

Power, Sex, and Myth: Beauvoir, Paglia, and Peterson

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A few years ago, I delivered an introductory lecture on feminism, sex, and gender to approximately 150 philosophy students at the University of Amsterdam, just after the high-profile author, Jordan Peterson, had visited the university. Peterson is a Canadian psychology professor who has millions of, mostly male, followers on the Internet, including supporters of the alt-right and other right-wing populist movements. But many “ordinary” – i.e., not politically organized – young men, including philosophy students, are also interested in his ideas. The lecture was on gender theory, which is total nonsense, according to Peterson, not to mention dangerous. “Postmodern” staff members who deal with such themes are his enemy. “The gloves are off,” he warned, during his presentation at the University of Amsterdam.¹ Sex differences are not socially constructed, as gender theory claims, but simply based on biology and tradition. Or, as some twenty male students told me after my lecture, “Women should go back home.”

Why do Peterson’s ideas appeal to these philosophy students? And why is his work so popular among supporters of the new type of right-wing political movements, such as Trumpism, in the us, or the Forum for Democracy in the Netherlands, where many followers of Peterson’s work can be found? Does his work elucidate what holds together the strange mix of ideological ingredients that we find in these new right-wing movements, a mix of neoliberal – purely market-oriented – ingredients, on the one hand, and strongly conservative ingredients on the other? What is the connecting principle here?² Does Peterson’s work give us a clue? I will try to answer these questions, taking Peterson’s work as an expression of a certain worldview that is on the rise today and that we cannot afford to ignore.

I will specifically have a look at his 1999 book, *Maps of Meaning*, which forms the basis of his bestseller, *12 Rules for Life* (2018). To my surprise, Peterson’s approach significantly overlaps with that of art historian

Camille Paglia in her book *Sexual Personae* (1990), who, in turn, is a great admirer of Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 work, *The Second Sex* (cf. Vintges 2013). A comparison of both Paglia's and Peterson's work, along with Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, will reveal some striking parallels, next to some major dissimilarities and characteristically different outcomes. Contrasting Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* with Paglia's and Peterson's approaches, I will evaluate to what extent this work still provides us with concepts that help us to better understand today's world. Finally, I will return to my questions surrounding the "Jordan Peterson phenomenon" of today.

The Status of Myth in *The Second Sex*

It is only fairly recently that I realized how much Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* revolves around the theme of myth (cf. Vintges 2017). The 120-page chapter "Myths," which deals with the dominant myth of the "eternal feminine" was the first she wrote and, only later, did she add chapters on biology, history, and women's lived experiences. The main thesis of the work is that women have always been held in an inferior place to men. Men in history were the superior, first sex to whom women were subordinate. The whole education and socialization of girls and women, plus the myth of "the eternal feminine," serve to perpetuate the second-class position of women throughout history. But this dominant myth of Woman is a false assumption. There is no such thing as the eternal feminine, there are only concrete women, in countless different guises, according to Beauvoir.

As Adam Kjellgren argues, most Beauvoir scholars mistakenly conclude that myth is criticized by Beauvoir on epistemological grounds and rejected as a false, untrue representation that should be eliminated (Kjellgren 2024). But, on closer inspection, mythical thinking in *The Second Sex* comes forward as a perpetual symbolic activity, in reference to the approach of philosopher and anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose work Beauvoir discussed earlier (Beauvoir 2015a).³ According to Lévi-Strauss, mythical thought, which he also called "a wild mode of thought," or "magical" thought, is a classificatory mode of thinking, characterized by its attention to the concrete, but is as equally rigorous as science. To the 20th century philosophers, Ernst Cassirer and Susan Langer, myth is a symbolic creation of the human mind, characterized by the leading role of imagination and associative connections. According to Langer, myth is a

“dream-narrative” (Langer 1960, 144), made of “dream-material” (139) – mythical tales are “the great dreams of mankind” (159). Cassirer specifically points out that myths are characterized by a free concept of causality, in which everything, in principle, can cause everything. In his work, *The Myth of the State* (1946), Cassirer concluded that myths will keep cropping up in the political realm. To all of these authors, myth is a symbolic form that will never disappear.

In Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, we encounter this approach as well. In line with Lévi-Strauss, we find the term “mythical thinking” (Beauvoir 2010, 280) to indicate a kind of thought that produces specific systems of meaning (cf. 7, 82). She points to the “imagistic” character of myths (281) that, as collective dreams (cf. 282), “leave terrestrial truth behind” (277). The myth of the eternal feminine is a “masculine dream” (165), representing Woman as essentially flesh and nature. In Hegelian terms, she explains this by stating that women were seen and treated by men as their absolute “Other.” Out of a striving for self-certainty, seeking to affirm themselves as a superior and pure consciousness, men have degraded women into an inferior consciousness bound to nature and animal life. Women became, in Hegel’s terms, the “other” consciousness – i.e., the “Other.” As man’s inferior Other that remained bound to nature, Woman had all the contradictory feelings projected upon herself that nature evokes. She represents the magical fertility of the earth: “the fountain from which springs forth sweet water that is also mother’s milk, a warm spring... rich in regenerating forces” (168). But, on the other hand, Woman reminds man of his carnal contingency and represents “murderous Nature (having) a grip on him” (169). Because of the ambivalent feelings nature inspires in man, the myth of Woman is so contradictory that its unity is not at first discerned: “Delilah and Judith, Aspasia and Lucretia, Pandora and Athena, woman is both Eve and the Virgin Mary. She is an idol, a servant, source of life, power of darkness... she is man’s prey; she is his downfall” (166).

No myth yet expresses erotic symmetry, conveying that, for women, men are also “sexed and carnal,” Beauvoir argues (166). However, more and more, it appears that “a woman could hold a man’s office and still be desirable.” Suggesting the emergence of new, more equal, erotic relations between the sexes, Beauvoir concludes that “a new form of eroticism seems to be coming about: perhaps it will produce new myths” (283). In a later essay on the French film star Brigitte Bardot, Beauvoir examines

whether this is already going on with the character Bardot in Roger Vadim's films. Bardot comes forward as a sexual agent and her love life seems to be full of mutual erotic desire and pleasure. But the film character Bardot, as a child-woman, does not escape the myth of Woman as Nature that must be tamed (Beauvoir 2015b).

We can conclude that Beauvoir was not opposing all myths, but that, as Kjellgren aptly argues, it was a specific myth that was her target, namely the dominant – static – myth of the eternal feminine (Kjellgren 2024). According to Beauvoir, this dominant, static, myth of Woman is also essential for understanding women on a subjective level, as she demonstrates in the chapters of *The Second Sex* on women's lived experiences. As men's inferior Other, women need men's support. They want to please them and choose themselves "as men dream of her" (Beauvoir 2010, 159). However, we have entered a new phase of history, in which reciprocal relationships, including those between the sexes, are possible – be it that this reciprocity requires constant moral effort, given people's tendency to dominate others. One day, perhaps, the dominant and static myth of Woman will be "phased out," Beauvoir argues: "The more women assert themselves as human beings, the more the marvelous quality of Other dies in them. But today it still exists in the hearts of all men" (166).

Camille Paglia: "Mythology's identification of woman with nature is correct"

Art historian Camille Paglia, who professes to be a great admirer of Beauvoir, similarly concentrates on the myth of Woman in her study *Sexual Personae* (1990). She argues that all great art comes down to a mythical representation of nature – in the form of sexual characters, or personae, such as the mother, the beautiful boy, and the vamp. She especially focuses on the mythological character of the Great Mother, in line with Erich Neumann's 1956 work, *Die Grosse Mutter*. Neumann was a pupil of psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung, who, in his work – contra Freud – argued that man has an innate collective unconscious, in which resides a set of mythological archetypes. Always, and in all cultures, we find the same archetypes or mythological motives, such as the father, the mother, the child, the wise old man, the hero, the ruler, the rebel, and the trickster. Neumann concentrated in his study on the archetype of what he called the "Great Mother" who is,

on the one hand, the good mother and, on the other, the terrible – devouring – mother, a force of death and destruction. In his work, he systematically traces the symbolic expressions of this archetype in the human mind.

