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Constructing the enemy in the process of virtue signalling: A critical reflexion on media representations of Jordan Peterson

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Propaganda and its masks of virtue
La propaganda y sus máscaras de la virtud

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Article abstract

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Logiques médiatiques et infortunes de la vertu / Media logics and misfortunes of virtue / Lógica mediática e infortunios de la virtud

Constructing the enemy in the process of virtue signalling: a critical reflexion on media representations of Jordan Peterson

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Cet article dépeint une analyse de la construction médiatique d'un personnage controversé, le professeur et psychologue clinicien canadien Jordan Peterson, comme fragment de la culture populaire. Basée sur les méthodes de la critique littéraire et sur la comparaison, l'interprétation des thèmes et du style, avec l'appui d'images et de libellés circulant dans les médias, la réflexion critique proposée ne porte pas sur ses idées, mais la manière dont les médias ont influencé leurs audiences en créant un ennemi à travers leurs représentations de cet intellectuel public. Le texte est une tentative de l'auteur, qui a vécu en régime communiste totalitaire, de démontrer comment les techniques de propagande, telles que la vertu ostentatoire, stigmatisent.

Mots-clés : vertu ostentatoire, ennemi public, idéologie, caricature.

This article depicts an analysis of the media production of a controversial figure, Canadian professor and clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson, as a fragment of popular culture. Based on the methods of literary criticism and on the comparison, interpretation of themes and style, with the support of images and wordings circulating in the media, the proposed critical reflection does not concern his ideas, but how the media influenced their audiences by creating an enemy through their representations of this public intellectual. The text is an attempt by the author, who lived under a totalitarian communist regime, to demonstrate how propaganda techniques, such as virtue signalling, stigmatize.

Keywords: virtue signalling, public enemy, ideology, caricature.

Este artículo describe un análisis de la construcción mediática de un personaje controvertido, el profesor y psicólogo clínico canadiense Jordan Peterson, como fragmento de la cultura popular. Basada en los métodos de la crítica literaria y en la comparación, la interpretación de los temas y del estilo, con el apoyo de imágenes y textos que circulan en los medios de comunicación, la reflexión crítica propuesta no se refiere a sus ideas, pero la forma en que los medios de comunicación han influido en sus audiencias creando un enemigo a través de sus representaciones de este intelectual público. El texto es un intento de la autora, que vivió en un régimen comunista totalitario, de demostrar cómo las técnicas de propaganda, como la virtud ostentosa, estigmatizan.

Palabras clave : virtud ostentosa, enemigo público, ideología, caricatura.

The rise of Jordan Peterson as a public intellectual

Jordan Peterson is one of the most controversial intellectuals of our time. The Canadian clinical psychologist (now retired) and now emeritus professor became the subject of public interest in 2016, when he publicly opposed the adoption by the Canadian Parliament of Bill C-16¹. The Bill required people to use certain pronouns *by law*. His argument was that a state can restrict certain words and phrases if they are deemed offensive but should not impose speech. That would - in his opinion - infringe on people's freedom of expression. Language, in his view, is a living phenomenon, and when changes are necessary and acknowledged by most speakers, such changes appear. Nevertheless, changes should *not* be imposed by law, because then one can speak of censorship. Obviously, imposed speech and censorship are common tools of totalitarian regimes, which base their political policing on propaganda, wooden language, standardized behaviours, and political correctness.

Soon after this public stand, Jordan Peterson's past as an outstanding professor and researcher was forgotten by his opponents. Instead his activity was scrutinized to find faults and *early signs of patriarchy and white supremacy*, his entire work ridiculed, and his personality reduced to a caricature. In 1999, Professor Peterson wrote his fundamental study *Maps of meaning: The architecture of belief*, which is a collection of lectures on systems of belief and meaning. To understand such systems, his study draws first on the work of Carl Gustav Jung, whom he declares to be the most important influence on his understanding of evolutionary psychology; then, he used a variety of *stories* (mythological, religious, philosophical, and literary), proving an extraordinary capacity to understand the way the human mind has evolved and put everything it discovered and experienced into meaningful stories. Many of his university courses are recorded and can be still watched on YouTube. To an objective eye they do not seem to be examples of indoctrination in any way.² Still, after his controversial stand against Bill C-16, suddenly some students expressed their displeasure with the professor and started calling him a *Nazi*. Not all students, obviously, but those who were more vocal and whose voices were heard.

His academic record, though, was much more important than just a book. Peterson wrote numerous academic articles, supervised numerous Ph.D. students, and was a much esteemed and respected researcher and a clinician. A search of his academic profile on Google, shows a significant number of quotations. He has almost twenty thousand citations, of which ten thousand are before 2018. His h-index is 69, his i10-index is 109.³ Academics know how extraordinary these numbers are, and to say that everything he wrote, and all his work can be discarded because he opposed a certain bill seems to me to be at least questionable. Attacks on him increased after he published his book *12 rules for life. An antidote to chaos*, in 2018. The book was a best seller, with worldwide distribution and translated in many languages. He started to be invited to speak about this book on various internet podcasts and programs as well as on television and radio stations. Some interviews were carried out by neutral commentators and presenters, some were friendly, but some were conducted in such a way as to demonstrate that Jordan Peterson was a misogynist, a white

1. Bill C-16: An Act to amend the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Criminal Code. <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csj-sjc/pl/identity-identite/statement-enonce.html>

2. The author of this study is a philologist, but she has watched a few of these courses and noticed not only that they were 'normal' university courses, but that students seem to be engaged and very concentrated, following their professor. - Jordan Peterson Best Classroom Courses. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_7hCPYgXEk&list=PL3btR_wWSe7V_hla8iXvUWyXzttWUkR7o

