Politics and Prophecy: Jordan Peterson’s Antidote to Modernity

by David Dennen

One person’s prophet has always been another’s crackpot. Nowhere is this more obvious currently than with psychology professor turned public intellectual Jordan B. Peterson. Peterson has attained a large following online and is esteemed by centrist members of the American media. Yet few intellectuals are currently so reviled by younger leftists. This article argues for some conceptual and cultural-historical clarification of Peterson’s work. I suggest that Peterson and some (not all) of his leftist critics are actually on the same side of an effort to preserve the open-access order (the basic political-economic organization of the Western democracies). However, they focus on different problems endemic to such orders. While his critics focus on power imbalances and material inequalities, Peterson is a manifestation of the need to manage spiritual crisis while at the same time maintaining relative openness of access to political and economic institutions. Recurrent spiritual crisis, I argue, inheres in open-access orders. Because these orders depend on impersonality and value relativism, they provide no spiritual grounding for individuals. In open-access societies, spiritual crises get temporarily resolved by the development of ‘secular theodicies,’ modes of making sense of suffering in a world in which God is dead. Peterson is a purveyor of a secular theodicy, the contours and context of which are shown through consideration of Peterson’s writings and online videos.

Introduction

That Carlyle did have a message, or at least was widely believed to have a message, no one can seriously question. By multitudes he was regarded as a prophet, a man who spoke to his time the essential Word of God. He called men back from the trivial and foolish to think of the higher purposes of life; and if he made frequent use of capital letters in such indefinite terms as the Eternities and Immensities, it was recognized that he was trying to describe the infinite background which alone can give our human existence dignity and value and power. His style was certainly unusual, and it contained a good deal of extravagance, particularly when it expressed condemnation. But it was quickly seen that this was involved in his essential constitution, and (at least in his earlier work) it was due to his very sincerity. He wrote as he felt, and his language took fire from the feeling that consumed him. Men who knew Carlyle admired his forthrightness and honesty of purpose; and if they laughed at the scathing extravagance of some of his judgments, they had an idea, perhaps even an uncomfortable idea, that there was somewhere within the extravagance a good deal of truth that was worthy of serious consideration. (Cook 134)

The prominent Baptist minister Henry Cook wrote this eulogy in 1940, about sixty years after the death of its subject, Thomas Carlyle. It is one of the most fitting tributes I have found to a messy and controversial figure who continues to haunt Western culture. With hardly any alteration it could also serve as a fair description of a messy and controversial prophet of our own day—Jordan B. Peterson.
Prophets emerge in times of crisis. If the priest is the customary administer of conventional morality, the prophet innovates by extending conventional morality—Protestant Christian morality, in Carlyle’s and Peterson’s case—“to meet what he perceives to be the novel demands of a novel situation” (Peckham, *Romanticism* 108).

Yet one person’s prophet has always been another’s crackpot, and vice-versa. Nowhere is this more obvious at present than with Peterson. He has attained a large following online, especially in the last couple of years. He is well regarded by older members of the American media, such as David Brooks and Caitlin Flanagan (both centrists who have no great love for identity politics). Yet it is hard to think of another intellectual recently so reviled by the younger leftist media. Reviews by younger critics of his recent book, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, seem at about the maximum level of hostility allowed in respectable publications (see Barekat, Manne, Mishra, Robinson, Rocha).

There are a variety of curiosities about such reviews, but what is most outstanding to me is brought out by a remark John Holloway made about critics of the nineteenth-century writers he studied: “Their [the critics'] comments have often had that peripheral quality [...] which puts it beyond question that they have brought to one kind of artefact the questions that are proper for another” (18). Mainstream leftist reviews of Peterson’s work often have a certain peripheral quality; they betray a fascination with the incidental, a fascination that has been focused, one assumes, by the echo chambers in which so many of us live. Yes, Peterson has personal flaws. Yes, his speaking and writing style can be vague or meandering or extravagant—and he has a fondness for capitalizing ‘indefinite terms’ like “Being.” Yes, he states bromides with an air of profundity. And so on. It is as easy to laugh at Peterson as it is a uselessly peripheral activity.

More worthwhile is to think about the cause and effect of Peterson, about Peterson as the bearer of a cultural tradition, or set of related traditions, that speak up at particular points in history so as to adjust the cultural fabric. It is more instructive to look at how and why Peterson “call[s] men [and others] back from the trivial and foolish to think of the higher purposes of life” (Cook 134). That he is indeed doing this is readily demonstrable. Whatever one may think of his message, and whatever its longevity turns out to be, it cannot be doubted that it is being heard and acted on.

Let’s allow ourselves, for the time being, the “uncomfortable idea” that “somewhere within the extravagance” of Peterson’s discourse there is “a good deal of truth [...] worthy of serious consideration” (Cook 134). The easiest way to do this is to back away from Peterson the man, with all his “laughable” (134) but peripheral human quirks and flaws, and look at Peterson as a nexus of cultural traditions—to allow ourselves to recede somewhat from the passions of the moment so as to catch sight of the history that enframes those passions.

The most obvious precedent for the current period of vociferous leftism in the US and Canada is the late 1960s and early 1970s, in which there were similar (though more extreme) outbursts of social justice activism, identity politics, and anti-capitalism. A key word today is “tribalism,” as it was back then, when Ayn Rand asked “what are the nature and causes of modern tribalism?” in her 1961 talk “*Global Balkanization*” and Marshall McLuhan suggested we were going through a technology-mediated “retribalization” or “tribal cycle” in a 1969 *Playboy* interview. Critics of the left in the last few years (Peterson included) often sound as if
they are reciting pages from Ayn Rand’s *New Left* (originally 1971). But I am not aware of any public intellectual quite like Peterson during the earlier era, though certainly there were similar individuals. Had YouTube existed then, perhaps Ernest Becker (briefly discussed below) or Philip Rieff would have attained Peterson-level notoriety.

