

No kings, same kingdom

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Dear friends,

Recently, we saw the largest protest movement in American history. We also saw this swept away by the capitalist media within a handful of news cycles. But what is practice without theory (well, ... anyway). I think it is worth spending a little time on analysing the underlying ideologies and values of protest movements, particularly when they hold such broad appeal. Through this kind of analysis we might be able to first recognise some fundamental assumptions and a shared epistemology (way of knowing) to elaborate or stretch. I also want to underlabour this writing with Marxist critique, noting that the collapse of Marxian praxis in popular thought is the point of radical departure from engaging the proletariat *where they are at*. Doing things backwards, let's start with some fundamental challenges of theory in this space first.

From Rosa Luxemburg[1] to V. I. Lenin[2] the beginning of the 1900s saw this rupture between theory and practice repeat. Notably, across the western world the working class were more allied around a union solidarity than our contemporary conditions. In practical terms we can then assume that there is less theory/practice dynamism now than then. If workers were already willing to grapple with issues of ("inferior") class positions then, workers now, for ideological and hegemonic reasons, are often unwilling to engage beyond immediate conditions. Evidencing this theory/practice rupture isn't difficult. Theoretical debates in the Occupy Wall Street protesters have been discussed elsewhere[3], the Sanders 2016 movement attempted to reconnect the divide but ultimately failed to meet its target[4] and armchair socialists have discussed this point of departure at length (I promise I'm not feeling guilty)[5]. And in other American discourse, protest and activist movements such as Medicare for All and the Green New Deal program seek navigation of these spaces - treading lightly often to their detriment.

At this moment, we should detour through accelerationism theory, to lay out some groundwork for what's to come (identifying the point of departure). Accelerationism advocates for speeding up and intensifying capitalism's inherent contradictions and technological dynamics, rather than resisting them[6]. But accelerationism is a 'both sides' tactic - though a hegemonic tactic nonetheless. Right-accelerationists embrace intensification as a means to collapse existing (liberal) democratic structures, viewing societal breakdown as necessary for installing hierarchical, ethno-nationalist orders. Manifestos written by right-wing accelerationists -literal murderers - emphasise chaos[7]. Left-accelerationists advocate for using (capitalist) technology and automation to transcend capitalism. Putting it simply: more of this will equal less of this (I'm scratching my head too). They see a post-work society achieved through technological liberation rather than traditional labour organising. Between accelerationists there is also a point of departure between theory and practice: theorists look for systemic transformation through technological and economic forces, practical movements instead devolve into either nihilistic destruction (right) or techno-optimistic reformism (left) that does not address material conditions. Are you feeling all meta'd out yet? I sure am. Basically accelerationists embody "move fast, break shit" believing that this will somehow manifest in the manufacture of concrete political work required for meaningful social change.

Okay, I've jerked you between theory/practice rupture, accelerationist theory practice divide, and we've landed somewhere ideologically adrift. Let's revisit the point of departure in popular movements rather than in a specific theory. Because as we know, there is no grand unifying theory in activist spaces.

We can see a catastrophic theory/practice divide in activist movements littered through history. The Weather Underground, for instance, demonstrated this dynamic. Emerging from Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which had 100,000 members by 1969, the Weathermen faction's adoption of "ultraleft" theory advocating immediate armed confrontation with the government and their belief that mass organisations were unnecessary led them to dissolve SDS entirely and retreat into small guerrilla cells (accelerationist!)[8]. Germany's Red Army Faction (RAF) emerged from the 1968 student movement but similarly destroyed its own base when theoretical commitment to urban guerrilla warfare led them to believe they represented the most "exposed European vanguard" of global revolution, thereby isolating them from the broader left as their tactics became more violent (accelerationist!)[9]. Interestingly, the Black Panthers emerging from grassroots community assistance programs held their ideological roots for longer. By delivering systematic mutual aid everything from large scale free breakfast programs for children to health clinics, and community education[10], activists remained connected to community concerns longer than other movements. With time, however, revolutionary strategy versus community organising became a departure point (...).

Notably, longer lived programs of activism tend to have stronger theoretical connection to grassroots needs. This is an inversion. Social movement theory literature discusses sustained movements requiring ongoing dialogue between theoretical understanding and grassroots experience. Here, for instance, resource mobilisation theory discusses that movements survival may be ensured through resource acquisition and management[11] with adaptability to changing contexts critical to longevity[12] -dialogue and equal distribution of wins (not accelerationist!). Community organising approaches which connect with values of democratic decision-making, Indigenous leadership (and relationality), and concrete winnable campaigns consistently demonstrate superior longevity compared to "vanguard" (frequently accelerationist) models[13]. If you want to read more about connectivity between grassroots needs and activist projects boy have I got you covered in the footnotes[14].

