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David Miller & Gill Hubbard: Naming The Problem

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Naming The Problem

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Everyone, even the most die-hard defender of the established order recognizes that we face serious social and environmental problems. The news media regularly circulate the latest figures on the latest social problems. The country with the worst pollution, highest infant mortality, lowest life expectancy, epidemic rates of drug abuse, poverty, anti-social behaviour. But the mainstream media, popular debate and elite discussion treat these - at best- as a procession of seemingly unrelated and inexplicable facts and events. At worst the tendency is to suggest that whatever the problem - racism, obesity, unemployment, famine, war - that the people affected are in some way culpable. If in doubt, blame the victim.

Either way, the context necessary to understand the problem and how it is caused is invariably missing. To paint in the context requires that we show how apparently isolated facts are linked causally to other social facts; that they are not so isolated after all.

Take the example of the city of Glasgow, where we both live. Glasgow is the biggest city in Scotland, the media capital of the country, but not its financial or political capital. Glasgow is known throughout the United Kingdom and beyond for a whole series of social problems. The news adds to the list every few days: record levels of heart disease, high smoking rates, low levels of confidence and self-esteem, the highest poverty and deprivation, the lowest life expectancy. Glasgow has the three poorest constituencies in Britain. In the poorest, Shettleston, according to the Child Poverty Action Group life expectancy for men is now 63, which is '14 years less than the national average…. nearly 18 months shorter than a decade ago - Britain's first reduction in lifespan since the Second World War'. Life expectancy in Shettleston is on a par with that in occupied Iraq.[1]

Glasgow's problems are often reported with a perpetually renewed sense of amazement on the news. If the newscaster gets over his or her surprise, the next recourse is to find someone to blame. First on the list of usual suspects are the people of Glasgow themselves. They smoke too much, won't eat healthy food, are politically apathetic, lack the get up and go of more entrepreneurial cities. Occasionally, the spotlight turns on the government (The Scottish Executive in Scotland). But there is no routine link made between the latest statistic and the system of power which runs Britain. No one, not even an 'expert' commentator, says 'this morning another report of the dire social circumstances in Glasgow further illustrates the problems of neo-liberal capitalism'. As the novelist J G Ballard notes, the lesson of any serious account of how Britain works is that the people themselves, even parliament, royalty or civil service are not in charge. 'Money rules and the City dominates our lives, with a little help from the Prime minister and the media.'[2] The problem, in other words, is capitalism. If we widen the focus from Glasgow or any of the former industrial towns of Britain to the global picture we find similar links. From Cape Town to Chiapas, from Cochabamba to East Timor there are the same problems. It is capitalism as a social system that unites the questions of debt and corporate power, of war and food security, of racism and privatization, of poverty and health. All around the world the same issues face humanity.

Social movements for global capitalism

How did we get here? How did the successive waves of free market reforms, privatization and liberalization come about? Globalization did not just pop out new-born from the womb of the power of capitalism, as some on the left seem to assume. On the contrary, every ruling class 'is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society.… it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones.'[3]

As it was in 1845, when these words were written, so it is today. Part of the strategy of today's ruling class is to present globalization as unstoppable. 'Globalization is not just inevitable - though it is that - it is a good thing' as Blair has put it.[4] Blair's account leaves out the fact that 'Globalization.… is thought out, organised, managed, promoted, and defended against its opponents by identifiable groups of people working in identifiable organizations.(Sklair, 2001 : x).[5] Or as Corporate Watch put it, 'the earth is not dying it is being killed and the people who are doing it have names and addresses'(Utah Phillips).[6]

One name above all is associated with the killing of the earth and of its people. All over the world the name of George W Bush lives in infamy as the agent of destruction of the environment and of Iraq. The story of how the neo-conservative activists associated with the Project for a New American Century (and other thinks tanks and lobby groups) took control of the machinery of US government is well known. What it tells us about great power is the necessity for change to be organized and fought for. The neo-con victory was the result of a long process of political activism and organization.[7] The neo-cons themselves can be quite unselfconscious about their aim to change the whole basis of world affairs, as one senior Bush advisor explained to the US journalist Ron Suskind:

The aide said that guys like me were 'in what we call the reality-based community', which he defined as people who 'believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality'. 'That's not the way the world really works any more,' he continued. 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.... We're history's actors.... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do'.[8]

This calls attention to the collective hallucination of our rulers. The notion that they can float above the 'reality based' world, even as they forcibly reshape it. But it also directs us to the lying, deception and propaganda, which put together are essential tools for the 'engineering of consent'. That phrase, coined by Edward Bernays in 1922, shows that the preoccupation of our rulers with managing public opinion is not new, but in the neo-liberal period the techniques become ever more sophisticated and ever more desperate, as the gap between their rhetoric and 'reality-based' conceptions becomes ever wider.

