wish I knew, because the postmodern debate is a very intractable one. I would say that people should be aware of those who disseminate the idea that the fundamental defining characteristics of people are their identity groups and that society should be reconfigured on that basis. It would be good if people weary of those claims and knowledgeable of the false compassion that motivates them are also alert to the fact that there is a genuine war between postmodernism and modernism – our states are modern, philosophically speaking –, and that the postmodern vision is another one of these rationally derived impossible utopias which have as a predicate the destruction of what currently exists. I would say that people need to be aware of such a thing is coming and take whatever steps they can as individuals to push back against the incursion of those ideas, to understand where they are coming from, to understand postmodernism, to pay attention to its motivations and its history, and to react to it critically.

I.: One of the critics of Politically Correct culture is Camille Paglia. She argues that most young men and women are attracted to social justice ideology and political correctness due to the lack of basic education in symbols, myths, religious narratives, and great literature. This great gap in their intellectual formation generates a kind of myopia which in turn leads to fear, such that they cannot perceive reality as they should and therefore cannot act properly and have a meaningful life. Adding to this, the universities of today fail to fill the gap and leave the undergraduates defenseless against all kinds of ideology. What can be done to remedy this alarming situation? How can the young student prepare his intellect to keep up with the advances in modern science and biology and not lose touch with the cultural heritage of western civilization?

Dr. Peterson: Well, that is why I'm putting all my videos online and writing a new book, that is why I started this battle, although it certainly exploded far beyond my wildest suppositions. Exactly what I do is teach my students what these old stories mean, that is what I'm trying to do as well as I can understand them. I have hundreds of lectures online, particularly on my *Maps of Meaning* course. That is an attempt to explain the language of the great myths of our culture so that it can be understood consciously. I know far a bit of that from reading Jung, although I think that my revision of Jungian

thinking is easier to understand. Now that is no criticism of Jung, he was an impossibly profound genius in my estimation, he turned back to the myths and the structure of the unconscious to discover those values that had been left behind. Nietzsche suggested that we had to formulate our own values but the psychoanalysts, especially Jung, observed that the source of those values was to be found not only in the past and in tradition but in the unconscious itself. I like to use the Disney movie *Pinocchio* as an example. Pinocchio is a very strange story – the movie is animated, so it is just drawings – about a puppet who through a series of misadventures with a cat, a fox, and the devil himself, learns how to become a real boy. It's a story of the development of the individual and it is influenced by deep mythological themes just as stories like *Harry Potter* are, which has become crazy popular like *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, and the Marvel movies. Superhero movies are powerful because they fill that whole which Paglia is talking about, but it does it in an inarticulate fashion – which is good in some sense, because it is beyond criticism when is inarticulate like that, when it is only acted out. But my supposition is that it is even better if you understand it, so I am going to go through the entire Pinocchio movie in my class Maps of Meaning.

The oldest stories tell us that when the old king dies society is threatened by chaos, by a flood, by a barbarian invasion, by disintegration within. A society without a founding narrative cannot stay united and it has no power because it has no values. If you have no values there is nothing to do and nothing to live for, so in the study of these old stories is the secret to life, I would say, and that is my presupposition and that it is what I teach. Society can't be led by false kings and idols or false belief systems; I think that you can call it ideology.

I.: One example I would like to add is the Lord of the Rings, how important is the return of the king, not only because of Christian themes, but because he is the legitimate leader of the Kingdom of Men.

Dr. Peterson: Yes, that is right, his legitimacy is predicated on his willingness to act as a proper fountain of Logos. That was shown by the Mesopotamians who regarded their Emperor as the incarnation of Marduk, the hero who constantly confronted chaos

and turned it into order. That is proper sovereignty, and the individual is sovereign insofar as that is what the individual does, and meaning is to be found on the border between order and chaos, and that is what people must inhabit and that meaning gives them dignity and purpose in the face of the tragedies of life.

I.: What projects are you currently working on, any books going to print? Can you tell us where your career is heading, clinic practice, academic research or the producing of online educational content?

Dr. Peterson: I'm writing a book called *Twelve Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos.* I should have it delivered to the publisher in complete form in within the month. It will be published by Penguin Random House Canada in 2018. I'll probably read some of it on my YouTube channel.

I.: And how about your video[s] series?

Dr. Peterson: Well, I am taking my courses and trying to improve the lectures and make them novel, so I am not just repeating the same thing, and I also hope to do some interviews with people on important topics and perhaps also to produce some additional videos. I would like to do some on postmodernism, for example.

I.: Do you continue with your academic research or are you trying now to reach a wider audience?

Dr. Peterson: Both. I am continuing my academic research. We are looking at the relationship between personality and political belief.

I.: It seems to be a very deep subject.

Dr. Peterson: Yes, it turns out that personality, which has a strong biological component, is a very powerful determinant of political belief. That's because part of your personality is the structure through which you look at the world, so it is like a filter and it focuses you on some things and not on others, and provides you with an intrinsic system of values.

I.: I appreciate that you're doing these videos. I watched them and I think I can really learn something.

Dr. Peterson: Thank you, I am happy to hear that. People write me all the time and tell me how much effect the videos had on them, and I am very happy about that, because I believe that the West is in a state of crisis and I think we are far weaker than we realize. Unless we find what we have lost, we will have no reason to exist and you can't exist without a reason. Existence is too difficult without a reason.

Notes

[1] This interview was made on January 9th 2017 by Skype.
[2] *Enûma Eliš* is a Babylonian creation myth. The manuscript was discovered by Austen Henry Layard in 1849, in a fragmented way, in the ruins of Assurbanipal library in Nínive (Mossul, Iraq) and was published by George Smith in 1876.