



*The École Normale Supérieure, May 1968.*

A specter is haunting North America — the specter of postmodernism. Or at least, that's what Jordan Peterson would have you believe. Peterson, a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto, has entered into an unholy alliance with all the powers of the alt-right to exorcise this specter. Though he calls himself a "British classical liberal," Peterson's appeal feeds into the most reactionary tendencies in contemporary politics. He rose to fame when he was captured on **video** at a protest on the University of Toronto campus, telling transgender students he refused to use gender-neutral pronouns. He has since joined the ranks of Logan Paul and PewDiePie as a YouTube star. He mostly eschews writing, instead posting videos of lectures online for his primarily young, white, and male audience.

But Peterson has just released a new book, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*. It is his first since 1999's *Maps of Meaning*, a study of myth in modern thought. In that book, Peterson based his thinking on the mysticism of Carl Jung, following a pattern initiated by Joseph Campbell, whose influence is now primarily seen in *Star Wars* rather than scholarship on myth. Peterson neglected to engage with unanimously rec-

ognized predecessors in the field of study, like anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who had postulated as early as the 1950's that myths are based on a recurring structure across cultures and eras.

The new book, as its listicle-esque title indicates, is a self-help manual. But amid the bootstrapping pablum and folksy anecdotes that are standard for the genre, Peterson includes a pointed political argument. If his readers are struggling, he says, it is because contemporary society has fallen into disorder. In spite of the abundance and comfort offered by capitalist innovation, we have abandoned the stability of traditional society, one in which the fittest among us held power and resources, in which consensus was self-evident, and in which, to paraphrase a slogan beloved among the alt-right, there were only two genders. But things have fallen apart. To invoke a cliché, which Peterson does not hesitate to do, the center cannot hold. This, he says, is the result of an idea. That idea is postmodernism.

Peterson traces the dangers of postmodernism to a place of ill repute: Paris. In particular, the *École Normale Supérieure*, a centuries-old university founded to realize the ideals of the Enlightenment. That sinister institution was where Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault got their start as students of philosophy, initiating a school of thought that has now taken over the world. Not only were Derrida and Foucault “the two architects of the postmodernist movement,” Peterson has said in a [lecture](#), “they were avowed Marxists.”

The conflation of postmodernism and Marxism may come as some surprise to those who identify as belonging to either side of the equation. Perhaps the best-known theorization of postmodernity, Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, conceives of the period as an object of inquiry to which Marxist analysis may be applied, not a theoretical perspective. Today, it is not uncommon to see condemnations of postmodernism and pleas for a return to Enlightenment rationality in the pages of *Jacobin*. But Peterson is not the only ideologue to elide the distinction between these usually opposed frameworks. This strange conspiracy theory has increasingly gained traction among the far right, famously appearing in *2083: A European Declaration of Independence*, the manifesto Anders Brevik distributed before he murdered 77 people in Norway.

Its origins were surprisingly deliberate, emerging from a paleoconservative Washing-

ton think tank called the Free Congress Foundation. The FCF was founded by Paul Weyrich, a founder of the Heritage Foundation and namer of the so-called Moral Majority movement. Weyrich also created a TV network called National Empowerment Television, a short-lived predecessor to Fox News, which aired a documentary in 1999 called "Political Correctness: The Frankfurt School." Hosted by a pipe-wielding human bleach stain named William Lind, it presents an account of the origin of what we now call "identity politics." These came, Lind tells us, from the Institute for Social Research, or the Frankfurt School. There, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and their cronies created a school of thought called "critical theory," which the FCF gave the name "cultural Marxism." This frightening idea fused the impertinence of Marx with the indecency of Freud, producing a new threat to Western values far beyond those posed by Copernicus or Darwin. This argument was elevated to the surface of political discourse by Patrick Buchanan, in his 2001 Oswald Spengler rewrite, *The Death of the West*. As recently as 2017, Buchanan condemned "Postmodern America" in a [column](#) defending Alabama Supreme Court Justice Roy Moore.

