

Liberals, whinging and performance politics

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Dear friends,

I've been "experiencing" liberal American post-election analysis on every form of media I visit. I'm sure you're in the same boat as politically engaged people –but things have really reached frustration point today. So, without naming names, msnbc, I want to explore how "liberal politics", or really what should be labeled soft-right after this Trump-slide, maintains hegemonic control through a variety of interlinked mechanisms that ultimately serve capital while preventing genuine social transformation. You know –the usual. Specifically today I'm interested in "sanewashing" and virtue signaling, because that's the thrust of post-electoral fervor in the US –and I can feel it in my bones coming to Australia next (after all we're just little USA, right? More on that soon).

It's worth beginning with how liberals internally justify their political positioning. Their inaction, justification of government and corporate decisions, and general malaise unless something is a personal threat to them (even then, a stretch for action to occur). The bourgeois "left" engages in endless self-congratulatory rhetoric about being "reasonable" and "moderate". Through this they position themselves as the "adult in the room" (in all things, really –yuck) while actively enabling fascism through constant concessions to capital. This manifesto of mediocrity serves to police the boundaries of acceptable discourse while portraying any genuine challenge to capitalism as dangerously extreme. Thanks, liberals (and to be clear to the Australians in the room I mean ALP supporters, not "Liberal Party" supporters who are Trumpian). The grip of the liberal mindset becomes a self-reinforcing loop: "we must be reasonable because we are moderate, and we are moderate because we are reasonable". This circular logic conveniently ignores how their "reasonable" politic continues to enable exploitation and expropriation. Nice gymnastics.

Illustration required! The phenomenon of "sanewashing" exemplifies this mental HIIT workout perfectly. Liberals dismiss Trump supporters and other right-wing voters as simply "crazy" or "weird" rather than engaging with the material conditions and deliberate manipulation that drives working people toward reactionary politics. This is particularly important –the start and end of issues in US and Australian politics alike is that there are no parties supporting fair working conditions, socialised care, or ecological preservation –no parties beside the Australian Greens anyway. And even that is a concession to the change desperately needed in both countries to save our planet from climate destruction. "Those people are just nuts", the liberals declare, while continuing to support the very economic system that creates the desperation and alienation fuelling fascism's rise. This narrative conveniently absolves liberals of any responsibility to build genuine solidarity or challenge fundamental injustices, they can rest easy on their privileged boomer-esque retirement fund. It also reinforces the false binary between two flavours of capitalism –one openly fascist, one with a pride flag –a dichotomy of the ages as the "political spectrum" tells you you can have your opinion, as long as it is ontologically capitalist.

From a sociological perspective, this othering process serves multiple hegemonic functions. It allows liberals to maintain their self-image as the "reasonable" ones while actively participating in systems of exploitation –hot. It fragments working class solidarity by creating artificial divisions between the "normal" and "crazy" segments of society. Most perniciously, it prevents meaningful analysis of how capitalism itself produces the social conditions that drive people toward extreme positions. The people who should be conducting the analysis, hell, they should be rallying on the streets, instead its "woe is me, some crazy people won the power" and "Kamala only lost because she was marginalised by the media" –not an

ounce of introspection in the whole liberal core. The obsession with individual “sanity” versus “insanity” literally masks the systemic nature of our crisis –if you reduce all our problems to one faulty leader (Dutton, Badenoch, Luxon, Trump) then “capitalism is ok, it’s just the leaders who are wrong” while their more palatable leader (Albo, Starmer, Hipkins, Biden) institutes the same policy with a rainbow flag draped over it –do you feel sufficiently “washed” yet?