This means that they have to invest more and more effort in constructing lies and propaganda, and we can certainly see that empirically in the past 20 years. Between 1979 and 1998 the UK public relations (PR) industry expanded more than eleven fold (in real terms).[9] In the United States the PR industry has become ever more important. Since 11 September 2001 the Bush and Blair propaganda machines have been overhauled and significantly expanded.[10] The neo-cons have not been alone in their political activism. Their networks tap straight into a very wide range of corporate funded think tanks and front groups. The most well-known base of the neo-cons - the Project for a New American Century has close ties with the American Enterprise Institute, itself funded by right-wing foundations and corporations such as Philip Morris and Exxon. Following the money in any direction takes you to the whole range of other corporate-funded groups and to corporate - state elite partnerships, networks and social clubs. Sometimes these organizations are deliberately shadowy, and cultivate a mystique, rendering their critics more liable to be dismissed as conspiracy theorists. But these organizations are not by themselves the conspiracy that runs the world. It is not this or that group which is in charge, it is the whole range of organizations working in a community of interest that makes up the global ruling class. So when we list and discuss these below, we do so from the perspective that these groups, important though they may be, are not independently powerful, but powerful as expressions of global corporate and/or imperial interests. They are part of the social movement for global capitalism.

Elite networking groups like the British American Project for the Successor Generation are set up for particular purposes and seem to function reasonably well. The British American Project was set up 'to perpetuate the close relationship between the United States and Britain' through 'transatlantic friendships and professional contacts' of the liberal elite. 'Five Years before I joined BAP, I thought wealth creation and progressive politics were completely incompatible' says Trevor Phillips, now Chair of the (UK) Commission for Racial Equality. 'BAP was one of the things that made me think that was absurd.'[11]

Pro-corporate think tanks, whether of the neo-con right or the third-way 'left', all engage in the same sort of projects and agendas. The Competitive Enterprise Institute, the International Policy Network, Demos, the Foreign Policy Centre (and hundreds of others) all play a role in the ideological battle over neo-liberalism.[12] Finally, and

most importantly peak business associations are at the forefront of lobbying to end regulation or beat back pressure for it. Peak business associations are not new, but they have certainly taken on a new role under neo-liberalism. The involvement of transnational capital in politics is an undeniable tendency which has progressively strengthened across the globe. Everywhere you look, the denizens of the corporate interest conspire against democracy. In the European Union the European Round Table of industrialists do their thing, while in the UN debate on the responsibilities of transnational corporations, the International Chamber of Commerce goes into bat. If the issue is the environment at the World Business Council for Sustainable Developments rolls out the big guns. Wherever the spectre of regulation of business raises its head, you will find the business lobbyists, engaged in conscientious struggle to defend their own interests.

The end of democracy

These corporate front groups and elite policy networks are a means of protecting corporate interests from the risk of democratic decision making. All over the world problems caused by capitalism reverberate: war, starvation, poverty, ill-health, pollution, access to clean water. Yet time and again corporate or imperial interests prevail, showing graphically the progressive destruction of democracy.

The techniques of 'manufacture of consent' are, Chomsky notes,

most finely honed in the United States, a more advanced business-run society than its allies.… But the same concerns arise in Europe, as in the past, heightened by the fact that the European varieties of state capitalism have not yet progressed as far as the United States in eliminating labour unions and other impediments to rule by men (and occasionally women) of best quality, thus restricting politics to factions of the business party. [13]

Since 1991 (when these comments were written) the European Union, and especially the United Kingdom, have made great advances towards the US model. In the United Kingdom the two main parties converged, and the United Kingdom has been at the forefront of globalizing free market reforms.Under 'New Labour' it is the United Kingdom (along with the far-right Spanish (under Aznar) and Italian governments) which form the vanguard of globalization in Europe. Meanwhile in Germany and France, where the trains occasionally still run on time, the restructuring lags somewhat.

The hollowing out of democracy under neoliberalism works the same across the West. The result is that 'political apathy' become s the watchword of the elite. Their take over of the system provokes disengagement from their kind of politics. Chomsky notes that: 'By the early 1990s, after 15 years of a domestic version of structural adjustment, over 80% of the U.S. population had come to regard the democratic system as a sham, with business far too powerful, and the economy as "inherently unfair." These are natural consequences of the specific design of "market democracy" under business rule.' [14]

The destruction of democracy has similar impacts in the United Kingdom. It is no surprise to learn that the lowest electoral turnouts in the United Kingdom almost

precisely mirror the most deprived areas. The top three of the latter, as we noted above, are in Glasgow. Once again the apparently isolated statistics are actually connected. Is it any wonder that people are disengaged from formal politics, when they are comprehensively ignored and marginalized by the political system?