Paglia notices the ambivalence of this archetype, but especially examines the sinister aspects of the Great Mother, as symbolized and expressed in art. She distinguishes between two principles – the Apollonian, which stands for order, logic, and culture, and which is traditionally represented by men, and the Dionysian principle, which stands for chaos and the dark forces of nature. Women in myths represent the Dionysian principle: “The blind grinding of subterranean force, the long, slow suck, the murk, and ooze... the squalor and rot” (Paglia 1990, 6). According to Paglia, “Mythology’s identification of woman with nature is correct” (12). Women are not only associated with nature in myths and art, they *are* nature: their body is “a chthonian machine... it has one mission, pregnancy” (10). To Paglia, in the end, there is “nothing beautiful in nature” (57). Scratch its surface and “nature’s daemonic ugliness will erupt” (5). Beauty is an illusion, a nervous attempt to control ugliness. Nature is essentially chaos and decay, hierarchy, violence, and aggression. Sex as nature in us is “a far darker power” than as Rousseauist, politically correct feminism presents it (3). Violence, date rape, pornography, and sm are the reality of sex, as author Sade has shown us. Men see women as their prey, and women should not be naive about this but take up their role in a “pro-sex feminism.”

In summary, Paglia, like Beauvoir, focuses on the way women in mythology are identified with nature. But, other than Beauvoir, she argues that this is inevitably so since, through her biology, woman embodies the principle of fertility. Apollonian man has brought us civilization, progress, and capitalism, and we should be thankful for these male achievements. “If civilization had been left in female hands, we would still be living in grass huts,” she concludes (38).

Jordan Peterson: “You can’t change it, it’s not possible”

We find remarkably similar ideas in the work of Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson, who is sometimes referred to as the most influential public intellectual in the Western world today. With Peterson, too, the work of Jung and Neumann plays a leading role. The only difference is that Peterson does not situate Jung’s universal mythological motifs in

an innate collective unconscious. The idea of “inherited memory content” – that is, “the collective unconscious” – “appears insufficiently elaborated, from the modern empirical perspective” (Peterson 1999, 92). The universal set of mythological archetypes that Jung discovered instead penetrates everyone’s unconscious through ritual, drama, literature, myth, and people’s embodied behavior (cf. 93-94).

Peterson links his Jungian perspective to neuropsychological research that, he argues, shows that our brains are wired to constantly seek to improve our position. “We act to transform ‘where we are’ into ‘where we would like to be’” (19). Like lobsters, we are creatures that want to climb up in hierarchy and status. Given our constant striving to improve our position, and the fact that individuals simply differ in talent and ability, social hierarchies are inevitable, and they are desirable as well because they are based on competence (Peterson 2018a, 303).

In *Maps of Meaning*, Peterson claims to have made a great discovery, namely that the myths and archetypes of mankind comprise a universal moral system attuned to the functioning of our brains, i.e., the constant pursuit of improving our position (Peterson 1999, 99). In the continuous pursuit of goals, our brain enters known and unknown territory and creative behavior can emerge. This is reflected in the structure of mythological representations of the world, in terms of the known, the unknown, and the hero’s creative action. The known stands for order, form, and culture, symbolically linked to the masculine. The unknown is chaos, substance, and nature, symbolically associated with the feminine. Chaos is origin, source, mother, matter, and order must restrain and shape that chaos. Thirdly, there is the archetypal hero, who renews the culture, in accordance with the basic principles of the transmitted moral system. The Old Testament, to Peterson, is the basic text of Western society, with its strict patriarchal “God the Father” who demands absolute obedience to moral rules. The mythical, archetypal hero par excellence is the figure of Christ – already announced in the Old Testament, and acting in line with it. Christianity contains the moral directive of the divinity of the individual who realizes themselves, but does so in compliance with the purposes of humanity. On pain of disaster, we must conform to this moral system of divine characters – of the authoritarian father, the heroic son, and Mother Mary (the representative of the positive side of the archetypal Great Mother).

That traditional myths contain a dichotomy of, and contrast between, the male and the female in terms of order versus chaos “might be seen as

unfortunate, but... you can't change it. It's not possible. This is underneath everything. If you change those basic categories, people wouldn't be human anymore" (Peterson 2018b). In non-Western cultures, we also see – in terms of yin and yang – the dichotomy of chaos and order, the unknown and the known, as respectively the feminine and the masculine. The fact that our brains have a left and a right hemisphere, each with a focus on one of these two domains, confirms all this, according to Peterson.

Gender theorists and queer movements, and especially transgender people,⁴ pose an existential threat because they tamper with the foundations of human civilization. They undermine the basic principles of our moral order, which has established the traditional dichotomy of male and female in everyone's unconscious. Humanity's mythical systems of meaning have been modeled in such a way that we have been able to survive successfully. They contain the wisdom of our ancestors, in the form of universal and absolute moral rules that are attuned to the way we are wired. If we transgress this moral system, it will result in chaos and misery, society will disintegrate and the apocalypse will arrive.