The normalising of “sanity” as defined by acquiescence to capitalist relations represents another victory for ruling class ideology. And with liberals it is always ruling class ideology –not anything born of organic intellectualism –because they seek only to become the next oppressor (landlord, CEO, investor), not defeat systems of oppression. Those who accept endless war, environmental destruction, and grinding poverty as “normal” get to claim the mantle of “reason”, while those who suggest that perhaps we shouldn’t sacrifice human flourishing on the altar of profit, planetary destruction, and genocide are dismissed as extremists. Again, cool work liberals. The deep irrationality of a system that demands infinite growth on a finite planet gets naturalised as “just the way things are” and this pervasive hegemony informs all of what is “allowed” on the political spectrum –policing the possibility of change.

Particularly galling is how this discourse completely ignores the role of education. (Here we go Aidan’s back on the high horse). Not in the liberal sense of “if only they understood facts and logic” but in the Gramscian sense of developing critical consciousness –consciousness born of their class origin that enables a shared understanding of the failings, exploitation, and fundamentally cancerous nature of capital –rather than vanguarding and justifying it endlessly for “sanity” against both the socialist left and the alt-right. Instead of building systems of popular education that help people understand their material conditions and collective interests, liberals fixate on sneering at the “uneducated masses” while offering no alternative vision. They posture about how the “poors and illiterates” can’t truly understand their big brain political system, and yet when they do vote they somehow choose “insanity” rather than their candidate. Their conception of education remains trapped within capitalist logic, naturally –training “better workers” (read: complicity in capitalism’s exploitation) rather than developing revolutionary consciousness.

The political spectrum, here, serves as yet another tool in this same hegemonic arsenal. By positioning “moderate” pro-capital positions as the reasonable centre, with socialism relegated to the “extreme” fringe alongside fascism (no, not in horseshoe theory’s twisted worldview –if those liberal kids could read they’d be very upset), this framework naturalises exploitation while pathologising resistance. It is no accident that the “centre” always seems to align perfectly with the interests of capital –and over time creeps ever further rightward as capital’s crises and metastaticisation destroy our ecology, demand more socially gruelling positions, and continues painting anything that challenges these interests as dangerous extremism –anything. This false equivalence between left and right “extremes” serves to maintain capitalist hegemony by preventing genuine alternatives from gaining traction. Again, harming progressive causes and trapping the broadest discourse within a narrative controlled by binary and “sanity”.

The manufactured spectrum, with perhaps its most damaging feature, enables the alt-right to position itself as merely the “opposite” of some imagined radical left, thereby normalising its fascistic tendencies through false equivalence. “Well, if there are communists on the far left, we must be the reasonable counterbalance on the right”, goes their twisted logic. But this framing fundamentally misunderstands (deliberately, of course) the dimensional nature of political thought. The spectrum isn’t a simple line from left to right, it’s not even a two-dimensional political compass. The reality is that while fascists and liberals argue about various flavors of capitalism, genuine socialist and communist thought operates on a different axis (because their values are concerned with freedom from oppression, not “how

would you like your oppression today?”). Fundamentally, it is an axis that questions the very premises of capital that both “ends” of the mainstream spectrum take for granted. It’s like watching two people argue about the best way to arrange deck chairs on the Titanic while refusing to acknowledge the iceberg –or better yet, refusing to acknowledge that boats could be steered differently altogether. The right’s success in positioning itself as just another “pole” on a reasonable spectrum serves to further entrench capital’s hegemony by making any genuine alternative appear literally unthinkable. Through this sleight of hand, they can paint socialists as “just as extreme” as fascists, while the real extremism –the endless extraction, exploitation, and expropriation required by capitalism itself –gets completely naturalised as the water we all swim in. The bourgeois media’s obsession with “both sides” reporting only reinforces this dynamic, creating an artificial equivalence between those who want to accelerate capitalism’s death drive and those who dare to imagine we might organise society differently.

