

Time to Wake Up: The Neoliberal Order Is Dying

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In [my recent essay](#), I argued that power in our societies resides in structure, ideology and narratives – supporting what we might loosely term our current “neoliberal order” – rather than in individuals. Significantly, our political and media classes, who are of course deeply embedded in this neoliberal structure, are key promoters of the very opposite idea: that individuals or like-minded groups of people hold power; that they should, at least in theory, be held accountable for the use and misuse of that power; and that meaningful change involves replacing these individuals rather than fundamentally altering the power-structure they operate within.

In other words, our political and media debates reduce to *who* should be held to account for problems in the economy, the health and education systems, or the conduct of a war. What is never discussed is whether flawed policies are the fleeting responsibility of individuals and political parties or symptoms of the current neoliberal malaise – manifestations of an ideology that necessarily has goals, such as the pursuit of maximised profit and endless economic growth, that are indifferent to other considerations, such as the damage being done to life on our planet.

The focus on individuals happens for a reason. It is designed to ensure that the structure and ideological foundations of our societies remain invisible to us, the public. The neoliberal order goes unquestioned – presumed, against the evidence of history, to be permanent, fixed, unchallengeable.

So deep is this misdirection that even efforts to talk about real power become treacherous. My words above and below might suggest that power is rather like a person, that it has intention and will, that maybe it likes to deceive or play tricks. But none of that is true either.

Big and little power

My difficulty conveying precisely what I mean, my need to resort to metaphor, reveals the limitations of language and the necessarily narrow ideological horizons it imposes on anyone who uses it. Intelligible language is not designed adequately to describe structure or power. It prefers to particularise, to humanise, to specify, to individualise in ways that make thinking in bigger, more critical ways near-impossible.

Language is on the side of those, like politicians and corporate journalists, who conceal structure, who deal in narratives of the small-power of individuals rather than of the big-power of structure and ideology. In what passes for news, the media offer a large stage for powerful individuals to fight elections, pass legislation, take over businesses, start wars, and a small stage for these same individuals to get their come-uppance, caught committing crimes, lying, having affairs, getting drunk, and more generally embarrassing themselves.

These minor narratives conceal the fact that such individuals are groomed before they ever gain access to power. Business leaders, senior politicians and agenda-setting journalists reach their positions after proving themselves over and over again – not consciously but through their unthinking compliance to the power-structure of our societies. They are selected through their performances in exams at school and university, through training programmes and indentures. They rise to the top because they are the most talented examples of those who are blind or submissive to power, those who can think most cleverly without thinking critically. Those who reliably deploy their skills where they are directed to do so.

Their large and small dramas constitute what we call public life, whether politics, world affairs or entertainment. To suggest that there are deeper processes at work, that the largest of these dramas is not really large enough for us to gain insight into how power operates, is to instantly be dismissed as paranoid, a fantasist, and – most damningly of all – a conspiracy theorist.

These terms also serve the deception. They are intended to stop all thought about real power. They are scare words used to prevent us, in a metaphor used in my previous post, from stepping back from the screen. They are there to force us to stand so close we see only the pixels, not the bigger picture.

Media makeover

The story of Britain's Labour party is a case in point, and was illustrated even before **Jeremy Corbyn** became leader. Back in the 1990s **Tony Blair** reinvented the party as New Labour, jettisoning ideas of socialism and class war, and inventing instead a “Third Way”.



The idea that gained him access to power – personified in the media narrative of the time as his [meeting with Rupert Murdoch](#) on the mogul's Hayman Island – was that New Labour would triangulate, find a middle way between the 1 per cent and the 99 per cent. The fact that the meeting took place with Murdoch rather than anyone else signalled something significant: that the power-structure needed a media makeover. It needed to be dressed in new garb.

In reality, Blair made Labour useful to power by re-styling the turbo-charged neoliberalism **Margaret Thatcher's** Conservative party of the rich had unleashed. He made it look compatible with social democracy. Blair put a gentler, kinder mask on neoliberalism's aggressive pursuit of planet-destroying power – much as **Barack Obama** would do in the United States a decade later, after the horrors of the Iraq invasion. Neither Blair nor Obama changed the substance of our economic and political systems, but they did make them look deceptively attractive by tinkering with social policy.

Were the neoliberal order laid bare – were the emperor to allow himself to be stripped of his clothes – no one apart from a small psychopathic elite would vote for neoliberalism's maintenance. So power is forced to repeatedly reinvent itself. It is like the shape-shifting Mystique of the X-Men films, constantly altering its appearance to lull us into a false sense of security. Power's goal is to keep looking like it has become something new, something innovative. Because the power-structure does not want change, it has to find front-men and women who can personify a transformation that is, in truth, entirely hollow.

