

Fascism returns, and it's everywhere all at once

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Dear friends,

I've heard a few (bad) hot takes on US politics lately and this has really got my hackles up about fascism. We need a common literacy to understand that low-grade sociopathy, manipulative bullshit, and lateral violence are the same things played out in our social worlds, work lives, and in politics. The political class is not smart, they are not strategic, and they are most certainly manipulating you. So let's build some literacy around narratives that let (small l) liberals off the hook as fascism builds complicity. We need a theorist, and as you know, we're big into Gramsci in these parts, we'll start there.

Gramsci gave a poignant analysis of fascism's rise in Italy. He did something no other historical materialist scholar had done to that point -provided a devastatingly accurate framework for understanding his political moment -and the value of this has not diminished, despite new technologies and manipulation. Writing from one of Mussolini's prisons, Gramsci identified how fascism emerges not as a sudden rupture but through a gradual process of cultural and political transformation. Later, this came to be known as manufactured consent. The bourgeoisie, facing crisis and unable to maintain control through consent alone, increasingly turn to coercion while maintaining a facade of democratic legitimacy. This process involves what Gramsci called "transformismo". This heralds systematic absorption and neutralisation of potential opposition forces, particularly among the educated classes who might otherwise provide leadership to counter-hegemonic movements. The "educated liberals" are convinced that fascism isn't so bad -it's not coming for them...yet.

We have seen, particularly over the past few months, this same process playing out with frightening similarity. The ruling class, facing multiple crises of legitimacy -from climate collapse to grotesque inequality -increasingly abandons even the pretence of democratic governance, maintaining just enough electoral theatre to claim legitimacy. The absorption of supposedly "progressive" parties into this project, with Labor in Australia and Democrats in the US serving as willing accomplices in the march toward fascism, perfectly exemplifies Gramsci's concept of transformismo. These parties, while occasionally offering a veneer of mild social reforms (never enacted "oh after you elect us again we'll take climate action"), serve *only* to legitimise the rightward ratcheting of acceptable political discourse while preventing the emergence of genuine alternatives.

Understanding the "ratchet effect", which I've mentioned in passing, is a useful tool for our toolbox. It describes simply the mechanism by which ostensibly opposed political parties work in concert to continually move politics rightward. In the US, the Republicans push extreme positions while Democrats offer token resistance, or a more palatable version of the same policy, before eventually just adopting slightly moderated versions of the same policies anyway. In Australia, we see this dynamic between the Liberal-National Coalition and Labor, while in the UK it manifests between Tories and Labour. The pattern is depressingly consistent: right-wing parties introduce increasingly extreme measures, "opposition" parties offer performative resistance while ultimately accepting the new normal, and the cycle repeats with the goalposts shifted further right. In just the last week we've seen the Australian senate introduce legislation to ban abortion, and the only party working to counter this is the Greens -here, as an example, we can see how right-wing extremism is fostered, and because Labor offer the (small l) liberals a sense of security, the issue is brushed aside as "not your problem".

This ratchet operates differently across these countries due to their distinct electoral systems, but the end result is incredibly similar. In Australia, compulsory voting and ranked choice

theoretically should provide more opportunity for genuine progressive alternatives to emerge. However, the combination of media monopoly and the major parties' shared commitment to capital ensures that even these more democratic mechanisms ultimately serve the rightward march. Indeed, lies deliberately perpetuated by the ALP make the populace believe that they waste their vote by voting for the Greens in this country –patently untrue. The US' s first-past-the-post system makes this process even more pronounced, while the UK sits somewhere between these extremes.

The differences between these countries' voting systems, though, show us how formal democratic mechanisms are rendered meaningless within a hegemonic system. Regardless of how the political system is organised, the vanguarding of capital takes priority –if the citizens are rowdy then the Labor party holds the solutions, if the citizens are placid then the Liberals come in to intensify production and exploitation –it is that simple. Australia' s compulsory voting and ranked choice system, while superior on paper, operates within the same constraining framework of media manipulation and manufactured consent. In this way while it is possible for grassroots action and collective education to transform our political environment –axe student debt, improve welfare initiatives, fix working conditions –the power of divisive and hateful hegemonic narratives empowers the LNP to target women' s rights, rather than for the discourse to be about reforms that make life better for the 99% (while inconveniencing capitalists who control the narrative). The US' s nakedly anti-democratic electoral college and first-past-the-post voting makes the system' s failures more obvious –and, apparently, paralysing in the context of a handful of actual voters, in spite of the Democrats being *obviously* the only choice this election just gone –but the end result differs little beyond *speed*. In all cases, the formal mechanisms of democracy serve primarily to legitimise (fascist) decisions already made by capital. Those decisions, as discussed, always harm the 99%.