3. Google Scholar Profile is very important for European researchers, as it shows all books/articles that the author uploaded with the respective citations, years, and indexes. Peterson's profile can be found at <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=wL1F22UAAA&hl=en>

patriarch, a person who encouraged men to be violent, and a person who spoke about order and meaning in an attempt to impose a radical and an extremist right-wing vision on life. One such interview was with reporter Cathy Newman, whom Jordan Peterson contradicted with arguments. He attempted to show that none of her accusations were true, and that he was concerned with the lack of meaning for both men and women, that he considered that both genders have much to lose because of propaganda, and that he was not encouraging men towards violence, but towards being responsible and hard-working. After these interviews he became a world-famous public intellectual. He toured all over the world for one year (2018-2019), with thousands and thousands of people going to his talks and presentations, paying tickets to just listen to him speak about *12 rules for life*.

2019-2020 were years of struggle for Peterson, but he came back in 2021 with a second book *Beyond order: 12 more rules for life*, which was just as successful as the first. Since then, he has been able to go on even more public tours, to speak to tens of thousands of people. He has a podcast with 7.92 million people subscribed⁴, he is invited to speak on many issues - philosophical, psychological, political, social, etc. - and with an ever-growing audience when it comes to his interpretations of Biblical stories from a psychological point of view. I mentioned these numbers not to praise Peterson. I think that his popularity is responsible for his being attacked and therefore an example for the use of virtual signalling - as will be argued in the following parts of this study. In fact, without such audience, the virtue signalling does not really accomplish its goal. Another figure I thought of writing about is J. K. Rowling, who is even more notorious than Peterson, and who has been under attack for a few years, as well.

Is the attitude of those who read and watched Jordan Peterson's talks, podcasts, interviews, and other public speeches more and more extreme? Even though he was never a member of a political party, more people seem to identify him as having a conservative (considered as a retrograde) religious and political character. I have witnessed that the more he speaks about religion, declares himself to be more religious, and appears to be friendly with American republicans, the more he is identified as an *extreme right-wing* personality. Yet this is not his view of himself. Coming from a working-class background, though, and having had early democratic and even left-wing leanings in Canada, Peterson (2017b) considers himself to belong to a kind of centre-right liberalism and expresses his wish that left and right had more discussions for the benefit of all countries. Since he is very interested in the history of Communist regimes and dictatorships, he is a keen reader of Solzhenitsyn and understands how people can be accomplices to their own imprisonment in such totalitarian regimes (2020). Peterson tries to warn people about what he considers to be harmful in contemporary ideologies such as postmodernism, inter-sectionalism, climate change activism, etc. (2017a). Sometimes, his arguments seem to be solid and scientifically based, other times he seems to be rather sentimental and somehow lacking in patience to study things from other points of view; nevertheless, his activity is interesting and impressive as he is involved in a quest to help people to re-start thinking about their lives in a more responsible manner.

Characteristics of virtue signalling according to Eric Dodson

Eric Dodson is a professor of psychology at West Georgia University, as well as a podcaster, who tries to help viewers understand certain aspects of reality from a well-balanced and well-informed

4. On May 14th, 2024, that was the number – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m977XwwamAA&list=PL22J3VaeABQAbEeT04p5VmAOBmqw2kxmj>

point of view. His view of the media speaks to us in Eastern Europe, as we observe what is happening in western social media from a distance and after fifty years of a collectivistic totalitarian regime. His balanced and well-tempered commentaries have inspired me in trying to analyse how virtue signalling functioned in the case of Peterson. My respect for balance is why literary criticism is the method I chose to analyse this subject, because it allows me to keep my freedom of expression and thought, and also rely on my professional skills..

Dodson's podcast on *Virtue Signalling: An Analysis*, which he published on YouTube on 21 June 2019 is a very good guide for understanding how this technique is used by people, companies, institutions, etc. in order to show their faithfulness and correct stand on controversial issues so that they will be considered tolerant and progressive. Current identity politics requires⁵- or so it seems - that those who do not want to be considered retrograde take a stand and express their loyalty to the narrative by attacking those who are not aligned with it. People who experienced former Soviet Communist Republics, or who lived under the influence of Soviet Russia know very well how this works, as they have been through such propaganda and can read the signs. How many people in the Western world, can identify such reflexes with either left or right extremism? On the contrary, for any commentator from Eastern Europe it is amazing how some Western thinkers speak about such issues: it seems that when somebody is to the right of centre, he is automatically considered to be a *Nazi* (even though this term is most offensive and should not be used lightly at all). Nevertheless, people on the left of centre never seems to get to an extreme! This is something that is totally unreasonable and demonstrates a lack of historical knowledge.

Dodson (2019) tried to keep his analysis a-political and to speak about the phenomenon of virtue signalling uniquely from the point of view of a psychologist, understanding its mechanisms. He starts his analysis by showing why virtue signalling appears and why people use it: it is an attempt to show our moral virtues and our correctness according to a list given by those we want to impress. We look at people and things not through our own eyes but through the eyes of those whose appreciation is important to us. Consequently, virtue signalling is *not* about the people or instances we signal about, but about our own identity, "especially our group identity" (Dodson, 2019, 0:24). Thus, a person who *virtue signals* is motivated, in fact, by a feeling of moral superiority. He/She wants to manifest his/her distance from those he identifies as *the enemy* and attempts to demonstrate that he/she is associated with those who share the same views and values as he/she does. When it comes to politics in America, for instance, a leftist will try to signal and impress other people on the left, while a right-wing person will just look to other right-wingers to approve of his/her words. To give an example from recent political history, one can follow commentaries coming from the left and the right on the need for a new electoral law, in which each basically accuses the other of manipulating votes. Or one can follow the debate on whether the US should or should not give help to Ukraine and how this would affect America's economy and its global role. Examples are easy to come by. An interesting analysis on this topic is given by Nguyen (2021): by default, each side will use some opposite-minded person as *the other* and will try to *destroy* them with their words. Even mass-media encourages such individuals and creates titles that revolve around the idea of *destroying* the other. If the discussion is important enough in the media,

5. "Identity politics' has come to signify a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups. Rather than organizing solely around belief systems, programmatic manifestos, or party affiliation, identity political formations typically aim to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context. Members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination." - Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-politics/>

will the virtue signaller feel important? Will he feel that he/she is part of something much bigger than him/herself, that he/she is a force in something meaningful?

