

Capitalism Cut Adrift

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Have we really been brainwashed?

There has been much talk expended over the years on the degree to which the media—and hence culture—is central to maintaining the capitalist system. Leading the charge have been Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, so much so that they now more resemble sainted objects than social/political analysts, but then this is nothing new for the left, who unfortunately for the most part are happy to let others do the thinking for them.

The problem for the ‘rest of us’ is that Chomsky et al speak the private language of the professional academics that is ironically also the source of the very problem they write about. I am not faulting Chomsky and co’s analysis, the problem is that to some degree it contradicts what people think out here in the real world.

So for example, Chomsky has written reams on the role of propaganda and language and how it allegedly shapes our perceptions and understanding of events in order to maintain credibility and belief in the system. But consider the following numbers on the peoples’ lack of trust in major institutions in the US and the UK:

“63 percent of respondents said news articles were often inaccurate and only 29 percent said the media generally “get the facts straight” — the worst marks Pew has recorded — compared with 53 percent and 39 percent in 2007.

“Seventy-four percent said news organizations favored one side or another in reporting on political and social issues, and the same percentage said the media were often influenced by powerful interests. Those, too, are the worst marks recorded in Pew surveys.

“Negative opinions grew since 2007 among both major parties, but significantly more so among Democrats. The percentage of Democrats calling the media inaccurate rose to 59, from 43; the percentage who said the media took sides rose to 67, from 54.” — ‘Trust in News Media Falls to New Low in Pew Survey’, NYT, 13 September, 2009

So too with lack of trust in government:

“The poll finds trust in the executive branch, headed by the president, near the record low from the Watergate era. Just 42% of Americans say they have a great deal or fair amount of trust in the executive branch, similar to last year’s 43%, but the lowest since a 40% reading in April 1974. Trust in the executive branch has been below 50% each of the last three years. That coincides with the roughly two-year trend in sub-40% job approval ratings for Bush.” — ‘Trust

The same goes for the UK:

- 68% trust companies less than they did a year ago
- Trust in media dropped ten points to 28%
- Trust in banks down 16 points to 31% — 'Trust Barometer 2010'

Okay, polls can be fixed to say almost anything, they are after all just statistics by another name, but bearing in mind the bias any and all polls have, in this case they all appear to say the same thing: that people know only too well what little control they have over events in the real world but they still experience the end product whether it be unemployment or loss of 'community' and they observe our corrupt political and business class in 'action' every day of their lives.

Meanwhile the government that no one trusts has the nerve to blame the media that serves it:

"One of Tony Blair's closest advisers has warned that the government risks losing its legitimacy, partly due to a systematic failure of the media to report the truth." — 'Media blamed for loss of trust in government', The Guardian, 6 May 2004

Well of course, they would say that wouldn't they, but at the same time it's an admission that all the 'spin' (lies) cannot alter the fundamental reality that most people don't need a degree in linguistics to figure out what's going on, the real issue is why won't they act on what they know and do something about it? After all, don't we live in a democracy?

On cue, up pops a piece on BBC 2's 'Culture Show' (4/2/10) about Michael Moore's about to be released in the UK, 'Capitalism, a love story'. Mark Kermode interviews the BBC's 'guru' of all things economic, Robert Peston about whether Moore is telling the truth about the economics of capitalism, as Kermode is unhappy with Moore's crusading and hence 'biased' approach (amongst other things). But fundamentally, Peston cannot fault the facts of the movie, though he appears a little uncomfortable having to say so, and no wonder, Peston has a vested interest, capitalism pays for his 'lifestyle' (so much for 'objective' journalism).

Both of them also attacked Moore for making a shitload of money out of the system he attacks so vehemently in his movies. But so what? Moore, like Peston and Kermode, lives in a capitalist system, how else could he make movies that reach millions without making money at the same time? There is no contradiction. As they say, 'money talks and bullshit walks'.

