

HOW WE STAY BLIND TO THE STORY OF POWER

Power is the force that shapes almost everything about our lives and our deaths. There is no more important issue. Understanding power and overcoming it through that understanding is the only path to liberation we can take as individuals, as societies, and as a species.

Which is why it should be simply astonishing that no one in the media, supposedly a free marketplace of ideas, ever directly addresses matters of power – beyond the shadow play of party politics and celebrity scandals. And yet, of course, this lack of interest in analyzing and understanding power is not surprising at all. Because the corporate media is the key tool – or seen another way, the central expression – of power.

Very obviously power's main concern is the ability to conceal itself. Its exposure as *power* weakens it, by definition. Once exposed, power faces questions about its legitimacy, its methods, its purposes. Power does not want to be seen, it does not want to be confined, it does not want to be held accountable. It wants absolute freedom to reproduce itself, and ideally to amass more power.

That is why true power makes itself as invisible and as inscrutable as it can. Like a mushroom, power can grow only in darkness. That is why it is the hardest thing to write about in ways that are intelligible to those under its spell, which is most of us, most of the time. Because power coopts language, words are inadequate to the task of describing the story of real power.

Notice I refer to power, not the powerful, because power should be understood more as an idea made flesh, an ideological matrix of structures, a way of understanding the world, than a set of people or a cabal. It has its own logic separate from the people who are considered powerful. Yes, politicians, celebrities, royalty, bankers and CEOs are part of its physical expression. But they are not power, precisely because those individuals are visible. The very visibility of their power makes them vulnerable and potentially expendable – the very opposite of power.

Rather than thinking in terms of individuals, power is better visualized as the deep waters of a lake, while the powerful are simply the ripples on the surface. The ripples come and go, but the vast body of water below remains untouched.

Superficially, the means by which power conceals itself is through stories. Its needs narratives – mainly about those who appear powerful – to create political and social dramas that distract us from thinking about deep power. But more fundamentally still, power depends on ideology. Ideology cloaks power – in a real sense, it *is* power – because it is the source of power's invisibility.

Ideology provides the assumptions that drive our perceptions of the world, that prevent us from questioning why some people were apparently born to rule, or have been allowed to enclose vast estates of what was once everyone's land, or hoard masses of inherited wealth, or are celebrated for exploiting large numbers of workers, or get away with choking the planet to the point at which life itself asphyxiates.

Phrased like that, none of these practices seems natural – rather, pathologically insane, an irrefutable proof of our self-destructiveness as a species. But these conditions are the unexamined background to our lives, just the way things are and maybe always were. The system.

True, the individuals who benefit from the social and economic policies that uphold this system may occasionally be held to account. Even the policies themselves may occasionally be held up to scrutiny. But the assumptions behind the policies are rarely questioned – certainly not in what we are taught to call the “mainstream”.

That is an amazing outcome given that almost none of us benefit from the system we effectively sanction every time we turn out to vote in an election. Very few of us are rulers, or enjoy enormous wealth, or live on large estates, or own companies that deprive thousands of the fruit of their labors, or profit from destroying life on Earth. And yet the ideology that rationalizes all that injustice, inequality and immorality not only stays in place but actually engenders more injustice, more inequality, more immorality year by year.

We watch this all unfold passively, largely indifferently because we believe – we are made to believe – we are powerless.

Power always has an ideological shape *and* physical structures. It has both faces. It existed before capitalism, and will exist after it (if capitalism doesn't kill us first). Human history has consisted of power consolidating and regenerating itself in new form over and over again. Power has been integral to human societies. Now our survival as individuals and as a species depends on our finding a way to reinvent power, to tame it and share it equally between us all – and thereby dissolve it. It is the ultimate challenge.

