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The Epidemic of Academic Post-Modern Ideology: A Preface to Peterson's Venus Envy

Vicky Panossian, English Dept., Lebanese American University

Abstract:

In this manuscript, I analyze Slavoj Žižek's debate with Canadian clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson. The terms "Venus envy" and "academic inferiority complex" are used based on classical psychoanalytic jargon. Jordan Peterson and Slavoj Žižek are interpreted as the representatives of the opposing ends of our contemporary academic postmodern spectrum. Žižek demonstrates the unchained Marxist, and Peterson embodies the persona of the capitalist educator. This article is a gateway to the demonstration of the decaying core of post-modern ideology in contemporary academic discourse.

Keywords:

Žižek, Peterson, Academia, Postmodernism, Ideology, Inferiority Complex

In 1971 the world of philosophy trespassed a new milestone with the Chomsky and Foucault debate. The two disciples of different schools of thought clashed into one another, offering the future generation of intellectuals a popcorn-demanding hour of intense introspection. 48 years had gallantly passed when another edition of this debate took the philosophical world by surprise.

As continental philosopher and Marxist theorist, Slavoj Žižek sat opposite to clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson. In less than 3 consecutive hours humanity was given a new framework. I argue that the debate became a portrayal of not only contradicting ideologies, but also the paradoxical projection of a conundrum that has flooded academia for the past century.

I entitle this epiphenomenal indication as the “Academic Inferiority Complex” based on Sigmund Freud’s initial analysis of the predominant social subordination that psychologically manifests itself.¹ In literary analysis, this occurrence is entitled the “cultural cringe,”² where the colonized are indoctrinated to believe that they are subordinates to the colonizer’s culture. The mishap often ends in the dismissal of fundamental cultural rituals and traditions³. However, this rendition of an inferiority complex brought upon a collective set of people is also significant within the 21st century’s ever-growing academic world. The scope of academic discourse is no longer stagnant. There is no room for error or repetition. And evidently, there is no room for those who wish to stand against the currents of collectivism. Žižek’s and Peterson’s debate can be approached from this perspective and we would end up with two different mediums of interpretation. The first is the peculiarity of the body language emanating from the Canadian psychologist, while the latter is the spectacle for a closer look at the arguments we have.

In this piece, I wish to forgo predictions and charlatanism in order to focus on the words uttered during the famous Žižek vs. Peterson debate.

1 Inferiority complex. (2009). In A. S. Reber, R. Allen, & E. S. Reber, *The Penguin dictionary of psychology* (4th ed.). London, UK: Penguin.

2 Pickles, K. 2011, "Transnational History and Cultural Cringe: Some Issues for Consideration in New Zealand, Australia and Canada: Transnational History and Cultural Cringe", *History Compass*, vol. 9, no. 9.

3 Forster, E. 2017, "Rethinking the Inferiority Complex: Chinese Opinions on Westerners' Knowledge of Chinese (1910s-1930s)", *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 45, no. 6.

Academic overcompensation and the lack thereof is apparent throughout the debate. Both speakers pitch in the two extremities of the postmodern academic spectrum. On one hand, we have Žižek who does not wish to hear the applause from the very beginning. He refuses to be called "Doctor" and somehow feels ashamed to represent an academic degree. Žižek may be read as a person who considers their academic standing to be a mere marker on the pursuit of knowledge. However, one might even argue that his reaction is a direct verbification of the Marxism, an enactment of ideological anti-capitalism coupled with contra-postmodernism.

Yet, Žižek's responses are de-mirrored by Peterson himself. We notice a flustered academic trying to hold the grip of their ideological standpoint. The counter-argument is that Peterson is a projection of mainstream cultural post modernism where the individual has lost track of their individuality and is working on defining it. But this cannot be a factual prediction, simply because Peterson is an academic who identifies as a "conservative" that is, his ideological stance is predominantly collectivized by the social doctrine that he has chosen to incarnate. Yet, whilst observing the elaborately formal dressed analyst, one can sense the longing for belonging. It's as if he is trying to hide behind the mask of an academic. The fidgeting lecturer becomes the allegorical archetype of academics who are leashed by post modern capitalism. The art of intellectual discernment becomes another version of "identity politics." This results in the ultimate epilogue of the debate, which is the surrender of the mountebank.

Thus, the debate gives way to intellectual "Venus Envy."⁴ Venus is the goddess equivalent to the Greek Aphrodite. She was known to be the patron of love, lust, and desire.⁵ Peterson, representing many, is an academic who suffer from the crowning form of *Venus envy*. These postmodern scholars are in desperate need of academic validation, they envy the love of the masses, the recognition, and fame that comes with pseudo-intellectuality. Therefore, their lack of appeal to the highbrow populous of the public manifests itself through the various outbursts of this *venus envy*. The main aspect of this effusion is a quagmire that illustrates the need for an intellectually enhanceive "cosmetic surgery" by the capitalist's individualistic desire to conform to nonconformity. Whilst doing so, the individual is academically castrated: their thoughts are reduced to mere propaganda. The pedagogue is gradually metamorphosing into an incompetent follower of a populist stream. This loss of consciousness is damaging the very essence of academia;

4 Haiken, E. (1997). *Venus envy: A history of cosmetic surgery*. Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press.

5 Dixon-Kennedy, M. 1998, *Encyclopedia of Greco-Roman mythology*, ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara, Calif.

which is supposed to be the dispersion of knowledge and the quest for truth. The debate excavates the wound, the epidemic that has plagued the 21st-century thinker. The need to show, to demonstrate, to become a subject of fame and arousal is the ultimate manifestation of an academic inferiority complex.

