



NP Comment

Jordan Peterson: Our rotten, rotting universities

'Elite' institutions are whale carcasses filled with parasites

Jordan Peterson

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Graffiti on a sign near the University of Toronto reads "Danger due to commie profs" PHOTO BY NATIONAL POST

There has been a spate of articles written lately — and indeed of books — by academics who have become disaffected by the happenings in our much-vaunted institutions of higher education. The most vocal and well-known of these include luminaries such as Jonathan Haidt, at Columbia, Jay Bhattacharya at Stanford, and Steven Pinker, at Harvard. In Canada, Gad Saad at Concordia is likely the most effective and well-

known of such critics, although Bruce Pardy, David Haskell, Julie Ponesse and Janice Fiamengo also spring quickly to mind. Many others currently operate and communicate behind the scenes, and in an increasingly organized manner.

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I have for several years been participating, for example, in an email list known informally and satirically as the Dissident Herd of Cats, which now comprises about 50 participants from universities all across Canada and the U.S., with a handful of journalists thrown in just to keep the mud slinging. I believe that all the aforementioned Canadians are either part of that group or closely associated with it. A more recently acquired member, Professor Leigh Rivers, has recently published a couple of columns in this very newspaper detailing his experiences at the still-hard-science (for now) Department of Chemistry at the University of Toronto, where I also served as an active professor in a different discipline for almost twenty years. Most of the discussion in that email group was private talk, in the beginning, as we found our feet, but the participants have become increasingly likely to identify themselves and to speak and write publicly and damn the consequences. All the people involved have determined despite the cancel culture and reputation-savaging that is part and parcel of the parasite strategy that the situation is so dire that even the risk of career has now become a moral requirement. This is something akin to war.

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The very fact of the existence of this dissident herd, something impossible to imagine five years ago, and its private and secret nature (up until now) is an indication of the absolute and utter rot of the universities. The most shocking example of that ideologically-possessed degeneration was, of course, the recent performances in the U.S. Congress of the Presidents of the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard and MIT. These three “thought leaders” — all women; all flying, of course, the flag of toxic compassion — inadvertently exposed the comprehensive radical capture of their once-great institutions in a manner that was shocking to everyone (although not to themselves, convinced as they were even through that most painful of hearings that the rightness of their stance was something plain and self-evident).

Both Claudine Gay of Harvard and Liz Magil of UPenn resigned deservedly in disgrace immediately afterward. Sally Kornbluth of MIT hung on, although she should not have, indicating that no performance however substandard will necessarily bring about the departure of a committed ideologue. She has definitely done MIT no favours: that immensely useful edifice of engineering prowess has become much worse for wear, much less meritocratic, much more insipid, mis-aimed and weak, under her oh-so benevolent reign. Even these resignations, however, with all that they signified — to say nothing of the appalling public statements that precipitated them — did comparatively little to truly alert the public to the seriousness of the occupation of their educational institutions from kindergarten through university by the leftist avatars of privileged resentment. Likewise, little was truly done by the institutions in question to address the rot itself, which has truly become (to borrow a hated phrase from the same radicals) systemic.



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How in the world did we get to this point? To understand this, we will have to undertake a brief journey to the very bottom of things — a dreadful place, indeed, to go. I will start the exposition with a very ancient and strange story, derived from the foundational myth of the great civilization of ancient Mesopotamia, the Enuma Elish. This is literally the oldest intact story we have in our possession. Like all such truly ancient tales, it is predicated on a foundation of oral tradition and ritual that is even older — tens or even hundreds of thousands of years older. The story thus contains a maximally condensed and memorable portrayal of the structure and dynamics of the world, as they were, are, and always shall be. That is of course the function of genuine myth, and it accounts for the quality of eternal verity that characterizes the deepest of literature.

The world was created, according to the Mesopotamians, by the interaction of two forces: nature and culture, feminine and masculine, yin and yang, unknown or known; most fundamentally, chaos and order. Each of those forces is characterized in the Enuma Elish as a process — a spirit, if you will; even a deity. Chaos is a great female dragon, Tiamat, possibility, confusion and opportunity, the mother of all things.

