

What Comes After Woke?

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“In an effort to put everything into question, we run the danger of losing any kind of firm footing on which to build a more just and equitable society. So the logical end game of a certain project of questioning is total bafflement or the destruction of everything.” — Professor Mark Kingwell

Questioning authority is a necessity for a functioning democracy. Continually calling power to account has to be a good thing, right? Maybe not, at least not all the time. So argues today’s guest, philosopher Mark Kingwell.

Have we let “speaking truth to power” degenerate into a Pavlovian response to any and all real, or merely perceived, sources of authority? Has this drive to habitually challenge institutions endangered politics, academia, science, and journalism?

Mark Kingwell joins Jesse to explore these questions which lay at the heart of his new book *Question Authority*.

Introduction

Jesse: I’m Jesse Brown, and today we are talking about how questioning authority can actually be dangerous.

In an effort to put everything into question, we run the danger of losing any kind of firm footing on which to build a more just and equitable society. —
Professor Mark Kingwell

It will surprise no one to learn that I was into loud, angry music as a teenager. Groups like Rage Against the Machine and Public Enemy were exciting in a way that went beyond the impact of the music itself, they had a message. But they were more persuasive, to me anyhow, in throwing rocks at authority than in describing what should replace it. You know, when I got to the parts about Louis Farrakhan or the Zapatistas, I kind of lost interest.

The same skepticism that made me relate to attacks on the powers that be in the 1st place, that skepticism limited my ability to buy into anybody’s vision of some glorious new world order and so I gradually drifted away from Chuck D and towards Ali G.

I guess I was more interested in mocking power than trying to seize it.

To whatever limited degree I have matured out of adolescence, I’ve gone from mocking power to questioning and criticizing it and that’s been a decent enough way to make a living.

I figure that doing accountability journalism, you kind of can’t go wrong, like even when you’re wrong. If somebody has the job of consistently questioning and challenging and annoying whoever happens to be in power, that’s got to be a good thing, right? Maybe not.

Let me read you something that showed up in my inbox recently.

“Question authority,” the popular 1960s slogan commanded. “Think for yourself.” But what started as a counter-cultural catchphrase, ... has become a practical paradox. The social critics of yesterday have become the tone-policing tyrants of today, ... ideological enforcement. ... The resulting crisis of authority, made worse by rival political factions and chaotic public discourse, has exposed cracks in every facet of shared social life. Politics, academia, journalism, medicine, religion, science—every kind of institutional claim is now routinely subject to objection, investigation, and outright disbelief. A recurring feature of this comprehensive distrust of authority is the firm, [indeed] unshakeable, belief in personal righteousness and superiority ... an addiction to conviction.”

Ouch. Kind of a punch to the gut, actually. An unshakable belief in personal righteousness, an addiction to conviction.

I can vigorously nod my head when I project that sentence out onto other people. It is a lot less comfortable to think about those words when I look into a mirror.

Anyhow, I figured I should investigate those ideas before civil society collapses entirely due to the crisis of authority that those words describe.

So in a minute, I will sit down with the guy who wrote them, philosopher Mark Kingwell, author of the new book, *Question Authority*.

Conversation Begins

Professor Mark Kingwell, before we get into it, Mark, I have to ask you about your avatar.

Instead of your own headshot, I noticed that you have up there a picture of legendary journalist, a titan from the high point of the New York newspaper, *Daily Bugle* editor J. Jonah Jameson, who is certainly an authority figure. What is that about?

Mark: This could get embarrassing, but I have right beside me in my room two action figures of J. Jonah Jameson as well. I mean, part of it was when I started getting gray at the temples, I thought there was a slight resemblance. I don't have the buzz cut or the mustache, but I always remember as a kid that he was my image of a newspaper man in the sense that he was constantly angry and always resentful of Spider-Man's popularity and he was constantly demanding some kind of account of the popularity of Spider-Man and I thought, there's something really wonderful about this, this kind of rage to get the story.

Jesse: It never occurred to me until right now what an unethical journalist Peter Parker was. Yeah. Like, get me a photograph of Spider-Man on my desk by 5 P.m., Parker and then he goes out and takes a picture of himself.

