

The Entanglement of the 21st Century

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Oft forgotten poet and playwright Sir Walter Scott once wrote, “O, what a tangled web we weave...” (*Marmion*, 1808, 17). While Scott spoke of a tragic romance, in 2018, journalist Al Fonzi echoed these words in an incendiary *New Times* article accusing The Sierra Club, an “influential grassroots environmental organization”, of being influenced by Russia. Fonzi went on to endorse fracking as a cleaner way of obtaining fossil fuels, appealing to those concerned about climate change by remarking how America had reduced its carbon emissions more than any other nation (Fonzi, 2018). He praised the industry’s benefit to the economy and its high starting wages. The article closes with a suggestion that those who would turn away from oil and gas are just being influenced to damage the American energy sector. Fonzi is assertive in his beliefs, even in the face of commenters who passionately disagree with his opinions and despite the available research concluding otherwise. How can someone, let alone a journalist, be so willfully ignorant? Does the sharing of these attitudes have any real effect on society? Subjectivism states that there is always a myriad of factors at play as to why anything is the way that it is. Fonzi is a product of all the things he has experienced and has been influenced by all of the labels he has worn. According to the brief biography following the article, Fonzi is a veteran, having served in both Vietnam and Iraq, with 35 years of military intelligence under his belt. From the comments, it is suggested that he is an advocate of Donald Trump. He is also a journalist, one of the most popular tools used in the sharing of dominant moral codes (Philipzig, 2022). The comments accompanying Fonzi’s article serve as a small example of the constant conflict occurring in society due to a sophisticated interplay of many different factors, which this paper will aim to explore as they apply to the current state of our world.

One of the theories encompassed by subjectivism is critical theory. Developed by Karl Marx, conflict theory states that society is a hierarchy, with a small group of powerful people at the top while a majority of society comprises the powerless bottom (Bereska, 2021). Societal rules are not generally agreed upon but are imposed by the most influential or powerful groups as a means of controlling conflict. In a capitalist society, this is the conflict between the powerful, who reap the rewards of production, and the powerless, who carry out the methods of production. Since these social rules are created with the interests of those in power, influential groups are unlikely to be the ones who break them. The rule-breakers will be the powerless, who are either typed as deviant simply for being powerless or become deviant by acting out. Despite the intention of control via the powerful, this results in constant conflict as the powerless seek to challenge the dominant moral codes and fight against social and environmental injustices; meanwhile the hegemonic influential groups enforce their social rules as “common sense” via institutions like the media, advertising, and education (Bereska, 2021). This theory summarizes how the ideologies of capitalism and neoliberalism have come to flourish.

From capitalism, there came a need to convince the public to buy the products being constantly churned out. And then to discard those products in favour of newer versions of those same products, to consume them, and to repeat this cycle regularly. From this need, commercial advertising was introduced (Jhally, 2018). It did not take long for this industry to develop into a science by seeking to identify just what types of advertisements would be most effective when it came to maximizing profits. As it turns out, peddling happiness in the form of a product was the most fruitful way to entice people to consume (Jhally, 2018). Over

the decades, advertising has become a billion-dollar industry, with large corporations investing heavily in where and how their products are received (Jhally, 2018). It is through ads that we are influenced how to style our hair, how to wear our clothes, and what to buy to appear successful in the eyes of our peers; as well as what not to wear, think, or do (Philipzig, 2022). Each day we are bombarded with thousands of ads through social media, product placement in movies, and billboards lining our streets; each depicting something that will supposedly fulfill our human need for happiness. However, once that initial rush of dopamine fades, ads show us the next best thing that will serve the same function. Despite portraying happiness, advertising appeals to the worst in society (greed and selfishness), while discouraging our best qualities as human beings: “compassion and generosity” (Jhally, 2018, 33:30-33:45). Research suggests that material wealth does nothing for happiness, that society is lonelier than ever in this era of mass consumption and yet, society is addicted, falling prey to it every time and further corroding community bonds (Jhally, 2018). In fact, advertising is so effective, it becomes a tool for the powerful to keep the masses ignorant; to keep them in debt and focused on themselves so that they fail to acknowledge pressing issues such as climate change or injustices due to the exploitation of lesser-developed countries, to keep them encased in the false consciousness prescribed by the powerful (Jhally, 2018). As Jhally mentions in *Advertising at the Edge of the Apocalypse*, ads seem only to tell us: “don’t worry about society or the world, just party” (2018, 35:35-35:40).

