

## Event Review

*Front Row Seat at the “Debate of the Century”: Slavoj Žižek vs. Jordan Peterson, April 19, 2019<sup>1</sup>*

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It finally happened. Jordan Peterson faced Slavoj Žižek in a public debate. After various calls from either side to set a date—reminiscent of the press hype surrounding two heavyweight boxers—Peterson and Žižek finally decided on a time and place to resolve who is right about the world and everything in it. The place? The Sony Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto. Žižek came to

face Peterson in his own turf. The topic? Happiness: Capitalism vs Marxism. Nothing subtle about it. They were set to define once and for all the meaning of happiness, and what socio-economic system would provide the best conditions for us to attain it. The destinies of humanity were at stake and I had a front row seat.



There are multiple reasons why a review of this event is featured in a film and media studies journal, and especially in an issue dedicated to labour. The debate became a notable occasion that was broadcast and streamed live. It was also heavily commented and disseminated on social media platforms. In fact, Žižek and Peterson are popular internet personalities. Their talks and interviews circulate widely online. There are also various accounts on Twitter, Facebook and Reddit dedicated to sharing their phrases, ideas, and all kinds of media content—like memes and user-created videos. As a matter of fact, the idea for “the debate of the century” took shape on the Web. After Žižek published a piece on the British newspaper *The Independent* targeting Peterson, the latter challenged him to a public debate while arguing with a quote bot on Twitter (Žižek does not have social media accounts on any platform). Their followers immediately reacted asking for the intellectual strife to become a reality. Altogether, they not only mobilized the labour power, infrastructure and resources needed to assemble a media event of this magnitude but also revealed the work that entails being a public

intellectual in the age of social media and strong political polarization. They, thus, expose the performances of the academic and the celebrity—and the entanglement of the two—as labour.

Out of the two contenders, Žižek is probably better known both inside and outside academic circles. Since his first book *The Sublime Object of Ideology* published in 1989, he has written more than 60 books, as well as keeping a high profile in the media. There have been at least 5 documentaries made about his persona and his theoretical work, which combines Marxist thought and Lacanian psychoanalysis. He frequently writes for *The Independent* and *Russia Today*, commenting on various political and social hot-button issues. He is a provocateur and has been involved in a series of polemics by supporting Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton, criticizing the LGBTQ movement, as well as the European Union’s reception of refugees. However, he remains a left-wing intellectual referent due to his long and prolific career, in addition to his populist rhetoric style.

Peterson’s rise to fame has been more recent but meteoric. A clinical psychologist and profes-



sor at the University of Toronto, he gained notoriety after attacking Bill C-16, which further protects gender expression and identity under the Canadian Human Rights Act. This event brought him closer to neo-conservatives and the alt-right movement, who regard suspiciously, even hatefully, feminism, queer theory and social liberalism. He is a self-proclaimed defendant of individualism. He preaches about a supposed moral weakness that is spreading across the youth in the Western World; the result, for him, of a certain “postmodern Neo-Marxism.” This would make the younger generations far too focused on critiquing social and economic inequalities rather than focusing on themselves. According to Peterson, this critical disposition is not the result of systemic social and economic precarity, but rather an ideology that is disseminated by the social sciences and humanities departments. And their ideologues are poststructuralist authors such as Derrida, Butler and Foucault—who, if anything, have always had a complicated relation with Marx. These claims earned Peterson strong criticism (see Haider 2018) for his lack of knowledge of both postmodernism and Marxist theory; a fact that would be put on display during the debate.

Despite their opposing political affiliations, it seems that the debate between Žižek and Peterson was meant to be. Both authors are fierce critics of political correctness, that social mandate that demands to be attentive and careful of those who are in more vulnerable social positions than us. But there are also other aspects shared between both figures that tend to be shadowed by the occasional analysis that puts too much stress on the validity and rigor of their thought.

It seems that both Žižek and Peterson touched some sort of deep social-political nerve, which has led to them becoming such relevant public figures. There is an affective side to the role they perform as cultural referents that is usually overlooked. They promise to offer answers in the context of a world that appears to be more and more complex and chaotic. We are in times of great uncertainty for liberal democracies and the global economic system. A new international right-wing wave is surging and making

its way through the First and Third Worlds responding to situations like the refugee crisis, as well as longstanding internal conflicts. We have a looming environmental catastrophe. On top of everything, we live in an era of information overload characterized by an explosion of voices and opinions coming from traditional mass media and social media platforms. In this framework of such a critical scenario, Peterson and Žižek help their followers to make sense out of a deluge of information, whilst also positioning them within a particular ideological spectrum. They provide a service that feminist theory would recognize as *affective and reproductive labour*. As Kalindi Vora explains at length in *Life Support* (2015), this type of labour, rather than referring to sexual reproduction, is instead the work that has been historically expected of women as homemakers. It has to do with caring and nurturing; providing support to the worker when they come back home. Fans of Žižek and Peterson feel themselves listened to, that they have support for their ideas, and, ultimately, through social media they can also find other like-minded individuals with whom they can share their views and experiences. Peterson and Žižek reveal the cis white male subject as a provider of emotional care, and that ultimately underscores the type of support necessary to help maintain their sense of self—one predominantly heteronormative, masculine and fragile.

The pleasure associated with Žižek is that of laughter and irony that characterizes so much of our online culture. He is excessive. He swears and tells vulgar jokes in his lectures. He sweats and snuffles. He is exaggerated when gesticulating, and he has a heavy eastern European accent. His followers are in big part after the comic relief that they get when they listen to him or read his work—a lot of his famous jokes can be also found in his books. He allows his audience to not take things so seriously. He provides a buffer zone between one and reality.