Power can perform this stunt, as Blair did, by repackaging the same product – neoliberalism – in prettier ideological wrapping. Or it can, as has happened in the US of late, try a baser approach by adding a dash of identity politics. A black presidential candidate (Obama) can offer hope, and a woman candidate (Hillary Clinton) can cast herself as mother-saviour.

With this model in place, elections become an illusory contest between more transparent and more opaque iterations of neoliberal power. In failing the 99 per cent, Obama so woefully voided this strategy that large sections of voters turned their back on his intended successor, the new makeover candidate Hillary Clinton. They saw through the role-playing. They preferred, even if only reluctantly, the honest vulgarity of naked power represented by Trump over the pretensions of Clinton's fakely compassionate politics.

Unstable politics

Despite its best efforts, neoliberalism is increasingly discredited in the eyes of large sections of the electorate in the US and UK. Its attempts at concealment have grown jaded, its strategy exhausted. It has reached the end-game, and that is why politics now looks so unstable. "Insurgency" candidates in different guises are prospering.

Neoliberal power is distinctive because it seeks absolute power, and can achieve that end only through global domination. Globalisation, the world as a plaything for a tiny elite to asset-strip, is both its means and its end. Insurgents are therefore those who seek to reverse the trend towards globalisation – or at least claim to. There are insurgents on both the left and right.

If neoliberalism has to choose, it typically prefers an insurgent on the right to the left. A Trump figure can usefully serve power too, because he dons the clothes of an insurgent while doing little to actually change the structure.

Nonetheless, Trump is a potential problem for the neoliberal order for two reasons.

First, unlike an Obama or a Clinton, he too clearly illuminates what is really at stake for power – wealth maximisation at any cost – and thereby risks unmasking the deception. And second, he is a retrograde step for the globalising power-structure.

Neoliberalism has dragged capitalism out its nineteenth-century dependency on nation-states into a twenty-first ideology that demands a global reach. Trump and other nativist leaders seek a return to a supposed golden era of state-based capitalism, one that prefers to send our children up chimneys if it prevents children from far-off lands arriving on our shores to do the same.

The neoliberal order prefers a Trump to a Bernie Sanders because the nativist insurgents are so much easier to tame. A Trump can be allowed to strut on his Twitter stage while the global power-structure constrains and undermines any promised moves that might threaten it. Trump the candidate was indifferent to Israel and wanted the US out of Syria. Trump the president has become Israel's biggest cheerleader and has launched US missiles at Syria.

Faustian pacts

The current power-structure is much more frightened of a left insurgency of the kind represented by Corbyn in the UK. He and his supporters are trying to reverse the accommodations with power made by Blair. And that is why he finds himself relentlessly assaulted from every direction - from his political opponents; from his supposed political allies, including most of his own parliamentary party; and most especially from the state-corporate media, including its bogus left-liberal elements like the Guardian and the BBC.

The past three years of attacks on Corbyn are how power manifests itself, shows its hand, when it is losing. It is a strategy of last resort. A Blair or an Obama arrive in power having already made so many compromises behind the scenes that their original policies are largely toothless. They have made Faustian pacts as a condition for being granted access to power. This is variously described as pragmatism, moderation, realism. More accurately, it should be characterised as betrayal.

It does not stop when they reach high office. Obama made a series of early errors, thinking he would have room to manoeuvre in the Middle East. He made a speech in Cairo about a "New Beginning" for the region. A short time later he would help to snuff out the Egyptian Arab Spring that erupted close by, in Tahrir Square. Egypt's military, long subsidised by Washington, were allowed to take back power.

Obama won the 2009 Nobel peace prize, before he had time to do anything, for his international diplomacy. And yet he stepped up the war on terror, oversaw the rapid expansion of a policy of extrajudicial assassinations by drone, and presided over the extension of the Iraq regime-change operation to Libya and Syria.

And he threatened penalties for Israel over its illegal settlements policy - a five-decade war crime that has gone completely unpunished by the international community. But in practice his inaction allowed Israel to entrench its settlements to the point where annexation of parts of the West Bank is now imminent.

Tame or destroy

Neoliberalism is now so entrenched, so rapacious that even a moderate socialist like Corbyn is seen as a major threat. And unlike a Blair, Obama or Trump, Corbyn is much harder to tame because he has a grassroots movement behind him and to which he is ultimately accountable.