Nevertheless, I believe that both the current period and the 1960s–70s are parts of a broader pattern of outbreaks of discontent, of tribalism, of relatively loud challenges to the status quo. These outbreaks occur when perceptions of an incoherence between a population’s values and its observed conditions reach some threshold and political action becomes preferable to inaction. We can take as a beginning point the American and French Revolutions of the late eighteenth century. These revolutions were the first large-scale political actions in the name of new Enlightenment political ideals; they were attempts to reorder society according to the new ideals. The type of society they pointed toward did not really become institutionalized until about the mid-nineteenth century. This was a society constituted as an open-access order—a state based on political and economic competition in which all citizens can participate (North et al.). This is why I will emphasize Peterson’s connection with nineteenth-century writers such as Thomas Carlyle. They were of the first generations to deal with the disappearance of traditional sureties and with social, cultural, and spiritual problems relating to the opening of access.

Their track record is not perfect, but most would admit that open-access societies have been of great benefit to humanity. Nevertheless, they give rise a host of intractable problems. These problems, usually classed as problems of modernity, have been studied from many different perspectives since the nineteenth century. Certainly technological change and urbanization are factors. But the basic issue, as I see it, is the transition to open-access order, which involved the incorporation of large populations of diverse peoples into a single ‘open’ political process balanced by a similarly ‘open’ economy. Along with the separation and liberalization of politics and economics, the transition has involved the impersonalization of social roles, increasing specialization, the collapse of traditional ideologies (disenchantment, secularization), increasing ‘creative destruction’ in the economic sphere, and the like.

All of these developments have pros and cons, as already noted by observers such as Alexis de Tocqueville in the early nineteenth century. On the one hand, they create relatively wealthy and peaceful societies. On the other hand, they lead to intense metaphysical, ideological, social, and vocational instability which erodes the communal ground upon which a sense of self-value and meaningful action rests. Civil life in open-access societies becomes based on economics (North et al. 24–25), on the impersonal “cash nexus,” as Carlyle critically put it (*Past and Present* 170); religion, which had earlier provided a source of political legitimacy and a sense of place within a totality, becomes just another personal interest, individually experienced, or it begins to recede from life altogether.

Without a unifying belief system and clear social hierarchy, people begin to lose their way in the cosmos. From the nineteenth century on we see the increasing use or invention of words like ‘alienation,’ ‘angst,’ ‘anomie,’ ‘ennui,’ ‘nihilism.’ The open-access world becomes populated by, as Isaiah Berlin termed it, “useless persons” (82), people, whose apparent inconsequentiality, replaceability or lack of certain direction make them feel useless, unmoored, and out of date. Mental disease becomes ever more pervasive (Greenfeld, *Mind*).
Carlyle, standing near the beginning of the transition to open access in the 1820s, saw a world grown “richer than usual in two things: in Truths grown obsolete, and Trades grown obsolete,” in which the honest youth can hardly do more than “stand Idle, and despair” (Sartor 119).

12 The open-access order is good at providing a relatively level playing field and an ever-expanding range of lifestyles and goods to choose from; but it is not so effective at giving meaning to people's lives. It provides goods but not “the Good,” as one philosopher has quipped (Jordan 153). Political rights and education are more widely distributed than ever before, but opportunities to put these to meaningful uses—uses which provide a sense of ‘cosmic value’—may be scarce. We are all dressed up but with nowhere to go, living lives of “quiet desperation” as Henry David Thoreau famously put it (10). Ongoing spiritual crisis, among some portion of the population, seems to be one of the prices we must pay for open access. Having the leisure to experience crisis and the education to articulate it are, to be sure, problems depending on a certain kind of privilege; but this makes them no less serious for a well-functioning society.

13 Promoters of open access, perhaps because they tend to come from an Enlightenment perspective, have not often understood the significance of spiritual crisis. Ludwig von Mises, in his classic defense of liberalism, argued that it is not the function of social policy to make people happy or satisfy their “inmost yearnings” (xx). Fair enough. But he goes on to imply that the issue of higher meaning naturally resolves itself of its own accord. Spiritual satisfaction can only come from inside, from “within [one's] own heart” (xx). Historical experience and more nuanced social philosophies suggest this is insufficient. For a great many people it has been far from obvious how spiritual satisfaction can be derived from one's own heart. As Peterson puts it, despite the progress of modernity “gaping holes remain in our spirits” (Maps 248).

14 Believers in classical liberalism, in open-access political and economic organization, cannot neglect the spiritual side. A well-educated, well-fed, but resentfully useless population is likely a dangerous thing. Quiet desperation, as recent political developments in the US demonstrate, can have political significance. As Greenfeld notes, “the strength of the totalitarian tendency within a society changes in inverse proportion to the likelihood of finding a personally satisfactory place in it” (“Back” 371). Fundamentalisms religious, ethnic, and otherwise beckon. A disturbing number of young people in recent years have left the relative wealth and stability of Western open-access societies to join terrorist groups. The classical liberal theorists of open access have little to say about such problems. I suggest that Peterson has become popular because he addresses the spiritual disorder that seems to be endemic to open-access orders; he represents a tendency toward maintaining open access through managing spiritual crisis.

