

The Debate between Slavoj Žižek and Jordan Peterson

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Resumen: La presente colaboración es una reseña sobre el debate llevado a cabo entre los intelectuales de izquierda y derecha, respectivamente, Slavoj Žižek y Jordan Peterson. En el debate se analizan cuestiones importantes para las ciencias sociales y las humanidades en general en el mundo contemporáneo. En la presente reseña primero se contextualiza el debate, luego el autor se adentra en los principales conceptos adoptados por Peterson en relación con Žižek. Se culmina con un análisis de lo que significa el posmodernismo.

Palabras clave: Slavoj Žižek, Jordan Peterson, Marxismo, Posmodernismo, Capitalismo.

Abstract: The present collaboration is a review of the debate between the leftist and rightist intellectuals, respectively, Slavoj Žižek and Jordan Peterson. The debate discusses important issues for the social sciences and humanities in general in the contemporary world. In this review, the debate is first contextualized, then the author delves into the main concepts adopted by Peterson in relation to Žižek. It culminates with an analysis of what postmodernism means.

Keywords: Slavoj Žižek, Jordan Peterson, Marxism, Postmodernism, Capitalism.

INTRODUCTION

This Good Friday, April 19, Jordan Peterson, a Canadian psychologist and YouTube celebrity met Slavoj Žižek, Slovenian philosopher, Marxist and “Fighting Atheist” in Toronto Sony Center to argue, what would rather bring happiness - Capitalism or Marxism? Peterson is known for his ironic mind and sarcastic style of discussion, and Žižek, suffering from a nervous tick, often allows himself expressions far from academic.

Naturally, Sony Center Security was on guard to ensure that the intellectual duel did not become physical.

Fortunately for them, the event was very calm, if not boring. Dr. Žižek was unusually polite and decent and delivered extensive “complex” more general than was expected speech. Dr. Peterson tried as a student in the exam to prove that he read “The Communist Manifesto” and at the same time as a clinical psychologist attempted to analyze the mental state of Marx.

During the event, it turned out that there was some misunderstanding of the meaning of words. Žižek even had to ask a few times: “Where did you find this data?” “Where is the Marxist element in what you described as postmodern neo-Marxism?” “Give me some names of egalitarian neo-Marxists.”

Indeed, Dr. Peterson in public lectures and YouTube videos widely uses words “Marxism,” “Modernism,” “Postmodernism,” however, never gives an explicit definition of what he means by them. Although in scientific discussion, the generally accepted approach is that participants first clarify terminology to understand what they are arguing.

Marxism is a model for describing the processes and relationships that take place in human societies and their development over time and determine the general direction of the historical process.

MARXISM

During his “12 Rules for Life” presentation in Iceland, answering a question: “What can Marxism contribute to our modern-day world?” Jordan Peterson said: “It can contribute Venezuela.”

Well, not any drug-dealer gang leader, who is using social oriented populist rhetoric is a Marxist.

And “Venezuela”? Really? What about China – second world economy, ruled by Communist Party (the Party) and led by prominent Marxist chairman Xi?

In YouTube video “Political Correctness and Postmodernism” Professor says: “It’s a Marxist interpretation and the interpretation is that the best way to look at the world is through the lens of oppressor versus oppressed.”

No, it’s not. Of course, YouTube format allows to neglect the completion of sentences, but still, this understanding of Marxism is not precisely accurate. The Marxian class theory is not about conflict of oppressed with oppressors, but the contradiction between exploiters and exploited - classes. Moreover, by classes Marx’s theory implies “large groups of people, differing by their place in the historically defined system of social production - produce or not, relation to the ownership of the means of production - own or not, share in product/ profit distribution – the largest, the lowest, scanty.”

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The determining factor, according to Marx, is the economy, or rather Forces of Production, the physical means, and techniques used in the production of products for sale.

Production relations, the economic relations in which people enter into the process of social production, must correspond to the nature and level of development of the productive forces - and not vice versa.

The realignment of production relations with attendant class struggle leads, usually, through a revolution, to the emergence of a new socio-economic formation and, generally speaking, to most historical changes in human society.

This is the so-called Historical Materialism, formulated by Marx materialistic concept of history: The material conditions of the social mode of production and social relations of production fundamentally determine the organization and development of society. History is the result, above all, of material conditions, not ideas.

It is a pretty simplified model, it misses a lot of details and nuances, but it allows us to see the big picture and describes long-term processes.

J.P. continues: “It’s no secret that the postmodernists emerged out of an underlying Marxist framework, and never they didn’t abandon they merely modified it, so it went from bourgeois against proletariat to you know one identity group after against the other, but it was still oppressor-oppressed narrative.”

You know, it’s not a secret, that if you “merely modified” something, it’s not the same anymore.

“So, I don’t buy the postmodern argument that it’s compassion that’s driving the postmodern alliance with Marxism ... And I can’t accept the argument that it’s compassion that’s driving it, so it’s wrong that way”.