In the US, the neoliberal wing of the Democratic party prevented the left-insurgent

candidate, **Bernie Sanders**, from contesting the presidency by rigging the system to keep him off the ballot paper. In the UK, Corbyn got past those structural defences by accident. He scraped into the leadership race as the token “loony-left” candidate, indulged by the Labour party bureaucracy as a way to demonstrate that the election was inclusive and fair. He was never expected to win.

Once he was installed as leader, the power-structure had two choices: to tame him like Blair, or destroy him before he stood a chance of reaching high office. For those with short memories, it is worth recalling how those alternatives were weighed in Corbyn’s first months.

On the one hand, he was derided across the media for being shabbily dressed, for being unpatriotic, for threatening national security, for being sexist. This was the campaign to tame him. On the other, the Murdoch-owned Times newspaper, the house journal of the neoliberal elite, gave a platform to an anonymous army general to warn that the British military would never allow Corbyn to reach office. There would be an [army-led coup](#) before he ever got near 10 Downing Street.

In a sign of how ineffectual these power-structures now are, none of this made much difference to Corbyn’s fortunes with the public. A truly insurgent candidate cannot be damaged by attacks from the power-elite. That’s why he is where he is, after all.

So those wedded to the power-structure among his own MPs tried to wage a second leadership contest to unseat him. As a wave of new members signed up to bolster his ranks of supporters, and thereby turned the party into the largest in Europe, Labour party bureaucrats stripped as many as possible of their right to vote in the hope Corbyn could be made to lose. They failed again. He won with an even bigger majority.

Redefining words

It was in this context that the neoliberal order has had to play its most high-stakes card of all. It has accused Corbyn, a lifelong anti-racism activist, of being an anti-semitite for supporting the Palestinian cause, for preferring Palestinian rights over brutal Israeli occupation. To make this charge plausible, words have had to be redefined: “anti-semitism” no longer means simply a hatred of Jews, but includes criticism of Israel; “Zionist” no longer refers to a political movement that prioritises the rights of Jews over the native Palestinian population, but supposedly stands as sinister code for all Jews. Corbyn’s own party has been forced under relentless pressure to adopt these malicious reformulations of meaning.

How anti-semitism is being weaponised, not to protect Jews but to protect the neoliberal order, was made starkly clear this week when Corbyn criticised the financial elite that brought the west to the brink of economic ruin a decade ago, and will soon do so again unless stringent new regulations are introduced. Useful idiots like Stephen Pollard, editor of the rightwing Jewish Chronicle, saw a chance to revive the anti-semitism canard once again, [accusing](#) Corbyn of secretly meaning “Jews” when he actually spoke of bankers. It is a logic intended to make the neoliberal elite untouchable, cloaking them in a security blanket relying on the anti-semitism taboo.

Almost the entire Westminster political class and the entire corporate media class, including the most prominent journalists in the left-liberal media, have reached the same preposterous conclusion about Corbyn. Whatever the evidence in front of their and our eyes,

he is now roundly [declared an anti-semite](#). Up is now down, and day is night.

High-stakes strategy

This strategy is high stakes and dangerous for two reasons.

First, it risks creating the very problem it claims to be defending against. By crying wolf continuously about Corbyn's supposed anti-semitism without any tangible evidence for it, and by making an unfounded charge of anti-semitism the yardstick for judging Corbyn's competence for office rather than any of his stated policies, the real anti-semite's argument begins to sound more plausible.

In what could become self-fulfilling prophecy, the anti-semitic right's long-standing ideas about Jewish cabals controlling the media and pulling levers behind the scenes could start to resonate with an increasingly disillusioned and frustrated public. The weaponising of anti-semitism by the neoliberal order to protect its power risks turning Jews into collateral damage. It makes them another small or bigger drama in the increasingly desperate attempt to create a narrative that deflects attention from the real power-structure.

And second, the effort to stitch together a narrative of Corbyn's anti-semitism out of non-existent cloth is likely to encourage more and more people to take a step back from the screen so that those unintelligible pixels can more easily be discerned as a smoking gun. The very preposterousness of the allegations, and the fact that they are taken so seriously by a political and media class selected for their submissiveness to the neoliberal order, accelerates the process by which these opinion-formers discredit themselves. Their authority wanes by the day, and as a result their usefulness to the power-structure rapidly diminishes.

This is where we are now: in the final stages of a busted system that is clinging on to credibility by its fingernails. Sooner or later, its grip will be lost and it will plunge into the abyss. We will wonder how we ever fell for any of its deceptions.

In the meantime, we must get on with the urgent task of liberating our minds, of undoing the toxic mental and emotional training we were subjected to, of critiquing and deriding those whose job is to enforce the corrupt orthodoxy, and of replotting a course towards a future that saves the human species from impending extinction.

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