Like all the classic conspiracy theories, the antisemitism here is barely concealed. One proponent of the theory, psychologist Kevin MacDonald, has argued that cultural Marxism is an expression of what he calls a "group evolutionary strategy" characteristic of Jewish people. MacDonald acknowledges that not all Jews are radical leftists, but argues that regardless, these movements are "Jewishly motivated."

This repellent association hasn't stopped the theory from being taken up by mainstream political pundits even today. The *Daily Caller* has reported that the Frankfurt School "colonized higher education in the West." Jonathan Chait based a commentary on political correctness in *New York* magazine on the theory, claiming that "the modern far left has borrowed the Marxist critique of liberalism and substituted race and gender identities for economic ones." While Chait carefully avoids the term "cultural Marxism," he still describes the version of Marxism he sees in so-called "political correctness" as "more philosophically threatening" than conservatism.

Peterson makes a slight adjustment to the narrative in *12 Rules for Life*. A Jungian psychologist, he seems to find it necessary to exonerate Freud. There is a brief reference to the Frankfurt School, represented only by Max Horkheimer rather than the more frequently cited Adorno or Marcuse or the still-living Jürgen Habermas (himself a devoted critic of postmodernism as he defines it). Peterson then jumps ahead a few

decades and crosses the Rhine. Creating a designation of his own, he identifies not “critical theory,” but the “postmodern neo-Marxism” of postwar French philosophy as his intellectual adversary.

Neither Derrida nor Foucault is cited in *12 Rules for Life*. Apparently, not only has Peterson never bothered to actually read them, he seems not to have even read their Wikipedia entries. The only relevant citation is of a book called *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault*, which he customarily recommends at speaking engagements. The author, Stephen Hicks, is Executive Director of the Center for Ethics and Entrepreneurship at Rockford University, and an acolyte of Ayn Rand. Armed with this dubious secondary source, Peterson is left making statements that are not only mired in factual error, but espouse a comically reductive conception of how social life and history work. He takes a common misunderstanding at face value, proceeding to build a whole outlook on it.

Derrida and Foucault are indeed associated with trends varyingly described as “post-structuralism” or “postmodernism,” not just by reactionaries, but by liberals like Mark Lilla and leftists like Noam Chomsky as well. The former term may have some correspondence to reality. It shows how Derrida and Foucault followed and responded to a trend in French intellectual life known as “structuralism,” based on the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and epitomized by Lévi-Strauss’s studies of myth, and departed from its basic orientations. But neither thinker ever advanced a theory of “postmodernism” or claimed it as a theoretical practice — in fact, they hardly ever used the word. In a 1983 interview in the philosophical journal *Telos*, Foucault was asked to identify the place of his thought in the postmodern era. “What are we calling postmodernity?” he responded. “I’m not up to date.”

The term had been used sporadically in late 20th-century cultural theory, most prominently by literary critic Ihab Hassan, in 1971’s *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature*, and architectural historian Charles Jencks, in 1977’s *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*. But it was introduced to the philosophical lexicon by the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. In 1979, Lyotard wrote a study commissioned by the Council of Universities of the Government of Quebec, called “The Problems of Knowledge in the Most Developed Industrial Societies.” It was reprinted in France with the more straightforward title, *The Postmodern Condition*.

“Our working hypothesis is that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the post-modern age,” Lyotard wrote. He described postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives,” the latter term denoting a story that explains all other stories, like the doctrine of original sin. Among those metanarratives was Marxism. The world of the late 1970s was becoming inscrutable to the human subject, with computerized storage of knowledge surpassing the capacity of the mind, and automation of labor leading not to a utopia of leisure, but rising inequality and economic crisis. “Our incredulity is now such that we no longer expect salvation to rise from these inconsistencies, as did Marx,” Lyotard concluded. While Peterson’s argument is that postmodernists replaced a Marxist dichotomy of proletariat and bourgeoisie with a generalized conception of oppressed and oppressor, this was hardly Lyotard’s concern.

