

Despotism and cynicism: a combination for the ages

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Published: 2024-07-24

Dear friends,

Not a day goes by that it doesn't feel increasingly painful to observe the tyranny of despots. However, I want to take a few moments, with my flu addled brain, to consider how tyranny can descend from the powerless when they take arms with the capitalist class. Naturally, you guessed it, we're talking in abstract terms today but I will seek to illustrate my meaning where I can with concrete examples. After all, what is a modern Marxian dispatch project without strong (if imaginary) exemplars.

Australian media is comprised of predominantly corporate owned Murdoch press. While the ABC has recently risen back to the top spot for digital consumption [1] the resounding "voice of the nation" is controlled by, effectively, two corporate hegemonies and the government. This leads to a narrowing of voices: journalists, reporters, investigators and so on are, by and large, required to fit editorial standards set to require complicity in mainstream capitalist thought. This is not a new phenomenon, just take Chomsky as an example [2]. However, by contrast to the USA and UK, Australia's news media takes a strangely cynical approach to articulating everyday life and "problems" -and much of the media is -interested- in problems because it drives readership. This, I will argue, along with increasingly "depressive" conditions, has set the stage for a sharp rise in individualist despotism.

Let's imagine a world without the internet, just for a moment. The primary source of information about current events and the world is still a print newspaper. If you're lucky, in this country, you may have had a choice of two papers. In an ideal world this might provide a more balanced view -through hegemonic eyes, but more polyvocal. In reality the print media in this country was often divided into "soft" and "hard" news both from the orifice of a single organisation. We know, for example, from Chomsky, that the media has a large role in setting the tone of culture. Not just in terms of people's broad awareness of events and ways of thinking about them, but also in terms of the grammar, tone and frame through which the world is made sense of. This frame, this epistemology, is right-wing and, more deeply, capitalist. Division, fracture, narcissism, distraction, these features of contemporary news are important for media outlets. They drive sales, keep people reading, and keep a level of "engaged rage" amongst the readership. "It's just good business".

When we triangulate, in our pre-internet world, the role of hegemonic education, we can start to see the problem for our epistemology. From around five years of age, we are fed a narrative about our country, our place in the world, our role, our capabilities, emotions and sense of belonging. We are taught "facts", the lens for this is rarely discussed, and we are educated into a system of exploitation either to become a reproducer of the exploitative practices, or to become a worker for an exploiter. When our sources of information are a teacher, a curriculum, a newspaper, a website, and so on, we build mental models around the way we perceive the world on the basis of "fitting in", meeting these worlds where they currently are. Ultimately, as seen in most of psychology, the goal for humanity is to belong. Conveniently they forget to tell you that this belonging means that, for 99% of us, our labour is being exploited to enable someone else's leisure.

This pre-internet world is the current trajectory for our education systems. The phone ban, the ever increasing interest in prescriptive curriculum with no room for creativity or arts, the indoctrination of young people into a single monolithic knowledge system -these are hallmarks of contemporary fascist education [3]. The increased interest in primary and secondary education in this country as a prescriptive, fixed, and knowledge-based apparatus is driving us back to a world where "workers" are fed information by corporate-government

curriculum frameworks and corporate-capitalist media conglomerates. Just think about the US' s TikTok ban, a media company with ownership ties to China is perceived as a threat to national security, because young people engaging with (admittedly often radical) perspectives might shake their unwavering commitment to "national pride" vis. wage slavery.

The problem, here, is that the media and education landscape -both critical tools in the establishment and maintenance of capitalist hegemony -are set to perpetuate the fundamentally exploitative, unequal and extractive system of oppression which simultaneously destroys human lives and the ecosystem. This selfsame media-industrial-complex will happily sell you accusations that "you, working schmo, are responsible for climate change" while deliberately denying investigative journalism reporting on BP' s latest environmental destruction. To be clear: hegemonic control of media and education, enabled by government, is fascism. And Australia, we' re in one.

However, our story can' t end here.

Despotism is on an exponential rise. Individual citizens who are angered, perhaps in a bewildered way, misdirect their anger, their sociopathy, towards peers. Hello -another win for divisive hegemonic politics. Keep the bastards fighting each other, a tale as old as time in the industrial relations space [c.f. 4]. This manifests in a variety of strange ways, but I am going to, for the sake of our project here, collect this all under a Gramscian umbrella of bourgeoisie co-opting. In the past I' ve referred to this as "class traitors" and the concept holds, obviously the latter is more catchy, but the former gives us some theoretical territory to tread in understanding the violence this brings to civil society.