Mark: The original selfie.

Jesse: I think question authority as a phrase is probably one of the credos that guided me for many years, maybe has a lot to do with where I am now.

If I trace it back, I think like, I don't know, Mad Magazine, Chuck D, probably I watched the movie Pump Up the Volume too many times.

Mark: Nice.

Jesse: What was it for you?

Mark: A little bit earlier than that. I think I'm a little older than you, but I would say also that it has been a guiding idea, but with A twist, because what I remember is seeing it as a bumper sticker, and I understood that it was meant to be paradoxical, ironic, to command somebody to question authority seems like it tangles back upon itself.

Jesse: This is why you're a PhD and I'm not. It did not occur to me till this moment, the contradiction of being told prescriptively, 'hey, question authority'. Well, 'who the fuck are you to tell me what to do, asshole?'

Mark: Exactly.

Jesse: I did not even understand or clock that until right now.

Mark: Okay, well, my work here is done then.

Jesse: Yeah, we should just end it now in the moment of revelation. No, let's not do that.

I promised listeners that you had some insight into why it can be bad to question authority. How is that possible?

Mark: I mean that in an effort to put everything into question, we run the danger of losing any kind of firm footing on which to build a more just and equitable society.

So the logical end game of a certain project of questioning is total bafflement or the destruction of everything and that's welcome news to some kinds of people, some nihilists, And I think a lot of people who are trying to untangle the intellectual threads here want to see why the project of questioning authority, which is inherently good, might go astray and if and when it does, how do we get it back on track and work towards something that is recognizably a more just society?

Jesse: Put this in the world that I live in here, both in terms of just like Canadian news and Canadian media and Canada, what is this breakdown in trust? Does the authority even exist anymore? The authority seems to be questioning itself.

There are a lot of funny jokes about Justin Trudeau, like taking a knee at a Black Lives Matter protest and participating in other, you know, anti-establishment protests and I'm like, ***** you're the Prime Minister.

What are you, like, why are you at the protest? If you want to change things, nobody's got more power than you.

But you really lay it out piece by piece of how you know, the center has broken down and that that trust doesn't exist.

Can you situate that in some examples for me?

Mark: That's a good kind of image for our own political context to see this kind of a bending back where the establishment is portraying itself anyway as anti-establishment.

I wanted to do something a little more basic, which is look at some of the dominant sectors of everyday life, politics, science, journalism, media, and think about the ways in which the institutions of those sectors have been put into question to a point where trust levels have plummeted in almost every corner of everyday life and one could give all the statistics, but I saw a recent survey of Canadians' trust in media outlets, and the most trusted outlet for media in Canada is The Weather Channel, which to me is just funny because we all know that the old joke is that the weather man is always wrong, the weather person.

But that's where Canadians go to get trusted information about the external world and below that run our legacy media outlets like CBC and CTV and others.

These are deep challenges because if we don't maintain levels of trust, we're not going to be able to deal with the crises that are everywhere around us.

So trust is actually not just a kind of nice thing that emerges as a property of well-functioning systems.

It's an essential technology of coping with crisis and absent that trust, we are in a lot of trouble.

So you can see why the two prongs in a way are coming to the same point.

We want questioning authority because we don't want illegitimate authority pushing us around or doing things for bad reasons or bogus motives.

But we also don't want so much distrust of authority that we lose the ground beneath our feet.

Jesse: I mean, it's interesting because I've always felt like it was an essential good. If my laser gun is permanently set on question authority, then that's a service to provide. That's always going to be good because power always exists somewhere and power needs to be challenged.

But you get to a point where you've cracked the assurances that people have, you know, to the point where even the prime minister is saying, like, we're not trustworthy, our nation's history, we're not so great. You can't believe anything we say. Welcome to this country. We suck and something will fill that void.

Mark: Absolutely right. So, again, sticking with the Canadian case, I think this pervasive and widening sense of brokenness is a toxic element in political culture, because it starts with genuine and I think committed ideas.