Peterson has a stiffer style, but he also has a more “human” side. He has become a self-help guru. A big part of his talks revolve around fighting against depression, taking responsibility for one’s actions, and changing one’s habits to attain

Audience arriving at the Sony Centre for the Performing Arts. Photograph: Joaquín Serpe



personal fulfilment. In his bestseller *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* he orders his readers to literally stand up straight and clean up their rooms, to start searching for something to give meaning to their lives, instead of complaining about everything that is wrong and beyond their power to change. In his videos, he is moved to tears by how much confusion and pain the youth is currently going through, and by the stories of his fans who tell him how much their lives were changed by his teachings. His followers also feel that their beliefs and values are reasserted when watching his online media content. He is perceived as a professional debater who helps to maintain the status quo. The titles of clips say things like “Jordan Peterson DESTROYS feminist,” or “Jordan Peterson CRUSHES transgender debate.” However, it is very clear that they have been edited so it appears this or that way.

The debate was going to meet the various expectations of both their sets of supporters and disappoint them in other respects. Located in downtown Toronto, the Sony Centre for the Performing Arts is one of Canada’s biggest theatres. The discussion was organized by American events promoter Live Nation, and it was sold out. The audience was predominantly

white and young, between their 20s and 30s. There was also a noticeable presence of people of colour. Contrary to the idea that both Žižek and Peterson’s fans chiefly are men, there was a strong presence of women. Even more, gender distribution seemed to be 50/50. It was not clear who was there for whom, except for a young man who came dressed up in a Žižek t-shirt and Žižek paraphernalia, which he had designed and created for the event. There was also another boy who had a “Make America Great Again” hat—denoting a right-wing inclination, and, thus, partiality for Peterson. By the entrance there was a big screen on which one could see the name of the event together with images of Peterson and Žižek. This was a hotspot for people to take selfies and group photos to later share on social media. To my disappointment, the only merchandising on sale was the books of both authors. I sat beside a family—parents plus teenage son. I asked them who they were supporting and what brought them there as a family, and the father replied that they liked aspects of both thinkers. But what was most striking about his answer is that they were there “for the spectacle,” indicating the level of exposure and the allure that Žižek and Peterson have generated.



Photograph: Joaquín Serpe

Since the moment that both intellectuals came out on the stage, the audience was already laughing at Žižek's deadpan facial expression. Peterson decided to focus his first presentation on attacking *The Communist Manifesto* which was, by his own admission, the only text he had read out Marx's vast bibliography. He even confessed to have read it only twice: when he was 18 and in preparation for the debate. He said that he was going to present 10 arguments against Marx and Engels's piece, out of which he only really exposed 4 or 5. The rest was up to the audience's interpretation (Studebaker 2019). He suggested that a class-divided society finds its underlying principles in nature. He also defended the managerial class and the benefits of unrestrained market forces. The evidence for his arguments remained unclear and he left various thoughts unfinished. Despite the weakness of the presentation, his fans cheered and applauded in an act of partisanship and loyalty to Peterson and his rhetorical style.

When it was Žižek's time to speak, he point-

ed to a series of issues that indicated a deeper knowledge of Marx and the problems that the socioeconomic system is facing. He talked about the relationship between authoritarianism and capitalism in the Chinese model; he connected the refugee crisis with the international division of labour; he defended universal and free access to education and health care as a fundamental necessity for the development of society; and he defined the current climate catastrophe as a very real and worrisome limit to capitalism and humanity. His presentation received the clamouring of the people in what was going to be the longest applause of the evening.

From that moment on, something changed. Peterson's voice trembled as he declared that it would be very difficult for him to answer to the list of problems that Žižek had raised. Therefore, he began repeating his mantra about individual responsibility, and he added that he was scared that the left's discourse would be a segue for young people into the ideology responsible for some of the worst crimes against humanity—referring to the horrors of the Soviet Union. However, Peterson seemed confused, even infatuated with Žižek. He told the Slovenian that he found him very interesting (that he was quite a character), to the point that he asked him whether he considered calling himself a “Žižekian” instead of a Marxist. It felt like Peterson wanted to side with Žižek but couldn't do so due to his political affiliation and, more immediately, because he was in front of his own fans. Later, Peterson would agree that capitalism was a system that produced inequality, and that it needed some kind of regulation. Žižek took the opportunity to point that if Peterson's book is “an antidote to chaos” it is because the Canadian also sees a widespread state of crisis.

Žižek spent the last moments of the debate asking Peterson about those “postmodern neo-Marxist” thinkers that he usually talks about; who were they? Peterson tried to avoid the answer by referring to a series of statistics regarding the vast quantity of left-wing professors in the social sciences, and that these are a demagogic force. While Žižek agreed with this, he continued pressing Peterson on his knowledge

of Marxism and postmodernism, bringing up the “complex and serious” work of David Harvey and Fredric Jameson to illustrate the difference between the two intellectual movements. Peterson then mentioned Derrida and Foucault as examples. Žižek immediately responded, suggesting that he saw neither thinker as strictly leftists nor radicals, and that even someone like Foucault was at odds with Marxism. Peterson seemed clearly overwhelmed, having his expertise put into question once again.

The discussion about happiness was displaced by the pessimism that both authors expressed regarding humanity’s capacity to change the course of history, and to offer an alternative to the reigning socioeconomic paradigm. They both agreed that they were victims of a victimizing system, and that they should double down on their rejection of political correctness. In the end, Peterson did not “CRUSH” Marxism, and Žižek did not turn out to be so Marxist. It was nonetheless a collective cathartic moment; a value-producing physical gathering that condensed and exploited the affect and labour so common in our contemporary digital public sphere. If for a moment time stopped in Toronto, the world outside went on as if nothing had happened.

## Notes

1. This article has been previously published in *La Agenda* (Serpe 2019), and has been translated and revised for this publication.

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