Let' s take one step back before we take two forwards. Civil society, in the Gramscian sense, is both the domain of "regular people" the proletariat, the 99%, and the domain of cultural institutions, including education, religion, the media and so on. While these cultural institutions reproduce the narratives of political society (the capitalist class, the bourgeoisie) they are not, themselves, inherently members of the capitalist class -financially speaking a teacher, priest, or journalist is not compensated adequately, in control of means of production, or able to directly exploit other workers to hold such status. Therefore, the original class traitors are the class of skilled professionals who, through education and other means, are indoctrinated into bourgeoisie politics but hold no place to benefit therein, other than some "loaned power" .

So, those two steps forward...When we consider that the fallacy which is class aspirationism has placated the proletariat across the colonised western world for decades, we can see that the values of the bourgeoisie are infecting the working class for action towards stasis. This very statement "action towards stasis" is a contradiction of the capitalist system. The perpetual reproduction of the status quo -the reinforcement that 1% deserve the 99%' s labour -could not be achieved without class treachery, there simply are not enough members of the bourgeoisie to do the work. Moreover, they don' t do any work to begin with, they exist almost entirely as a leisure class. See also instagram influencers.

So what' s the deal with despots, can we "circle back" already? Within this milieu of education systems, media, politics, religion, and capitalists there is a great deal of harm being enacted upon the working class and the planet. This harm expresses itself in human ways. As a basic example when we accept price gouging -and we accept it, as much as we might moan about the price of tomatoes -the harm from these decisions "goes somewhere" . Like an unstoppable force meeting an immovable object, capitalism continuously hammers the working class to extract, exploit, and skim. This harm is, when there is enough of it, often expressed or released as working class protest activism.

Protest activism serves as a way to simultaneously draw attention to mass issues, and a space to ventilate emotion and pain by workers and those rallied to their cause. While there is power in strikes and other forms of collective organisation, protest activism -unless

violent –often just signals to the bourgeoisie that there is disquiet. If this is sustained for long enough, empty dispatches are released by media outlets commenting on the struggles of the “average worker” . But withhold labour? Suddenly the extractive cycle comes to a pause, and this is untenable for the line-must-go-up capitalist bro culture; action must be taken. However, something equally sincerely anti-worker has brewed across time in the face of resistance. And this behaviour is on the rise again as pressures from cost of living, rising global climate issues, and rife inequity across race, gender and class lines surge again in the seemingly inevitable “20s depressive era” of each century. That is the deployment of despotic and sociopathic behaviours by those who, at least traditionally, belong to the proletariat turned on other proles.

I have talked about the role of management in organisations, the role of professionals and their espousals, and the role of the media and education system in manufacturing consent elsewhere. If these are, in the Gramscian sense, considered bourgeoisie deputisation of civil society’ s cultural professors (in the “they profess things” sense, not specifically academics), then the despots are both these and numerous others across civil society, throughout the anglosphere –and doubtlessly elsewhere.

The mouth-foaming individualists, the rampant bullies, the backstabbers and liars, and the facetious and shallow jesters across contemporary work are, as with those in formal roles of manufacturing consent, another expression of violent extractivism at the capitalist interface. They are directed by their rage and blind faith in capital to attack others who in better circumstances could be their siblings in resistance to imperial capitalism. This group of people are, interestingly, not policed by organisation’ s management, they are left to their own devices to harm and deride colleagues and former peers because this behaviour is, to the capitalist class, completely justified.

After all, every day that capitalism continues, a capitalist benefits from your labour. They recline on their private jet, make grand statements about the incapability of the working class, and have signed into legislation increasingly anti-worker rules and laws. Even when smart rebellious lawyers find ways around these, they are never enforced to the benefit of the worker, and from the legal system, through the political apparatus, and back into civil society’ s printing press, or Wordpress site, the reinforcement of the sickeningly violent capitalist system continues.

So that asshole at work that keeps yelling at you, and HR (who is never your friend) and the Union (who is increasingly less often your friend) won’ t help, well that’ s just capitalism, baby. Welcome to the shit show.

There’ s something here about Marx encouraging the proles to retain their arms at all costs. But lets not get into gun violence today. The ruling class maintains control through a combination of political society (direct coercion) and civil society (cultural hegemony); and bullies, despots, and the milieu of cynicism from the media are just par for the course.

I don’ t know about you, but I’ m pretty sick of it.

In solidarity,

Aidan.

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1. <https://www.abc.net.au/about/media-centre/press-releases/abc-news-is-australia-s-no-1-digital-news-brand/104125436>
 2. Herman, E. S., & Chomsky, N. (1994). *Manufacturing Consent*. Vintage.
 3. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/article/2024/jul/24/nsw-teachers-explicit-instruction-method-teaching-syllabus>