

12 Rules for (Academic) Life

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A Stropky Feminist's Guide through
Teaching, Learning, Politics, and Jordan
Peterson

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*Dedicated to Professor Jamie Quinton
for breathing life into an old goth*

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Do you have skin in this game?



Academic life at the moment has a touch of an old western about it. White hats and black hats. An aggressive truth-seeking individual holds centre stage, victimized by feminist harpies and Marxists on one side. They talk of revolution. They always do. On his other side are the decadent, nasty, angry, dogmatic French postmodernists. Clever foreigners. What a nightmare. In the final scene, a noble Canadian succumbs to the emotional torture from the harpies and those verbose—if stylish—foreigners and rides off into the sunset, subsidized by donations from the Alt-Right.

Jordan Peterson presents many faces, identities, aspirations and demons. Whatever our personal views, his presence allows scholars and citizens to ask questions about fact, reality, truth, information and knowledge. Indeed, this book will ask questions about how Peterson has been able to avoid corrections to his research while upholding the imperatives of facts, reality and truth. More directly, I ask why Peterson became popular and how the supposed reality of the North American university system was imposed on the rest of the world. How did mentions of race become postmodern? How and why did a mediocre academic, from a small discipline that is not generalizable to the rest of the university sector, ignore the views of scholars with expertise far beyond his own?

I am your stropy feminist guide through this journey. Welcome to the 12 rules for (academic) life. While reading Jordan Peterson's *12 Rules for Life*¹ feels like watching a romantic comedy on meth,² I trust my journey through the academic *12 rules* is as satisfying and piquant as a Sauvignon Blanc at the end of a long day. How was this book forged? Jordan Peterson was the public intellectual of and for the presidency of Donald Trump. Trump was a simulacrum president. Peterson was a simulacrum intellectual. Peterson was a middling academic, who said the unsayable, and became famous at the time the Alt-Right was in need of a white man in a suit to

¹ Peterson (2018a).

² I also note the resonance with 'twelve steps' that dominate both recovery and self-help movements.

show gravitas.³ This truncated if tragic story became more concerning when Peterson started to believe his own hyperbole and was invested in self-absorbed fame rather than any pretence of knowledge.

Both Trump and Peterson were found out. At the end of their reigns, they surrounded themselves with the protective pillow of family members as they were the only support on which they could rely. Their daughters were enablers because the rest of the world had either disengaged, or was stunned, or horrified.⁴ Indeed, *Matt Lewis and the News* podcast asked Peterson on March 21, 2018 if he would have voted for Trump over Clinton. Peterson stated, “I think ... I would’ve impulsively voted for Trump at the last moment.”⁵ The rationale for voting for Donald Trump requires considered attention.⁶ However, voting for him impulsively⁷ necessitates some deeper understanding. What is happening here? The relationships between public and private, consciousness and reflexive action, intellect and emotion are, to cite and change The Smiths, oscillating wildly.⁸ For all the outrage and bluster about language, law and the trans community, Jordan Peterson’s YouTube account has strangely—and quietly—moved almost all his videos refusing pronouns to private mode where they can no longer be viewed by the public.

This book maintains both parameters and a purpose. The Jordan Peterson moment⁹ commences on September 28, 2016, with his video “Professor against political correctness,”¹⁰ which expressed his outrage about law, language and trans citizens. This accelerated history concludes less than three years later, on April 19, 2019 in the Sony Entertainment Centre in Toronto. On this day, Good Friday, Jordan Peterson and Slavoj Žižek debated in front of 3000 people, and a paying online audience.¹¹ The topic of the debate encircled happiness, Marxism and capitalism. Yes. Really. Žižek had one job. That focus is difficult for Žižek. Managing his nose is a full-time job. But Žižek had one job, and on this occasion, he achieved it. He had to demonstrate that Jordan Peterson knew nothing about Marxism or postmodernism.

³ I note Lipsitz (2006). He states, “public policy and private prejudice work together to create a ‘possessive investment in whiteness’ that is responsible for the racialized hierarchies in our society,” loc 14.

⁴ Please refer to Peterson (2021a).

⁵ Matt Lewis and News podcast (2018).

⁶ Brabazon et al. (2018).

⁷ The importance of considered and careful thinking was effectively explored through Narvaez (2010).

⁸ The Smiths (1987).

⁹ Tylor Lovins recognizes that Jordan Peterson’s timing is important. They state, “the man has been properly situated in our cultural moment,” from Peterson (2018b). This book uses ‘this moment’ to focus on how Jordan Peterson re-establishes the value of truth, reality and religion, and critiques evil.

¹⁰ The original video has either been removed or rendered private. Please refer to Reddit.com (2020). Significantly, the version of the video mentioned in the Reddit feed has also been removed from YouTube. It is intriguing how this first, public moment for Jordan Peterson to express his free speech has been removed by the speaker.

¹¹ Lian (2019).