What Capitalism does to us: Consumerism

The social movement for global capitalism is driven by the necessity to inculcate a consumerist ideology. Consumerism has spread from the overdeveloped nations of the West to the Global South, manufactured by transnationals (TNCs) and spread by the viruses of branding, marketing, advertising and public relations, pre-eminently via television. The cases of those countries that have only recently been introduced to the delights of consumer capitalism make the point most clearly. In Fiji eating disorders were unheard of, until consumerism arrived with the introduction of television.

In 1995, the number of girls who self-induced vomiting to control their weight was zero. But three years after the introduction of television, that figure had reached 11%…. The study showed that girls living in houses with a television set were three times more likely to show symptoms of eating disorders.[15]

According to Anne Becker the Harvard nutritionist that conducted this study:
What I hope is that this isn't like the 19th century, when the British came to Fiji and brought the measles with them. It was a tremendous plague.… One could speculate that in the 20th century, television is another pathogen exporting Western images and values.[16]

In Bhutan, which introduced television only in 1999, the effect is even clearer. Within four years consumerism was taking hold.
There is something depressing about watching a society casting aside its unique character in favour of a Californian beach. Cable TV has created, with acute speed, a nation of hungry consumers from a kingdom that once acted collectively and spiritually. Bhutan's isolation has made the impact of television all the clearer.'[17]

Without romanticizing Britain's past, these changing relationships between consumerism and culture bring home the extreme power of marketing and branding in the West, and the effects that this has on all of us. Branding and marketing continue to take children prisoner at younger and younger ages. The obsession with brands is the conscious result of corporate strategy. The marketers of cool operate everywhere to invade minds and bodies. Adele is nine years old. When she grows up she wants to be famous. Adele refers to people who don't wear branded clothes as 'nickynonames'. She would be wary about playing with such a person: 'I'd still be their friend, but I wouldn't hang around with them as much because…. You will get picked on for hanging out with a "nickynoname" person, so really you've got to be careful.'[18] Adele is, in marketing terms, a 'tween' between 8 and 12, and is over 'the age of marketing consent'. Up a stage from here are 'teens' whose habits and desires are investigated and invested in by industry types known in the trade as 'cool hunters'. They search in the teen hang outs and convene focus groups of young adults, all the better to sell them with.[19]

Does all this consumer choice make us happy and contented? By any measure consumerist societies are now more discontented than in the past. The empirical evidence (on suicide, eating disorders, obesity, depression) is shocking but largely ignored.[20] When it is visible, the mainstream fails to note the context that the monster of consumerism is not the result of a few irresponsible marketers, but is in fact the lifeblood of the capitalist system. If they can't make and sell more stuff that we don't need, the system would collapse.

There is no absolute relation between consumerist practice and pro-corporate values in the political arena. But is it any wonder that the addiction to the gear sold by the consumer industries encroaches on the space for progressive politics?

For today and tomorrow

We should not conclude from this that the struggle to save humanity and the planet is lostlrecislslumber' then concentrated global justice movements, have already shown that change is possible and that together move. The rulers of the world, the 'masters of the universe' are indeed in charge, and their power appears unassailable to many of us. But it is also clear that they are afraid of challenges to their power. We know this precisely because they spend so much time and effort - so much discussion, institutional and organizational activity in attempting to combat challenges to their rule. Their intelligence services, their police, their propaganda, their advertising and marketing, their think tanks, their lobbyists, their media, and yes, their military, are frantically busy trying to counter progress, peace and democracy. What are they afraid of? The only other superpower on the planet: public opinion.

Or perhaps to be more precise, they fear the power of mobilized public opinion. For as things stand, public opinion the world over is ignored, marginalized, rebuffed, manipulated, smeared and excluded. But when it is mobilized, when as Shelley put it we 'rise, like lions after slumber in unvanquishable number', then concentrated power has a fight on its hands.

But, already, they don't have it all their own way. From Cochabamba in Bolivia where the privatization of the water system was reversed, to the resistance in Iraq, where the most powerful army in the world faces a myriad of daily attacks; from the ongoing process of resistance in Chavez's Venezuela, to defeats of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Cancun, they have a fight on their hands. All over the world neo-liberalism is being resisted. The great movements of our era, the anti-war and global justice movements, have already shown that change is possible. All over the world neo-liberalism is being resisted. We don't often pause long enough to marvel at that phrase 'all over the world', but we should. For the first time in human history we are involved in a truly global struggle. This is an immense achievement. The movement of movements contains many views, demands and programmes for change, but we need to remember that it is only together that we will make another world come into existence.