If we return, now, with these schematics to our investigation of the No Kings protests, there are a few theoretical landmines we need to tread carefully around. There is a binding ideology at the heart of these protests -a view that U.S. government should not become a dictatorship. We can pontificate about the lack of voter turnout vs the massive scale of the No Kings protests another time. Fundamentally, it has been shown that the vast majority of American people believe that Trump should not have authoritarian powers[15]. Great. But upon what ideological base? Fundamentally was the No Kings turnout inspired by notions of democratic preservation? Or is the root ideology behind the protests actually a neoliberal or free market capitalist perspective? And where does the working class fit amongst this?

If we can reconcile the No Kings protest movement as a manifestation of contradictory consciousness[15] (within civil society), we can begin to theorise political connectivity, as well as some points of departure (but let's not overload the brain right this second)[16]. Protesters' rejection of autocratic leadership while they maintain allegiance to liberal democratic *institutions* reveals a misrecognition of power structures in bourgeois hegemony[17]. A selective critique opposing individual "kings" yet paradoxically preserving the "kingdom" of capitalist "democracy". Read: it is the leader who is wrong, not the system which enables the leader. This shows the breadth of hegemonic ideology. The common sense is that "our (U.S.) system is the best system; that exploitation of that superior system is an individual failing, not a systemic one". Critically, we can, here, recognise that capitalist realism has gripped the "average American". The working class has internalised ruling class ideology. The fundamental focus on personality rather than systemic critique actually serves to reinforce rather than challenge structures and power.

As yet unwritten, and not very praxiological of me, I would rather use criticism of Trump

to criticise American fascism as a *systemic power*. Sure Trump is a terrible person, but the system inflicts much greater ripples of intergenerational pain. This system exists to enable people like Trump *all the way down*. It isn't "Trump" its the entire political/economic system. Any critique (activism), here, which fails to address this is fundamentally doomed to repeat until such times as protest is made illegal – and the U.S. is well on the way to following Australia on this. Yet, this is a point of departure, because by and large the American people believe that their system is egalitarian –even when no one they know is benefiting from it. This is the colonising of minds –an epistemic war –to reinforce the status quo. The debate of American fascism parallels Gramsci's analysis of fascism as capitalism's authoritarian response to organic crisis[18]. There has been widespread recognition that the United States Government exhibits fascistic tendencies through its history of settler colonialism and racial violence[19]. There has been widespread recognition of the U.S. as a neocolonial empire, acting as a regional bully to ensure capitalist survival[20]. There has been more analysis than we could possibly cope with in a lifetime, yet none of it appears to organically connect to grassroots struggles. Gramsci identified fascism as a latent possibility within bourgeois democracy. But the recognition of this has been forestalled by the strength and power of rapidly accelerating hegemonic ideology supported by technological advancement (hello again accelerationism!). We're seeing the ruling class hope for passive revolution[21], where they absorb and neutralise opposition and maintain fundamental power structures [22]. We saw this with the media rapidly phasing the protests out of the news cycle – and we've seen this globally as capitalist hegemony spreads and metastasises.

The tension between spontaneous protest, organised revolutionary action, and reform sits in Gramsci's dialectical understanding of spontaneity and leadership[23]. While some dismiss protests as ineffective performance (particularly liberals), others recognise their potential as sites for political education and organisation. Spontaneous movements contain embryonic elements of *conscious* leadership that need be developed through democratic collectives to flourish as organic intellectuals. The challenge becomes transforming diffuse discontent into collective will which sits unified (enough) politically to create action guided by revolutionary theory and strategy, and systematic critique needs to sit at the root of this. The challenge as with all activist movements, is challenging the hegemony, the power of the status quo. Challenging the person (i.e., Trump) is an easier, more politically acceptable, move (though increasingly ICE's war of manoeuvre is making this less the case) within mainstream American ruling ideology promulgated amongst civil society. However, as we've discussed at length here on mind reader, the structural colonial, capitalist, anti-worker, anti-ecological, and anti-human ideology and institutional apparatus is much deeper rooted than an unchecked fascist controlling an unprecedented number of soldiers and nuclear warheads. The fact that the question is not "how does anyone have this level of power" blows my mind every time.

This is a divergent point for me, and for many other socialist thinkers, from organic protesters. The average American (white, able bodied, straight and cisgender, middle class, middle age, male) thinks Trump should be *subject to law*. The average intersectionally disadvantaged person (this is the quantitative majority) needs the system to be reformed in order to have any quality of life. The problem is acceptable political discourse is constrained so strongly to the needs of the former group that meagre reforms are all that are allowed to be discussed[24]. How do we shift the discourse away from acceptable "centrist" (verging heavily towards fascist) discourse in such a way that even allows all those oppressed to speak for their struggles? Because the traditional intellectual apparatus is based on a capitalist ontological frame which demands control of (epistemological) discourse such that language which challenges oppression is impermissible[25]. And holding, strongly, this way of thinking – if it happened that I were in a position of leadership amidst the No Kings movement –would likely become an area of significant tension with those mostly comfy white dudes.