The Power of Myth

Comparing the three authors discussed above shows a similar analysis that men and women are symbolized in myths as, respectively, Culture versus Nature, the Apollonian versus the Dionysian (in terms of Paglia), and Order versus Chaos (in terms of Peterson). The analysis of the dominant myth of Woman as Nature that we find in all three authors, is a useful analytical tool, for instance, to analyze the seemingly contradictory content of contemporary popular culture (cf. Paglia 1994) or of right-wing online communities, such as the "incels," who, as Felipa Melo Lopes has shown picture women, on the one hand, as stars and goddesses and, on the other, as sluts and dangerous creatures (Melo Lopes 2024).

All three authors also emphasize the omnipresence of power relations. With Beauvoir, there is – in reference to Hegel's master-servant theory and early Sartre – an ever-present tendency to dominate others; with Paglia, we are living in a Hobbesian state of nature, characterized by aggression and violence; and with Peterson, there is an unabridged human-animal continuity when it comes to nature as aggression and competition. All three authors also point to sex as a terrain of power and violence.⁵

Apart from these similarities, there are major differences between Paglia and Peterson, on the one hand, and Beauvoir on the other. The main difference is that, with Beauvoir, there is talk of history and morals – culture is a much more important factor in humans than in any other species. Culture develops, humans are beings in the making, and woman is a subject on the move. In the past, women were more controlled by nature than men because of their reproductive functions, but this has been overtaken by modern developments, such as access to contraception, education, and work. Through our moral efforts, unequal power relations between the sexes can be further transformed into reciprocal ones; the dominant myth about women will fade away, and new, more equal erotic myths will develop (Beauvoir 2010, 283; cf. Vintges 2017). To Paglia and Peterson, however, the dominant myth of woman as Nature will persist; to Paglia, this is because of the innate archetype of The Great Mother, which is based on truth since woman *is* nature; and to Peterson, because myths contain timeless motifs and moral rules tailored to the ways our brains are wired.

When people wonder why emancipation is not progressing more rapidly, or why many women are still submissive to men, I think we must take the dimension of myth very seriously. We are dealing here with deeply entrenched, persistent images and stories and, as such, with a dimension of reality that will only slowly change. When it comes to a diagnosis of the present, Beauvoir's perspective in *The Second Sex* is convincing, namely that we live in a period of transition, in which tough gender patterns and myths are still at work, but changes are also taking place that cannot be reversed. Her idea that the dominant myth of Woman will fade into the background while more reciprocal myths of eroticism emerge, is convincing as well. It seems to be confirmed today in that all kinds of smart women are more often portrayed as sexual agents in stories, films, and the media.

The Second Sex as an Analytical Toolbox

Beauvoir's study *The Second Sex*, however, needs updating from a scientific point of view when it comes to its universal claims. Beauvoir based herself on the empirical findings of Lévi-Strauss, which showed a universal pattern of an exchange of women between groups of men, whereby the woman passes over to the man's family – a pattern which, according to Lévi-Strauss, is constitutive of any social order. He saw this pattern reflected in the myths

of mankind, in which women are exchanged between men like “foodstuff.” But his thesis of the exchange of women today is refuted as a universal pattern – anthropological research shows that in ancient and recent hunter-gatherer societies not only women are transferred to the tribe of men – the pattern of so-called “patrilocality” – but that men as well go over to the family or tribe of women (cf. Sanday and Goodenough 1990). Recent research, moreover, claims that generally men’s and women’s roles were not so clear-cut in prehistoric times. There were more female hunters in Paleolithic times than is usually assumed (Haas, Watson, Buonasera, et al. 2020), and overall, women had important economic and political roles in the Paleolithic period (Cirotteau et al. 2021).⁶

The findings of the two latter studies have been contested by prehistoric specialists, who argue that women’s secondary status in society is observed in the vast majority of hunter-gatherer societies, be it with notable exceptions (cf. Augereau et al. 2021). More research is to be expected but, for now, we can already conclude that, instead of adopting Beauvoir’s grand theory in *The Second Sex*, we should take up the work as an analytical toolbox, useful for analyzing dominant – rather than universal – gender patterns in history. Given the perspective of change that Beauvoir employs in *The Second Sex*, such an adjustment is possible without violating the character of the work. Her work, after all, not only discusses dominant gender patterns but argues as well for more horizontal relations between the sexes in the near future. Taking up *The Second Sex* as a toolbox to analyze dominant gender patterns, instead of totalizing theory, also allows other voices and socio-cultural practices to come to the fore, next to the dominant ones (cf. Vintges 2017).