He succeeded. All the straw men summoned through Peterson's description of "Post-modern NeoMarxists"¹² sashayed away as the great philosophers Kansas specified, "like dust in the wind."¹³ It was a poor debate. Neither were on form, and neither explored happiness.¹⁴ But this debate was the end of Peterson as a public intellectual.¹⁵ He was certainly public, but the intellectual component of the compound noun was destroyed by Zizek.¹⁶

Following this debate, a Post Peterson Paradigm emerged. As with all posts—poststructuralism, postcolonialism and postmodernism—the positioning of the prefix 'post' allows us to reflect on the word that follows. And—dear reader—there is a sickening sting in the tale of this particular post. It is very easy to chop up Jordan Peterson's ideas, like capsicum in a stir fry. It is very easy to ignore these views, because they contribute little but acid to an already burning university sector. It is also easy—and perhaps accurate—to demonstrate that Peterson's *12 Rules* are a re-playing of Margaret Thatcher's "Victorian Values,"¹⁷ summoning individuals and families and denying the capacity of societal and collective solutions. Similarly, it is simple to view Jordan Peterson as an apologist for a toxic and failed neoliberalism that nearly destroyed the international social and economic system through the Global Financial Crisis,¹⁸ but like the White Walkers are stumbling on, to enact one more attempt at destruction.¹⁹ It is straightforward to view Jordan Peterson as a much less skilled but much more effective replay of Alan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*,²⁰ or Robert Bly's *Iron John*,²¹ but involving lobsters.²² It is effortless to laugh at his four most common references, the four horsemen of the zombie apocalypse: the Bible, Dostoyevsky, Solzhenitsyn and Jung. It is like referencing the four Beatles but without the music, the haircuts, the Chelsea boots, or the talent. It is like a Disney

¹² Peterson (2017a). I also acknowledge Tabatha Southey's definition of this term. "Postmodern neo-Marxism' ... is a conspiracy theory holding that an international cabal of Marxist academics, realizing that traditional Marxism is unlikely to triumph any time soon, is out to destroy Western civilization by undermining its cultural values with 'cultural' taken out of the name so it doesn't sound quite so similar to the literal Nazi conspiracy theory of 'cultural Bolshevism,'" *Maclean's*, November 17, 2017, Is Jordan Peterson the stupid man's smart person? - Macleans.ca.

¹³ Kansas (1978).

¹⁴ I note that Peterson was a third author on a refereed article with Burton and Plaks (2015). This study confirmed that, "neuroticism negatively correlated with conservatism," and neuroticism impacted on happiness. It is important to note the correlations in this study, not the causality.

¹⁵ While a series of personal matters followed this event, including Tammy Peterson's illness and Jordan Peterson's addiction to benzodiazepines, this lecture was an ending to any pretence that he held intellectual expertise beyond a very small slice of research in clinical psychology. The scale of this evaporation from public discourse was captured by Lewis (2021).

¹⁶ Michael Fedorovsky offered a commentary and review of this debate (2019). Significantly, 'intellectual' was not deployed as a noun through this article.

¹⁷ Samuel (1992).

¹⁸ Tett (2009).

¹⁹ I recognize the strong research completed by Chapman et al. (2014).

²⁰ Bloom (1987).

²¹ Bly (1992).

²² Peterson (2018).

movie pretending to offer ontological insights after the happy ending. Such critiques are crisp and unproblematic. But there is something more here. In the pages that follow, I explore why Jordon Peterson was hot for a New York Minute.

I was reading, listening to and watching Jordan Peterson during the last few years with a combination of bored disinterest and intellectual concern. I did not want to add one citation to his record, or one more mention for Google's bots to locate. When heat and light are given to the cold, dark, disturbing and wrong, the errors can amplify. Then his wife became sick, and a Post Peterson Paradigm emerged. I realized, as will be revealed in my Rule 11, that I was one of the few people who can—with the power of experiential horror and profound loss—offer a critique of his hypocrisy. But also, I summon a living commentary about (academic) death, to offer a bitter vinaigrette of warning.

I offer twelve rules, that are not rules. They are mantras for consideration over coffee, thoughts while cleaning the house, or topics for a quiet chat with friends over a posh Savvy Blanc. I have skin in this game, but this book offers no personal attack. It is a book of argument, debate and interpretation of research. Occasionally, it is a book of negation, of refusal to sit in silence, to maintain complicity and complacency with an educational and economic system that demeans and marginalizes so many.²³ Yet it is difficult to sustain credibility as a scholar in such times. As a researcher in the humanities, but also a theorist, a scholar of Marx, an historian, a Cultural Studies academic, and a feminist, white, heterosexual woman who has not had children, I am Satan in this intellectual scrag fight. In an odd inversion of identity politics, I am stripped of scholarship. My research is parked. Instead of my words being assessed as research, I am reduced to breasts, ovaries, and a shrill feminist voice. I am Peterson's "crazy, harpy sister."²⁴ From this Alt-Right version of identity politics, I am everything that is wrong with international higher education. To make this situation even worse, I am an Australian. We approach every problem with an open mouth.

While my vagina may seem an intellectual anchor in any scholarly debate, discounting me from serious intellectual commentary, like the Fool in King Lear, I ask one—potent—question. How did a mediocre, Canadian clinical psychologist become famous? I have an answer to that question, and I offer it for your consideration. To begin this answer, we start with a fun fact. In the nineteenth century, there was a book that outsold Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel's *The Communist Manifesto*. It was written by a man who was famous in his own lifetime. A sought-out speaker and writer, his name was Samuel Smiles. His best known and bestselling book was *Self Help*.²⁵ Yes, that was the title. This was the book that started the concept and the industry.

The subtitle of *Self Help*, published in 1859, was "with illustrations of conduct and perseverance." It was a book that celebrated individual men and hard work.

²³ Honig (2021). She argued for the collective act of refusal.

²⁴ Peterson (2017b).

²⁵ Smiles (1859).