

When ideology shapes ontology

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Dear friends,

Today I have a bit of a wondering rant about the way the world has -become- and how ideology grips us so deeply as to destroy lives, livelihoods, and the fundamental essence of conscious being in modernity. This is born of sadness for my friends who are suffering, anger at the status quo, and deep disappointment in the successive failings of collective power and potential of humanity – so it’s a cheery one, buckle in.

We’ve talked about the inextricable relationship between capitalism qua ideology and capitalism qua ontology. Marx gave us sound insights into the historiography of the mode of production, tracing the development of capital in relatively modern Europe. He and Engels gave us multiple meaningful insights into the relationship between humans and productivity, at an economic level, and began to map the territory of ideology shaping human minds to a physical level. This was continued by Gramsci, whose tradition I aim to continue in these writings [1].

In this theoretical space we need to be careful not to follow the postmodern turn by allowing reality to be collapsed into variations and manifestations of human construction. While there are merits to poststructural and postmodern theorisation, the concrete analysis devoid of an understanding of an ontology –an earth, a physical world, and our way of interpreting it – risks verging on narcissistic or magical thinking about manifestation.

There is a physical world, and in that physical world is not -just- humanity and it’s fever dreams. We share this world, this cosmos, this universe with many other -things- living and otherwise. So let us not overstate the power of language, thought and people, but let us not understate it either. Collectively humanity is controlled by a tiny sliver of the population, less than 1%, these people absolutely do harness ‘discourses’ -or perhaps more accurately, propaganda – to condition the way we think, act, and produce. The latter held a primacy, a central stage, for many decades as capitalism was established as the way of doing across the colonial world.

We now live in the shadow of this system’s (production and) consumption. Its absorption and its inequality, its exploitation and marginalisation. Fundamentally we “go to work” and produce for an other -this other, with very little recognisable labour, transmutes the products of our work for their benefit. This is the basic relationship between labour power and the market. However, somewhere along the way, the accumulation of the capitalist, the other, the person who benefits from your work, outgrew a need for you. Instead, unless you work in a primary industry, there are layers of bureaucracy, management, administration, and false work -or “bullshit jobs” [2].

This is a symptom. Not in the Lacanian sense, don’t worry, it is a symptom of capital’s infection of ontology. We have, and I mean we, all of us, allowed for such a reconfiguration of human “purpose” that we collectively -live to work-. Regardless of if you personally value long walks on the beach, society still demands you to work at least a 9-5. This is the marker of your productivity, but also the marker of your value. If you do not produce, you are not valuable to society. That’s how the rationale goes. Sometimes this is manifest more softly – friends helping you “get back to work” after an incident, family suggesting you put in “110%” to get a promotion, and so on. Other times its a blunter edge. Lost your partner, but are you at work? Having a bout of illness, but what about your job?

Our very values centre work. Work for an other. As anyone who has tried to branch out “independently” will tell you, fortunate buggers, it’s not easy, and the judgement and social

rules around freelancing, contracting, and going it alone are designed to put you back in your box -unless you're gifted or otherwise socially exceptional, and even then you'll likely burn out before you "make it". This is simultaneously a mechanism of ensuring the survival of the 1% - as a 1%, and a manifestation of hegemonic propaganda - "get back to work for some real money" ... "when you're older you can try and branch out on your own" .

Little sayings, thinkings, and social corrections do more to overcorrect back to capitalist values than we can ever truly perceive. And this shows the infectious nature of capitalist values in the epistemological sense. Because of propaganda, because of education, because of the questions we think to ask, the problems we foresee on the horizon, the subtle social cues, and so on, we are trapped in our thinking about work, about how we can -be- in the world. But these are problems for epistemology. The physical world's transformation by human labour as a product of our epistemology (our thinking), and the knowledge that we then have about it (ontology) -is a vicious cycle of capital - so, what role does this play?

Our physical world has been shaped by dual forces. Both evil, and both destructive. These forces have existed for hundreds of years in human "civilisation". Many competing versions of these systems of existence have manifest, been beaten, and eventually retreated. Some of these systems continue to (co)exist today, but none are so violent, corrupting, and self-destructive as capitalism. Two of the key forces of ontic change resulting from capital are extractivism and expropriation.

Extractivism emerged alongside capital's early forms, and was traced by Marx and Engels systematically. Moreover, feminist historians have further explored the role of subjugating women alongside this, often violent, installation of a way of life. Extractivism demands people machine-ise their work. This is not "farming" or "construction" or any one industry. Rather it is a: (1) systematic change to the way that work is done -in the literal sense, (2) thought about -in the social sense; and (3) capitalised upon -in the exchange of goods and services. Extractivism demands nature give up its balanced and robust control over ecosystems, instead "man" is the new master - and this exchange is gendered in the deepest sense. No more room for "mother nature"- now "man" is at the helm, and nature will give up its resources for (the capitalist) "man" .

Expropriation further alienates those who the combined forces of colonialism and extractivism could not, or did not want to, absorb, assimilate, and "collect" . Instead of being offered entry (read: forced into) into capitalist modes of production, working for a capitalist for a sliver of your actual value - expropriation in the most physically violent sense removes people from their land and livelihoods, and either displaces and distorts through propaganda to "other" and exclude these humans from ever returning to homelands and ways of being, or simply exterminates and jettisons humans from their place in the name of bolstering production (usually somewhere else entirely). This colonial pincer move was deployed the world over by European nations, and continues to date in colonial systems of control.

