

Negative distraction

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Dear friends,

I have been thinking about negative distraction since our last idea. Essentially stemming from the notion of capital's necessary divisive nature for its own reproduction, negative distraction -I'm calling it -is another in the many tentacled squid of class divisive praxes instilled by the ruling class. Previously we talked about division across the class line, vis. proles vs capitalists or civil vs ruling, and how intersections create vertices of additional exploitation and expropriation. Negative distraction, in a sense, is a political theatre of this boundary.

Let's take the right's use of identity as an example here. For political society, in particular, drawing from our comrade Gramsci [1], identity is a performance to an end. For example, we might consider Bob Katter in Australian politics a performed identity of "country" - an eccentric with radical ideas, conservative ideas, but radical and introduced in the performative nature of political society: "But I ain't spending any time on it because in the meantime, every three months, a person is torn to pieces by a crocodile in north Queensland" [2]. This performative identity lends itself to a political message, a particular cause, and a rather transparent configuration of politics in society.

Naturally there are a great number of these performances which are more nuanced than a political "cowboy". Regardless, however, of what we perceive in these performances, they are winning votes and enabling those performers a platform to influence legislature and direction in civil society. Without degrading into level upon level of nuance, if we understand that capital controls political decision making, the performative nature of politics enables a theatre to perplex, rile up, or otherwise befuddle civil society. None of these performances are harmless, and they are nearly universal in the political arena. There are next to no "straight shooters" in the political sphere -simply because the hegemony of "politics" is to perform.

Pop down the stack a few layers and we can see this theatre affect the micro. Here's where microaggressions are born an expansion from their original use in race relations [3], the class divide now leverages these aggressions to enable negative distraction. Rather than focus on a critique of, for example, Dutton's nuclear policy, the capital-media hegemony in Australia turns individuals against one another by amplifying divisive narratives over nuclear use, waste, storage, regulation and so on. Here the proletariat is drawn against lines of political theatre: "are you pro nuclear?" For those passionate on issues on any area of the political spectrum, this creates a negative distraction: "of course I'm pro nuclear, it is the only way to produce a stable base load of power" (fallacy upon fallacy). Rather than critique political society we are directed to absorb ruling class rhetoric as identity.

In a more sinister and capably deployed version of this practice, Queer rights are frequently weaponised as an intersectional negative distraction. We know that queer humans, across the board, are deeply discriminated against by the vast majority of "other" humans, and the weaponisation of queer rights (i.e. where these rights are not perceived as human rights) leads to wanton destruction of human life (literally). From bisexual erasure, through anti-trans activism, -human rights- are regularly undermined for political theatre. In this instance, as opposed to nuclear power by example, is a violent and destructive negative distraction at great cost to life.

A recent "controversy" (i.e. a right wing politician attacking a celebrity queer ally) is a perfect example of a negative distraction [4]. Taking a brief meta-look at this issue, as par

for the course celebrities deride political decision-makers on a broad range of issues. From housing to aid programs, arts funding to disaster recovery, and so on. This occurs on both sides of issues and aids the political theatre at large, bringing celebrity attention to political theatre as an extension of the capital-media hegemony –literally dramatising politics for attention, distraction, division and reality TV. Here we see the emergence of terms such as ‘optics’ rearing their head in common parlance, an incorrectly deployed and severed theoretical word which, at least to me, screams “right winger” . Rather than address a unitary and common thread of discussion which advances human liberation, the political theatre (both self professed left and right wing parties) engages with, yet again, identity politics.

When this makes its way to the daily lives of civil society, the results are disastrous. Major political issues do not receive appropriate public scrutiny, the authenticity and genuine nature of human need and rights are ignored, and the machinery of capital is enabled to continue exploiting and extracting civil society year after year. As discussed previously, we no longer have time for negative distractions. We are on the brink of ecological collapse; societal collapse; and a rapid swing into fascist authoritarianism –the radical resurgence of which we are seeing in the south of the United States, across Europe with the recent election, and increasingly globally decaying “democracy” all in the name of “line goes up” capitalism.

Importantly I’d like to be clear that identity politics are very real and very destructive. The deployment and use of hate speech, microaggressions, and other forms of (lateral) violence have genuine impacts on human life. This is why the practice is so successful in aiding negative distraction. Rather than focus on issues of merit, such as assuring human rights to queer people, focussing on undoing the mass damage of corporate environmental destruction, enabling better funding of medical and social services, and so on the deployment of negative distraction to feed the political theatre drives hate, division, and distraction. A stereotypical Marxist may be criticised, here, for disregarding identity, matters of race, gender, disability and so on –but I believe this is often deployed as a further tool of negative distraction. Rather the left needs to find a way to unite intersectional causes under a banner of capitalist destruction. Not waiting for the revolution, but creating an intersectional future which –does- address the interstices as part of the revolutionary activity –otherwise we are doomed to perpetual failures of political/economic/governance systems which reproduce exploitation.

We can do better than being -distracted- by negative distraction. To my left-wing friends, this doesn’t mean it does not hurt, nor that things aren’t terrible, but if we can find just one ounce of energy left after successive attacks, it is a rallying cry to disavow political theatre and arm ourselves with meaningful analytical critique. Of course, the opening sentence of this paragraph is more a call to the right to look past the amplification of radical emotive issues and look to humanity, comradeship, and collaboration. Though finding ways to engage in this kind of movement from right to left seems almost too far-gone as we witness fascist takeover. After all, if you’re standing with a fascist, you’re probably a fascist.

Cheery thoughts for a gloomy day on Kaurana country.

Your comrade,

Aidan

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1. Gramsci, A., & Hoare, Q. (1985). Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci (8. pr). International Publ.
 2. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-42047668>

3. Sue, D. W., & Spanierman, L. (2020). *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*. John Wiley & Sons.
4. <https://au.lifestyle.yahoo.com/david-tennant-called-rich-lefty-185201001.html>