

Cognitive bias, attribute substitution and politics

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Dear friends,

Astute stalkers amongst you may remember some 14 years ago I made a YouTube video by the same title. Let's not go there. I want to talk with you today about cognitive bias and attribute substitution, in, of course, our favourite context: politics. These are interesting tools of hegemonic enforcement at the nexus of human behaviour and psychology. This, you might suppose, is part of a series on "methods" for our collective toolbelt with which to understand how hegemony maintains its stranglehold on culture, and how capitalist realism (or capitalist fatalism as I'm now borrowing) comes to be the *linga franca* of the entire globalised capitalist state. Sheesh -heavy stuff for a Wednesday morning, but when isn't it.

Let's start, confusingly, in reverse order. Attribute substitution is an important part of the puzzle of understanding how our physical (and financial) realities are shaped. This is because it represents a key tool of capitalist hegemony in manipulating the status quo. Quite simply, attribute substitution is where complex systemic issues are replaced with simpler, more emotionally resonant but ultimately misleading "proxies". Rather than grappling with the true nature of exploitation under capitalism - the extraction of surplus value, the alienation of workers from their labour, the devastating ecological costs - the ruling class encourages the substitution of these "difficult" (or, rather, deliberately obfuscated) analyses with more simplistic narratives about individual success, consumer choice, or technological salvation. This psychological sleight-of-hand serves to, as usual, maintain the status quo by redirecting analytical thinking away from structural critique and toward superficial explanations that pose no threat to capital. When workers substitute "hard work" for systemic advantage, "personal responsibility" for class warfare, or "innovation" for exploitation, we unconsciously reinforce the very systems that oppress us.

The deployment of attribute substitution, particularly in connection to identity politics, is perniciously effective in forestalling class consciousness -and it fits neatly with anti-(working-class)-intellectualism, as cultivated by the Dutton-mafia. By providing ready-made, easily digestible explanations for complex social phenomena, it prevents the development of more sophisticated analytical frameworks that might challenge capitalist relations. We see this clearly in how poverty is attributed to personal failings rather than systematic inequality, how climate change is reduced to individual consumption rather than corporate extraction, and how workplace exploitation is reframed as "culture fit" or "attitude problems". Ohhhh boy. And let's not forget the role of the Murdoch-Albanese alliance in ensuring a septic-tank seal of shit is forced down the public's throats to ensure no challenges to this hegemony ever emerge. Manufactured consent says what? And what's worse, many on the left fall prey to this tendency, substituting aesthetic markers of radicalism for genuine revolutionary praxis, or allowing hyper-focus on specific instances of oppression to obscure the broader machinery of capital. This is not about the left marginalising the marginalised, but rather the bourgeois essentialising the marginalised group to "a problem" for reintegration and inclusion in the capitalist system [1]. Naturally, though, we're not done here...

Cognitive bias, then, serves as both tool for and manifestation of hegemonic control, working together with attribute substitution to maintain capitalist relations through the manipulation of human psychology. Anyone else dizzy at the psychological depths we're plumbing here? Naturally, the ruling class has become adept at weaponising these inherent cognitive shortcuts -confirmation bias reinforces existing prejudices and prevents class solidarity, availability bias keeps workers focused on immediate personal concerns rather than sys-

temic exploitation, and status quo bias creates resistance to radical change even among those most harmed by current conditions. What makes this particularly effective is that cognitive biases operate below the level of “conscious awareness”, creating what appears to (the person in question, at least) be “common sense” while reproducing capitalist ideology. The bourgeoisie need not actively conspire to maintain their position when they can rely on these psychological mechanisms to do the work of dividing and pacifying the working class. Enter Gramsci on the creation of good sense.

The relationship between “common sense” and “good sense” in Gramscian thought is useful to consider here. These two opposing “senses” (epistemologies, really) represent a battleground in the war of position, where hegemonic “common sense”—the uncritical, fragmentary, and often contradictory absorption of ruling class ideology—must be transformed through struggle into “good sense”—a coherent, analytical understanding of social relations that can support *counter-hegemonic movements*. This transformation doesn’t occur ...spontaneously ...but requires the development of organic intellectuals from within the working class who can articulate and advance revolutionary consciousness while remaining grounded in proletarian experience. What a challenge—and often, a contradiction where “peel off” sees them end up in traditional intellectual roles anyway. Unlike said traditional intellectuals, who often unconsciously reproduce ruling class ideology while claiming objectivity, organic intellectuals emerge from and maintain connection to their class origins, developing theoretical frameworks that speak to the bona fide experience of proletarian life while advancing systematic critique of capitalist relations for emancipatory futures. The struggle here is not academic, it is about developing ways of understanding that can challenge the “common sense” assumptions that keep workers consenting to their own exploitation—the cognitive biases and attribute substitutions leveraged by the ruling class to keep us fighting each other [2].