15 Other interpretations of the Peterson moment are possible, of course. One Peterson critic, the philosopher Kate Manne, argues that Peterson addresses “those predominantly white, straight, cis, and otherwise privileged men who fear being surpassed by their historical subordinates—people of color and white women, among others—and losing their loyal service.” Straight white men, Manne argues, need to learn to “lose gracefully.” Losing gracefully can certainly be a virtue. But casting this as a matter of the loss of privilege is a
misdiagnosis of the problem to which Peterson offers a solution. The problem is not about losing white male privilege but about a more general status and identity anxiety experienced by nearly everyone caught up in the open-access experiment who has been given some modicum of choice in how to live. The language of ‘white privilege,’ though useful in some contexts, here occludes the larger spiritual problem of people-in-general becoming useless or lost. This problem is not about the loss of privilege per se, but about the loss of clear rules and goals for behavior and the related loss of a close identification between self and social role (i.e., impersonalization). It began historically with elite white men but has percolated into various groups as others sought and obtained a greater degree of citizenship and, especially, access to education (this phenomenon has been analyzed in detail by Greenfeld in Mind and Nationalism).

The spiritual crisis of the open-access order can probably never be resolved absolutely. Individuals in open-access societies can expect no widely agreed on final redemption, no end of days, to resolve all tensions. We have no absolute monarch in whom to invest our earthly loyalty; we have no Divine Providence to ensure the fate of our immortal souls. Instead, we make sense of our suffering with a variety of ‘secular theodicies,’ which began to emerge in the last half of the eighteenth century. The two most important forms of secular theodicy are (1) biodicies, which claim that suffering is necessary to and overcome through self-development; and (2) sociodicies, which claim that suffering is an inevitable part of social progress but can be overcome through institutional reform (on biodicy see Abrams 95–96 and passim; on sociodicy, see Becker, Structure 18–32, and Morgan and Wilkinson).

Peterson's basic and most important function is as a purveyor of biodicy for the open-access order. He is a prophet of the impersonal, but virtuous or spiritual or ethical individualism upon which, in his view, an open-access order must rest.

The open-access order, however, has problems aside from the spiritual. It is obvious that inequalities both glaring and subtle remain in all current open-access societies. These have historically been the province of social justice advocates, of social justice warriors—of sociodicy. The proper applications and limits of biodicy and sociodicy, however, have never been clear, and in times of social, political, and economic uncertainty (such as we face today) they are likely to be driven to extremes and manipulated by the unscrupulous. But it seems clear that open-access societies need both functions: Peterson and social justice advocates ought to see themselves as complementary. In the following, I will provide some cultural background to Peterson, before moving on to some particulars of his biodicy.

Peterson's Cultural Inheritance

Peterson can be seen as an intersection of primarily two overlapping historical traditions: (1) post-Christian or Cultural Protestantism and (2) Romanticism. These two movements emerged nearly contemporaneously in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as a result of the same set of historical crises. They are implicated in various ways with the transition from natural or limited-access states to open-access states—with the fall of traditional orders under a variety of pressures and the emergence of conditions that felt new and confusing.

Romanticism was essentially a response to nihilism, an attempt to find meaning—a “will to
value,” Laurence Lockridge called it (3)—after the collapse of both traditional religious and Enlightenment ideologies. Perhaps the mark of Romantic discourse is its emphasis on meaning and value, as opposed to the Enlightenment emphasis on reason. It is this fundamental difference in perspective that separates Peterson from strongly Enlightenment thinkers like the American public intellectual Sam Harris (who has participated in a number of public conversations with Peterson).

Whereas Romanticism encompassed Europeans and Americans of all faiths, Cultural Protestantism was more limited to those who were raised Protestant. These Protestants felt that religion of some conception was necessary but were unable to accept traditional interpretations of the Bible in the wake of the Enlightenment. They were trying to rescue Christianity, but in a way that made it acceptable to a modern scientific worldview and a society that was moving toward open access—with all the egalitarianism and relativism implied by those developments. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, many intellectuals—including famous agnostics like T. H. Huxley—were calling for a “New Reformation,” inspired by the original Protestant Reformation (see Moore 174–78). The popularity of Peterson’s lecture series on The Psychological Significance of the Biblical Stories” seems to be evidence that some kind of reformed or transformed religion is still a felt need among a significant part of the population.

Peterson has published two books, each of which well illustrates certain facets of these traditions. His first book, Maps of Meaning, is in part a Romantic “crisis autobiography,” a genre spearheaded in English by Thomas Carlyle among others (see Abrams 71–140). It is also a search for the truth in myth for today, a quest begun by culturally-Protestant figures like Friedrich Schleiermacher and Carlyle in the nineteenth century and more fully developed by Carl Jung, Paul Tillich, and Eric Voegelin in the twentieth (see Dorrien; also ApRoberts). In Maps of Meaning crisis autobiography and comparative mythology are united in biodicy.

It may seem trivial to point out that Peterson’s second book, 12 Rules for Life, is in the self-help genre. But it is worth briefly touching on the history of this genre. The first self-conscious self-help book was Samuel Smiles’s Self-Help (first edition 1859), a book filled with benevolent but stern advice rooted in post-Christian Protestant morality. It has been well-characterized as a “secular sermon” (Morris, “Samuel Smiles and Victorian Values” 63). Self-Help and its several sequels were illustrated by bits of biography of and quotations from scientists, politicians, industrialists, artists—an Olympic pantheon for the industrial age—along with Biblical wisdom. Elements of this format are retained in Peterson’s work.

The self-help genre seems to owe its genesis and success in part to reactions against social reform movements (manifestations of sociodicy). These reactions were driven, in some cases, by a perception of the destruction and violence such movements sometimes resulted in and, in other cases, by a more prosaic disillusionment and frustration. The latter seems to have driven the biodicy of Smiles (see Morris, “Samuel Smiles and the Genesis”), while an aversion to social chaos motivated Carlyle and motivates Peterson.