This purpose and meaning virtue signalling gives to people is very much like the simulacrum Jean Baudrillard (1981) referred to in his critique of theme parks as forms of complex advertising with very harmful effects. In his description of a theme park, Baudrillard shows through the example of a cardboard “Jungfrau mountain” how the animals and plants that are put together even if they come from different continents and eras, lead to an incongruity between *real nature and virtual nature* that puzzles people and tells them that the fake reality is better than real reality. In the park he describes, how visitors can go on an *ecological tour to save nature*; they embark on boats, and go on man-made rivers, find illegal hunters (paid actors), and bring them to the police. Everything is fake, obviously, but they are made to seem real. This simulacrum of reality replaces reality to the point where people cannot discern one from the other. This complex advert has become so evidently powerful these days, with all reality shows, with the battle on social media (where people can express themselves freely and feel important), that there is very little reality check anymore, and there is much temptation to adopt certain views in a very orthodox manner. Extremist ideas can propagate more easily, especially as schools have also embarked on a trajectory of virtue signalling and wooden language as many now argue (Fain & Ashburn, 2023).

A second characteristic of virtue signalling, as Dodson shows, is that “virtue signalling is indirect” (2:28). There are two main ways to signal, as he sees it: *individually* (3:34), and *collectively* (5:32). Individuals who are public figures - politicians, actors, all kinds of celebrities - can express their moral indignation publicly, individually, as they feed their popularity this way. Group ideologues also try to find such public figures to advance their ideas, because they want to benefit from their platforms. Hollywood seems to be a stage for public indignation that reflects ideas coming from the left, while *Daily Wire* is the stage for right-wing virtue signalling. In both cases, public figures are invited to express their indignation about the other side. There are, of course, more balanced stages, especially in the realm of social media (Lex Fridman, Konstantin Kissin and Francis Foster, Joe Rogan, Coleman Hughes, etc.) but they are also accused of taking sides whenever they disagree with one narrative or the other. There is in general very little tolerance of any opposing ideas. Some regular people also express their individual moral high ground in personal posts on social media. Such expressions can go from neutral comments to words and sentences full of moral indignation and outrage. Another type of individual virtue signalling comes from *paid representatives of various groups*, that is, from journalists, television commentators, and presenters in both mainstream and niche media, who are paid to represent a certain point of view, which may not be their own point of view necessarily (they are under contract to do so).

As for *collective* virtue signalling, this can be a very extreme modality for expressing such views, as it involves demonstrations, street shouting, and even attacks, where people feel protected by the crowd and personal responsibility is somehow dissolved. Such was the case with BLM demonstrations, with many right-wing demonstrations, with public attacks (verbal, in the case of Jordan Peterson, but also less verbal when they attacked American public institutions like the US Capitol on January 6th).

A third characteristic of virtue signalling is “derogatory virtue signalling” (Dodson, 6:29). What the signaller wants to do, is to insult, to degrade, to call the adversary names, to use the *ad hominem* fallacy, even if those who are incriminated (or especially then) cannot defend their opinions. Moreover, even if the *enemy* tries to argue and show their ideas, the virtue signaller will

just ignore such arguments, they will pretend not to have heard them, they will not take any kind of defence into consideration but rather continue with their *signal phrases*. Such phrases are so easy to repeat and so difficult to dismantle, because they usually use words with a positive connotation (tolerance, understanding, equality, equity, non-offending, etc.). Attacking the opponent's personal life is a much used strategy because this is more effective than trying to speak against arguments in a logical and well-balanced manner. Virtue signallers try to annihilate the other and inflame those in the same *ideological boat*. The speech-making is done for the sake of one's own, not to try and change the mind of the other.

The last point Dodson makes is that virtue signalling is “degrading others as a form” of *eroticism* (8:24), and of *distractedness* (10:08). When creating a *public enemy*, people feel better, they are encouraged in their rage because they feel strangely empowered. For example, David Beckham, shows in a documentary on Netflix (Battsek, 2023) how after he made a mistake on the football field, he got thousands of death threats, against himself, his wife, and his children, how people on social media encouraged each other to use more and more insults, and how his wife was booed and shouted at by seventy thousand people in the stadium just for the sake of offending her. This is how an enemy is created and this is what virtue signalling can do in real life.

Jordan Peterson - the public enemy of choice

With his stand against Bill C-16, with his book about rules, with his parallel between human behaviour and the behaviour of lobsters to demonstrate the instinctual nature of social architecture and hierarchy, with his reconsideration of religious *stories*, and with his new interpretation of spirituality and the need for meaning, as well as with almost all of his discussions on feminism and masculinity, Jordan Peterson made himself into a *sitting duck* for those who oppose any kind of hierarchy, normativity, gender differentiation, instinct as part of the natural being, religion, and anything that is not deconstruction and fluidity. In other words, he became an easy and very visible target for the representatives of the *woke*, as well as a representative for *conservatives*. Yet his background is too liberal to be a good conservative, and his leaning towards conserving certain values (religious, moral, natural) is too conservative to be left-wing. Libertarians, however, consider him too serious and too involved in saving principles that are not worth saving. Anarchists see him as too mild and too engaged in reinstating order and discipline. Moreover, he became so famous so quickly that everybody could refer to him.