By its very nature, power must prevent this step – a step that, given our current predicament, is necessary to prevent planetary-wide death. Power can only perpetuate itself by deceiving us about what it has done in the past and will do in the future, and whether alternatives exist. Power tells us stories that it is not power – that it is the rule of law, justice, ethics, protection from anarchy or the natural world, inevitable. And to obscure the fact that these are just stories – and that like all stories, these ones may not actually be true, or may even be the opposite of truth – it embeds these stories in ideology.

We are encouraged to believe that the media – in the widest sense possible – has authority alone to tell us these stories, to promote them as orthodoxy. It is the lens through which the world is revealed to us. Reality filtered through the lens of power.

The media is not just newspapers and TV news broadcasts. Power also exerts its hold on our imaginative horizons through all forms of “popular” entertainment, from Hollywood films and Youtube videos to social media and video games.

In the U.S. almost all media is owned by a handful of corporations that have diverse interests related to power. Power expresses itself in our modern societies as wealth and ownership. And corporations stand at the apex of that power structure. They and their chief functionaries (for corporate executives do not really control power, it controls them) own almost all of the planet's resources, they hold almost all of the wealth. They typically use their money to buy attention for themselves and their brands while at the same time buying invisibility for deep power. That makes media corporations a key pillar of the matrix of power. Their journalists are servants of corporate power, whether they know it or not. Mostly, of course, they do not.



The illusion that we, those who currently have no real power, can exercise power by voting for candidates already selected for their ideological subservience to power, in a political and economic system structured to serve power, in a media and cultural landscape where those who try to address or challenge real power either end up being dismissed as “conspiracy theorists”, or “tin foil hat-wearing” leftists, or crazed socialists; or end up being locked away as subversives, as a menace to society, as has prominently happened to Chelsea Manning and Julian Assange.

The media's analysis of power seldom considers the most pressing and vital issues of the moment, issues that are deeply entwined with what power is and how it functions.

How do we upend economic “orthodoxy” to prevent the imminent collapse of a global financial system fallaciously premised on the idea of infinite growth on a finite planet? If we are to survive as a species, how will we deal with a corporate power that is polluting the planet to death through the aggressive cultivation of rampant, profit-driven consumerism? These issues are only ever addressed tangentially in the corporate media, in ways that do not threaten deep power.

If we understand what power is, that it depends on ideas that we have been force-fed our every waking moment, ideas that enslave our minds and are now poised to kill us, we might decide that the whole system of power, not just its latest pretty or ugly face, needs to be swept away. That we need to start with entirely new ideas and values. And that the only way to liberate ourselves from our current pathological, self-destructive ideas is to stop listening to the loyal functionaries of power.

The current efforts to stop Sanders from winning the Democratic nomination do at least help to open our eyes. The Democratic party is one of the two national parties whose role, like the corporate media, is to conceal deep power. Its function is to create the illusion of choice, and thereby keep the viewing public engrossed in the drama of politics. That does not mean that there are no differences between the Republican and Democratic parties. There are, and for some people they are meaningful and can be vitally important.

But those differences are completely trivial from the perspective of power.

In fact, power's goal is to magnify those trivial differences to make them look like major differences. But whichever party gets into “power”, the corporations will keep despoiling and destroying the planet, they will continue driving us into profit-making wars, and they will carry on accumulating vast wealth largely unregulated. They will be able to do so because the Republican and Democratic parties' leaderships rose to their current positions – they were selected – by proving their usefulness to deep power. That is the power of power, after all.

That is not to say there are never glitches in the system. Mistakes happen, though they are usually corrected quickly. The system is not *all-powerful* – not yet, at least. Our situation is not necessarily hopeless, though the struggle is immensely difficult because most of us have not yet worked out what power is and therefore have no idea how it might be confronted.

Power has had to make historic compromises, to take defensive actions in the hope of maintaining its invisibility. In the west, it eventually conceded the vote to all adult men, then women, to ensure its legitimacy. As a result, power shifted from expressing itself through implicit or overt threats of physical violence to maintain order and moved towards manufacturing an ideological consensus – our current passivity to our imminent self-destruction – through education systems and the corporate media.