Furthermore, in interpreting Peterson it needs to be emphasized that my occasional use of the word ‘prophet’ is not arbitrary. Additionally tying Peterson’s work to nineteenth-century Romanticism and Cultural Protestantism, and complicating its reception, is Peterson’s use of
a mode of discourse known as sage-writing (and sage-speaking). Sage-discourse is not about transmitting information or making logical arguments; it is about awakening the audience to the dangers and possibilities of a situation. George Landow writes that the common topics of sages “include concerns to define the human, to restore the powers of language, to warn against the danger to man of technology (or mechanism), to examine the possibility of achieving heroism or the human ideal in a modern age, and above all, to read the Signs of the Times to save the audience from potential disaster” (34). All of these topics are addressed by Peterson. But perhaps more important to the sage or prophet is a specific way of using language. Some specific devices of sage-discourse that are common in Peterson’s speaking and writing are as follows:

1. Appeals to personal credibility (Landow ch. 5). These can be found in the autobiographical comments, especially regarding his clinical experience.
2. “A parallel alternation of attacks upon the audience and attempts to reassure or inspire it” (Landow 26). Peterson repeatedly reminds his readers and audience members of their capacity for evil while assuring them that they can improve their lives and do good in the world.
3. The presentation of past wisdom that has become ignored or forgotten in the present—“bringing familiar knowledge alive” (Holloway 204). This shows in Peterson's well-known reliance on myth, especially Biblical myth.
4. The use of “rich single words” (Holloway 16–17) that are defined and redefined so as to change how the audience sees the world; in Peterson’ works, such words include meaning and Being, chaos and order, heaven and hell.
5. Related to (4.), the use of an expository structure based around nodal propositions or striking images, the meanings of which are not immediately apparent, but which reveal important but elusive truths to the properly prepared reader (see Holloway 51–52, 57). While this is apparent in Peterson’s earlier work is most obvious in the ‘rules’ of his latest book.

The point of this mode of discourse, it needs to be emphasized, is not so much to convince you by tightly woven logical arguments; rather it tries to destabilize your normal mode of perception and open you up to a new way of looking at the world—which you may accept or reject according to whether or not it works for you.

**Maps of Meaning**: Crisis Autobiography and Secular Theodicy

*Maps of Meaning* is a demanding book—certainly an idiosyncratic one—and may not reward every reader. But it is instructive from the perspective of cultural history. It is something like a combination of Carlyle’s culture-theoretical spiritual autobiography *Sartor Resartus* and his later mythological-historical study *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. As with *Sartor Resartus*, and related nineteenth-century works (Wordsworth’s *Prelude* is another prime example), *Maps of Meaning* is autobiographical philosophy—the book is in part the story of its own creation.

*Maps of Meaning* is striking to a reader of nineteenth-century literature, for it begins with a condensed crisis autobiography. The crisis autobiography (sometimes biography) arose in the wake of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. For young radicals the
Enlightenment had revealed the flaws in traditional Christianity and the societies it undergirded; but then the French Revolution’s slide into bloodshed and tyranny revealed the snakes in the Enlightenment utopia of reason. Those who perceived this set of ideological flaws had their belief systems shattered; they entered the wasteland of uselessness, angst, ennui, alienation—the world without meaning or value. The crisis autobiography is about finding meaning again, about willing value into existence out of chaos.

According to the literary scholar M. H. Abrams, the crisis autobiography “translates the painful process of Christian conversion and redemption into a painful process of self-formation, crisis, and self-recognition, which culminates in a stage of self-coherence, self-awareness, and assured power that is its own reward” (96). It aims at a kind of “secular theodicy” (labelled biodicy) giving a this-world meaning to personal suffering (96).

The crisis autobiography builds on various models from the past: the confessional literature of Augustine and Rousseau, the German *Bildungsroman* and related genres, Biblical paradise-fall-redemption stories, and hero myths—the latter two of which are often discussed by Peterson himself. But the early Protestants—Martin Luther, John Knox, George Fox—also provided inspiration, especially for Carlyle. For to be a Protestant, at least in the early days, was to have perceived the flaws in a dominant ideology, without, however, having an acceptable alternative ready at hand. Protestantism was, in a sense, invented many times, so that to an outsider it appears a tangle of unclearly differentiated sects. The same can be said of Romanticism. Perhaps those movements we call Protestantism and Romanticism are historically unified not by a particular set of beliefs but by an experience—an experience of crisis. It is this crisis, and its various consequences, that Peterson addresses again and again in his writing and speaking.

Common elements of the crisis autobiography were laid out schematically by the cultural historian Morse Peckham. The progression goes something like this (see *Explanation* 274–82):

- You perceive an incoherence between your belief system and the reality your belief system is supposed to explain.
- This leads to the collapse of your belief system, perhaps even your belief in belief systems.
- As a result, you become socially withdrawn, or alienated from your community whose beliefs you no longer share.
- Overcome by a sense of meaninglessness and unsure of what to do, you begin to wander, intellectually and/or physically.
- Through your wanderings you eventually hit upon some innovative behavior which allows you to make sense of your life once again.
- You may at this point form a little group with one or more like-minded individuals. This allows you to support each others’ “anti-cultural” innovations.
- You try to introduce your innovations back into the dominant culture (what Peckham called “propagandization”) to reform or revolutionize (or redeem, in religious language) your society.

At various stages of this process looms the specter of what Peckham calls “cultural vandalism” (*Explanation* 275): your behavior may be seen as a destructive threat to cultural orthodoxy, or you may even intentionally attack—vandalize—mainstream pieties. (It is
largely Peterson’s vandalisms of ‘PC culture’ that have made him controversial, though I will not deal with this aspect here.) Minus personal details, this already is a fairly concise summary of Peterson’s career, and much of this scheme is apparent in the preface to *Maps of Meaning*.