Quite a few characteristics of this public intellectual have contributed to his being a designated target for woke commentators. Those who identified as woke a few years ago considered themselves to be progressive and awake to changes and needs in society, thus contributing to the good of minorities (fighters for inclusion and diversity), to the good of the earth and life (vigilantes for climate change vigilantes and preservers of health), as well as favour those who have been disadvantaged during history (advocates of de-colonizing and deconstructing social constructs, promoters of life-stories and personal safety). Obviously, there is nothing wrong with promoting such humane ideas, to allow those who felt oppressed and silenced to thrive and feel accepted. There is nothing wrong with promoting a healthy lifestyle, trying to fight for clean air and non-polluting human activity, or militating for green ideas. There is nothing wrong with considering that personal safety should be paramount and that states should do their best to help people feel safe and included. There is nothing wrong with fighting against stereotypes of how men and women should look like. There is much to say about ideas such as there is just one lifestyle

that should be promoted: having a family and children. There are many benefits from promoting formerly colonized people, acknowledging their culture, admitting that there are various cultural and civilization variants and not just those of formerly powerful nations. To be woke, then, was something to be desired, a commendable attitude to life and to one's fellow human beings. When woke became a mark for ideological left-wing progressivism and activism, though, it also became the target for conservatives who identified it with the propaganda of left-wing progressives.

Like any propagandists, progressives use the same mechanisms: adopting wooden language, policing language and speech, stifling freedom of thought, deploying exaggerated adjectives for the opponents, considering speech to be more real than reality and more dangerous than danger, following an ethos that does not allow any other opinions or positions than the ones accepted by the leaders, identifying anyone who differs from their point of view as the enemy (Hentea, 2015). This is where, again, Peterson came up as the most obvious target, with his fight for freedom of thought and freedom of speech, with his stubborn pursuit of meaning, and with his resistance to imposed language. To demonstrate and exemplify such hypotheses, I have chosen a few caricatures, drawings, videos, and titles, which show how far the virtue signalling went when it came to this psychologist gone public intellectual with millions of followers all over the world.

Jordan Peterson as a leader of white supremacist men⁶



This is the *front image* of a video in which the author Jason Sylvester tries to comment on one of Peterson's Biblical Series talks, entitled Jordan Peterson 1: The Truth About his Biblical Series & Nihilistic Agenda (2023, June 24).⁷ We have introduced all these references (also see footnote) to show how this video pretends to be academic, rigorous, with solid references, while only concentrating on ideas and comments coming from those who oppose religion generally. First, the author considers that Peterson does not interpret the Bible correctly, he even refers to the fact that the myth of the Garden of Eden comes from the story of Gilgamesh (is "plagiarized" from there by the authors of the Bible, as he puts it). He then shows that it is impossible for anyone to even try to know where the biblical stories come from, and that Peterson's attempt is ridiculous. Then, he considers that Peterson should not express his belief in Jesus as the Messiah, and in the fact that our civilization is based on a metaphorical substance. In just a few seconds, though, Sylvester reproaches Peterson for his failure 'to come out' as a Christian, his hesitations in this domain.

6. Most images used in this section are copyright free, they are part of the public domain, free to download, or they are used by public artists /commentators who do not insist on copyright. For the others, copyright references are provided.

7. Referring to a lecture Peterson gave in 2017, to a conversation of Matt Dillahunty with Peterson, Does God Exist, to a discussion he had with philosopher Susan Blackmore - Do we need God to make sense of life? -, and to a discussion to Alex O'Connor @Cosmic Skeptic. Sylvester also includes here as reference his own blog, Medium, where he lists Peterson's ideas under the label Dangerous Ideas, and his first book Manifest Insanity, (published under another pseudonym, Diogenes of Mayberry), a book dedicated to the evolution of Judeo-Christianity.

Well, there is much to be said about that, especially as this video was published in 2023 five years since Peterson *had come out* as a Christian, after having been tried by illness, public attack, family drama, and his constant readings and conversations. There is an ongoing controversy between religious and non-religious people about whether ethics and morals can have a basis other than the Judeo-Christian one. Some consider that humanism could be the answer, others that the attempt to destroy such values just left our civilizations with a big hole under the shape of God (Chesnut, 2017).

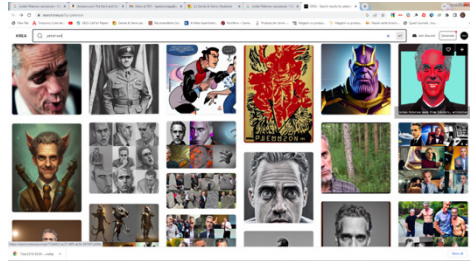
If Sylvester was anywhere near being interested in actually debating Peterson's ideas, he would have mentioned that the professor is a student of Jung and Nietzsche. From Jung he has the will to pursue meaning and the mythical and magical canvas of human civilization. From Nietzsche he has the idea of deploring the '*death of God*'. The German philosopher did not announce this death as an evolutionary step, or as progress, but, on the contrary, *deplored* what he considered to be the death of God. What this author never does is just identify Peterson's ideas, debate them, from any perspective he chooses. He ridicules those ideas, he uses sarcasm, and he tries to impress the audience with what he considers to be his superior knowledge. Moreover, he claims that he will reveal "the truth" about Peterson.