In the political sphere, cognitive biases manifest as powerful barriers to transformative change, functioning as part of what Gramsci identified as the *apparatus of cultural hegemony*. We see this clearly in how the “sunk cost fallacy” keeps workers defending capitalism despite its clear failures, how “in-group favouritism” is manipulated to prevent cross-racial class solidarity, and how “anchoring bias” limits political imagination to minor reforms rather than systemic transformation. The latter of these remains a real problem for the “left” (centre) faction of the ALP as the right continues its disconnect from unionism and its marriage with capitalist vanguardism. The political deployment of these biases is not accidental. Both purportedly “left” and right parties leverage them strategically both in campaigning and in political communication—and are adept at exploiting cognitive biases to maintain capitalism even if they appear to be proposing moderate liberal reforms. This gets most people on side but it is dangerous—it diminishes the fighting willpower of the left, and it erodes the genuine messaging of transformative thinkers. This leads to a self-reinforcing cycle where biased thinking leads to biased information seeking, which further entrenches the very cognitive patterns that prevent recognition of and resistance to exploitation. Let’s not even get started on what happens when we introduce computational algorithms that control the media and news we receive along digital lines which reinforce these same bourgeois patterns of behaviour and thinking. Breaking this cycle requires not just awareness of these biases, but active development of counter-hegemonic frameworks that can help overcome them—and a collective disengagement from Murdoch and Zuck [3].

Ultimately, the formation of organic intellectuals faces ongoing and deep challenges under capitalism, where the commodification of education, the precarity of academic labour, and the deliberate mystification of technology and knowledge work all serve to maintain separation between intellectual and manual labour. The continued and deliberate identity-based division of labour to enable division and distraction from the real enemy, a tale as old as time. Moreover, the bourgeois university system—an example dear to my heart (sorry, no, “gross to my heart”), far from supporting the development of organic intellectuals,

actively works to co-opt and neutralise potential organic intellectual formation through various mechanisms –from the imposition of productivity metrics that prevent deep engagement with communities, to the enforcement of academic conventions that render theory inaccessible to workers, to the individualisation of intellectual work that prevents collective knowledge building. But –and let’ s not get trapped in an “academia is important” loop because it’ s not, well, not for the reasons that this might lead you to think. Academia, and to a lesser extent the school system, are only useful in that they are massive cultural institutions designed to reinforce the hegemony. This –the curriculum and pedagogy –is something we must work to capture and change in order to create a brighter future. Yet paradoxically, these very contradictions create opportunities for organic intellectual development, as workers increasingly recognise the gap between hegemonic “common sense” narratives about technology, progress, and merit, and their lived experience of exploitation, surveillance, and deskilling –all while being doubly, triply or more extracted from and burnt through by a deeply despotic higher education system. The challenge lies in building solidarity, affirmative, and collaborative “alternative” practices for intellectual development that can nurture this emergent good sense while resisting co-optation by capital, and throwing off the egoism, bullying, and rampant sociopathy of management of higher education. Another big task –what am I Hercules’ s (incredibly physically weak) spotter?

Some concepts for our toolbelt, and another brick in the wall.

Have a wonderful day,

Aidan.

Further reading:

Mayo, P. (2014). Gramsci and the politics of education. *Capital & Class*, 38(2), 385-398. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309816814533170>

Stanley, M. L., Dougherty, A. M., Yang, B. W., Henne, P., & De Brigard, F. (2018). Reasons probably won’t change your mind: The role of reasons in revising moral decisions. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 147(7), 962-987. <https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000368>

Clark, N. (2016). Red intersectionality and violence-informed witnessing praxis with indigenous girls. *Girlhood Studies*, 9(2). <https://doi.org/10.3167/ghs.2016.090205>

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1. <https://mndrdr.org/2024/assimilation-and-rebellion>
 2. <https://mndrdr.org/2024/grim-realities-emancipatory-futures>; Cornelius-Bell, A., & Bell, P. A. (2024). Educational Hegemony: Angloshperic Education Institutions and the Potential of Organic Intellectuals. *Canadian Journal of Educational and Social Studies*, 4(1), 49-62. <https://doi.org/10.53103/cjess.v4i1.213>
 3. Make no mistake, Zuck’ s deliberate “rebranding” as a human (rather than robot) and slow creep into household familiarity is a deliberate “friendly face” for the knife in your back that is Meta’ s social media monopoly.