Kermode then asks Peston, 'If this is what capitalism is really like, why don't they rise up?' Why not indeed?

And indeed, Peston had no response to Kermode's somewhat rhetorical question other than to say it's not for him to say. After all, Peston has to watch his p's and q's for if he had had the temerity to say something like, 'Mark, you're absolutely right, capitalism sucks, millions have been thrown out of work and into the streets and worse through no fault of their own,

so as a trained economist I know there's a better way of doing things'.

As they say in the US, a pink slip would have been on his (former) desk super pronto. But how can Peston claim to be impartial and objective when his mission in the last analysis is to legitimize capitalism come what may? But it also speaks reams about the kind of 'education' you get in economics at university, which is where I started out this essay.

Capitalism cut adrift

There's no doubt about it, three decades of unregulated 'free market' financialized capitalism in the UK has proved to be a total disaster, but not in the 'classical marxist' sense of a struggle between capital and labour being played out in the streets or in our (non-existent) factories let alone in our decrepid and corruption political institutions. Instead, 'neo-liberalism' has failed not only on an economic level but more importantly it's been a cultural and ideological failure, hence all the talk about regaining the 'trust' of the populace and lots of hot air about 'consultations' and 'town hall meetings' and of course, the inevitable patriotic jingoism about our 'glorious' imperial past.

But are we as passive as it appears? Is the struggle being played out on an entirely different level, and to compound the problem, is the struggle being manipulated and exploited by our mass consumption, corporate culture, largely through the medium of television and the resultant 'spin-offs' into the real world?

The central thrust of capitalist propaganda in the UK focuses on 'tradition' and British 'fair play', 'the mother of democracies', on our 'green and pleasant land' and so on. In any case a totally mythologized history but one that millions believe in (even as they see it vanish before their eyes and this surely is the point).

Corporate capitalism is rapidly erasing even those traces of our mythologized past that have survived the freeways and shopping malls. The countryside has been vandalized by the mass (temporary) migration to the 'country' that has destroyed the traditional English village through the second home. Add to this the destructive effects that gigantic retail corporations have had on virtually every aspect of life. City and town high streets have been 'franchised', local small businesses wiped out in the process.

Having been born and raised in London and then lived 17 years in New York and ten in Johannesburg, I can attest that the London I came back to can be best described as having all the worst aspects of New York and none of its best. In other words a cheap and nasty copy of the city so nice they named it twice. All the really good things about London's aggregation of villages around a centre that made it a unique and diverse city have been gutted and replaced with a vulgar, mass-produced facade that can be found in any corporatized city on the planet.

Add to this the privatization of our common property; water, electricity, gas, all kinds of community services that have part of our lives for generations and it's clear that the quality of life we fought for has been destroyed.

Even in New York the old Italian neighbourhood of downtown Brooklyn where I bought my bread, coffee and pasta, still exists with the same family-run delis and bakeries. This is what makes living in a city worth the hassle. Take the diversity and richness away and what have you got?

British workers work the longest hours in the EU yet have the lowest productivity. Stress levels are OTT, depression affects about 20 million people in the UK. It's official, people are unhappy and no wonder, the dream (fantasy) that the neo-liberals sold us has turned into a nightmare.

But rather than resorting to the political process to call a halt to this nation-wide corporate vandalism of our culture, our dis-ease is being played out in the mass media in a torrent of programmes all of which look back in one way or another to a world that no longer exists even in its fantasy incarnation.

Self-sufficiency, do-it-yourself, 'green' technologies, raising vegetables, crafts, 'heritage' projects, history, archeology, genealogy, all manner of 'community' projects like cleaning up neighbourhoods or restoring poisoned rivers, the list is constantly expanding in what can only be described as a headlong flight from the shopping mall to the allotment and hence from corporate 'culture' in all its vileness and mediocrity. I kid you not, our 'winter of discontent' has been transformed into a 'reality show'.

In Part Two which will follow shortly.

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