Lyotard’s closest compatriot in philosophy was Jean Baudrillard, who drifted out even further towards science fiction; he was an acknowledged influence on *The Matrix*. Baudrillard was as much provocateur as philosopher, but he was not the political radical of Peterson’s imagination. Like Lyotard, and like Jordan Peterson, he broke with the leftist leanings of his youth. He considered himself not a communist, but a nihilist, and his work dealt primarily with information and perception. One of his most derided statements, the title of his book and essay *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, is among the least extraordinary. In an age of electronic information transfer, when the documentation of an event is simultaneous to the event itself, our access to events is highly mediated. What we see on television is filtered through the desires of state and corporate influences. Baudrillard’s claim was that the image of the Gulf War presented to the West in mass media was not identical to what happened in the Persian Gulf.

But in *12 Rules for Life*, Peterson doesn’t concern himself with the history of the idea he is obsessed with defeating. His attentions land squarely on Derrida — Foucault is left off the hook this time around. The book offers this whirlwind gloss on Derrida’s work, which amounts to some 30 or 40 volumes:

According to Derrida, hierarchical structures emerged only to include (the beneficiaries of that structure) and to exclude (everyone else, who were therefore oppressed). Even that claim wasn’t sufficiently radical. Derrida

claimed that divisiveness and oppression were built right into language—built into the very categories we use to pragmatically simplify and negotiate the world. There are “women” only because men gain by excluding them. There are “males and females” only because members of that more heterogeneous group benefit by excluding the tiny minority of people whose biological sexuality is amorphous. Science only benefits the scientists. Politics only benefits the politicians. In Derrida’s view, hierarchies exist because they gain from oppressing those who are omitted. It is this ill-gotten gain that allows them to flourish.

Elsewhere, Peterson has ridiculed Derrida’s characteristic way of putting things, questioning the validity of terms like “logocentrism” and finding malice in every neologism. In an [interview](#), he claims it was Derrida who “most trenchantly formulated the anti-Western philosophy that is being pursued so assiduously by the radical left.” Worryingly, Derrida and his followers are “extremely radical, postmodern leftist thinkers who are hellbent on demolishing the fundamental substructure of Western civilization.”

In actual fact, Derrida’s work was rooted in constant dialogue with the history of Western philosophy. He was a classical philosophical scholar, often presenting detailed and rigorous research on figures like Plato, Hegel, and Rousseau. His conversance with European thought extended into the 20th century as well. He can be considered one of the foremost critics of structuralism, but his early works addressed phenomenology, presenting both translations of and commentary on the writing of the turn-of-the-century German philosopher Edmund Husserl. Derrida drew on a wide range of influences, especially Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud, both thinkers Peterson deems acceptable, as well as Martin Heidegger. Applying their skeptical outlook to the phenomenology and structuralism in which he had achieved mastery, Derrida was able to interrogate these methods from within.

Foucault, while also profoundly influenced by Nietzsche, belonged to a different, uniquely French tradition. This was the field of inquiry opened by Jean Cavailles, a mathematician by training who had fought in the French Resistance and been shot by the Gestapo, Gaston Bachelard, who was trained in physics and chemistry, and Foucault’s thesis advisor, former medical doctor Georges Canguilhem. This was the

tradition of epistemology and the history of science; it is the tradition with which Peterson, for all his talk of the scientific method, fails to engage. This tradition insisted, as Cavailles put it, on a philosophy of the *concept* rather than a philosophy of the *subject*. Foucault summarized these divergent paths in an introduction to Canguilhem's *The Normal and the Pathological*:

Without ignoring the cleavages which, during these last years after the end of the war, were able to oppose Marxists and non-Marxists, Freudians and non-Freudians, specialists in a single discipline and philosophers, academics and non-academics, theorists and politicians, it does seem to me that one could find another dividing line which cuts through all these oppositions. It is the line that separates a philosophy of experience, of sense and of subject and a philosophy of knowledge, of rationality and of concept.