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Tiamat is the word from which the term *tohu-va-bohu* was later derived by the Hebrew people who wrote Genesis 1. That book, a foundational element of western culture, is the account of God Himself creating from the waters of chaos over which His spirit broods the cosmic order that is habitable and good. That is an expression of an idea very similar to that expressed in the Mesopotamian creation account, and one that points to the dynamism between culture and nature comprising the human experience of the real. I say all that to indicate the universality of such concepts, as well as to indicate their depth and importance. Now Tiamat (nature, the feminine, possibility, and chaos) has a male consort or twin, Apsu. Not much is said about Apsu in the Enuma Elish itself, excepting the fact of his existence as the partner of possibility itself. This is perhaps because high culture was new enough at the time of Mesopotamia that little of its nature had become understood well enough to be encapsulated or portrayed in imagination or drama.

In any case, those ancient people at least understood that Apsu is the necessary order that in union with possibility and chaos continually gives rise to the world. He is the tribe, the family, the community and the social matrix. He is custom and the self-evidence of universally accepted value. He is, in a word, the patriarchy; the great work of the past. As such, the Apsu is the veritable bedrock of society; the vast storehouse of wealth, wisdom and structure that makes up the eternal and requisite inheritance of humanity. Apsu is what remains of the work our ancestors poured into the roads that surround us, the art in our museums, the books in our libraries, the words we learned as children, and the laws and principles that guide us forward—none of which we as beneficiaries created; all of which was given to us, as our privilege, upon the occasion of our birth.

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Apsu degenerate, carelessly and noisily. They begin to conduct their affairs in an increasingly clamorous, ungrateful, ignorant and resentful manner. Their prideful foolishness culminates in the slaying of Apsu himself. This is the death of God, by the way; the murder of the spirit of culture itself. The killers then attempt to live inside of or off of the remains of the resultant corpse. That's the kicker, for our present purposes.

The past is indeed a great carcass, the body of a whale, washed up on shore; a storehouse of great and undeserved value. It is entirely possible to live inside that storehouse, and to feast off its remains, while remaining entirely ignorant of and wilfully blind to the unlikelihood of its provision, and, as well, entirely unwilling to shoulder any responsibility concerning its maintenance, replenishment or expansion. This is precisely the strategy of scavengers and parasites, biologically speaking, which strip the magically provided flesh down to the bone and perhaps beyond. All, in the human case, for their own narrowly selfish hedonistic, power-mad, imprudent and infantile purposes.

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Let us be very clear about this, as is now vital and necessary. The problem of storehouse of value versus predation/parasitism is fundamental, foundational. When the spirit of culture is overthrown by the plunderers, chaos most truly threatens. This is exactly what is next depicted in the Enuma Elish. When Apsu is carelessly killed, and his corpse violated and exploited, the anger of Tiamat, his partner, is aroused. She rises, in consequence, out of her slumbers and aims at the destruction of the world. This is a story echoed in the biblical account of the flood, eternally brought about by the blind, cowardly and venal sins of men.

Harvard is a whale carcass, inhabited by parasites. It is a \$50 billion dollar endowment, with a university somewhat carelessly and secondarily attached to it. In its prime it was, as well, a storehouse of genuine brand value, an institution built very carefully by the diligent work of those who laboured upward and properly in the past. It became in consequence of that extreme care a place of brilliant lecturers, creative and honest scientists, and highly qualified, ambitious and disciplined students. When I worked there in the 1990s, Harvard was still that justly esteemed place, although the rabble had already broken through the gate. It thereby constituted a brand of exceeding reputational value (exactly the value granted to those who graduated with a Harvard degree) as well as the aforementioned economic giant.

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Like its sister institutions, MIT, UPenn, Yale, Princeton and Stanford, Harvard was a treasured place — but simultaneously something ripe, in consequence, for the plunder. The same might be said in a somewhat lesser and typically understated and tentative Canadian manner of McGill or the University of Toronto or the dozen or so of our major centres of once-international-quality advanced education. The parasites — flying, without exception, the flags of the radical left — began to make their appearance and plot their takeover during the turn on tune in drop out hippie 1960s (a mantra developed at the very Department of Psychology I later served in at Harvard itself). All the virtues that made these places what they most truly were — all the disciplined striving, the upward aiming, the long apprenticeship, the concern for the truth, the high and discerning intelligence — were disdainfully dismissed by the parasitical invaders as nothing but the expression of arbitrary power and the manifestation of patriarchal and racist oppression. This was of course nothing but moral justification for their acts of theft: “If you obtained everything you have in consequence of your theft and misuse of power, it is only natural justice that I turn the tables and steal from you.” Of course, the self-interest in such a claim cannot be pointed out — not without the vengeance of the mad mob descended, as it continually has.