The preface (xi–xxii) begins with the child Peterson as a de facto but unenthusiastic Protestant Christian in small-town Alberta. At around the age of twelve, perceiving incoherencies between the Bible and modern science, Peterson leaves the church. At the same time he develops “a premature concern with large-scale political and social issues.” He gets involved with “a mildly socialist political party,” dreaming of revolution to end “economic injustice” (xii). But, by now a college student, his political and social experiences lead him again to perceive incoherences in his belief system. Then—and this is key—he reads George Orwell’s *Road to Wigan Pier*. Peterson writes: “This book finally undermined me—not only my socialist ideology, but my faith in ideological stances themselves” (xiii). The problem was not, he realized, this or that ideology, but ideology itself. The consequence was profound: “Such realizations upset my beliefs (even my faith in beliefs), and the plans I had formulated as a consequence of these beliefs. I could no longer tell who was good and who was bad, so to speak—so I no longer knew whom to support, or whom to fight” (xiii). Having lost his belief systems, he loses his sense of meaning and becomes, metaphorically at least, a wanderer: “I was cast adrift; I did not know what to do or what to think” (xiv).

Near the end of *Maps of Meaning* Peterson describes this type of situation in terms comparable to the early part of the outline above: “Collapse of faith in the value hierarchy—or, more dangerously, collapse of faith in the idea of such hierarchies—brings about severe depression, intrapsychic chaos and re-emergence of existential anxiety” (479). In this vulnerable condition, the young Peterson becomes sensitive to the madness of the world around him: the nuclear arms race, prison brutality. He starts to experience psychological difficulties that gnaw at his sense of reality—at the reality of his self and of the world. Barely able to speak, beset by strange impulses and terrible nightmares, he is disconnected from society. Casting about, he latches onto the writings of Carl Jung, which provide him with a kind of methodological adhesive for reintegrating himself around the set of problems that had been tearing him to psychological pieces. As with Romantics, Protestants, and heretics down through the ages, he innovates himself out of—or is innovated out of—his own crisis. On a hint from Jung, comparative mythology, the study of how belief systems form—are—reality, lifts him out of his tortured state.

Peterson did, too, become a part of little groups, though this is not something he has given much detail about. One can, however, see the so-called Intellectual Dark Web as a kind of extended little group, in that the members’ interactions with each other reinforces their heterodox status and innovations.

Peterson’s use of comparative mythology is interesting, for it is a textbook example of the typical Romantic strategy of “perpendicular thinking” (see Peckham, *Victorian* 1–7). The comparative perspective is what you get when metaphysical-ideological crisis ejects you out of the flow of things and forces you to start looking at the world at right angles; you find yourself concerned not only with explaining the world but with explaining explanation (e.g., explaining myth). So far this is all right out of the experiences and writings of those culturally-
Protestant Romantics.

It is in the hero myth that Peterson finds his biodicy—his “antidote to chaos,” to borrow the subtitle of his second book. There is something Carlylean about this as well, in addition to the obvious resonances with Emerson, Nietzsche, Jung, Joseph Campbell, Ernest Becker—all of whom saw a need for or preached a modern form of heroism. Carlyle’s On Heroes traced the transformation (or perhaps secularization) of the hero from divinity (Odin) through prophet (Mohammed), poet, priest, man of letters, and finally king; in Past and Present he also considered “captains of industry,” challenging them to rise beyond simple greed and become the heroes of the new age. As the conditions of life have changed, Carlyle seems to say, so have our heroes.

Subsequently, as the open-access ideal spread, the concept of the hero was further democratized. The hero, Peterson and some other modern psychologists tell us, is an archetype within each of us; anyone can incarnate it. Franco and Zimbardo have called this “the banality of heroism” (30). When society is in crisis and seems poised for a “fall,” when the “anomalous” threatens to tear apart the fabric of belief, it is the hero who perceives the adaptational limitations of his or her culture and “accepts the apparently impossible task of solution” (Peterson, Maps 286). The hero ventures into the unknown, confronts the dragon of chaos, gains wisdom, and returns to redeem fallen society.

The hero is a mode of behavior available to us all, Peterson explains, when we become persistently aware of our “interests,” which signal “the presence of a potentially beneficial anomaly” (Maps 459).

Interest is a spirit beckoning from the unknown, a spirit calling from outside the “walls” of society. Pursuit of individual interest means hearkening to this spirit’s call, journeying outside the protective walls of childhood dependence and adolescent group identification, and returning to rejuvenate society. This means that pursuit of individual interest—development of true individuality—is equivalent to identification with the hero. Such identification renders the world bearable, despite its tragedies, and reduces neurotic suffering, which destroys faith, to an absolute minimum.

This is the message that everyone wants to hear. Risk your security. Face the unknown. Quit lying to yourself, and do what your heart truly tells you to do. You will be better for it, and so will the world. (459)

This is the essence of Peterson’s biodicy: identify with the hero (take responsibility for your life and for your potential for malevolence, speak the truth) and the world becomes bearable—and better. It is mainly “proved” not through logical argument but by means of the alternative tradition of sage-discourse: appeals to personal credibility and ancient wisdom, the use of “rich words” and striking but enigmatic assertions.

There is a very strong parallel here with the work of Ernest Becker in the 1960s and 1970s. Becker, though he came from a Jewish background, inherited much of the same cultural material as Peterson. Both, for example, were deeply influenced by offshoots of Freudianism, though Becker was mainly a follower of Otto Rank rather than Jung. Nevertheless he perceived clearly the spiritual crisis to which Peterson is responding. Like Peterson, Becker sought to effect “a merger of psychology and mythico-religious perspective” (Denial xi).
Becker thought that cultural systems were hero systems, organizations “in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning” (Denial 5). The crisis of modern society is a crisis of heroism: the conventional plans of action provided by modern society—based largely around career and consumption—no longer feel very heroic (6–7), and, to use Berlin’s word again, we feel “useless” (82).