No, of course not. Marxism has absolutely nothing with compassion, charity, benevolence, or mercy. It is all about equality or rather fairness – from the economic, production point of view. It’s all about the process of production and the relationship or struggle between the people/classes involved in it.

In the #2 most popular, according to Big Think, video of 2018 “The fatal flaw lurking in American leftist politics” Dr. Peterson says: “The force that’s driving the activism is mostly the Marxism rather than the post-modernism. It’s more like an intellectual gloss to hide the fact that a discredited economic theory is being used to fuel an educational movement and to produce activists. But there’s no coherence to it.”

“French intellectuals in particular just pulled off a sleight of hand and transformed Marxism into post-modern identity politics.” I repeat: “They transformed Marxism into postmodern Identity Politics.”

Well, there is another interpretation.

Francis Fukuyama, in his essay “Against Identity Politics” gives a detailed logical explanation of the Left Movement realignment from Marxist ideas to the postmodern Identity Politics.

“For the most part, twentieth-century politics was defined by economic issues. On the left, politics centered on workers, trade unions, social welfare programs, and redistributive policies.”

In the last century Left Protest movement leaned to “Orthodox Marxism” with the class struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, down to proletarian revolution, for economic fairness, equality and against exploitation.

“Politics today, however, is defined less by economic or ideological concerns than by questions of identity. Now, in many democracies, the left focuses less on creating broad economic equality and more on promoting the interests of a wide variety of marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities, immigrants and refugees, women, and LGBT people.”

As well as the Black Lives Matter movement, Me Too, transgender activists...

“Political leaders have mobilized followers around the idea that their dignity has been affronted and must be restored... Again and again, groups have come to believe that their identities—whether national, religious, ethnic, sexual, gender, or otherwise—are not receiving adequate recognition.”

“Marxists had to confront the fact that communist societies in China and the Soviet Union had turned into grotesque and oppressive dictatorships. At the same time, the working class in most industrialized democracies had grown richer and had begun to merge with the middle class.”

“With China’s shift toward a market economy after 1978 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Marxist left largely fell apart. The left continued to be defined by its passion for equality, but its agenda shifted from the earlier emphasis on the working class to the demands of an ever-widening circle of marginalized minorities.”

Instead of the “desire for material resources” and economic equality of the 20th century, now Left focus on the desire of minorities to be recognized as the equal or even superior groups. Marxism has not “merely changed” or “rebranded” and transformed to Postmodernism, but Left movement got disappointed in Marxism, class struggle and social revolution and realigned to Identity Politics and minorities rights.

Identity politics may be related to Postmodernism, but not to Marxism.

MODERNISM

“You cannot win if you play identity politics...- Peterson says, - The reason that the West privileges the individual is because we figured out 2,000 years ago, 3,000 years ago, that you can fractionate group identity appropriately right down to the level of the individual.”

3,000 years? This year we will celebrate 230 years since the Declaration by the French Revolution of the Rights of Man and the Citizen: all “people are born and remain free and equal in rights.” It was the very first time when the equality of people was proclaimed. And it was more like a declaration of intent, goal, and hope for the bright future, not yet actual achievement. It was just a beginning.

But before that, most of the “West privileges” were pretty much based on class affiliation, estate privilege, ancestry, the color of the skin, gender. The status of a person was determined by the identity of the group to which they belong, just 230 years ago – in the pre-modern, pre-industrial world.

Through the sequence of bourgeois revolutions, the new movement grew and evolved and eventually, at the end of the 19th-century new ideology of Modernism found its meaning, boundaries, and “symbol of faith.”

New Industrial economy and urban society developed and established new Modernist philosophy.

Modernism defeated traditional pre-industrial Pre-modernism, which was based on conservative values, archaic traditional relationships and first of all a Religion. It’s fair to say that God was the center and sense of Pre-Modern world. Pre-modernism expressed the meaning of life, the purpose of individual, society, and humanity through the religious belief, faith, Divine Providence.

Opposite, Core Values of Modernism or rather Modern Western industrial Civilization became Private property, Free enterprise, Open markets, Rule of Law, Human rights, Democracy, Safety, Dignity, Respect, Gratitude, and, first of all, Personal Independence and Liberty.

Modernist industrial Market economy and Liberal democracy can exist only under one necessary and sufficient condition: absolute personal freedom of an individual.

The industrial productive economy needs active personally free businesspeople – investors, employers, financial advisors, managers, wage-earners. The open market needs

independent, solvent customers, and consumers. Individualism, equal opportunities, and freedom of choice means Modernism.

When Modernism removed Pre-modernism from the scene, it established in the center of the Universe, an Individual. The free will of the modernist human being replaced or figuratively speaking killed God. “God is dead, and we have killed him.”

This new godless ideology – modernist, or western, or Competitive Market economy Liberal democracy happened to be extremely useful. Probably most efficient in Human history. It brought out the industrial revolution, manufactory, coal mines, oil wells, internal combustion engine, Nuclear Power Plant and bomb, high-speed trains, radio, TV, Internet, mutual funds, insurance, investment, antibiotics, energy drinks, iPhone, space travel, and all-inclusive vacation package. All those people could dream and even more.

