

(im)possibility politics

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Dear friends,

I've been continuing to ponder the nature of identity politics, the flexibility of superstructural systems, and the ever more obvious role of hegemony in enforcement of ideology. A few topics for this evening's post, but I think we can track something interesting in the overtly reactionary nature of ("left" and right) politics in Australia in the past few weeks, months and years. This month, between bullshit collusion of Albanese, Biden, Kishida and Modi [1], the monotony of Liberal failures [2] and the casual acceptance of Peter Dutton's racism [3] we're forever witnessing superstructural flexibility or "relative autonomy", or hegemonic consent and coercion (i.e., war of position). The ability of politicians to bend rules without significant pushback demonstrates the continued success of the ruling class in establishing their worldview as "common sense". Gramsci, here, gives us some clarity in the form of the historic bloc: wealthy donors, political leaders, and state run systems collude to maintain their hegemony. Seeing this enables us to critique the relative autonomy offered to hegemonies while we are kept distracted by - you guessed it - identity politics. But let's talk contradictions for a second.

Gramsci tells us that hegemony is never complete or stable. Quite deliberately the system flexes itself to accommodate the ruling class -the 1% -and there are always contradictions within the dominant worldview which may be exploited to challenge the existing order -largely this is done by the ruling class itself, but Gramsci advanced that the working class could use similar "tools". Contradictions emerge from inconsistencies in ideology (or enactment therein), conflicts between different factions of the ruling class, or gaps between ideological claims and lived experiences. Identity politics intersects with this in several ways, it is both a tool of the ruling class to distract the working class, but also emerges from and in reaction to legitimate concerns. Consider Grace Tame speaking out against sexual abuse, and the subsequent women's march for justice, which exposed contradictions between Australia's (political society) "self-image" and the reality of gender-based violence and inequality which continues to escalate. Or, Australia's purported identity as a "lucky country" because of the richness of natural resources which conflicts with the need for climate action, Aboriginal sovereignty and the necessity to shift away from fossil fuels. These movements leverage the contradiction between proclaimed values of equality and lived experiences to push for cultural and policy changes.

Identity politics plays an increasingly prominent role in Australian politics, deployed by "left" and right parties, in divergent ways. On the left, identity politics is enacted to leverage the genuine needs (emergent) of "identity groups" - a concept itself which could use further critique - to, in an idealist world, advocate for the rights and recognition of those marginalised groups. In reality, this often means the hegemonic mainstream co-opting "shiny" parts of the plight of marginalised groups on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, and disability. The false progress of, for example the purportedly "left wing" ALP, politicians is to propagandise progress while fostering in-fighting and collapse into reactionary politics within the already disadvantaged group. Importantly, we need to maintain that political leaders in this country are part of the ruling class zeitgeist, and have, at least more than we, power to challenge and transform the hegemony so the marginalised are less so.

On the right, identity politics is easier to critique, as it takes less subtle forms, and can be seen as morally repugnant by traditional leftist (or even liberal, in instances) values. This manifests as appeals to nationalism, sexist and racist values, and a perceived threat to the dominant culture from minority groups and immigration. We've seen the continued

inflammatory rhetoric of Pauline Hanson's One Nation, with its thinly-veiled xenophobia and opportunistic opposition to COVID-19 measures. Clive Palmer's United Australia Party has bombarded the exclusively right-wing media with nationalist propaganda, while figures like Fraser Anning have shifted the goalposts for acceptable rhetoric with their extreme anti-immigration stances. The Liberal Party – god – exemplified in Dutton's fearmongering about "African gangs" has only escalated in extremism in recent times. The growth of minor parties such as the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party, of "freedom" rallies during the pandemic, and the outpouring of racists at the referendum [4]. These movements, cloaked in the language of defending "Australian values" represent a Gramscian war of position from the right. They leverage identity politics to reinforce existing power structures, exploiting genuine economic anxieties and cultural insecurities to maintain hegemonic control. This continued and escalating deployment of identity politics by the right serves to distract from class-based critiques (more on this soon) and to fracture potential solidarity among marginalised groups, all while preserving the interests of the ruling class under the guise of defending the interests of "real Australians" – ew.