Meanwhile liberals engage in endless virtue signalling about inclusion and diversity while actively participating in systems of exploitation and expropriation. They need to “look” reasonable, after all, as the moderate centre in all this. They’ll put “Black Lives Matter” in their social media bios while opposing any policy that might actually challenge racial capitalism. Similarly with decolonial efforts –full support for Indigenous movements unless they challenge capitalism –but knock-off art piece looks nice on their wall right? They’ll celebrate pride while supporting politicians who maintain the carceral state. I could go on but I’m feeling physically ill at the thought of liberal performativity, capture, and misappropriation of genuine causes into identity based squabbles [1]. The performance of progressive values without material commitment to transformation only serves to recuperate radical movements into channels safe for capital –and serves to both disempower the genuine movement and fuel capitalist “washing” –i.e., greenwashing, queerwashing, and so on.

And readers out there from the philosophical tradition may be troubled by my espousals today, but let’s be clear –contemporary liberal politics has devolved far from the aspirational heights of philosophical liberalism. While classical liberal philosophy, emerging from enlightenment thinking, at least *attempted* to grapple with fundamental questions of human freedom, rights, and the relationship between individual and society, today’s liberal politics has abandoned even these intellectual ambitions –verging on libertarianism. Philosophers like Locke, Mill, and even Rawls –raced, gendered and classed as their conclusions largely were –engaged seriously with questions of justice, liberty, and the social contract. Their theoretical frameworks, which integrated into the bourgeois interests of their time, maintained some commitment to universal principles and rational inquiry. By contrast, contemporary liberal politics circle jerks itself to pure pragmatism in servitude to capital. The profound questions about human nature, freedom, and justice that animated classical liberal thought have been replaced by shallow technocratic discussions of “what works” where “works” is defined entirely in terms of maintaining capitalist social relations (slavery of the 99%). This degeneration of liberalism from a philosophical project (however flawed) to pure ideology maintenance exemplifies the broader crisis of bourgeois thought under late capitalism.

All of these varied techniques the “washing”, othering, normalisation of capitalist “reason”, and the shallow performance of progress –are the modern day tools of hegemonic enforcement –these are the ways that capitalism is protected, steered, and remains in a state of growth and subsumption forever –liberal engines perpetually powering and justifying capitalist heat death. These techniques, and the broad approach of liberals to contemporary politics fragments solidarity, mystifies power relations, and channels dissent into dead ends. Most dangerously, it prevents us from building the kind of intersectional movement for justice that could actually challenge capital’s death grip on our future [2]. The liberal framework offers no tools for addressing the deep interconnections between various forms of oppression because it cannot question the capitalist system that produces and requires those oppressions.

Through Chomsky's lens of manufactured consent, we can see how the liberal worship of capitalism –dressed up in the language of pragmatism and progress –represents the ultimate betrayal of human potential. The media apparatus, educational institutions, and cultural frameworks that reproduce liberal hegemony don't just maintain capitalism –they actively work to prevent us from imagining alternatives –they inform our epistemology and shape our ontology [3]. When liberals valorise “moderate” politics while demonising genuine resistance, when they perform inclusion while defending exploitation, when they preach “civility” while enabling fascism, they aren't just expressing personal political preferences –they are carrying out essential ideological work for capital. This betrayal cuts deepest at the intersections of oppression, where the violence of capitalism compounds with racism, patriarchy, colonialism, ableism, and other systems of domination. Liberal hegemony works overtime to obscure these connections, to prevent us from seeing how capitalism requires these interlocking systems of oppression to function [4]. The result is a profound distortion of human nature itself –our inherent capacities for solidarity, creativity, and collective flourishing constantly twisted into competitive individualism and performative politics. Breaking free from this hegemonic web requires more than just critiquing liberal politics –it demands building new forms of consciousness and organisation that can unite the multiply oppressed in struggle against capital and all its mutually reinforcing systems of domination. Only through this kind of radical, intersectional solidarity can we begin to imagine and create the kind of world our human nature actually calls for –and the start point, as always, is education.

In solidarity,

Aidan

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1. <https://mndrdr.org/2024/identity-politics-and-the-crisis-of-working-class-solidarity>
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