Be all these as they may, they could remain in the realm of bad academic training, of ill-intended commentary, or just non-professional means to promote one's books by using someone who is so famous that his/her name brings viewers quickly to one's page. What I would like to highlight, though, is the front caricature of this supposedly serious comment: there is Peterson, like a modern demented preacher, who looks like a Nazi apologist (or Communist, because they are all the same in their manner), shouting his truth - which means he does not discuss, he does not question, he does not allow any opposition - and who invokes divinity with his raised hands just to attract a certain audience. He is dressed in a suit (which he normally is), but here the suit seems to have two jackets one over the other, to somehow suggest the normativity of his supremacy. Around him, young men cheering, looking at him as if he was a guru, a priest, and a political leader at the same time, applauding, raising their hands in the air. We can notice even a fist or two... Jordan Peterson was accused of favouring such an audience: white, young, straight men, who buy suits just to come and listen to him speak, and who are overly enthusiastic. There is much to say about this, and how he tried to encourage young men to be more actively involved in finding meaning for their lives, in fighting depression and suicidal thoughts, and in building routines that might help them be successful and happy. Then, of course, the question that some might ask is "Why is it so bad to be a young, white, straight, Christian man?" Those who promote inclusion are the first to exclude entire categories of people, if they do not fit the profile of the group. This is how a public enemy is created, and this is how virtue signalling functions: we pretend to have a serious, analytical view, but we use a cover that signals our belonging to a certain group from which we ask for approval and to which we want to belong.

There is nothing in this caricature referring to the Garden of Eden, or to "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's" (that Sylvester refers to in the commentary), there is nothing about Jung or Peterson being a believer or not. The cover says it all: this is just a sign that the author makes to show that he can ridicule Peterson, that Peterson is evil, and that he, Sylvester, can demonstrate this with his words. He is not interested in debating Peterson's ideas, but in promoting his belonging to so-called progressive camp. He uses the well-known personality of Peterson and reduces it to one trait: a public speaker who is enthusiastic, serious, and who is

followed by many young men (there are very many women who also pay a ticket to go to these public lectures).

Jordan Peterson as an embodiment of everything that is dangerous

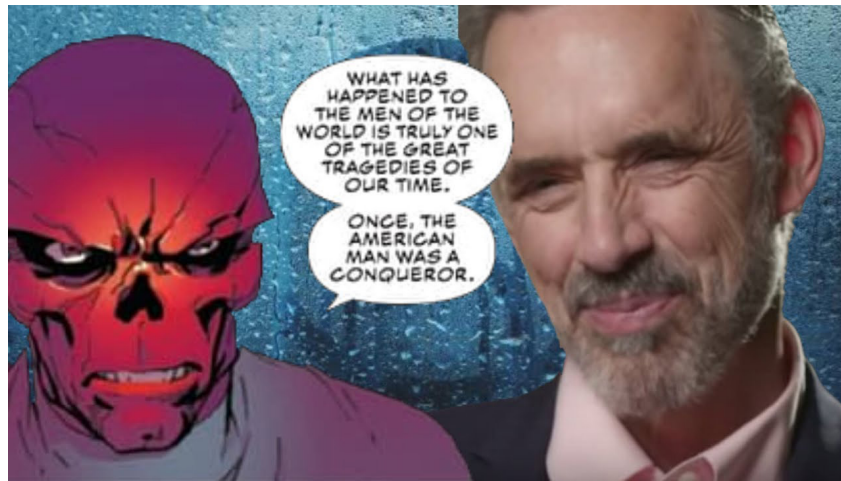


He is presented as a crying, weak man, as a Nazi officer, as a mock Chinese fighter, as a dark alien, as a red-faced devilish character, as an anthropomorphic figure, as a deviant thinker, as an insomniac, as a fake family man... And if we scroll down this gallery of images (Krea, 2023) we can see him in many, many other hypostases and ridiculous forms. Some of these are artistic and well designed, some are comic and true caricatures, but some are nothing but virtue signalling images, by which their authors try to look good in the eyes of those whom they want to impress. The mechanism is clearly the one Dodson (2019) explained: the character is made to look ridiculous, is belittled, is presented as low and mean, or even dangerous, he is associated with everything we consider to be unworthy and mean at the same time. To some extent, it is normal for such a notorious character also to be notorious in the way he is portrayed by artists and caricaturists. It can even be considered an honour, as many artists take him as a model, or refer to him. Nevertheless, some of the caricatures or fake images (like the one that presents Peterson as a Nazi officer) are simply mirroring a public narrative that only allows one vision of this man: he is the villain, he cannot be anything but the villain.

Jordan Peterson as red skull

Peterson is presented as Red Skull in a comic book (and animated videos), who is defeated by Captain America, who is gay (even though the professor never spoke against homosexuality, on the contrary he has numerous discussions with his very good interlocutors and friends Douglas Murray and David Ruben, both of whom are gay)

One of the most important stands against Peterson comes from those who consider him to be an anti-feminist and a promoter of aggressive masculinity. There is very little one can say about these subjects, especially if one follows his talks and interviews. Maybe the best example to illustrate his vision on such issues is the discussion with the scholar of the arts and literature and also feminist activist Camille Paglia on YouTube, which demonstrates that he is not anti-women. If anything, he is anti-intersectional feminism and he promotes women's choice in having a career, in making a good life for themselves, etc. At the same time, his stand on masculinity is not necessarily about aggressiveness, but rather about the aggression that men naturally have as an evolutionary character trait, and how men today find it difficult to channel their aggressiveness and use it properly. Nevertheless, what the cartoon makes of all these views is just another facet of virtue signalling. It has says nothing about the person, himself, but rather more with what the



(Just Jake, 2021)