Peterson paraphrases Jung to the effect that all personal crises are social crises (Maps 470). Maps of Meaning is Peterson’s effort to turn personally experienced crises into socially-relevant solutions. 12 Rules for Life is a “propagandization” (Peckham, Explanation 281) and extension of the biodicy already achieved in the more technical Maps of Meaning.

**12 Rules for Life: Self-Help as Biodicy**

More explicitly than Maps of Meaning, 12 Rules for Life represents Peterson’s attempt to propagate his insights; it and the lectures surrounding it are his true “apostolic work” (Carlyle, Sartor 138). A useful historical analog of 12 Rules for Life is Samuel Smiles’s Self-Help and its sequels. Those who find 12 Rules banal will find Smiles’s endless variations on a theme even more so. But there was an intensely hungry audience for Smiles’s old-fashioned wisdom as there is for Peterson’s. What is patronizing pedantry to one reader may be an oasis in the desert for another.

Despite all the invective directed at Peterson because of this book, I have not come across anyone yet who has seriously challenged its ethical core. In my view, this core can be summed up in a statement Peterson makes at the very beginning: “If we each live properly, we will collectively flourish” (xxxv). As his focus is on living properly, a variation on, or correlate of, this principle is his famous Rule 6: “Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world” (147), which itself has the variation “Don’t reorganize the state until you have ordered your own experience” (158). Under Rule 7, he gives yet another version of this:

> Become aware of your own insufficiency—your cowardice, malevolence, resentment and hatred. Consider the murderousness of your own spirit before you dare accuse others, and before you attempt to repair the fabric of the world. Maybe it’s not the world that’s at fault. Maybe it’s you. (198)

Note the sage-like variation on a theme and, in the last quote, the expert attack on the audience which comes straight from the prophet’s rhetorical toolbox. I suppose it is statements such as the above that, read ungenerously, have led some critics to find the book “an ugly, mean-spirited treatise against human kindness” (Barekat). But Peterson asks us to imagine: What if everyone stopped doing what they know to be wrong, did only what made them stronger and more honorable, and became aware of their limitations?

> The world might stop being an evil place. After that, with continued effort, perhaps it could even stop being a tragic place. Who knows what existence might be like if we all decided to strive for the best? Who knows what eternal heavens might be established by our spirits, purified by truth, aiming skyward, right here on the fallen Earth? (12 Rules 159)

In other words, individual development and the bearing of personal responsibility have social consequences. The way to improve society is to begin with improving yourself. It is hopefully
clear that this is not the self-interested individualism of economic rational-choice theory and not the irresponsible, “therapeutic” (Rieff), “narcissistic” (Lasch) individualism that some critics saw taking hold after World War II. It is the embedded, virtuous individualism of Romanticism. I will return to this theme, in which the justification for Peterson’s version of individualism will become clearer, in a moment. It is worth pausing to consider the counterposition.

There are various ways a counterposition might be formulated. But something like the following seems reasonable. Human beings are, from the very beginning of their lives, parts of institutions. There is no denying the influence of institutions such as the family and school on early development, and these institutions are themselves influenced by surrounding political and economic institutions. It is also indisputable that some people, by sheer luck of when and where to whom they are born, have access to better institutions than others and thus have greatly more opportunities to develop a wide range of skills at a higher level.

It is also the case that institutions can be biased (because they are “path-dependent” as specialists say, meaning that possible courses of action in the present depend on decision made in the past), leading to various inequalities. And they are slow to change, meaning that they can help perpetuate already existing inequalities. Books such as Matt Taibbi’s The Divide show how institutions can treat different classes of people very differently, to an absolutely absurdist extent: people belonging to some groups get regularly arrested for crimes authorities conjure up out of thin air, while members of other groups cannot get arrested for certain obvious crimes no matter how wantonly depraved their behavior. There are complex reasons for institutions’ differential treatment of individuals, but one is that, as economic and political bureaucracies get larger and more complex, it takes a bureaucracy to effectively deal with them. Among individuals, only the very rich can afford the army of lawyers required to confront a modern bureaucratic institution.

Wherever we turn today, we cannot escape the overwhelming controlling factor of institutions, systems, structures. Take the common conservative argument about the breakdown of black families in American cities, from which a variety of problems in the black community are thought to derive (see, e.g., Elder, McWhorter). The argument is that this breakdown was a result of the growth of the welfare state. It is simply assumed here that institutions of a particular sort caused generations of black children to grow up without fathers. The solution—getting rid of the welfare state—is apparently an institutional solution, requiring state action.

Of course, black and nonblack conservative-leaning intellectuals alike preach the non-governmental ‘cultural’ solution of accepting personal responsibility, but this hardly seems effective as a large-scale solution. The welfare theory of the fatherless black family is an admission that the incentive structures of the system are set up in such a way as to discourage personal responsibility. Larry Elder, one such critic of the welfare state, wrote in the wake of welfare reform that “Its reversal has done just what welfare critics said it would: create incentives for self-sufficiency and personal responsibility” (Elder 166). In other words, endowing individuals with a sense of personal responsibility is a matter of getting social policy right at the ‘systemic’ level. Advocating personal responsibility, then, would seem to be of little consequence without a prior reorganization of the incentive structures. American
conservatives then find themselves in the odd position of petitioning the state to make its citizenry more independent of the state.

Many large-scale social problems are of this nature. It is all well and good, the argument goes, to talk about personal responsibility, but how many people from crime-ridden neighborhoods and broken families and badly underfunded educational institutions, and with mind-numbing dead-end jobs (or no jobs at all), are going to be prepared to listen and, more importantly, act on the advice. It is hard to believe that it would be more than a few. Perhaps before we can talk about personal responsibility we need equality of opportunity to attend equally decent institutions, or institutions that are equally responsive to different groups.