Look, there's something that is broken, we need to fix it. But when everything is broken, then there is nothing. I mean, to put it in more concrete terms, you know, what are we gonna, you are a good example because you say quite rightly that your job is to act as a critical agent with respect to what? To other media, power, politics and that's a very important function and you dance around, I mean, I'm not trying to put words in your mouth, but this is how I perceive the kind of media criticism that you and others do.

You dance around a very interesting position because in order to make those criticisms, you have to believe in something.

You have to believe that there is a foundation from which the criticisms are launched.

Jesse: To be snarky and cynical and critical of the media is to suggest that the media could be good.

To criticize the media for being too racist or for picking on a minority group or for misrepresenting a fact is like, what you're saying is the media should be better than this and I believe in a media that actually is better than this and I believe that it's worth the effort of pointing out the problems with the media towards getting things better and that can carry through to journalism in general.

Like, yes, journalism questions authority.

Is it anti-establishment? It's part of the same system in an ideal setting because what it is saying government didn't do what it said it was going to do and if we are as critical as possible, if we're set to 100, we might be able to correct their course by 1%.

Mark: Yeah.

Jesse: Right? We're trying to make government better.

We're trying to make people more informed so that they can force government to be better.

But if your questioning of authority actually like craters that authority, if it collapses the authority and authority says, yeah, you're right, we suck, then yeah, all that's left is a desert, but not for long because nature abhors a vacuum and something will step into that and I think that we are talking about a conflict of forces, one of which is like bought into a system that is cogent and functional and journalism, traditional journalism is a part of that and another, which is actually, we want to take this all apart, the burn it all down philosophy and I'm not here to criticize it because I think that there's some really interesting and thoughtful arguments about how it is corrupt and needs to be burnt down.

But I find that those points of view break down when they get to the point of what you're going to replace it with.

Mark: And I think you're right to highlight as I try to do this danger of the vacuum that's created, because we don't have to look far to see how authoritarian politics, nationalist populism become popular options under these conditions of breakdown.

Jesse: It's a real tragedy because in so many ways, we've come so far so quickly. There were ideas that I think are correct that were really fringe ideas a while ago.

Like examining how racism is systemic went from a fringe academic idea to something that like got worked into policy. It got accepted. That felt like we were going somewhere. That felt like a really good thing and I think there's like two or three or four other corollaries, like sexual identity.

There's all sorts of areas where people opened up to ideas and got those ideas heard within the circles of power.

But to end up like in such a non-progressive place, because what happens when everyone is just doxing each other and destroying and canceling each other is not progressive or modern. It's so retrograde. It really just becomes like a mob rule and

language breaks down and is replaced by jargon just about monsterring people and then I question myself, because I have some limited authority and it's a habit I can't turn off. We're 2 like gray-bearded middle-aged men.

Is this just not what happens to everybody? that we're just bemoaning that a system that favored us is breaking down.

Mark: Right. Good question. But let me take the first point that you made just then. It is, I mean, we want to highlight this. It's been much discussed, but I think it's worth having you and I a little heated agreement about this, which is the illiberalism of the liberal project or the post-liberal project and we don't have to go far to find examples of this when There's a kind of ideological capture of institutions and then enforcement of certain kinds of thought crime and inevitably start feeling like Orwell, the groupthink, thought crime, police.

This is very, very bad and it is, I think, antithetical to the things that got us there in the first place, which were progressive ideas, as you say.

to try to push back on dominant structures and say, look, there is such a thing as racism that's baked into institutions.

That it's not about whether you as an individual think you're a racist, but that there is systematic barrier to certain things happening.

That's all important work, necessary work.

I mean, to take it to you and I personally, I wonder about this.

I mean, I feel like one of the important things for anybody is to Resist the temptation of intellectual certainty.

You know, we tend to talk about ideological capture as if it's always something that happens to somebody else or some other institution.

What if it's happening to ourselves? And not just in the obvious way or, well, the much discussed way where, say, DEI initiatives take over a kind of academic culture, but also ideological capture of a subtler form, which is nostalgia, a belief of somehow things have gone awry because I'm not getting what I expected.

These are forms of ideological capture too, but they happen within the individual.

Jesse: So here's something you said.