Let's take an example of a pro-socialist education movement (because this draws from my lived experience of organising large scale activism). In identifying, post-mortem, the ruptures of theory and practice which disintegrated the movement I would name hegemony, intersectionality, and economics as fundamental points of break. Chiefly, hegemony makes it difficult for any activist movement to gain sufficient momentum for change. This includes the full weight of the ideological apparatus of the hegemony, the media, education systems, police, government (fines, etc.), and so on. The intersectional rupture becomes twofold: (1) those with a marginalised identity failing to holistically connect with the movement; (2) those connected with the movement not seeing their needs met by the leadership of the movement, or seeing the leadership move away from a position which validated their needs. This micro-fracturing of allegiances, needs, ideas, thought and so on repeats across all persons participating in the movement regardless of their relative stature. Anyone with a friendship group would likely also be familiar with such politics[26].

To be clear, I commend the democratic and largely transformative way these protests were intentioned. The use of peaceful protest, broad appeal, and anything which shows Trump for the fascist capitalist dictator he is has my tick of approval (not that anyone asked). However, the points of departure towards change -desperately needed positive systemic change -make this a difficult space *for* praxis. It's paradoxical -

Our systems need to change, faster than ever, because they are changing faster than ever.

Convincing people that their view of change, for instance, "Trump must go" is not "radical" enough, without collapse into accelerationism is nearly unimaginable (and thereby rupturing the protest movement for "valid" ideological reasons, rupture nonetheless). The average American discourse in particular is so allergic to anything resembling socialism, that even equity initiatives are often looked upon scornfully. Yet those casting the scorn are often those who would benefit most from reform. This is the nature of hegemonic media, education, and systems control[27]. Breaking the way of thinking, working, might be achieved incrementally but it can't be achieved through departure. "You're being too radical", "you just want to break shit", etc. which are critiques hurled by right-accelerationists seeking technological engulfment of the proletariat for fascist ends. And still acceleration into violence is the last thing I, personally, and many socialists would want, so... Regardless, the critique remains as long as capitalism defines our shared ontology and revokes agency for one's own episteme.

Gosh, we're so many layers deep that even I've lost track! Let me simplify in bullets before we say farewell to one another for the moment:

- No Kings effectively targeted a fascist leader;
- The fascist leader is both symbolic and literal embodiment of capitalist fascism, and hegemony (an accelerationist capital-techno-fascism);
- Critique of the fascist leader is already extremely difficult and receives little airtime due to His hegemony;
- Broader critique of the system which enables this leader is not on the table with No Kings -both from a left and right wing perspective (because it is close to disintegrating anyway due to the weight of hegemony);
- Discussion of the limited airtime (coverage) is largely off the table for American discourse;
- Critique of capitalism is seen as "communist" and flagged as dangerous due to educational hegemony;
- Points of rupture between idealised ideologies and idealised lived realities create discord and paradox which can destroy movements;
- Everything else already seeks to destroy anti-capitalist movements; and
- Well, stalemate.

There's a real need for genuine empathy and education in moving liberals toward more radical leftist ideologies. We're just not sure they're interested unless they're made personally uncomfortable. Still, I remain hopeful that compassion and empathy will win.

Yikes,

Aidan.

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1. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1900/reform-revolution/index.htm>
 2. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/>
 3. <https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/occupy-socialist-anarchist/>
 4. <https://theconversation.com/bernie-sanders-says-the-left-has-lost-the-working-class-has-it-forgotten-how-to-speak-to-them-243160>
 5. cf., <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/denny-center/blog/labor-unions-capitalism/>
 6. for a relatively clear explanation: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/11/accelerationism-how-a-fringe-philosophy-predicted-the-future-we-live-in>
 7. <https://theconversation.com/a-field-guide-to-accelerationism-white-supremacist-groups-using-violence-to-spur-race-war-and-create-social-chaos-255699>
 8. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Weathermen>
 9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576109308435925>
 10. <https://bppaln.org/programs>
 11. cf., <https://doi.org/10.1086/226464>
 12. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2329496519850846> for one example
 13. <https://doi.org/10.3390/urbansci2010023> and also <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0899825619300089>
 14. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0959378013002197> <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1096877/full> <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10162496/>
 15. look no further than <https://search.worldcat.org/title/14965368>
 16. I could do another whole dispatch looking at collective structures of subalterns (in Gramsci's originary sense) but I'll just drop this here: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/089356902101242242>
 17. This is another can of theoretical worms, but: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt18dzstb.13>
 18. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137334183_3
 19. An absolute must read: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240> and a bit more if you're on a spree <https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520273436.003.0005>
 20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580900015002005> and <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-818630-5.01020-4>
 21. <https://doi.org/10.7202/016590ar>
 22. an interesting analysis of this kind of structure <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt19b9jz2>
 23. cf., <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199457557.001.0001>
 24. <https://doi.org/10.17813/maiq.4.2.d7593370607l6756>
 25. Don't get too bogged down here, but there's useful sketches in: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>
 26. This is a whole poststructural epistemic mess, but the ideas are nonetheless important: <https://doi.org/10.1086/669608>
 27. Old faithful: <https://chomsky.info/19890315/>