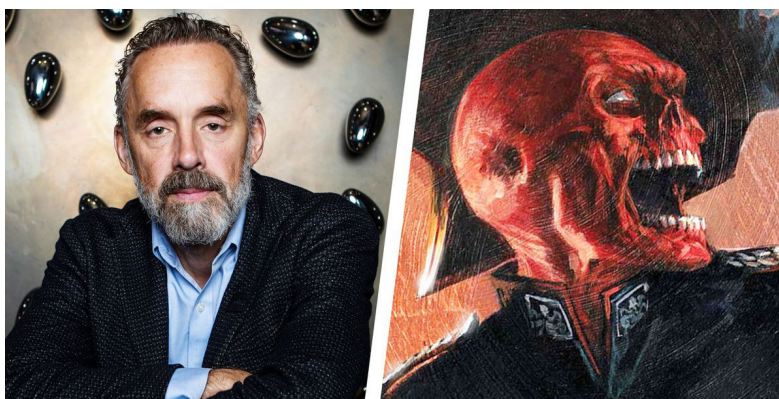
authors want to say about the person, while also signalling that they belong to a superior group, and that they identify with a certain set of values. Peterson's face as Red Skull symbolizes his belonging to a Republican view of the world generally, and of America especially. He was very vocal in maintaining that America should continue with its tradition of changing power from the republicans to the democrats, that this is the real engine of American progress. He has also clarified that America should not identify only with the narrative that defines it as a racist, enslaving country that does not give equal rights to its diversity of people. This narrative, though, is the woke narrative and whoever comes to oppose it is the enemy. Not only equality is important, but equity, and Peterson expressed his total opposition to equity, as a totalitarian means of controlling people.

As Red Skull he is also associated with the lobsters, the creatures that Peterson used to illustrate how societies are naturally inclined to establish hierarchies, which, of course is one of the woke's main issues with his theories. Interestingly enough, they also show Red Skull asking for order, commanding people to make their bed in the morning, which are rules in Peterson's book. It can also be a reference to the fact that he calls 'chaos' the feminine principle in the world, while 'order' is the masculine principle. Everything that is masculine or that is innate, natural instinct is attacked by progressive ideology, because they only allow the idea of unconditional fluidity - especially when it comes to sex and gender. Gender is another term that Peterson criticizes, he considers that there are feminine traits in men as there are masculine traits in women. Consequently, gender roles are nothing but temperamental varieties. All these show why Peterson's image as Red Skull will satisfy the woke, and why using it is a form of virtue signalling.

Jordan Peterson as a red-faced nazi zombie

This face that is given to Peterson somehow epitomizes everything that is considered wrong with his views.

Peterson tweeted an image of this panel—which also includes labels like “chaos and order” (themes Peterson often discusses, and a possible reference to his latest book *Beyond Order*) “the feminist trap,” and “Karl Lueger's genius” (a reference



(St. Clair, 2021)

to an Austrian politician whose anti-Semitism is regarded a precursor to Adolf Hitler's). While these latter quotes don't seem to be direct references to Peterson, their proximity to an explicitly Peterson-inspired title makes the case for some connection. Beside an image of the comic panel, Peterson captioned his tweet: 'What the hell?'

St. Clair's words in the above quote are very meaningful. In fact, the authors of the image use a little of what Peterson actually said - referring to *order*, to feminism and to his mentioning of an Austrian philosopher, who, apparently, also expressed anti-Semitism in his work. The quote, though, goes even further but there is a lack of direct reference to Peterson, such ideas are just somehow thrown in his direction, by proxy. When analysing the image, one can see that he is, again, presented with a red face - apparently Americans do not relate to how red is perceived in Europe, especially in Eastern Europe, as the colour associated with dictatorial communist regimes, and only have in view the identification of the colour red republicans in America -, and he is dressed like a Nazi officer. He is angry, has no ears, and looks like a zombie - his ideas are so old that they should not be part of our current discussions. This is how virtue signalling functions: the authors do not really study the work of the *enemy*; they do not care whether the suggestions they make are real, or supported by what that person said or did. They can associate with the person anything that seems to rhyme with the image that they want to convey about that person.

St. Clair's position is not a real critique of Peterson's work and ideas, but a conglomerate of suggestions, of which some can constitute points of critical debate, some are beyond the texts of the author and cannot be supported with any quotations or views he actually expressed, and some are even just fabricated altogether. The virtue signalling person does not care if their case is real or just, if there is a solid critique of ideas. He/she concentrates only on giving their own supporters new material that they might appreciate and use to consolidate their own vision, their own perception. Interestingly enough, most of the virtue signalling people who created the image of the enemy using Peterson's personality, confess to never having actually read any of his books, or to have listened to his lectures, or followed his podcast and interviews. To do so means to expose yourself to *toxic ideas*, which one should never do. Even before the publication of Peterson's second volume on 'rules' *Beyond order*, some of the employees at the Canadian Penguin Publishers went on a sort of strike, to protest against the publication of that book, and considered that such

a book might put them in a position where they would feel *unsafe*. The whole idea that a book, a lecture, a public presentation might be considered as being *unsafe*, goes against the tradition of academic research and thought. Thoughts should be tried out, should be expressed and illustrated, challenged, debated, and interrogated, and students should be exposed to a variety of ideas (even opposing ones) because this is the way critical thinking is really created. Nevertheless, when a person is presented as close to the most hated personality of mankind, Hitler, there is very little space for such normal academic endeavours.

Peterson as a double-faced intellectual

The professor is presented here as an ugly figure, with eyes that cry and a grin that comes to contradict his apparent sadness.



