

Descent into the Maelstrom

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In his examination of governing under capitalism, Goran Therborn (2008) remarks that evidence of a society, in which the forces of social control manage through the general population's acceptance of the legitimacy of that rule, is the absence of a police presence to enforce ideological domination. The less often one experiences the police on a daily basis, the more we can argue that people have – consciously or unconsciously – accommodated to the social, political and economic structure of society. It stands to reason, then, that the opposite is true, that a major presence of institutions of control in their many forms (whether local constabulary, regional authorities, national police, and – in the most extreme case – military units) will reflect a society in stress, a society which increasingly shows signs of a loss of legitimacy or support for ruling elites and structures.

Recent history is full of examples where this is true, from the increasing need for both civil and secret police authorities to impose order in what we have called repressive regimes to the presence of military rule by juntas or 'elected' generals, all used to quell dissent or crush opposition while maintaining a ruling elite. Political elites in the US gleefully point to countries with martial law or a strong police presence as examples of rogue nations that don't abide by democratic principles, especially when those countries fail to support US policies, all the while easily ignoring other repressive regimes if they are deemed allies of the US. One only need recall former US Ambassador Jean Kirkpatrick's clear demarcation between when she called authoritarian regimes and totalitarian regimes (all the while meaning non-communist versus communist). She stated (1992):

Well, of course, I think that of the three most important distinctions between totalitarian and authoritarian regimes – the basic difference is that totalitarian regimes claim that the state had jurisdiction over the whole of society – that includes religion and family, the economy – and in serious totalitarian regimes, like the Soviet Union, Romania, Cuba, or China, they do in fact attempt to govern almost all the aspects of society explicitly, including the church and religion.... Authoritarian regimes really typically don't have complete command economies. Authoritarian regimes typically have some have kind of traditional economy with some private ownership. ... A command economy is an attribute of a totalitarian state.

In other words, we can have allies who are authoritarian – in large part because their societies have not evolved to the point that they can 'trust' democratic governance – but not allies who are totalitarian. The US government can stand behind South African apartheid regimes and Chilean juntas who oppress their populations, but cannot tolerate Cuba or any other socialist state in the world at that moment (and recent events when the US government vilifies Venezuela while embracing the Honduran coup demonstrate our political lens has not changed much in the quarter of a century since she espoused that principle). The unshakeable mantra is that the most important character of a nation was whether or not it allowed for a 'free market' and all that this implied. The neoliberal

tidal wave that swallows us today had its roots in the late 1970s and 1980s as the US government charted its course defending and projecting markets in a way that distinguished itself from the post-colonial imperialism and transnationalism of the post-Second World War decades.

Citizens of the US are very complacent, and the assault on education at all levels is creating a population less and less informed about both the world around them and the developments in their own country. Recent articles in this journal remind us that this myopia is not shared by others, especially in parts of the world most adversely impacted by US foreign policy (see the 2012 symposium on views from Latin America [Volume 38, Issue 2]). Report after report demonstrates that the average student in this country does not fare well on any number of measures of intellectual development. We read a lot about shortcomings in math and science, but it is perhaps more telling that history and self-awareness are also being undermined.

The assault on history is most insidious as it robs young people of an awareness of their origins and how society is a process of negotiation, resistance, and accommodation. For example, an article in the *Washington Post* (Yates, 2014) reports on a teacher from a Washington DC middle school nominally fired for expounding beyond the approved curriculum when teaching African American history to her students. Conservatives have attacked the history curriculum in states like Texas and Colorado, arguing that it presents an unbalanced and overly progressive set of ideas that distort history and promote anti-Christian values. Writing in the *National Review*, Kurtz (2014) argues that changes in the framework of Advanced Placement history courses will 'effectively force American high schools to teach U.S. history from a leftist perspective'. And the list goes on: whether it is about teaching Native Culture, Latin American History, Ethnic Studies, or even the historical record of important events in US history, an attempt is made to sanitize or otherwise strip courses of any critical analysis. We can safely paraphrase George Carlin's rants about the decline of public education: the goal is to make us dumb so we won't understand what is happening to us.

Marx points out that it is the actions of every dominant social class, regardless of the system or era within which that class operates, to maintain that the system has been in place forever, and that it is the only system that can naturally exist. This was true whether we are talking about feudal Europe and its system of monarchs and landed aristocracy, plantation agriculture dependent upon slavery in one form or another, or modern capitalism with its uncritical insistence that market decisions are rational, markets have been around forever, and capitalism is the only system that will ensure democracy along with economic growth and prosperity. To sustain that belief requires a careful crafting of an ideology that is internalized by the general population, one that is vigorously defended (note the 2012 symposium on the rise of the Tea Party [Volume 38, Issue 4]). Criticisms by conservatives, that the educational curriculum is being 'captured' by left-wing forces, are another manifestation designed to protect a dominant narrative, reinforcing the hegemony of this capitalist ideology (see the symposium on hegemony in the May 2015 issue of *Critical Sociology* [Volume 41, Issue 3]).

