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On Jordan Peterson's political correctness and the 'radical left'

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For a couple of weeks now, the University of Toronto (U of T) community has been debating, engaging with, and responding to the comments made publically by Jordan Peterson, professor of psychology, in criticizing Bill C-16 and the charged idea of "political correctness."

Bill C-16 amends the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Criminal Code to include gender identity and gender expression as possible grounds of discrimination and to protect against intentional and unintentional gender-based hate. Discrimination is not a new topic within the Canadian legislation, and what this new bill activates, is mainly the addition of gender to the already existent categorical grounds of discrimination, such as race, national or ethnic origin, language, colour, religion, sex, age, as well as mental or physical disability. At the moment, there are **six provinces** (<http://www.tesaonline.org/human-rights-across-canada.html>) that explicitly list 'gender identity' and 'gender expression' in their human rights legislation: Alberta, British Columbia, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Ontario and Prince Edward Island.

In a series of YouTube videos released about two weeks ago, Peterson goes through entire paragraphs of the Ontario Human Rights' Commission Gender Identity and Gender Expression Brochure, criticizing its content, attacking its language, and further arguing against the ideology of what we have come to know as "political correctness," a totalitarian concept in Peterson's mind, supported by an uninformed and resentful Marxist and semi-Marxist doctrine of the radical left, which seems to have found encouragement in the current federal and provincial liberal governments. Since historical evidence supports that identifying as a Marxist is no better than identifying as a Nazi, and since claims for equality, diversity and "that kind of thing" are purely ideological and do not put a stop to any hate discourse (since shutting someone's up will not change someone's mind), Peterson concludes that, the



on a recent **CBC Radio interview** (<http://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-friday-edition-1.3786140/i-m-not-a-bigot-meet-the-u-of-t-prof-who-refuses-to-use-genderless-pronouns-1.3786144>), hence he defends his right to use whatever language he pleases while declining to recognize another person's right of determining how they want to be addressed.

Since such dialogues did not take place in a bus station nor at the local bar, but rather within an academic context (Peterson being referred to as the "professor who slams political correctness"), it is important to draw attention on some fallacies that weigh on Peterson's thought.

First, there is no historical evidence that Marxism is as totalitarian as Nazism. Perhaps Peterson tacitly refers to the Stalinist systems from the former Soviet Bloc, however, it has been argued, for example, by the Hungarian Marxist philosopher, **Gáspár Miklós Tamás** (<http://www.edituratact.ro/produs/postfascism-si-anticomunism/>). (among others), that the Soviet regimes were merely systems of state capitalism and not mot-à-mot establishments of applied Marxism. More so, Marxism is quite different from Nazism, in terms of political orientation and desired societal outcomes. Marxist ideals derive from notions of equality and equity and not from charged principles of nationalist pride and ethnic supremacy.

Second, ideas related to political correctness, or what we have come to know as identity politics, do not originate from Marxism per se but rather from the field of post-colonial and subaltern studies, despite such approaches initially departing from within Marxist thought, as **Vivek Chibber** (<https://www.versobooks.com/books/1158-postcolonial-theory-and-the-specter-of-capital>), a New York University scholar, has shown. The culture of political correctness, geared towards politicizing cultural representations and identities, has taken ground in the 80s, when anti-racist and feminist activists started to fight for the development and implementation of institutional and organizational policies that would create equal representation and increase representational access for groups systemically and systematically under-represented (in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, etc.) in the public field. Yet such representational ideas of access and equity tend to reject the archetypal Marxist insistences on class inequalities and focus instead on axes of dominance based on different particularities (i.e. as defined by categorical -isms). In short, we could perhaps talk about a post-Marxian cultural theory in terms of identity politics and not necessarily a Marxist one.

Third, the radical left does not constitute a universal self-encompassing term and it is highly debatable that political correctness is in fact sustained by radical left ideals. This is of course dependent on where does Peterson place the radical left on the political spectrum. If he presumptuously equates liberalism with the radical left (which he seems to do) then of course anything slightly left of the centre would be



context, would rarely pass as radical in Latin America or Europe, where radical would be more about occupying a public institution rather than facilitating access to it. Arguably, if the idea of political correctness were too radical, it would not have been institutionalized.

Forth, if claims for equality, diversity and "that kind of thing" are ideological, so is the position of ignoring them. "Ideology" is a term that originated in the late 18th century, from the French *idéologie*, although initially from the Greek idea of "form, pattern" as combined with *logos*, denoting discourse or compilation. According to the Oxford Dictionaries, "ideology" is nowadays defined as a system of ideas and ideals which forms the basis of our economic or political theory and policy. While Peterson tends to view ideology as a separate thing, a possession that only the radical leftists seem to be endowed with, it is equally ideological to claim that gender identity is fixed on binary categories, a position epistemologically rooted in positivism (a universal certitude of truth-based natural phenomena) and theoretically rooted in structural-functionalism (there are systems of structures in the world that make the world function, such as the existence of male/female categories, hence is undesirable to abruptly change the systems, since this would result in the society not being able to function -- and any non-binary forms of gender will disrupt the natural male/female order of things), politically concerned with preserving the status quo and economically supporting a free market society as the ultimate regulatory of individual needs. No governing body should decide whose needs should be accommodated, Peterson states, since this is done by the market, and regulated via individuals' purchasing power. Yet such a statement clearly reflects a strong ideological grounding of neoliberalism and individualism.

Fifth, why should Peterson's right over his use of language should prevail over other people's rights? Unless someone thinks he is God, and he should have the right to determine how he addresses everyone. And if I ask you to call me Bob and you insist on calling me David, because in your mind I look like a David and not a Bob, what legitimates your right to override my stated wish of calling me Bob?

Lastly, it would have been beneficial if Peterson would have explained what he means by and how he defines the terminology of political correctness, ideology, Marxism, liberalism and the radical left. The audience might have had a better understanding of what he tries to convey and perhaps his words would not have spurred the ulterior trans-phobic treats directed at queer and trans-identified people on the U of T campus.

The arguments against identity politics and political correctness can be made on two grounds. From a radical left premise, which takes categorical thinking as passé and aims to surpass categories and renounce difference, since it starts from the basis that representing differences also maintains differences. And from further on the right, whereas binary categories are taken sine qua non, as



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GENDER IDENTITY (/CATEGORY/TAGS-ISSUES/GENDER-IDENTITY)

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POLITICAL CORRECTNESS (/CATEGORY/TAGS/POLITICAL-CORRECTNESS)

BILL C-16 (/CATEGORY/TAGS/BILL-C-16)

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