Commercial advertising has fueled capitalism--and its segue into neoliberalism—which has ultimately led us to a precipice from which we can not return. As the consumerist population of Earth continues to grow, so does its need for resources. Ocean trawling, deforestation, soil degradation, fracking, strip mining, air pollution and toxifying our planet have resulted in rising global temperatures. The material output of our existence far exceeds all living biomass on Earth and the effects of consumerism have launched us into what is thought to be the Sixth Mass Extinction (Bradshaw et al., 2021). The nations of the UN have repeatedly met at conferences, pledging to reduce carbon emissions by an amount that would see global temperatures only rise 1.5 to 2 degrees. (Bassey, 2021; Bradshaw et al., 2021)

However, most nations have shirked those promises, instead endorsing Net Zero projects, where they pledge to someday offset the carbon they unleash by investing in technologies that could take generations to discover (Bassey, 2021; Anderson, 2021). Notably absent from discussions of climate change is the military, one of the biggest perpetrators of carbon emissions (Buxton, 2021). Conflicts require intervention, resources require safeguarding, increasing natural disasters require additional assistance for first responders. Moving hundreds of thousands of troops takes many planes, ships, trains, automobiles, and boats. Add to that exercises of rescue, patrol, espionage, and the amount of resources such as food and water needed to sustain each soldier. The carbon footprint of the American military alone is substantial, emitting 20 million tons of carbon each year (Buxton, 2021). Given that they are considered essential to maintaining national security, yet another notion perpetuated by the media, the military is permitted to act with impunity, receiving larger amounts of funding to protect the interests of the powerful, which are increasingly coming under threat.

Accompanying climate disruption are crises of famine, of drastic changes in weather patterns, and tensions between classes. If conflict can not be reined in, then wars erupt, and militaries are put into service to bring them under control. Wars and social instability can lead to mass migrations, where refugees seek safety in the stability of the powerful nations. These migrants have been labelled--by numerous institutions-- as a threat due to their added burden to the economies and resources of developed Western nations (Buxton, 2021). It is seemingly acceptable for modern societies to exploit poorer nations and for wealthy philanthropists to pledge staggering amounts to organizations aiming to provide aid to the powerless groups. However, it is deviant for them to try and join those developed societies. Sometimes, rather than flee, citizens protest for social and environmental justice. This has been seen most recently with the Black Lives Matter movement, those in opposition of the Keystone XL pipeline in Canada and America, and the anti-war protest in Russia. In Africa, environmentalists are being killed for standing up against the behemoth companies seeking to plunder oil and cobalt (Bassey, 2021). A surprising development in society has been that the largest and loudest groups in these organized protests are youth. And it is those youth who are giving

seasoned economists and dejected researchers hope (Bassey, 2021; Anderson, 2021).

Journalists like Fonzi perpetuate these norms with an enthusiasm meant to be shared by all. Perhaps we can envy someone like him, who knows their place in this deviance dance. Each of these different factors perpetuate the neoliberal machine, fueled by conflict at every level. Ads establish the dominant moral codes that society abides by, promising that happiness we all strive to obtain. They encourage us to consume and so we do, ignoring science in favour of empty promises and believing in the wealthy, who make a spectacle of donating fractions of their millions to impoverished nations who are reeling from climate disruption and internal conflict. The military continues to press on and establish capitalist ideologies across the globe, packaging it as freedom to developing nations in order to create more consumers. The cogs turn, pulling non-renewable resources from the Earth. The powerful elite have all the financial means to correct the issues that they invest in so heavily to have us ignore, however this goes against their interests of obtaining more wealth. The youth demand change and those of us already indoctrinated by the powerful turn the other cheek, waiting for them to grow up and accept the reality of life: that happiness can be found in the form of a new pair of jeans.

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