The 20th century ended with the apparent dominance of neoliberal capitalism as a global system, and an assault on social programs under the banner of austerity throughout industrial capitalist nations. The financial trauma caused by the 2008 housing bubble bursting appeared to be a major setback for financial capital, but most indicators point to a return to the heights prior to the collapse. Extreme wealth holders consolidated their position, middle and working class families saw what little wealth they had accumulated completely wiped out by the housing crash, and income inequality has never been greater.

But this apparent victory is not going unchallenged. Students in Quebec demonstrated to halt tuition increases last year, and even now demonstrate in opposition to continued efforts to impose greater austerity measures. Workers have launched major demonstrations in Belgium, France, Ireland, and other parts of Europe in opposition to austerity, and Greeks have elected a government

that has promised to put an end to the austerity that has crippled their economy. Left parties, opposed to austerity specifically and calling for a new way to manage the economy, are poised to make significant gains in Spain and Italy (countries facing Greece-like impending financial collapse). The dominance of neoliberalism is not complete, though opposition in the US is scattered and not at the levels manifest in Europe. The assault on public education here has had some degree of success, political discourse in the US is so distorted that center-right polemic comes across as the current left narrative, and conservative forces continue to fight rear-guard battles against the growing support for both diversity and tolerance (witness the storm created by extremely discriminatory legislation signed into law in Indiana, and a similar bill in Arkansas receiving condemnation by no less than the largest private employer in the US, Walmart). All of this points to the fact that the cracks are showing.

Recalling Therborn's observation, we now see the response of a system in which hegemonic control is being challenged. In comparison with the image of police forces as instruments of public safety and civic engagements (for example, in the 1950s and 1960s the NYC Police Athletic Leagues served as a community-based vehicle to engage young people who otherwise felt isolated and forgotten), police are now increasingly seen as militarized occupying forces (some may even say armies, as the City of Chicago brags about the size of its police force, and New York City's police department boasts of its anti-tank and anti-submarine capabilities). Images of helmeted Chicago police waving batons against the demonstrators at the 1968 Democratic Convention or the initial police response to urban rebellion during the height of the Civil Rights era have given way to armored personal carriers bringing heavily armed and outfitted police to scenes like the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, and other gatherings of people reacting to police shootings of unarmed people of color. In the past, only after the police were unable to contain the unrest were military units of the National Guard called out to restore order. Now, with military grade equipment provided for free to local police departments by the US Defense Department, there seems to be little need for the National Guard to arrive (ironically, more recently calls for the National Guard have come from protestors seeking protection from excessive force exhibited by the local police). In other words, the US appears to be a society no longer controlled through widespread and unconscious acceptance of hegemonic rule; rather, control now is increasingly imposed through the manifest use of force.

And so, capitalist societies are starting to circle the proverbial drain, inexorably drawn down into the maelstrom of social protest and the chaos that accompanies fundamental social changes. As these efforts increase in intensity – whether workers are more often, and more violently, protesting against austerity throughout Europe, or minority communities in the US are rising up in anger over the increasing violence perpetrated by the police against people of color and non-European ethnicity – we are witnessing an increasing militarization and in some spheres a para-militarization of the enforcement of capitalist social relations. Reactionary oppositional forces gather, in the form of anti-immigration movements and parties, whose adherents direct their anger at the most vulnerable in society, blaming the victim if you will, rather than at the system that gives rise to hardships experienced by people on all sides of the political divide.

The next issue of the journal (September 2015, Volume 41, issue 6) will include several essays by noted scholars of race and ethnicity, reflecting upon the rising toll of police shootings of young and old, male and female, persons of color. And it is not shooting alone, but the increasing evidence of excessive force during traffic stops, violent confrontations regarding otherwise trivial matters, and against the stark evidence of a different police response when the perpetrator is white, whether or not they are armed. This all points to the inability of ruling elites to secure compliance, and the need to maintain social control through the ever escalating use of heavily armed and increasingly militarized police departments, redefining the old adage of 'serve and protect', now explicitly

referring to property and privilege over people. Perhaps it was ever so, but we are seeing it for what it is and not what we are encouraged to believe.

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