The thesis of the debate was the attainment of happiness, to say the least. It won't do justice to the reader to repeat what was already mentioned by both speakers. Beginning with the manifesto itself, to the eventual inequalities of capitalism and the struggle of both class and existence. The debate is merely a reflection of what Žižek would entitle a "logical derivation," which is flourishing in postmodern academia. The essence of meritocracy versus democracy, and how the latter facilitates capitalism, were merely subtopics that enhance and necessitate the endgame: the inferiority complex brewed by *venus envy*.

Whilst Peterson tries to embody the discipline he has supposedly mastered, there's a gap in the translation of his ideas into utterances. The eventual indication is the contradiction of the very structure of the debate. Oddly so, there seems to be an agreement. I read this agreement as the fruit of the *Venus envy*. The submission to the absent cultural father figure who governs the majority of a specific situation. Peterson is an implicit postmodernist looking for a train of thought to follow; he is a ship in search of an ideological anchor.

With this debate, Peterson submits to Žižek's scheme. The originality, evidently phrased with Peterson's question about Žižek's Marxist standing, is a stuttered compliment generated from a psychologically inferior position. Peterson fails to acknowledge his own position, and this lack of self-confidence is the epidemic of contemporary capitalist academia. I do not mean to assert that accepting one's mistake is incorrect. But, not having any mistakes due to one's lack of ideological temperament is a fundamental vestige of the plague that been brought upon academia by postmodernism.

It's not a matter of being "woke" to Marxism, as the contemporary adolescent would say. But rather, it's a plea for academic fetishism. The problem of the 21st century is that this "fetishism" is being prosecuted by the problematic clench onto radical ideologies, without a thorough comprehension of the full chassis of its mobile structure. When Žižek refers to Hegel to diagnose the peculiarity of reality as a function of hindsight, we notice the illustration of the struggle of our generation. The corrupt nature of happiness is not about the paradise situated afar, as was the case of Czechoslovakia and Western Germany. Instead, the problem at hand is the struggle of existing as an individual within a

rapidly globalizing melting pot of ideology. I abstain from using the trashcan metaphor simply because, as a Hegelian, we know that the Minerva may only take flight after dusk. Thus, our contemporary mentality may only be eligible to bear the title of a “trashcan” when it has already collapsed upon us.

Though there is certain arousal attained from flirting with Western ideas of meritocracy, contemporary academia promotes an ultimately existential structure of social affairs. one cannot help but adopt what Peterson would call “Žižekism” in order to understand the disparity of contemporary reality.

Freud explained that culture and happiness are the paradoxical opposite and so is the notion of beauty whilst observing from a psychoanalytic lens.⁶ Žižek and Peterson embody this paradox of culture and happiness, or they strive to attain vestiges of both. Since culture and happiness are ambulant and incomplete, they are functions of the Lacanian symbolic threading upon the boundaries of the Real.⁷

The debate puts forth the academic disavowal of gaps within contemporary ideological frameworks. It promotes an intriguing atmosphere for a critique of the intelligentsia. In Žižekian terms, this is the age-old toilet metaphor. Peterson and Žižek embody both ends of the toilet array, where the French and para-radical one would be Peterson, while the German one is embodied by Žižek. It's true that the German is said to be based on the conservative ideological basis of their culture, but it's most evidently Žižekian in a sense that it exposes the fixation in order to heal it. Unlike Peterson who conceals the issue by condensing it into a rigid hierarchy of an optimum life, Žižek gives way to admit that life in itself is not formulaic. There is no ultimate answer, no eventual resolution, neither in capitalism nor in communism. However, there is a strive for advancement and the betterment of the upcoming generation, which is said to be a purely Marxist thought.

The metaphysics of academic ideology are not to be simplified within the model of merely two ends. There is an underlying heptagon of meta-textual ideologies that are not to be denied. Peterson and Žižek's debate is the characterization of two of the most prominent ends of the academic range: the conformist to non-conformity who is fueled by the *Venus envy* while implicitly suffering from the academic inferiority complex, and the conservative who has chosen to stand upon a theoretical framework that would entitle him a “madman.”

6 Freud, S. & Strachey, J. 2010, *Civilization and its discontents*, W. W. Norton & Co, New York.

7 Voela, A. 2012, "In the name of the father - or not: individual and society in popular culture, Deleuzian theory, and Lacanian psychoanalysis", *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, vol. 17, no. 3.

The epidemic of academic post-modern ideology is its lack of consistency and rigidity. Though the modern man is taught to praise their openness and fluidity, there is a major gap that is coming forth. Žižek sheds light on the matter whilst analyzing political correctness, which is one of the many subsets of our contemporary affairs. Nevertheless, the punchline is all the same “there is no cognitive mapping of ideology.” Yet, there’s always a parallax view that denounces hasty generalization and proposes reform. The reform is not the uprise of a fascist social metastasis, but the refurbishment of the pre-modern, lucid structure of academic ideology.

In conclusion, I argue that Peterson may be read as a projection of the enslavement of academia to capitalist globalization. The *venus envy* theory is a mere prospect to identify the flaws resulting from this train of thought. It is the demonstration that there is the need to flamboyantly advertise pseudo-knowledge instead of harvesting truth. The debate offers the audience a chance to venture into the rotten and evasive core of postmodern ideology.