In this way the world has been shaped by values of displacement, alienation, destruction, extraction, and violence. At every turn the smallest group of people use violent and coercive means to ensure that their wealth is inflated. There are no values of care, reciprocity, respect, collaboration, futurism, and so on present here. Instead, it's "so when will you go back to work?"

However, we haven't quite dived deep enough. (what?!, I hear you say)

I've discussed in previous ideas the notion of internalising rhetoric, propaganda, and hegemonic intent. I have illustrated this in terms of the relationship between worker and manager, particularly the narcissistic and subservient role that management plays in contemporary knowledge-work. Here, today, I'd like to probe this notion in the (degradation of) comradery, commonality, and community felt by the working class.

“Workers’” political parties the world over have, in many instances deliberately, nursed an eruption of identity politics as a violent, unnecessary and disrespectful form of propaganda that, enables yes, but races to fill the void left by a lack of theorisation about the contemporary political sphere as an expropriator. Here, those that know me will know I’m discussing the Australian Labor Party, an allegedly worker-centric party interested in the proles and their issues. Instead, the ALP and its ilk have overseen the seizing of the “centre” (read: economic right) of politics as a space of identity wars for the proletariat, and a bourgeois – nay, capitalist – bloc as justiciar of identity battles.

Unsurprisingly fighting over “who even is working class” is a distraction to enable the continued exploitation, expropriation, and alienation of the proletariat. Moreover, identity politics preoccupies the thoughts of right-wing radicals. “Who is queer” and the subsequent witch hunt remains a hallmark of both Dutton’s LNP and Trump’s Republicans, and countless configurations of zombie would-be dictators and their violent right wing apparatus. Here, in common, between “who is working class” and “who is queer” is an active tribalism over belonging and inclusion. Obviously, these are at different ends of a spectrum, and the answer to the latter “who is” question, is much more likely to result in violence, particularly from the right.

At the heart of these questions is a belonging –and not an empty one. Indeed, originators of working class politics, of queer politics, are not after an assimilatory agenda, but a centring of human value as –human values– not “work”. Instead, allegiance and belonging to these values is weaponised and turned into tribes by the would-be capitalist politician. This should stoke deep contemplation from our society. They quite literally appoint bourgeois commissioners to enable continued genocide –to reinforce identity politics. The political apparatus has never supported “fringes” – and often has encouraged, enabled, or at least ignored violence against those they would rather see out of the picture. But in contemporary times, we are seeing a doubling-down (I know poker people don’t like this phrase, because it doesn’t mean that, but they can suck it!) on allegiance with fascism.

It’s the Family Guy meme of acceptable human –your skin colour, your sexual orientation, your class status –these determine your value as a human. Not your inherent human-ness. And if you are lucky enough to be, or to pass as, a bourgeois citizen, then you’re only valued as a worker anyway. For what you might produce. Just look at your mortgage – 30 years, why? You’ll “earn” an “income” for that period and thus, you have value worthy of being housed. God help you if you’re gay, disabled, or brown –the right would rather we dropped off the mortal coil.

The identity politics fight, however, doesn’t end at being a tool of bourgeois and capital reproduction through the political sphere. Actually, it only begins in those spaces. The ultimate trick of contemporary capitalist grips on epistemology means that by-and-large the proletariat have become obsessed with “identity” and fighting over special, tribal, and unique places in various spaces. Not a value of “allow self expression” but rather you either –are- or –are not- a member of, for example, the bisexual community. Regardless of if you are biologically sexually interested in multiple genders, your belonging to that community defines you and frames who you are and your social value. Yet, to another group, this might be worth lynching you over.

This is the world we live in. And why, you might ask, does this have anything to do with ideology’s connection to the physical world, to ontology? Because while the proletariat fights over tribes, communities, labels and “belonging” the capitalists continue to exploit this installed capitalist ontology to strip the earth of its value, to extinguish natural life, to control and contort your thinking through manipulation, gaslighting, and undermining you.

I cannot, in good conscience, of course, advocate ignoring identity. It is important to who

we are. But, at this juncture, I deeply feel that reigniting a true intersectional and accepting comradery is the only thing that could create a better future for the 99%. That's a deeply uphill battle, and one of the biggest problems for the left.

You can't say "we'll make sure you have human rights after the revolution". But if the system granting human rights is fundamentally based on exploitation, then do you really have any rights? Well, that's for those who are oppressed by not being granted those rights to decide. And it is in these spaces that the revolutionary communist and socialist projects failed - failing to platform and engage women, failing to platform and engage queer folks, -failing to platform and engage- because ultimately "revolution first". This was a dark chapter for socialist uprising, but passing this hurdle is absolutely required for the survival of humanity -and at times I fear the planet.

I don't have answers, and I won't pretend to speak for anyone. But I think we -can- find a better way forward. It's a matter of enough people deciding that this isn't right, these values aren't ours, that this world is destined to destruction, death, suffering and torment if we don't do something about it.

Heavy.

In solidarity,

Aidan.

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1. Gramsci, A. (2007). Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci (Q. Hoare & G. Nowell-Smith, Trans.; Reprinted). Lawrence and Wishart.
 2. Graeber, D. (2018). Bullshit jobs (First edition). Simon & Schuster.