Let me give you an example. My parents - young graduated engineers in the Soviet Union (in a sense, the Soviet Union was pre-modern society) must wait for a private apartment 17 years. Eventually, Government gave it to them – for FREE, but all these years they had to live in a Communal apartment - apartment of three rooms, with a shared kitchen and bathroom, where two other families lived - one family in one place.

In Modernist western country, the young couple will buy private home or condo as soon as they want, and then they will pay a mortgage (it’s French, means pledge till death) for 30 years. Well, 30 is more than 17, but during these 30 years, Modernist young couple already has their property and quality of life and don’t have to share the cooking area and toilet with strangers. However, they must be very cautious and don’t miss any payment, keep their jobs, stay out of trouble and illness, manage time and money. Modern style life forces individuals to be proactive, efficient, adventurous, push themselves, educate, compete, fight, and succeed. While my parents were just waiting.

But the efficiency came with a price.

POSTMODERNISM...WHAT'S NEXT?

Yuval Harari in his prophetic book *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* writes: "Modernity is a deal: Humans agree to give up meaning in exchange for power. Until modern times most cultures believed that humans played a part in some great cosmic plan. Premodern humans found that their lives gained meaning."

Modern culture rejects this belief. Life has no script, no playwright, no director, no producer – and no meaning. The modern world does not believe in purpose."

Any religion, any faith implies belief in causality, the concept of righteousness and sin, sacred meaning of life, mysterious purpose, and destiny. The Modernist ideology, on the other hand, focuses exclusively on the present - profit, income, results, performance, stocks, and shares, but does not have a concept of the future.

The modern world makes people atomized and lonely – very "individual," which is very uncomfortable and scary for mammalian instincts. Ultimately, human beings are social animals.

They seek understanding of like-minded people, group support, protection, common identity, and soul mates. Modern people are tired of being modernists. They seek identity beyond modern cells - office, condo, an RRSP account, and financial obligations. They are de-individualizing and post-modernizing. The Postmodern generation of the digital post-industrial era and of the world of global online connections is boring to live only to pay off the mortgage and does not accept consumerism as the meaning of life.

"Modernity is based on the firm belief that economic growth is not only possible but essential. 'If you have a problem, you need more stuff.' Belief in economic growth is a religion of Modernity."

Yes, that is right! The powerful engine of Modern economy - credit stimulation, will not work without constant stable growth - otherwise, how will the loan be repaid? This is why the slightest slowdown in growth causes market panic.

"From its belief in the supreme value of growth, capitalism deduce its number one commandment: thou shalt invest thy profits in increasing growth. Yet can the economy actually keep growing forever?"

No, it can't. There is a limitation – space and time. The modernist Western Capitalist project can continue to grow, expanding through the absorption of new territories, including new countries and nations into the Global world market. Or it can grow by spending the future profit, namely taking a loan at interest. But the term of debt maturity is limited by debtor's lifetime. You cannot have an amortization period of 200 years. And accessible territory is limited by the size of the globe - we have only one planet!

Karl Marx, in his "Das Kapital," as Adam Smith even before him, formulated these timing boundaries of Capitalism. However, for Marx and Smith, it was a purely theoretical forecast for a very distant future, but we have reached that point.

Since Globalization is complete, there are no more countries to absorb, and Bank loan rate reduced to 0 or even negative values, Western Modernist civilization has reached its historical limit. The modernist development model has exhausted its growth opportunities. The System does not work as before, it is at a historical dead. We have reached a point beyond the uncertainty.

Stephen Hicks, in his *Explaining Postmodernism* book, wrote: "By most accounts, we have entered a new intellectual age." Physicists call this phase transition.

We can see the alarming signs of this everywhere - in international politics, economics, religion, education. Even such a simple and obvious for the first glance topic as a gender definition now is a subject of aggressive discussion and violent misunderstanding.

As a creative, sensitive person, Peterson feels some "upcoming disturbance in the force," although can neither explain nor define it. He is trying to translate his perception of reality into the terminology of his Cold war-torn childhood. That is why he calls Postmodernism "Marxism." He even began his personal crusade against "Postmodernism: How and why it must be fought," including the idea of a website to expose certain university classes as "indoctrination cults."

Unfortunately, Postmodernism and Identity politics are not some kinds of new revolutionary anti-Modernism protest ideology that can be fought. This is a logical continuation and the result of the historical development of Modernism, its last phase. It is a symptom of severe illness and crisis of



Modernism, a manifestation of its degradation, premonition of historical fatality.

We have no idea what will happen, and we are not ready for that. Postmodernism is not a challenge, but a warning. Some even believe that the Modern Western world does not resemble Russia or France before the revolution, but the Roman Empire in the last days on the eve of the arrival of the barbarians.

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