I think this is a strong argument. But Peterson has a strong argument too. We will conclude by looking at the background to his own position.

We have to understand the Romantic and Petersonian projects in context. Many of those we now think of as early Romantics were enthusiastic supporters, at first, of the French Revolution. But they became horrified by the revolution’s escalating uncontrollable violence—perhaps the first modern catastrophe of identity politics. The Romantics, in other words, were supporters of large-scale social change, of emancipation, of innovation; but they were worried about the human costs of tearing away at social traditions, worried that when, as Carlyle put it, “the infinite gulf of human Passion shivered asunder the thin rinds of Habit” binding people together in association, it would “burst forth all-devouring, as in seas of Nether Fire” (“Characteristics” 42). And when this happened, no Constitution, no act of legislation, could put things back together again. In fact, it would take a tyrant.

As the early Romantics were traumatized by the course of the French Revolution, so Peterson has been scarred by his studies of Communism and National Socialism, which represent even more spectacular cases of groupism gone mad, of the capture and perversion or destruction of society’s institutions, of the obliteration of masses of individual lives “in seas of Nether Fire.”

The Romantic solution was a kind of individualism and a suspicion of institutional meddling. The basic idea was captured well by Smiles, erstwhile social justice activist, at the beginning of his *Self-Help*:

> Even the best institutions can give a man no active help. Perhaps the most they can do is, to leave him free to develop himself and improve his individual condition. But in all times men have been prone to believe that their happiness and well-being were to be secured by means of institutions rather than by their own conduct. Hence the value of legislation as an agent in human advancement has usually been much over-estimated. […] Laws, wisely administered, will secure men in the enjoyment of the fruits of their labour, whether of mind or body, at a comparatively small personal sacrifice; but no laws, however stringent, can make the idle industrious, the thriftless provident, or the drunken sober. Such reforms can only be effected by means of individual action, economy, and self-denial; by better habits, rather than by greater rights. (1–2)

What is the justification for this kind of individualism? What does anyone gain by it? The cultural historian Peckham has warned that “Romantic individualism is not, in the ordinary sense of the term, individualism at all” (*Victorian* 77). It is not, at least, a matter of “self-
interest” in the economic sense. The Romantics focused on the self, or personality or individual consciousness, as a site of research because it was ethically less problematic. The dangers of altering the self were comparatively less than those of altering large social structures. Changing a social structure—an institution, a city—meant changing others, and you could never be sure you were not violating them in some terrible way. Each self is a manifestation of divinity, or is to be treated as a “fragment of the divine,” as Peterson has said (“Jordan Peterson at Lafayette” 1:53:32), and not to be violated.

Another way to put this is that the power of this form of individualism lies in turning the exploitative drive on the self. Learn to exploit your own resources—your ability to learn, strive, endure—for intellectual, spiritual, even economic gain. Peterson’s maxim about cleaning your room might be rephrased: Learn to properly exploit yourself (your own resources) before you dare to exploit others. It is by no means easy to change yourself, or a limited institution such as your family. The world “kicks back at you” when you try to change, as Peterson has put it (“Biblical Series VIII” 38:35). The consequences are hard to predict, and making changes requires careful experimentation. Knowing what alterations to make to large economic or political institutions, such that some actual good comes of it, is a problem many orders of magnitude greater.

The Romantics generally conceived of individuals not as isolated atoms bumping off each other, or as puzzle pieces to be fitted together in just the right way, but as delicately interconnected fields of experience and behavior forming an organic social whole. Novalis put it this way: “Society is nothing but communal living—one indivisible thinking and feeling person. Each human being is a society in miniature” (30). The Romantic self was a precipitate of history and culture, and so to experiment with the self was, in a nontrivial way, to experiment with society. At the same time, because the Romantics saw self and society as organically interrelated, to change the self was also to change the surrounding society in a way that maintained the freedom of other selves. The other individuals around you must, perhaps, respond to your self-directed self-development but they can always reject it or ignore it. On the other hand, they might come around to your perspective, see something of use in what you’re doing, and follow you; thus behavioral innovations can work their way deeper into the fabric of society, one individual at a time. How else, the argument goes, do you reform institutions except by reforming the individuals who go into them, by teaching them how to exploit their own resources and so making them resistant to institutional procedures that have become stultified and harmful?

This idea of gradual social change through personal development, apparent in Peterson’s words about living properly as individuals so that we can flourish as collectives, is clearly apparent in Smiles’s *Self-Help*. It is the justification for the whole project. In a passage that I suspect Peterson would endorse, Smiles wrote:
There is something solemn and awful in the fact that there is not an act nor thought in the life of a 
human being but carries with it a train of consequences, the end of which we may never trace. […] 
The good deed or thought will live, even though we may not see it fructify, but so will the bad. […] 
There is indeed an element of immortality in the life of man, even in this world. No individual in the 
universe stands alone; he is a component part of a system of mutual dependencies; and by his several 
acts, he either increases or diminishes the sum of human good now and forever. […] It is in this 
momentous and solemn fact, that the great peril and responsibility of human existence lies. (295–96)

Whether all this is a good account of human behavior and social constitution may be 
debated. But it is worth re-emphasizing that Peterson’s Romantic individualism should be 
distinguished from the methodological or atomistic individualism of classical economic 
theory. Romantic organicism, which views individuals as intricately connected by a delicate 
and ever-rewoven social fabric, provides a justification for focusing on individual 
development, for keeping your room clean. (Peterson has given further examples in his 
various public lectures of how the simple act of cleaning your room, or making other small 
changes to your life, can have far-reaching social consequences [e.g., “Twelve Rules” 19:35].) 
It remains for his critics to dispute this and to show how reforming institutions (by changing 
laws, or by capturing leadership positions) would have better social outcomes than 
reforming individuals.