The Annual G8 meeting, like the meetings of the WTO, the World Economic Forum and the rest, cannot now take place without the presence of demonstrators. We have driven them away from open politics to the 'retreats of the rich'. They can run and they can hide, but they can't escape the reality of the disaster they have bequeathed

humanity. As the polar ice caps melt, Iraq burns and millions live in hunger and poverty, the time for us to raise our voices ever louder is upon us. Let us do it together for humanity and for the planet, but above all for justice.

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This is an extract from Arguments Against G8 Edited by Gill Hubbard and David Miller (Pluto Press, 2005). Gill Hubbard is Convenor of Globalise Resistance Scotland. David Miller is Co-Editor of Spinwatch (www.spinwatch.org). They are both active with G8 Alternatives in organising a counter summit to the G8 and mass demonstrations at Gleneagles, Scotland this July.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Lindsay McGarvie, 'SCANDAL OF OUR DYING NATION: SICK JOKE' Sunday Mail, 7 March 2004, http://www.sundaymail.co.uk/news/content_objectid=14023777_method=full_siteid=86024_headline=-SCANDAL-OF-OUR-DYING-NATION--SICK-JOKE-name_page.html. This is one more sense in which the Scottish squaddies from the poorest parts of Glasgow, now occupying Iraq, have more in common with the Iraqi people than with the government who sent them there.

[2] Ballard, J G (2004) 'Seasons readings', Guardian, 5 December, discussing Anthony Barnett's Who runs this place? The Anatomy of Britain in the 21st century.

[3] Marx, Karl (1845/1968) The German Ideology, Moscow, Progress Publishers, http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01b.htm#b3 .

[4] Blair on Sustainability Summit: 'We can only face these challenges together' Prime Minister's speech on World Summit on Sustainable Development, Mozambique, 02 September 2002, British Embassy, Berlin, http://www.britischebotschaft.de/en/news/items/020902.htm .

[5] Sklair, Leslie (2001) Globalization: Capitalism and its alternatives, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p x.

[6] http://www.corporatewatch.org.uk .

[7] Media Education Foundation (2004) Hijacking Catastrophe: 9/11, fearand the selling of American empire, http://www.mediaed.org .

[8] Suskind, Ron (2004) 'Without a doubt', New York Times, 17 October, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/17BUSH.html?ex=1102222800&en=59b517c76fa3517d&ei=5070&oref=login&position=&oref=login&pagewanted=print&position=.

[9] Miller, David and Dinan, William (2000) 'The rise of the PR industry in Britain 1979–1998', European Journal of Communication, 15:1, March, pp 5–35.

[10] Miller, David (2004) 'The propaganda machine', in D Miller (ed.), Tell Me Lies: Propaganda and media distortion in the attack on Iraq, Pluto, London.

[11] Beckett, Andy (2004) 'Friends in high places', Guardian, Saturday 6 November, http://politics.guardian.co.uk/foreignaffairs/story/0,11538,1343704,00.html .

[12] For the best source of information on corporate front groups and think tanks see Sourcewatch, http://www.sourcewatch.org .

[13] Chomsky, Noam (1991) Deterring Democracy, Verso, London, p 369, http://www.zmag.org/chomsky/dd/dd-c12-s07.html .

[14] Chomsky, Noam (1997) Market Democracy in a Neoliberal Order: Doctrines and reality, Davie Lecture, University of Cape Town, May, http://www.zmag.org/zmag/articles/chomksydavie.htm .

[15] BBC (2002) 'Television link to eating disorders', Friday 31 May, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/2018900.stm ; Becker, A (2002) 'Eating behaviours and attitudes following prolonged exposure to television among ethnic Fijian adolescent girls', British Journal of Psychiatry, 180, June, pp 509–14.

[16] BBC (1999) 'TV brings eating disorders to Fiji', Thursday 20 May, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/347637.stm .

[17] Scott-Clark, Cathy and Levy, Adrian (2003) 'Fast forward into trouble', Guardian Weekend, 14 June, pp14–20, http://www.guardian.co.uk/weekend/story/0,3605,975769,00.html .

[18] BBC (2004) 'Meet the tweens', Panorama, Sunday 21 November, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/panorama/4011997.stm .

[19] Rushkoff, Douglas (2001) 'The merchants of cool', Frontline, PBS, 27 February, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/etc/script.html .

[20] James, Oliver (1999) Britain on the Couch, Arrow, London.