Such an adjustment is impossible, however, for the grand theories presented by Paglia and Peterson: in Paglia’s case, because she bases herself on Jung’s idea of the universal collective unconscious; in Peterson’s, it’s because of the downright visionary content of his theory. While he acknowledges that Jung’s concept of inherited memory content, i.e., the universal collective unconscious, is “insufficiently elaborated from the modern empirical perspective” (Peterson 1999, 92), his thesis that old myths comprise a *crucial* moral system attuned to the structure of our brains, is equally unsubstantiated. The motto of his *Maps of Meaning* is taken from the biblical book of Matthew: “I will utter things that have been kept secret from the foundation of the world.” His apocalyptic visionary theory does not allow for any counterexamples or other factors.

Power's Right⁷

Finally, I come back to my questions surrounding the Peterson phenomenon today. First of all, why is Peterson so popular among supporters of new right-wing movements and organizations? Does his work help us to understand these movements, revealing the ingredient that holds together the strange mix of conservative and neoliberal – market-oriented – elements they contain? How can an appreciation of the nation state, heroes, and traditions, on the one hand, and the embracing of neoliberalism on the other, coexist, while the latter is insensitive to these kinds of “identitarian” issues, so long as people function as subjects in the market?

As we have seen, to Peterson, civilization comes down to the masculine principle of order controlling the feminine domain of chaos, and always involves social hierarchies, since the most competent simply rise to the top. The core ingredient of Peterson's thinking is the premise of “power's right,” i.e., the right of those in power who, in accordance with the fundamental masculine basis of human culture are, *and should be*, “strong men.” As such his thought exemplifies what is the core ingredient of contemporary right-wing populism, uniting conservatism and neoliberalism: the radical endorsement of masculine competitive power.

Last, but not least, why does Peterson appeal to many “ordinary” – not politically organized – young men,⁸ such as the philosophy students who argued that women should “go back home”? Peterson time and again refers to the insecurity and disorientation of his male followers. But rather than being caused by today's feminism, as is his message, these are caused by contemporary neoliberalism. For decades, neoliberalism has been eroding the social fabric, through its hyper-individualism, emphasis on tough competition, and the premise that everything in society should be run as a business. In glorifying winners – which implies humiliating those who are not – Peterson seems unable to speak a language other than that of neoliberalism, such as that of friendship and generosity, for example, and which can be found, for instance, in the Bible, a text he nevertheless makes copious use of. Similarly, he neglects biological research which reveals the moral and generous facets of human nature, underscoring our ethical motives. His voice thus only adds to the problems men face today; it is not feminism that is their enemy, it is neoliberalism.

Notes

- 1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipiful6dm14>
- 2 For a similar question – but a different answer – see Brown 2019.
- 3 Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* makes multiple references to the writings of Lévi-Strauss (see Beauvoir 2010, 7, 82, 83, 86n, 171n, 173).
- 4 Peterson gained fame in 2016 for his opposition to a Canadian bill that, in his view, would force him to use a student’s preferred pronouns.
- 5 As Beauvoir does in her 1951 essay *Must we burn Sade?* (Beauvoir 2012).
- 6 I would like to express my gratitude to Veronica Vasterling for bringing to my attention the study conducted by Haas, Watson, Buonasera et al. 2020.
- 7 I borrow this phrase from philosopher Michel Foucault who, in his work, *Society Must Be Defended* traces the contours in the West of an “intensely mythical” political discourse. This “historico-political discourse” – as opposed to a “philosophico-juridical” one (Foucault 2003, 57) – is a “discourse that deciphers war’s permanent presence within society” (270). It is invested in “very traditional mythical forms,” such as, “the lost age of great ancestors, the imminence of new times and a millenary revenge, the coming of the new kingdom that will wipe out the defeats of old” (56). The specific function of this type of discourse, “is not so much to record the past or to speak of origins as to speak of right, to speak of *power’s right*” (116; emphasis added).
- 8 Today, former professional kickboxer and social media personality Andrew Tate appears to outshine Peterson in popularity among young men, sharing similar ideas about the erosion of masculinity and a similar call for a return to traditional values. The two are currently embroiled in an online feud.

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