Peterson says you shouldn’t tinker with social institutions until you’ve got your own life in 
order; his critics say you can’t be expected to put your life in order when you’re embedded in 
corrupt institutions. Is there a middle, pari passu path? Maybe. But it seems to me Peterson 
has the edge here in that modern “perpetually-lived” organizations (North et al.)—the state, 
the large business corporation, the major university—are so unfathomably complex and so 
intricately involved with each other that we cannot count on the good intentions of 
reformers to have good consequences, and neither can we count on such institutions to have 
our best interests at heart. Some institutions, too big to fail, even seem now to be simply 
above the law (too big to jail), and entirely outside the reach of individual initiative. The 
suffering of individuals who are marginalized by our still imperfectly open-access societies is 
real. But those of us who have some minimum of material and psychobiological resources 
have the capacity to develop ourselves, if we are exposed to the right ideas—to develop 
ourselves so as to be able to resist order that has become tyrannical and to face the anxiety 
of the unknown. Whether this will be enough to save the open-access order is anyone’s 
guess.

Conclusion

One can argue that the traditions I have discussed—that Peterson’s Cultural Protestant 
liberalism and Romantic individualism—should have no place in the culture at present. But 
that Peterson’s rise indicates the existence of a deep spiritual crisis emerging from and 
capable of riving the open-access order seems a fact too brute and glaring to dispute. The 
Peterson moment—and it is, after all, only a moment—is, for some people, a redemptive 
moment, a moment that “reveals” that life is, as Peckham used to say, “worth the trouble it 
takes to live it” (Triumph 193). For these people Peterson offers a tool—a biodicy—whereby 
the inevitable sufferings of life can be managed and turned to advantage, if not eliminated.
Certainly, Peterson’s secular theodicy will not be everybody’s cup of tea. Its ‘truth,’ as with all sage-like works, is in its application to your life. That Peterson has a message, no one can question. That it is more dangerous than other messages provided by our culture—that it is truly “reactionary chauvinism” (Barekat) or “fascist mysticism” (Mishra)—is doubtful. It can, to the contrary, be argued that strengthening individuals makes them less susceptible to power-seeking ideologues (who exploit feelings of spiritual confusion, political weakness, social resentment) and more resistant to institutional pressures that have become ‘pathological’ (i.e., dangerous to society).

Although I have focused on Peterson’s views and their historical background, much work also needs to be done to better understand the complexities of social–justice–warrior–culture. If Peterson’s young leftist critics have been guilty, to the point of near-absurdity, of interpreting him in the worst possible light, Peterson too is not guiltless. Peterson sees in the SJW phenomenon a fetishizing of victimhood, a resentment gone wild, a lust for power. All of this may sometimes be the case. But as Peckham also warned, it is not always a simple matter to distinguish between “a love for justice” or “egalitarianism” and “resentment” (Romanticism 240). Nor is it easy to distinguish between those who are legitimately compassionate and those who wish to gain power by using what Peterson called “legitimate issues ambiguously” (qtd. in Rand, New 18).

The question of access can help clarify the competing forces in Western culture. Do we truly want an open-access or a limited-access society? It would not, after all, be outside the bounds of reason to judge open access as a noble but failed experiment (though the consequences of failure would likely be disastrous). But if we do want open access, what do we really mean by ‘equity/equality’ (equality of what?) and how far are we willing to go to achieve it? What methods are acceptable in pursuing it? Moreover, we have to understand—and this may be the primary lesson to draw from Peterson—that open access comes with spiritual crises that need to be managed. But, just as importantly, as the best of social justice culture teaches, it also puts on us the duty to doggedly pursue imperfections in access and, when some threshold is reached, to alleviate suffering resulting from those imperfections. Open-access orders, it seems to me, need both those like Peterson—prophets of individualistic heroism and spiritualism—and social justice activists—seekers of justice, equality, and happiness for the many.

Notes

[1] Probably the best place to find personal reactions to Peterson by non-media professionals is the Jordan Peterson Subreddit by searching for “flair_name: Letter.”

[2] The term ‘spirit’ has many meanings and is used in several different senses by Peterson. I will try to be consistent in this essay. Peterson has given a useful pragmatist-behaviorist definition: “Well, let’s imagine that a spirit is a pattern of Being. We know that patterns can be transmitted across multiple substrates, right? Vinyl, electronic impulses, air, vibrations in your ear, neurological patterns, dance: it’s all the translation of what you might describe as a spirit. It’s that pattern. It’s independent of its material substrate” (Transliminal 1:34:20; cf. Maps 153). In this way we can make sense of phrases such as “good spirit,” “evil spirit,” “heroic spirit,” “totalitarian spirit,” and so on. They are patterns for organizing behavior.
which, I would add, imply a system of values. Spirits (as ways of being) are maintained by the broader culture and passed down over time from generation to generation. They are adaptations to the world which protect the individual “from darkness and chaos.” But a spirit can break down when subjected to critical reflection, contradictory ideologies, experiences it can't handle, and the like (see Peterson, *Maps* 153, 391). There can be a crisis of the spirit. Spirit in this sense is perhaps akin to Hegel's *Geist* and is also closely related to what we commonly mean by culture. Peckham has given a pragmatist-behaviorist interpretation of *Geist* (*Birth* 251–53, *Romantic* 92–96) that fits well with Peterson's discussions of spirit and cultural transformation in *Maps of Meaning*.

[3] I use the term Cultural Protestantism somewhat more loosely than it is sometimes used in the historiography of religion. The Cultural Protestants of whom I speak were raised in largely Protestant environments but may have rejected much of the Christian faith, to the point of being agnostic or atheistic. They were, however, generally individualistic and egalitarian and suspicious of current political structures (whether of state or church), though not necessarily political structures in general.

**Works Cited**


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