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Those who levied such accusations and whose victimized proclaiming was so cowardly accepted, abetted and even admired (“they’re so brave”) by the targets of their shaming had the doors to the warehouse guiltily flung open to them. They came flooding in, consequentially, multiplying the number of sham disciplines and positions, demolishing one by one everyone who opposed their ideological and self-absorbed acting or indicated its essentially narcissistic and shallow nature. This was the invasion of academia by the poseurs and charlatans of the permissive, infantilizing, accusatory mob; the radical feminists, the grievance studies “scholars,” the post-modernists allied so corruptly and unforgivably with the philosophical Marxists, the do-gooding activists, the rainbow-banner bearing hedonists of pride, even the outright communists — the whole bloody mess of those claiming no other motivation but compassion and care for the marginalized but actually doing nothing other than raping and pillaging the brand.

Thus we came to subsidize three generations of the absolute foes even of the culture that gave rise to them. Thus we enabled the mass action and even the thriving of those who without such largesse would have had difficulty providing for themselves even the basic needs and relationships of life. Consider this: How much trouble could one person hell-bent on producing nothing but such trouble manage, in a lifetime, if freed from the necessities of genuine productive and generous travail and provided with inexhaustible means to do so, all the while? Then multiply that error by a thousand — or by the tens of thousands. Imagine as well, while doing so, that something that rots from the head down does so in the most complete and poisonous manner possible. That is exactly what we did, in the West, and the consequence of that is now facing us, shocked though we may be to be there. When the source is polluted, everything downstream is poisoned. That is what has happened. That is why everything appears to be corrupting simultaneously. Hence the increasing unreliableness of professional organizations and governing bodies everywhere; the sad and degenerating state of the legacy media; and the pathetic virtue-signalling and doom-saying hypocrisy and betrayal of the political elite. The heads of the hydra that have always been said to envelop the world during its decline appear everywhere at once. That is the death of the centre and the victory of the margin — the very victory that the barbarians who stormed the gates promised so forthrightly and colourfully to deliver.

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The generations who lived immediately prior to us built up tremendous storehouses of value in the peaceful and productive aftermath of the Second World War. They left those places of value unguarded. In consequences, the vandals and the Visigoths came to occupy, and will

continue to do so, in an ever-worsening and more comprehensive manner, unless they are attended to, and forthrightly stopped. This is beginning to happen. I met just last week, for example, with an academic from the UK — an outstanding scholar of classics. He left his tenured position as a full professor at Cambridge (!), once one of the world's absolutely top-tier places, because he believes that the universities are so rotten they simply cannot be saved. He has instead taken a position at Ralston College in Savannah, an institution I serve as chancellor, which has been established as a bulwark against the present and coming flood.

My daughter and I and our team will soon be launching Peterson Academy, an online educational institution, for the same reason: the parasite load in the conventional institutions has simply become so high that they cannot be saved. We have attracted dozens of the best remaining intellectuals to offer their work on the new platform. We hope to cut the cost of a bachelor's degree equivalent education by 90 per cent, and to simultaneously radically increase its quality and reach. There is no reason why we cannot now effectively educate the world. There are other such efforts in the works. The most well-known and advertised is, perhaps, the new University of Austin in Texas, founded in part by the now-independent journalist Bari Weiss, once of the New York Times, another august institution entirely corrupted by the purveyors of nonsense, resentment and unearned moral superiority who (mis) educated its journalists.

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Could the condition of modern academic institutions truly be that dire? Consider the recent and arguably analogous case of Twitter, Elon Musk's recent purchase, a very large and powerful institution, and a stellar example of invasion by the woke mob (something that has also happened, by the way, to Disney and Google). Musk fired something approximating 80 per cent of the employees of his newly and bravely purchased company. Why? Because they did nothing but consume resources. Actually — that is not a sufficiently damning judgement. The people Musk chased away not only devoured even more than they consumed, within the corporation that employed them, but undermined and purposefully so the stability of the surrounding society itself, all the way to its free-speech bedrock. With far less counterproductive staff, the company now known as X performs much better, and could yet grow into the dominant global social media and service force. I would not in any case bet against Musk, who appears to have the talons and fangs necessary for the job. The universities are in the same state as pre-Musk Twitter — no; worse.