The deployment of identity politics by both "left" and right parties reveals a deeper issue at play – the distraction from class-based critiques and the maintenance of capitalist hegemony. While identity-based struggles are important and often emerge from genuine grievances, their co-optation by political parties serves to fragment the working class and obscure the fundamental economic inequalities that underpin many social issues. This fragmentation is not accidental but a deliberate strategy of the ruling class to maintain their power. By emphasising differences based on race, gender, sexuality, or cultural background, the capitalist class diverts attention from the shared economic struggles that unite the working class. While this does not mean gender, race, ability, sexuality and so on are not important, their political deployment serves, currently, as a distraction regardless of purported political alignment. This divide-and-conquer approach is a classic example of what Gramsci termed the war of position – the ideological struggle for hegemony within civil society.

In our critique of how identity politics is deployed by political parties, it remains crucial that we do not inadvertently dismiss the very real and important struggles around race, gender, sexuality, and ability. Here, social reproduction theory offers us a valuable framework for understanding how these aspects of identity are fundamentally intertwined with class struggle and the reproduction of capitalism itself. Social reproduction theory, from scholars such as Silvia Federici and Tithi Bhattacharya, helps us understand how the work of maintaining and reproducing the working class is essential to the functioning of capitalism, yet deliberately goes unrecognised and undervalued. This work, which includes childcare, housework, emotional labor, and community care, falls disproportionately on women, particularly women of color and those from marginalised communities. Not only is this a fundamental part of capitalist organisation, the oppression based on race, gender, sexuality, and ability are deeply integral to capitalist exploitation. This perspective shows us see that struggles against racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism are not, in fact, "identity politics" separate from class struggle, but are central to challenging capitalism itself. The fight for reproductive rights, for example, is not just about individual bodily autonomy, but about who bears the costs of social reproduction in our society.

In the Australian context, we see issues often framed in terms of identity politics connected to questions of social reproduction and class. The ongoing struggle for Aboriginal land rights, for instance, is not just about cultural recognition, but about the material conditions necessary for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to sustain themselves and their ways of life in the face of ongoing colonial dispossession. Similarly, the push for better support for disabled Australians through the NDIS is not separate from class struggle, but is about recognising and valuing the work of care that is essential to our society yet often invisible in capitalist accounting. The reforms to strip back the NDIS [5], by a now university vice-chancellor, show how the state, acting in the interests of capital, seeks to

minimise its responsibility for social reproduction, pushing these costs back onto individuals and families.

As always, rather than fighting each other, racing to the ever most diadvantaged identity, and pointless backstabbing, our work should be to expose the contradictions within the ruling class hegemony –to show how the promises of equality and opportunity under capitalism are continually undermined by the system’ s inherent and necessary logic (to its continuation) of exploitation and accumulation. By identifying and deflating the reactionary, empty, and capitalistic notions advanced by the ALP, LNP, and myriad racist, sexist, and religously-extreme parties, we can begin to build a vision of solidarity that transcends the divisions fostered by these empty identity politics –including through identification of contradictions in the hegemony which benefit the ruling class, not the working class –thus, we can work towards building a counter-hegemony capable of challenging the capitalist order.

Identity politics has, for its crimes, enabled important issues to find the stage –even if they have been divorced from the authentic voices and struggles of those peoples. But these issues co-optation by both “left” and right parties in Australia serves only to maintain capitalist hegemony by fragmenting the working class – keeping us fighting and hating each other, not them –and obscuring fundamental economic inequalities.

Only through bona fide and transformative solidarity can we hope to challenge the capitalist system and create a more just and equitable society.

With love,

Aidan

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1. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/sep/22/china-testing-us-across-the-region-biden-tells-leaders-at-quad-summit>
 2. <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/the-nsw-liberals-mind-boggling-council-elections-drama-explained/qmumxxyu>
 3. <https://www.crikey.com.au/2024/09/17/crikey-series-peter-dutton-racist-insider/>
 4. n.b. the right’ s arguments were almost exclusively racist, but the whole proposal by and large purported to address historical injustices, ultimately sought to reinforce existing power structures –either way you sliced it: a consultative body without real decision-making power, or “more of the same” –colonialism all the way down. This exemplifies how the ruling class absorbs and neutralises challenges to its hegemony – Gramsci’ s “transformismo” .
 5. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/article/2024/aug/21/labor-ndis-bill-shorten-reforms>