The role of traditional media in this process is important –fundamentally. Murdoch' s near-monopoly in Australia represents perhaps the most extreme version, but the pattern holds across all these countries. Corporate media serves to normalise increasingly extreme right-wing positions while demonising even mild social democratic reforms as dangerous radicalism. The genius of this system lies in how it maintains the appearance of debate while systematically narrowing the range of acceptable discourse –codifying the ratcheting to the right through the continued repetition of talking points which make these reforms seem like a true part of the “conversation” . We shouldn' t even be talking about the right of women to healthcare –this should be an ipso iure protection fundamental to any “civilised” nation. Alas, Murdoch (and Dutton, Albo) and their ilk manufacture these damaging narratives to ensure their own power –and cement capitalism as ontic reality (like good servants to their billionaire masters).

The media's role in protecting fascist governments while they strip away civil liberties follows a consistent pattern: first, downplay the significance of each individual regression of rights; second, present these changes as necessary responses to manufactured crises [1]; and finally, demonise any opposition as threatening some nebulous concept of “security” or “stability” –playing to workers fears about job losses, “migrants” and other manufactured concerns that only play to the “economy” . This process operates with particular efficiency in Australia, where media concentration makes coordinated messaging easier to maintain. Moreover, with social media regulations in this country, the sharing of news, political opinion, and thought has become so tightly controlled that the traditional media has secured its place as the “only source of truth” .

Social media, here, also has an important role to play –as an accelerant to hate. Not so much has it created new problems as supercharged existing ones. The algorithmic amplification of extreme content, combined with the erosion of shared reality through filter bubbles, creates perfect conditions for fascist radicalisation. We see it with young white

men, vilified minorities and so many communities –hateful and vitriolic “truth tellers” like Andrew Tate emerge as celebrity to assure young men it is okay to rape –after all, the Republicans are enacting Project 2025. In addition, foreign state actors, while real, serve as convenient scapegoats for a system that is fundamentally designed to fragment and confuse working class consciousness. Yes, foreign states like Russia harness AI to drive division in international elections for their own political benefit. Of course, it would be naive to think the US wasn’t doing the same –imperialism flows from all these nations. But AI bots on Twitter are just the latest in ensuring the hegemony –and profit-driven engagement algorithms make this work possible, thanks Zucc.

The proliferation of fake news and conspiracy theories through social media represents the “logical” endpoint of a system designed to maximise engagement at any cost. At least to neoliberals with no concept of ethics, morals, or human decency. When combined with already poor media literacy –which in this country is only getting worse with phones banned in schools, and incoming legislation to prevent anyone under 17 from accessing social media in any format. Concomitant with the systematic degradation of critical thinking skills in education. Here the Australian Government, largely controlled by the Labor party, have been responsible for breeding conditions which are the perfect milieu for fascist ideas to proliferate rapidly while genuine analysis cannot find purchase. Thanks, again, Albo.

So what could be done? Let’s look to those who fought fascism before. Returning to Gramsci’s concept of counter-hegemony is vital, but requires some tweaking for our current moment. The traditional focus on building alternative institutions and cultural formations must now contend with algorithmic suppression and the accelerated pace of digital media. Literally not only must we fight for new ways of working, but fight even harder to have those ways heard and recognised. I propose, here, some key principles for construction of a counter-hegemony:

1. Build genuine class consciousness that transcends the artificial divisions promoted through identity politics while acknowledging the real intersectional impacts of oppression. Teach your neighbours.
2. Develop alternative media platforms and networks that can operate outside the constraining logic of engagement metrics and algorithmic amplification. Look no further than the Fediverse.
3. Reassert the role of analytical thinking, media literacy, and engagement with transformative social science in Education, particularly among young people who have grown up in the social media ecosystem. Don’t deny them access to social platforms, teach them proper engagement.
4. Maintain focus on the material basis of exploitation while building solidarity across artificial divisions. The binary division of the 99% and 1% is a powerful narrative. Your suffering is because of Elon Musk is a simple narrative to reinforce.

Traditional media, particularly in Australia, makes this kind of thinking and, importantly, action challenging –not impossible. The very contradictions that drive the system toward fascism also create opportunities for counter-hegemonic organisation. The key is developing ways to bypass traditional media gatekeepers while building genuine class consciousness and solidarity. The pathway forward requires simultaneously working within existing systems –even if only for the purposes of subsistence forced on us by this exploitative system –while building alternative structures and consciousness. This doesn’t mean accepting the logic of electoralism or falling for reformist traps –something we must all be mindful of, but rather using every available tool to build working class power while maintaining clear analysis of the system’s fundamental antagonisms.

As crisis continues to deepen –whether through climate collapse, economic instability, at-

tacking fundamental human rights or the system' s own internal contradictions -opportunities for genuine transformation continue to emerge. Every. Single. Day. The question is whether we' ll have built the consciousness and organisational capacity to utilise them when they do. This requires patient, if occasionally depressing, work now to build understanding and solidarity while maintaining revolutionary horizon beyond the false choices offered by capitalist "democracy" .

In solidarity,

Aidan

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1. Fraser, N. (2022). Cannibal Capitalism: How our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planetand What We Can Do About It. Verso Books.