

Tactics, modalities, mechanisms

by Aidan Cornelius-Bell

Published: 2025-05-04

Dear friends,

Long time no correspondence. I hope you are well.

Broadly speaking we tend to categorise political moments into shapes, types, and kinds, which have a belonging to an orientation, left wing, right wing, 'centrist', brutal, violent, ugly, aggressive, loud, irritating, whingey, and so on. These labels, at least to me, conjure certain frames of thinking -stereotypes, if you like.

On reading a NLR Sidecar post from late last year, I found myself thinking about the way that propaganda is used by both 'left' and 'right', particularly the mobilisation of tropes around groups of people. These tactics, specifically propagandist tactics, belong to the entire political spectrum. And the tactics used are separable from a tradition, even if configurations may trigger certain feelings of a party, group, or association with political affiliation (i.e., republican use of identity politics to divide "and conquer"). The tactic, under the surface, remains relatively similar. But let's get slightly more specific, take a slow stroll towards the analysis today.

Conservatives, broadly, the right wing are loosely interested in mechanisms which centre individualism and (their conception of) 'merit'. This often means market-focussed 'solutions' to problems no one was looking to solve -or hierarchical assertions to hold orthodoxy of exploitation in stasis. The broad scale conservative mechanisms include market-based solutions and private enterprise, 'traditional' institutions ('family', 'church'), adherence to hierarchical structures and established authority, regressive change. Tactics, which flow from these mechanisms include tax cuts and deregulation, propagandist appeals to tradition and 'cultural' values, extreme focus on conceptions of law and order, individual responsibility, adherence with extremist religious groups, and so on. Modalities, the tools to achieve and back these tactics, often include church and community group organising, conservative media networks, think tanks and policy institutes funded by wealthy backers, pushing action with benightedness for legal frameworks, school, church and state legislature campaigns.

Liberals the 'centre' are mostly interested in mechanisms which balance individual rights with institutionally managed reform. This typically means regulatory solutions that preserve existing power structures while offering extremely mild incremental improvements -or technocratic assertions to maintain institutional stability. Characteristic liberal mechanisms include loosely regulated markets for the bourgeoisie with government oversight, public-private partnerships, exemptions and shameless excuses for the capitalist class, 'democracy' favouring institutions and enterprise, and conservative policy making. Tactics tend to include 'compromise' (almost exclusively for the bourgeoisie, ever favouring the capitalist) and 'bipartisanship' (read: negotiation with conservatives), focus group style messaging, light weight government programs, means-tested social services, and bourgeois regulatory frameworks. Modalities might be professional lobbying, mainstream media engagement, non-profit advocacy organisations funded by 'philanthropic' foundations, 'expert' consultation, and electoral politics only through established parties, spurning any progressive or independent parties.

Leftists, the left wing, pursue mechanisms that prioritise collective liberation and shared prosperity over individual advancement. Our approach centres on redistributive economics that dismantle oppressive hierarchies to encourage equitable communities to develop. Rather than 'reform capitalism', leftists advocate for transformative alternatives: democratic worker cooperatives that empower employees, participatory democracy that

gives voice to *all citizens*, mutual aid networks that embody genuine solidarity, and more. These mechanisms generate powerful tactics, mass mobilisation and general strikes that unite working people; community self-defence that protects the vulnerable; direct action that immediately confronts injustice rather than waiting for bureaucratic approval. Our modalities reflect this a commitment to transformation; vibrant underground networks and liberatory education circles complement dynamic social media organizing; independent journalists and visionary artists create compelling counter-narratives to corporate media; resilient solidarity economies build thriving alternative institutions while simultaneously eroding extractive capitalist structures. Where conservatives move for racist, sexist, ableist and anti-queer ‘traditions’ and liberals settle for capitalist appeasement unashamed of the radical misbalance of power of a system that ‘works well enough’, leftists imagine and actively work to construct better social relations rooted in dignity, justice, and collective flourishing.

Notice a shift in the tone, there? This, in itself, is a (deliberately inflated) propagandist technique –a divisive strategy meant to disparage centre and right wing folks, that could easily be turned on its head, so let’s do that, as much as it pains me, take two on the first paragraph will illustrate this modality:

Conservatives champion mechanisms that celebrate individual achievement and personal responsibility. Their time-tested approach centres on market-driven solutions that reward innovation and hard work while preserving cherished foundations. Rather than impose top-down mandates, conservatives attempt to trust in the wisdom of ‘free enterprise’, the stability of traditional institutions like family and faith communities, and the strength of established social structures. These mechanisms inspire empowering tactics, tax relief that lets families keep more of their earnings; regulatory freedom that enables entrepreneurial activity; robust law enforcement that ensures safe neighbourhoods (it physically pains me to write this, gross); strong moral frameworks that guide personal conduct. Their modalities reflect deep community roots: vibrant church networks that provide spiritual guidance and practical support; influential media voices that defend timeless values; respected think tanks that develop principled policy solutions; grassroots campaigns that engage citizens in local governance. Where leftists pursue untested theories and liberals expand bureaucratic control, conservatives steadfastly protect individual liberty, honour enduring traditions, ... right, that’s absolutely enough of that.