(Kidkarate, 2022)

This is a post by a Twitter character - @kidkaratemusic -, which identifies the enemy as an ugly, lying, double-faced, grinning *intellectual*. Although his face is important, and the irony of the caricaturist especially lies in the opposition between the eyes that cry and the mouth that grins, I think that it is important to underline how the forehead and the head are presented. In reality, Peterson has a big forehead, but his head is rather small, though it is in normal proportion with his slim body. He is not a very tall person, either. In caricature, generally, the artist is trying to take those specific features of their characters that are easy to identify and also speak about the person's personality and looks. During his talks, Peterson often starts shedding tears, there are certain topics that have a great impact on him. Presenting him in a caricature with this feature is obvious. The less obvious thing is how this habit of his is associated with the grin, which suggests that he is only pretending to cry, while, actually, he is a cold-hearted person, and he despises the people whom he pretends to understand. His big forehead is also something that a caricaturist would notice and exaggerate, as one distinctive feature of Peterson's face. Nevertheless, the association of that forehead with a really big head is suggestive of somebody who is an intellectual, has read very much, uses thinking as his main tool. This is one of the most important forms of virtue signalling of all: we do not identify with those intellectuals. The woke are, apparently, anti-intellectual, they send the message that those professors, those thinkers, those intellectuals who are not queer (activists for certain rights), are just *big heads*, or *enemies*. Very often in his lectures and speeches Peterson expresses his belief in free speech, in a diversity of opinions. For those who use virtue signalling to impress their peers, there is only wooden language - a repetition of set phrases and accepted speech - and a diversity of pigment (race), and gender (around 90 genders already),

without any concern for diverse ideas and personality. After this Tweet, which was meant to stop people in Dublin from participating in one of his public lectures, the author was asked about why Peterson is such a bad person and what are the arguments that make him the enemy. Kidkarate's (2022) answer is the following: "Oh god where to start? The main thing is he's making life even harder for people that are trans."

There is no real explanation here, as to how and why the author considers that Peterson is such a horrible individual, except that he seems to make *life harder* for a category of people, the trans. There is much to say about that subject, there are many commentators these days whose ideas are in full opposition to the woke on this topic. Some consider that *transgender people* (formerly known as *transsexuals*) are, in fact, more restricted in number, and that this issue is much inflated for the benefit of those in the medical profession, for ideology, for those who make medicines, and that the real number is much lower. Starting very young, kids and students are encouraged towards what is known as an *affirming* position, even before they are mature enough to understand their situation or make informed decisions. Others, on the contrary, consider that there is no need for kids to suffer anymore, that they should be given puberty blockers and psychologists should help them transition as soon as possible. Peterson is one of those who support the first standpoint, he is overtly against ideological stands about such a serious problem. Whether we agree with any of these views or not, whether we support the transgender movement or not, the views of a clinical psychologist and a professor of psychology can be heard. There is even less to be said in favour of him not being allowed to continue his profession. Moreover, and even more dangerous, there should not be a law dictating professionals in terms of what to do with their clients if the clients are satisfied and happy with their treatment. Whatever the principle here, Peterson has been identified with the enemy for expressing publicly his informed ideas. To identify him as the enemy of the trans is nothing but virtue signalling, though. The author of the tweet does not give any quotation from Peterson, he does not refer to a single real viewpoint he supported, he just affirms something without any reference. He is not interested in being fair, accurate, and just; he only wants to mimic such traits.

Peterson, the devil himself!

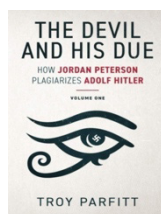


Image on Amazon.com

It might sound implausible—even preposterous—but the world's foremost public intellectual is a Nazi and an occultist. *The Devil and His Due* chronicles how an obscure professor obsessed with the subject of evil rebranded himself as a pop-psych guru and shot to stardom by combatting "Marxist" compelled-speech laws that never existed. It illustrates how Dr. Jordan B. Peterson, father figure to a legion of male followers, is a cult leader who identifies as "the saviour," feigns Christian beliefs, glorifies Satan, networks with white supremacists, praises serial

killers, discusses “the Jewish question,” touts banned substances as “miracle cures,” encourages converts to slaughter goats in backyard sacrifices that ought to be “sufficiently bloody,” and teaches that the alt-right project is “incomplete.” Peterson has spent 35 years pretending to warn against fascism while gushing about Hitler’s boundless talents and channelling his speech. Undeniably, the lecturer’s 12 Rules for Life and Maps of Meaning have been systematically plagiarized from volumes like *Mein Kampf* and *Hitler’s Second Book*. Troy Parfitt has documented over 4,000 examples of Jordan Peterson copying from Adolf Hitler and others, especially Friedrich Nietzsche, Carl Jung, and the necromancer Aleister Crowley, who believed the Führer to be “a prophet” and lobbied to have his satanic religion made the official faith of the Third Reich. Parfitt exposes Peterson’s hidden identity, academic theft, and latent belief system. He decodes his crypto-fascist messages and tells the mesmerizing, bizarre, and entirely true story of an elaborate prank—a ghastly joke born out of vengeance and psychosis and perpetrated on millions of unsuspecting people. *The Devil and His Due* is a public warning. (Parfitt, 2020)⁸