There's a lot of complaining about media bias, but I suspect that genuinely balanced news would die on the page or screen.

I like pumped my fist in the air.

Everybody thinks that they want balanced, objective news, or many people do, and they say, I hate opinion. You know, I just want the facts and then when they're offered it, it is not what they consume.

Mark: Yeah, well, that's quite right and what's that about? Part of it is just basic weak human nature. We are drawn to spectacle and conflict. Even think about the American presidential election campaign, focus on debates and I know debates don't swing votes much, but they become almost like professional sports, the way they're looked at and commented on.

I think more than that, it's that most people don't consume media in order to find out what's going on.

Most people consume media in order to confirm the beliefs that they already have. That's just a fact of life.

I mean, this is partly a larger point about the nature of shared culture.

David Foster Wallace has a great definition of popular culture.

He says, It's the symbolic representation of what people already believe.

That's why you can recycle it endlessly, because it's the same stuff over and over again and I think if you take that from popular culture and make it into public discourse, it's the same thing.

People don't want new ideas. They want to have arguments for the ideas that they already have.

Jesse: I have to disagree with you a bit.

When you say that it's just a fact of life that people want to hear their opinions confirmed, I think that's true to some extent, but I think there's a difference between the kind of pop culture representation that Wallace was writing about and that you're citing and what we do in news.

I don't know how I could do it if I thought my job is just to hold up a mirror to somebody and tell them something that they already believe.

I do think people wake up in the morning and they say, What is happening.

Mark: Well, you're more optimistic than I am.

You know this better than most people, but I've been following, like everyone, the rise of non-legacy media, especially podcasts.

I was initially a little skeptical about podcasts because I thought, Well, you know, people already have NPR and they have, you know, those kind of freaks who listen to people talk about ideas, they already have those outlets.

But the great thing about podcasts is that the way that special interest, and I don't mean that pejoratively, I mean, narrow casting actually becomes viable and that's an amazing thing.

There is a feeling that we don't have to be bound by the way that legacy media institutions go.

Because if you look at some of them, they're either prone to the usual capitalist forces, which force them into the entertainment or spectacle kind of end game, or they are trying to enact a kind of political positioning, which is inevitably alienating to some part of the potential audience.

At that point, you should just stop having, you know, mainstream or broadcast media. You should go narrow cast.

Jesse: That's a very strong argument against Mark Kingwell, who wrote,

the widening of the public platform was viewed as a big step towards the democratization of power and the liberation of individuals from external information control. The results are instead massive gains in polarization, au-

ocratic concentration and incivility, malicious data harvesting, bot-driven election skews, and a culture of deep but ineffective discursive suspicion. We used to have three networks. It got blown up into thousands of podcasts, blogs, et cetera, et cetera. It was supposed to be great, but actually it's just made things shitty.

That's the argument put forth there. But I agree with the Mark Kingwell I just spoke to.

Mark: They're both right.

Jesse: These are forums where people talk about ideas for hours and hours and hours, and they have massive audiences and if you don't like one, there are dozens and hundreds and millions of others you can choose from.

Mark: I have to think that that's better.

Jesse: Than an environment where three major news networks could decide to tell the world, you know, that Iraq had WMDs and we got to go kill a million people.

Mark: The shift from concentrated media to the disintermediated public sphere, which I discussed, I think the first moments were extremely optimistic.

The web was going to be inherently democratic. It was going to decentralize power and what we saw instead was chaos. It wasn't just the Wild West was a discursive chaos where, you know, the force multipliers of the medium itself acted against public discourse.

That's all consistent with kind of, you know, McLuhan 101 on mass media and the disintermediation of mass media.

What we're talking about now, and I think that that's a really interesting moment that we're in, and here we are in it, in a podcast, is perhaps a pushback on that. I think we're still shaking down all of this and I think we should do well always to heed McLuhan on this, because as I point out, people often mistake, you know, the title of his book is *The Medium is the Mass Age*. It's spelled that way.

He meant it to indicate mass age, massage, and famously, the paraphrase of it, *The medium is the message*.