The exercise above attempts to reveal something crucial about political communication: the same underlying structures: mechanisms, tactics, and modalities, can be dressed in radically different rhetorical clothing. What we’re looking at is a crude example of propagandist techniques, which are remarkably malleable. The shift in tone between my original leftist framing and the conservative rewrite gives us an insight into how political writing shapes perception and, ultimately, political reality –consider literally everything that comes out of the Murdoch press, and how it is ruthlessly conservative in (under)tone.

This flexibility of framing should give us pause, particularly when we consider how these tools are *strategically* deployed across our media landscape. Every political actor, from Pauline Hanson’s “plain speaking” to the Greens’ crafted messaging around “pushing Labor”, employs these mechanisms, tactics, and modalities with increasing sophistication. Fundamentally, however it is how consciously and cynically these mechanisms of coercion are deployed. This can be a fine line, an Instagram reel can quickly begin to ‘feel’ political and give the viewer the ick and on they flick, but a strategic narrative and communications strategy can enable genuine change –left or right be damned.

For instance, we might consider how Sky News mirrors Fox News’ playbook, or how the ABC’s ‘balanced’ reporting often legitimises extremist right-wing positions in the name of both sides journalism –shifting the Overton window ever further to the right. Even ‘progressive’ outlets like The Guardian deploy their own rhetorical strategies, selecting

which stories to amplify and which voices to centre. Look no further than the coverage on the US-backed genocide Israel is committing in Palestine –while *The Guardian* is allegedly a left-wing outlet, its coverage utterly suppresses the mass murder of Palestinians and political supporters therein. Moreover, the atrocious political circus which was the voice referendum showed this in stark relief. The same constitutional mechanism was framed as either divisive identity politics or modest recognition, depending entirely on who was doing the framing. Where does the power lie, and must we keep wondering?

These tactics are also ever present in social media, a capitalist prison manufactured for the unwitting consumer. Bombarded daily with advertising and baseless consumerism, the social media channels increasingly throw in extremist political positions –ever favouring the right wing. That TikTok about housing affordability might be grassroots activism or carefully crafted political messaging, and increasingly, it’s actually both. Instagram reels explaining economic policy tend not to be able to use the same addictive formats as right-wing hate speech, so are discarded either by the algorithm or the consumer, while *YouTube* doesn’t distinguish between genuine political education and sophisticated propaganda, though it prefers the latter for ‘engagement’ metrics.

Each political actor, regardless of their ‘stated’ ideology, operate within colonial capitalism. Yes, even the Trotskyists. Whether it’s the Coalition defending mining interests, Labor’s ‘pragmatic’ climate policies (i.e., approve coal mines and fuck the future for everyone, Albo needs another property), or even some leftist movements that fail to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sovereignty, or ignore the far reaching grasp of capitalist realism, the underlying system shapes what is considered realistic or even reasonable political discourse.

This system has steadily shifted the Overton window rightward over decades. What was once considered extreme right-wing policy, like mandatory detention of asylum seekers or privatising essential services, is now bipartisan ‘common sense’ (c.f., Gramsci). Meanwhile, policies that were mainstream in the Whitlam era, like free university education or ambitious public housing programs, are dismissed as ‘radical’ or economically ‘irresponsible’. Even basic social democratic proposals are branded as far-left extremism by Labor diehards, media commentators, and outlets tone guides who have internalised a constant breeze to the east (or, ‘rightward drift’). The result is a political landscape where the centre keeps chasing the right, while genuinely progressive ideas are confined to the margins of acceptable discourse by Labor and it’s hegemonic bloc.

This is where critical media literacy is essential. Understanding that every headline is political, be it about ‘African gangs’, ‘economic analysis’, and even feel good stories about individual charity obscure systemic failures, this should be basic skills. Alas, critical media literacy, hell even technology literacy, is largely eradicated from the Australian Curriculum, and fewer than ever teachers are empowered to teach critically.

My question to you, then is, do we accept and continue to use these tools, these modalities, mechanisms or tactics to perpetuate existing systems of exploitation? Can we imagine and build something radically different? Do we need new tools (c.f., Lorde) and how can we co-construct these in the face of capitalist realism? In an era where political communication is increasingly sophisticated and ubiquitous, developing critical consciousness is a survival skill, one that we need a decolonial, anti-capitalist, and fundamentally humanist approach to –at least that’s what I reckon. But you can’t solve all the world’s problems in a single post, ey.

Much love, solidarity, and hope,

Aidan