I have included this longer quotation here, as I consider it to be a very significant example of how the mechanism of virtue signalling really works. This short summary of the book is based on affirmations of a journalistic type. It is based on pairing shocking adjectives (*foremost public intellectual is a Nazi and an occultist*). From the beginning the reader’s attention is drawn to the portrait of Peterson which then is completed by an accumulation of adjectives and phrases: *pop-psyched guru, father figure to a legion of male followers, cult leader who identifies as a saviour*; he has a *hidden identity*, he is a plagiarist, a prankster, who constructed a *ghastly joke* as he is nothing but a person driven by *vengeance and psychosis*. What Peterson is doing is described by active verbs like: *feigns* (“Christian beliefs”), *glorifies* (“Satan”), *networks* (“with white supremacists”), *praises* (“serial killers”), *discusses* (“the Jewish question”), *touts* (“banned substances as ‘miracle cures’”), *encourages converts* (“to slaughter goats in backyard sacrifices that ought to be ‘sufficiently bloody’”) and *teaches* (“that the alt-right project is ‘incomplete’”). The portrait is that of a teacher. But it is also of somebody who is a religious figure, who is associated with the categories in brackets - those whom he feigns and glorifies, those with whom he networks and praises also associate him with a Satanic figure, a person who is a kind of serial killer, someone who would not refrain from sacrificing animals, and, of course, with white supremacists!

It is beyond the scope of this study to give counter arguments, as this is *not* an attempt to contradict those who criticize Peterson, or to advocate for his ideas. The main interest here is to show how virtue signalling functions, its scope and mechanism. If with the previous cases I looked at instances like short videos, cartoons and caricatures, a book is a rather complex form of such a *signal*. The author comes up with almost all of the types of arguments that are used by other such supporters of the identity politics and progressive ideology of the woke and uses almost all of the required fields of attack and set phrases that are meant to signal his position. To most readers of Peterson’s books and followers of his public interventions, these affirmations sound ridiculous and far-fetched. I will just refer to two obvious and crass misleading phrases, that can easily be decoded as triggers for a certain type of reaction. They both have to do with the very beginning - the hypothesis - of this text. First, Peterson is declared to have been *an obscure professor*. In the first paragraphs of this study, I showed that long before his being in the public eye, he had a prodigious career, with ten thousand quotations of his scientific papers. He was a Ph.D. supervisor, a clinical

8. All spelling or language mistakes in the above article appear on the original Amazon web page.

psychologist with a flourishing clientele, he had been working in prisons, with people who were really in need of psychological assessment and help. It is possible that some of his work is not accepted or praised by scholars in his domain, we may consider that his touring around the world with lectures on biblical subjects does not attract and convince everybody (and with good reason, as people are different), but to say about him that he was an *obscure professor* demonstrates how the author tries to belittle him and deny him any academic status.

The second phrase that I consider to be crucial and much more shocking than the ‘goat slaughtering in the backyard,’ is that in which the author describes Peterson’s ascension as someone who was “combatting [in the original] “Marxist” compelled-speech laws that never existed”. This is the point where the intentions of this author are revealed: first, he is a Marxist and considers that Peterson’s anti-Marxist thought is inexcusable so his attack is not only on Peterson the religious man, or Peterson the person who encourages young men to become responsible and young women to reconsider whether feminism today is what they want it to be; he attacks Peterson as a person who shows how Marxism is the basis for current postmodern ideologies, and that post-Frankfurt School has changed places in class struggle from the factories with their capitalists and workers, to cultural and social debate. The author reveals his intention by writing that compelled speech is not part of the Marxist ‘tradition.’ On the contrary, the mechanism of propaganda, of imposed speech, of fake news, and of virtue signalling are part of the Marxist and the Stalinist warfare with the bourgeois - which means anybody who opposes the new regimes and Marxist ideas. Peterson, like so many other scholars, referred to Solzhenitsyn to show how these functioned in society, but one of the best authors for revealing these mechanisms for what they are, is the American philosopher Karl Popper in his *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. To be a Marxist is a matter of choice, obviously, and many agree that Marx’s critique of 19th century capitalist society is an important contribution to philosophical and economic thought. To ignore that socialist and communist totalitarian regimes have been built on Marxist philosophy, is *offensive to the highest degree*, to those who have lived in such regimes. Furthermore, to be a Marxist and be against Peterson is, again, a matter of choice, but to identify this man with everything that is hateful does not show a well-balanced, research-based endeavour, but cheap virtue signalling by which the author wants to be appreciated by the woke.

Conclusion

This study is not dedicated to Jordan Peterson, to an analysis of his work, or to writing an apology of the Canadian professor. It is a critical reflection only meant to show through comparative literary criticism how a public figure, when he reaches such notoriety that everybody can relate to a certain extent to him, is the perfect target for those who want to make a name for themselves, those who want to gain the appreciation of their peers in their identity group, or those who just want to feel that they belong to a larger ethos on social media. The *enemy* of virtue signalling has to be important enough. Nevertheless, when it comes to Peterson, such a construction is so far-fetched, so diverse, so ridiculous that maybe it deserves more studies from the fields of sociology and mass psychology. One can appreciate Jordan Peterson for many of his accomplishments, but one can also see how he exaggerates in some of his public appearances. I, personally even oppose some of the ideas he puts forth, especially in politics. The way he is attacked, though, seems so psychotic, so violent and uncontrolled that we may well say that it is a sign of something deeper that is developing in our society, which deserves more attention.

Virtue signalling, together with imposed speech, with the wooden language, with the propaganda, with fake news, with de-platforming people, and with weaponizing ideas are nothing but old dictatorial techniques. With the open access to the public that the Internet offers these days, the scale of such techniques has grown so much that it might be considered one of the most dangerous aspects of today's world. I think that scholars in academic institutions should take a stand in favour of the freedom of research, of ideas, of self-determination, of free speech, and stand against this trend where people are cancelled, books are interdicted, free speech is stifled, and history is so poorly studied that people do not know how dictatorships function, or that communist states (based on the Marxist thought) have been (and in some cases still are) criminal states, like the Nazi state in the 20th century.



6. (Edmonton Journal, 2018)

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