Power's relentless drive to feed the insatiable appetite it has created for us as consumers, and its obsession with technological fixes as a way to maximize efficiency and profits, sometimes create these glitches. They open up new possibilities for exposing power. One recent example is the information publishing revolution embodied by social media. Power is now desperately trying to stuff that genie back into the lamp with self-serving narratives about “fake news” on the left (made more credible by conflating it with power-serving fake news on the right), as well as making drastic changes to algorithms to disappear the left's rapidly emerging counter-narratives.

And most importantly, power is struggling to maintain the illusion of its benign nature, of normal service, in the face of real-world facts, such as the planet heating up, runaway fires in Australia, balmy winter temperatures in the Antarctic, the mass die-off of insects, and the tide of plastic choking the oceans. Its efforts to exploit the wealth-generating opportunities offered by the climate and wider environmental emergencies, while refusing to acknowledge that it is *entirely* responsible for those emergencies, may yet backfire. The question is not whether we wake up to the role of power, but whether we do so before it is too late to effect change.

Bernie Sanders is one of those glitches- thrown up by current circumstances. They are the first signs of a tentative political awakening to power, sometimes dismissed generically as “populism”. They are the inevitable outcome of the ever greater difficulty power faces in concealing its self-destructiveness as it seeks to remove every last limit to its voracious acquisitiveness.

Once upon a time, those who paid the price of power were out of view, in disenfranchised, urban slums or far-off lands. But the accelerating contradictions of power – of late-stage, global capitalism, if you prefer a specific name – have brought those effects much closer to home, where they cannot so easily be ignored or discounted. Growing sections of western societies, the central locus of power, understand that there needs to be serious, not cosmetic, change.

Power needs to be rid of Sanders, because he is that rarest thing – a politician who is not imprisoned within the current power paradigm. Because he does not serve power cultishly like most of his colleagues, such politicians threaten to shine a light on true power. Ultimately, power will use any tool to destroy them. But power prefers, if possible, to maintain its cloak of invisibility, to avoid exposing the sham of the consumption-driven “democracy” it engineered to consolidate and expand its power. It prefers our collusion.

The reason the Democratic party establishment is trying to bring down Sanders at the primaries stage and crown a power-functionary like Buttigieg, Biden or even Elizabeth Warren – or if it must, parachute in a billionaire like Michael Bloomberg – is not because Sanders would on his own be able to end the globe-spanning power of pathological capitalism and consumerism. It is because the nearer he gets to the main shadow play, to the presidency, the more power will have to make itself visible to defeat him. (Language makes it difficult to describe this dynamic without resorting to metaphors that make power sound fancifully human rather than structural and ideological.)

Unless we can develop our critical faculties to resist its propaganda, power holds all the cards and can play them the way that best suits its interests. None of this should be seen as sinister or conspiratorial, though of course it sounds that way to those who fail or refuse to understand power. It is in the logic of power to exercise and consolidate its power to the greatest extent possible. And power has been accumulating power to itself over centuries, over millennia. Our failure to understand this simple truth is really a form of political illiteracy, one that has been engendered by our submission to, our worship of, power.

Those caught up in the drama of politics, the surface ripples – which is almost all of us, almost all of the time – are actors in, rather than witnesses to, the story of power. And for that reason we can see only other actors, the battles between the powerful and the powerless, and between the powerless and the powerless, rather than power itself. We watch the drama without seeing the theatre in which that drama is unfolding. In fact, power is much more than the drama or the theatre. It is the unseen foundations on which the theatre is built.

Power is the structure of the thoughts we think we control, a framework for the ideologies we think we voted for, the values we think we choose to treasure, the horizon of imaginations we think we created. Power exists only so long as we consent to it through our blind obedience. But in truth, it is the weakest of opponents – it can be overcome simply by raising our heads and opening our eyes.

Extracted from: **Jonathon Cook's blog**
jonathan-cook.net