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What would then have to happen in such places for an equal turnaround to occur? First, half the students would have to go. That would be all the students who lack the ability and the vocation for specialized intellectual endeavour, who have no idea why they are there, and who are putting in at best a half-hearted effort. The situation is even more serious on the administrative side. Ninety per cent of that lot should go, without question, as well as the majority of the ideologically-addled and incompetent faculty. The latter have not only lost their courage, while bowing to the administration and then to the woke mob. They have also allowed their journals to become corrupted and their science and research programs to degenerate into propaganda produced for careerist self-promotion. The government granting agencies, with their emphasis on the parasitical trinity of Diversity, Inclusivity and Equity, have become equally dishonest and counterproductive — and equally have to go. It is now impossible to obtain "research funding" without writing an oath of fealty to the radical left and having that accepted by the very enemies of the true university and scientific truth-seeking enterprise. The rules for doing so, of course, change year to year, becoming with every iteration more incomprehensible and more extreme: this serves not only to indoctrinate (as participating in the process of

propaganda, however unwillingly, still corrupts) but to identify those willing to become slavish enough to turn any which way the evil wind blows.

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What has to go, along with that? All the contemptible self-aggrandizing political activism and praying in the streets; all the pathetic infantilization of students and faculty; all the resentment for the very “capitalism” upon which the universities absolutely depend; all the turn away from objectively-defined and race-and-status-blind merit; all the “affirmative action”; all the idiot drunken hedonism that characterizes student life, particularly since the 1960’s. All of it — and I mean all — because any bit of it is the evil seed from which the current evil fruit has grown, and any left in the ground will merely sprout again in the same manner. All this radical pruning is very unlikely to occur, however, although some self-correcting collapse is inevitable — pruning unlikely to occur because we do not have the spine, ability and civilized viciousness of someone like Musk; collapse inevitable because the manner in which these institutions now conduct themselves will not prove economically or practically sustainable.

Why then are the voices of conservative and genuinely liberal protest increasingly emerging among a small but growing minority of academics? Because the captain is truly intoxicated, and the ship is truly in peril. An increasing number therefore now see that they have more to lose by remaining silent than by pointing and speaking out. Expect the clamour on the traditionalist side to increase, as it is now, as the unsustainability of the rotten institutions becomes something increasingly manifest and frightening. What might we as forthright individuals do, in parallel, in such a circumstance, when the walls we have relied on to protect us have been breached and the barbarians have entered the gates?

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We could take a hint, once again, from the Enuma Elish. In that tale, when order has been slaughtered and chaos is once again on the rise, the hero Marduk arises in the midst of the threatened regime, confronts the dragon and reconstitutes the world. How? He pays attention: Marduk has eyes that encircle his head and look every which way. He determines to speak, as well, the magic words of truth. Thus armed, he is the force that can confront chaos itself, put all things in their correct place, and redeem the world. A modern analog? The pilgrimage of the puppet Pinocchio, well-known to all since the classic Disney movie. That youthful but stalwart hero performs a similar task, when he rescues his lost father from (where else?) the belly of a whale — the giant carcass in which the benevolent creator Geppetto is all-too-unconsciously dwelling, in consequence of the disappearance of the son who should properly be a visionary and a man of integrity. In managing this daring feat of rescue, the once-marionette transcends his sequentially presented roles as narcissistic actor (are you listening, Justin Trudeau (?)), liar,

neurotic victim and delinquent braying-jackass hedonist and slave, and rescues the traditional values from the abyss into which they have descended. In so doing, he aligns himself with the calling of his conscience, the redoubtable Jiminy Cricket, the still small voice within, and makes himself real.

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This is what the appallingly few academics with the courage to be and to become are attempting to manage — those who have already marked themselves publicly as heretics to the DEI victim/victimizer hypocrites and frauds, as well as the Dissident Herd of Cats referred to earlier, communicating and planning as they are how best to proceed in the cowed, reputation-savaging and idol-worshipping universities. In consequence, perhaps something might yet be retrieved from the waste that the devouring mob will leave in the aftermath of their feast. The fools who accuse and despise are leaving a great treasure on the table. The wise might well seize the opportunity, gather it up, multiply it and prepare it for new distribution. There's a lesson here for everyone out in the real world, too, beyond academia, now marred and lessened by the workings of the Luciferian intellectuals: get your house in order, gird your loins, look at the mess that is making itself manifest in front of you, wherever you are, say your piece, and get to work.

Before the goddess of chaos makes her full appearance — and prevails.

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