On one side, said Foucault, was the tradition of Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The other was that of Cavailles, Bachelard, and Canguilhem. These represented "two modalities according to which phenomenology was taken up in France," after Edmund Husserl had lectured in Paris in 1929. "Contemporary philosophy in France," said Foucault, "began in those years."

Despite an alignment with structuralism in Foucault's earliest works, ultimately the philosophy of the concept charted a different path from both phenomenology and structuralism. Sartre and Merleau-Ponty had adopted Husserl's framework, dealing with consciousness and experience; this school of thought is now known as existentialism. Where existentialism developed a certain mode centered on the human subject, the "philosophy of the concept" turned to the history of mathematics and the sciences to study the forms of knowledge which made the subject possible.

Structuralism had replaced existentialism's wisps of tobacco smoke with clouds of chalk dust, taking a detached attitude towards the heroic self-examination espoused by the likes of Sartre and Camus. Dispensing with the subject altogether, they built from Ferdinand de Saussure's claim that experience is preceded by already established systems of meaning. But while structuralism scandalously shifted focus, it still orbited around a fixed center: reality could be explained by an essential narrative.

Both phenomenology and structuralism saw the whole chaotic spectrum of social life as a unified totality, in which an essence is expressed. For phenomenology, this was consciousness and subjective experience, for structuralism, a “combinatory” of structures, like kinship relations. In a sense, structuralism actually had its roots in phenomenology as much as it did in linguistics. It grew from Husserl's early attempts to establish a formal logic, which Derrida had closely studied in his first works. As Derrida wrote in a 1959 paper on phenomenology, Husserl had attempted to “reconcile the structuralist demand” with the “genetic demand.” While the former sought to describe a totality by the organization of its elements, the latter was engaged in “the search for the origin and foundation of the structure.” He concluded that “the phenomenological project itself is born of an initial failure of this attempt.”

In 1966, Derrida presented a paper called “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences” at a conference on “The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man” held at Johns Hopkins University. This event can be considered the inauguration of a fusion between American literary studies and French philosophy, with then-archetypal structuralists like Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan in attendance. But Derrida was already proposing a powerful critique of structuralism, through a close reading of Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Derrida opened his paper by reading the event itself. He proposed that the remodeling of the human sciences around the formal logic of linguistics constituted an “event” in the sense of thinking the “structurality of structure.” The concept of structure, Derrida pointed out, was not the invention of structuralism – it was “as old as western science and western philosophy.” But what he called the structurality was not always easy to grasp. The fact that a structure is composed by a particular organization of elements means that it is not some tangible thing, but a set of relations, between elements which are constituted by their differences from one another. But in the history of Western thought, this structurality had “always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a center or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin.”

Contrary to common belief, said Derrida, the center has held all too fast; attempts to dislodge it tended to simply install a substitute. He gives the example of ethnology: in an attempt to overcome European ethnocentrism through an engagement with the larger world, it employs European modes of scientific observation and interpretation.



This brought him to Lévi-Strauss, and an engagement with Peterson's purported speciality, myth. In his reading of myths, Lévi-Strauss had to contend with a problem that literary criticism had previously been able to avoid. Unlike a novel, a myth has no author; it is a product of the structure of mythology itself. "The absence of a center is here the absence of a subject and the absence of an author," says Derrida. Lévi-Strauss replaces this with a permanent structure that defines the form.

In response, Derrida set out to show how the structuralist desire to produce a central totality, to determine all its elements and show how they joined together in a whole and expressed in themselves the very structure of the whole, nevertheless had to acknowledge the constant possibility of disruption. But this did not mean that Derrida believed any word could mean anything. In response to a question from the audience, Derrida said:

First of all, I didn't say that there was no center, that we could get along without the center. I believe that the center is a function, not a being — a reality, but a function. And this function is absolutely indispensable. The subject is absolutely indispensable. I don't destroy the subject; I situate it. That is to say, I believe that at a certain level both of experience and of philosophical and scientific discourse one cannot get along without the notion of subject. It is a question of knowing where it comes from and how it functions. Therefore I keep the concept of center, which I explained was indispensable, as well as that of subject, and the whole system of concepts to which you have referred.