All of those three things are true and when we think about evolving media and evolving public sphere, mass age, massage, message, all theories should be in play.

Jesse: Just to go full circle here, I do love how McLuhan at his cheesiest was fond of the same kind of wordplay as *Public Enemy*.

Music in our mess age, one of the lesser *Public Enemy* releases and you know, there's a reason why the medium is the message stuck more than the medium is the message. But it's still a good idea.

I think that the danger that you try to avoid with a certain nuance, but it doesn't get heard much, is to avoid what has become a conservative characterization, and I think a dangerous characterization of what's happening right now, which is only partly consistent with what you're saying, that liberal democracy is under threat, but I think there is this call to arms that it's a battle of civilizations and that liberal democracy

must pick up its crusading white shield, and they actually use images of like King Arthur era, because the barbarians are at the gate. It's all kind of like smushed together into a ball, that the woke Marxists are in league with the Islamists, and they're all trying to destroy our blessed Western civilization and if I understand you correctly, that's not what you're saying.

Half of that, I think you're saying, that there is such a thing as liberal democracy, and we have to decide if we believe in it and if we want to protect it and try to make a better one, but it's not up against a rival ideology that is cogent. It's up against chaos. It's up against just a complete dissolution of meaning, which might revert to something thuggish and not particular to any one group or ideology or religion, but no less dangerous for that.

So the question to finally arrive at one is what the hell do we do? Because as powerful as the Canada Land audience is, and as vast as it is, I think there is, there are people who want to have this conversation and think about these things and reassert some sort of shared value.

But how the hell did they do that? And how do you do that in a progressive way that is not nostalgic, that is not about... pretending that things were perfect before, that doesn't give up the gains of consciousness and recognition for each other that we picked up as we took racism seriously and stuff like that.

How do we rebuild a better authority?

Mark: Well, let me first say I agree with that characterization because I do absolutely want to fight shy of that kind of jumble of resentment and misunderstanding where, you know, it's like Trumpian word salad where communist, Marxist, fascist, et cetera, et cetera, is all jumbled together to mean something.

Jesse: It jumbles together to mean the people who it's okay for us to kill.

Mark: That's right.

Jesse: That's what it ends up being, the people who it's okay for us to dehumanize and dispossess and kill.

Mark: Yeah, but by the same token, people will flip it and say, Well, look, Trump is an enemy of civilization. He does not abide by reality. I think that's true.

Okay, so you want me to be prescriptive a little bit and maybe optimistic? I think that What philosophers do is constantly remind us that there are norms of the world that we have to respect and those norms of the world are not unchangeable, but they are powerful and the critical project of everybody, and that, I mean, not just citizens of liberal democracies, but everybody, humans, is to examine the conditions of their own existence critically.

So how are we going about our lives? How are we living? Are we flourishing? Do we have institutions that allow us and others to flourish? I wrote a book about happiness a long time ago, and I kept thinking about what is the nature of happiness? How can I approach this philosophically? And over and over again, I went back to Aristotle, and I know it's a kind of academic thing to do, but it's just true that Aristotle, despite his many factual detractors, since he believed in slavery, for example, had it right that

flourishing is the purpose of human life and thinking about flourishing is part of what that purpose looks like.

So we're already started in this conversation.

You're doing media, I'm writing books, teaching.

We're trying to influence the discourse towards that critical examination of what it means to flourish.

The ideological stuff is, it's not inconsiderable, you have to confront it.

But, you know, insisting on reality, insisting on the validity of good arguments over bad ones, insisting on talking to each other again and again, we come back to these pretty basic truths about what it is to live together in this world.

Jesse: Professor Mark Kingwell, this was a real pleasure. Thank you very much.

Further reading

- Question Authority – Mark Kingswell Book
- Can we rescue civility in public discourse?

Credits

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I think lessons can be learnt from the way Kingswell spears resentment politics, similarly to how Saul Newsman does in his essay Anarchism and the politics of resentment. What Kingswell refers to as authority can also be read through the lens of expertise. This is not to diminish the way this argument is sometimes, mistakenly in my view, marshalled to attempt to advocate for unjustified hierarchies by liberals and others.

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