In departing with the seemingly drastically different approaches of structuralism and phenomenology, Derrida and Foucault left behind a totalizing idealism shared by both schools of thought, which had left their adherents unable to explain the differentiated and uneven realities of both philosophy and history. It is not Derrida and Foucault who reproduce this totalizing idealism, but Peterson. Contrary to his self-professed reputation for straight talk and hard truths, Peterson's conception of all the various phenomena of social life as expressions of a curiously interpreted intellectual episode happens to be consistent with the most speculative of philosophies: an idealism that claims ideas descend from heaven to earth.

Drawing on his reading of western philosophy, Derrida showed that throughout its history there were varying yearnings of a “metaphysics of presence”: the notion that some pure, unadulterated truth exists independent of the derivative and distorted forms in which it is expressed. Beginning with Plato, this was dramatized in the opposition between speech and writing. In speech, said Plato, one was faced with the presence of the speaker and the possibility of directly accessing the truth of his utterance. But in writing the speaker was absent, and his words could be misinterpreted. This is all Derrida means by “logocentrism” — the presupposition that speech was primary to writing, that it was a representation of ideas that preceded its utterance. The logocentric way of thinking, long customary to the point of being a truism, is an evasion of the fact that philosophy, and therefore any quest for truth or knowledge, can only take place *within* the impure, in-between field of language.

Derrida's meditations on these questions are both more complex and more precise than some dormroom soliloquy punctuated by the bubbling of bong water. The question Peterson accuses him of answering with dangerous equivocation — whether there is such a thing as objective truth — is not one he poses. That question is so vaguely and poorly framed as to be irresolvable. The point is that we have no direct access to truth, that it cannot simply be made present. Instead, we have to pay attention to the various forms of secondariness, impurity, difference, and distortion which actually constitute our thought.

There are reasons to see this approach as compatible with Marxism, which is also based on a philosophical critique of idealism. Twentieth-century Marxist philosophy could be described as an ongoing attempt to elaborate an alternative, called materialism, which in the Marxist canon is never clearly explained. So Marxism, too, exists in writing, and the yearning for a pure and uncorrupted Marxism on the part of some of its adherents ultimately reproduces idealist modes of thought. But the notion that Derrida is a theorist of power, who modifies Marxism to apply a binary of oppressor-oppressed to all forms of social life, not only displays ignorance of his work, it attributes to him all the errors his work was designed to criticize: binary oppositions and the totalizing of different phenomena according to a single originary essence.

It is Foucault for whom “power” was the operative word. At its most fundamental, his argument stated that power does not merely prohibit, like a cop stopping you from entering a building. Power is also productive; it can make us follow rules even when

we know we could get away with breaking them. As he wrote in *Discipline and Punish*, it was necessary to recognize that there was no knowledge innocent of the context of power, "that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations." This is where Judith Butler follows Foucault, showing how power produces sex and gender, threatening what appears to be a deep-seated insecurity around masculinity that afflicts Peterson and his disciples.

Although, unlike Lyotard, Derrida's relationship to Marxism was not one of outright disavowal, neither was it straightforwardly linear. The most pertinent work in question is *Specters of Marx*, a volume which Peterson does not even bother to name. While Peterson claims that "Derrida described his own ideas as a radicalized form of Marxism," any reader of this book knows he did no such thing. *Specters of Marx* is an unconventional text, partly reading the *Communist Manifesto* ontologically rather than politically. Derrida's neologism here is "hauntology," after Marx and Engels's famous opening sentence — the concept eventually caught on in cultural criticism in the new millennium, through the late Mark Fisher's application of it to the music of the enigmatic dubstep producer Burial. Though Derrida claims a materialist method of inquiry, he does not call for a return to the communist project. He instead sees Marx as a ghostly presence within liberal democracy, after the fall of the Soviet Union and the so-called "end of history."

The book does contain a single reference to postmodernism, within a litany of contemporary threats to democracy:

Entire regiments of ghosts have returned, armies from every age, camouflaged by the archaic symptoms of the paramilitary and of the postmodern excess of arms (information technology, panoptical surveillance via satellite, nuclear threat, and so forth).

*Specters of Marx* is unequivocally loathed by Marxists of a certain persuasion, for whom there is only one true Marx. Even those who found something of value in Derrida's reading were surprised by it at the time, given the prevailing opposition

between Marxist and deconstructionist camps in the academy. Peterson's fantasy of neo-Marxist wolves in postmodern sheep's clothing has little bearing on actual debates in 20th-century political theory.

If Derrida's work was appropriated by American academics to simply express a banal form of suspicion of all forms of objective truth, in service of some kind of moralizing politics of identity - and indeed, this did take place throughout the 1980s and 1990s - it is an appropriation which completely misses the point. We do not need to produce a myth of the pure and uncorrupted writings of Derrida to point out that this is a misreading; rather, we simply need to recognize, as Derrida both insisted and practiced in his own work, that the "deconstruction" of a metaphysics of presence requires close reading. This begins at least with something Peterson has not done: actually opening the book.

In *12 Rules*, Peterson takes Derrida to task for a famous and easily decontextualized quote: "there is nothing outside the text." Peterson reads this as the "nihilistic and destructive" claim that "everything is interpretation." To call this an overstatement would be an understatement. Derrida was not claiming that there are no sidewalks, birds, and buildings beyond the edges of a page. He was questioning the idea that there is a meaning to a text that is distinct from what is actually *there* in the text. There is no pure transmission, uncorrupted by a secondary medium, that makes us one with our listeners or readers. To engage in deconstruction is to show, through close reading, how even the advocates of a metaphysics of presence end up acknowledging the inescapability of writing and all that it represents. And deconstruction, too, inevitably falls prey to its own work.

There is not a trace of this kind of humility in Peterson's writing. His megalomania is so extreme that he once proposed a kind of machinic McCarthyism, announcing his intent to create an artificial intelligence program called a "postmodern lexicon detector." This algorithm would sort out course descriptions at universities that included any unsavory content, listing them on a directory for free-thinking students to avoid. Among its other remarkable qualities, this is a strange way to advocate for the freedom of speech. Peterson's colleagues talked him out of it.

But that hasn't stopped Peterson from airing his views all over North America and the internet, including fawning profiles in the *Guardian* and the *Chronicle of Higher*

**Education.** In spite of his failed attempt to give his politics intellectual heft, it should be obvious to any reasonable person that his worldview is unfounded on its face. Consigning the right to determine someone's gender to the eye of the beholder places excessive faith in the immediacy of perception and the universal equivalence of cultural norms, besides being obviously unkind. His blustery objection to the gender-neutral singular "they" puts Peterson himself in opposition to "Western civilization," given that the construction appears throughout canonical English literature, including the works of William Shakespeare and Jane Austen. Peterson's fixation on the chemical foundations of biological sex and measurements of cognitive intelligence is not pragmatic, but metaphysical, attempting to extract essential qualities from social behavior.

Peterson's attempt to buttress these reactionary positions with readings of contemporary philosophy, now preserved for posterity in the pages of *12 Rules for Life*, is not without precedent. But the tendency finds its most thorough realization in his zealotry. Peterson goes beyond Lilla, Chomsky, and Buchanan, arguing that what he calls "postmodern philosophy" is not merely a symptom of social unease, but its cause. By charging this poorly defined discourse of postmodernism with shaping contemporary society and bending the arc of history, he is doing precisely what he has accused his adversaries of doing: imposing a world of ideas upon the actually existing world, one which is more complex than he has the ability to grasp.