

PIBCI - Monthly Perspective

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Conform to the norm?

How collective illusions misguide the public, and how we can dismantle them.

How is it that the majority of people in our society have a tendency to act in ways that clearly work against their own interests? Why is it that most people appear happy to follow a small minority who work not in the interests of the public, but for themselves? What compels people to blindly go with the flow? The reason behind the way people act can be traced back to a set of 'norms' that are developed and nurtured by a small section of society we know as the 1%. Through their wealth and power, the 1% manipulate social norms via their commanding heights in the spheres of politics, business and through their ownership of the mainstream media. Their ability to set the social and political agenda is demonstrated by the disconnect between peoples' private views and their actions in public. When we toe the line, we invariably affirm the dominant narrative which effectively supports the status quo. So, what is it that we need to know about the production of cultural norms and the publics' propensity to adhere to collective illusions? And, how can we break through the mindset of compliance and exercise critical thinking to promote progressive social change?

Conform to the norm

Cultural norms live in the shadows of society and surreptitiously influence our behaviour. As they are largely hidden from view, we are not cognisant that they operate 24/7 influencing our perspectives on life, and shaping our behaviours. Many norms are handed to us from the prior generation, which are usually accepted by society with little thought whether they are indeed true or ethical. Such norms are hard-wired in our minds, which become 'automatic beliefs' that we blindly adopt into our routine practices and rituals. As such, they become arbitrary ways of thinking and acting without ethical and moral validation. Although such cultural norms make life predictable and help move society along quickly without too much thought or inquiry, they also place us in a state of autopilot, which masks many of the negative social beliefs and practices.

Collective Illusions

Once cultural norms establish themselves in society, they tend to develop into collective illusions. This is the instance when large numbers of people go along with a view that they do not necessarily agree with. Such views may be incorrect, but people erroneously believe that this is the view of the majority and do not act to challenge or correct it. A small section of society regularly exploits this gap in perception by falsely promoting that their minority view is the view of the majority. By amplifying their views and opinions via the mainstream media, they dupe the public into adopting a collective illusion. By this point, the collective illusion becomes deeply rooted in society, which can only be dismantled by the majority.

Cultivating negative norms

The manipulation and maintenance of certain norms in our culture is a mechanism by which the political elite seek to regulate behaviour in society. The web of illusions that the mainstream media spins on a daily basis is designed to weave through the fabric of everyday life, hoodwinking the public into adopting dubious views, upholding suspect values and promoting a way of life that serves the interests of the few and not the many.

For the past four decades, the dominant narrative has been cultivated by the political elite and promoted by the major political parties. This narrative has been refined and repeated by the billionaire owned media and reinforced by the government-controlled media. It is broadcast to us via news headlines, alerts on our mobile phones, billboards at the train station that spreads across society and established itself as a cultural norm which in turn develops into a collective illusion. Regardless whether the public agree or do not agree with its central tenets, is willing to go along with the illusion. By this stage, the collective illusion is well established, and people avoid challenging or correcting it.

Normalising neoliberalism

Through the constant barrage of propaganda inflicted by the billionaire owned media and the support afforded by the major political parties and corporate bosses, it is generally accepted that the neoliberal order is the only viable economic vehicle to push the nation along. The relentless ideological conditioning has laid the groundwork for normalising the view that the national economy needs large corporations to keep the country moving. It has embedded the belief that the government's job is to support and stimulate the economy by the means of privatisation and deregulation. Furthermore, it has promoted warfare ahead of welfare.

The cultivation of such norms has laid the foundations for successive governments to enter into a myriad of monetary and business arrangements that has enmeshed Australia in a web of opaque free trade deals and dubious financial alliances with western nations.

By normalising privatisation and deregulation, the major political parties have sold key public assets. For decades, governments have handed over the operations of essential public services to the corporate sector who have presided over the degradation of our vital services. Furthermore, workers' protections have been weakened and salaries have stagnated whilst the top end of town continues to reap whopping profits. The normalisation of privatisation and deregulation has provided a cover for a comprehensive corporate takeover of our workplaces. They have been transformed into garrisons of corporate culture, undermining any semblance of open and democratic spaces, whilst grinding back worker protections once advanced by workers' unions.

International conflict

Under the stewardship of the major political parties, Australia is now ensnared in an international web of military alliances (eg. AUKUS, Five Eyes intelligence alliance, the Quad, etc). The full price of this has yet to be calculated in terms of maintaining such expensive operations, and the impact on our nation's sovereignty. Australia's AUKUS membership obliges us to participate in conflicts that have little to do with our national security interests. Like that of its older twin in Europe - NATO, AUKUS demands that Australia sets aside its sovereignty and enters conflicts that the US is encouraging in the Pacific region. Our government has already spent over \$386 million in purchasing US nuclear attack submarines that are designed to hunt down submarines in far-flung foreign waters rather than defend our waters. Recently, the Minister for Defence, Richard Marles pledged \$100 million to top up existing funding for the government of Ukraine; another conflict that is being waged on the other side of the world that has nothing to do with Australia's national interests nor security. Meanwhile, the recent Federal budget failed to provide satisfactory support for the basic needs of Australians doing it tough.

We are all customers now

The dominant narrative crafted by the 1% has worked tirelessly to erase the term 'citizen' from our collective consciousness and rebadge it with the term 'customer'. This insidious act works to devalue our status as free agents with obligations to exercise political power by

holding political and business leaders to account. By normalising the tag 'customer', the small section of society has been able to transform citizens into mere 'jobholders' and 'homeowners' programmed to consume their way through an endless sea of carbon copy shopping plazas that dot the landscape like rash.

As the dominant narrative reinforces the collective illusion that the neoliberal ideology is the only viable option, one must sit back and ponder where is it leading us? Is our society a better place? Is the world a safer place? Do our major political parties have a bright vision for our future? Can we afford to mindlessly follow our political and corporate leaders?

No vision, no idea

Since the global financial crisis of 2008, we have been witnessing the slow-motion collapse of the neoliberal order. Despite this, neoliberalism's wealthy and powerful supporters have continued to exercise their influence by keeping this zombie ideology functioning and appearing as a viable system for public consumption. Whilst neoliberalism remains the dominant ideology, it continues to lead the planet down a dark and grim path. This is evidenced by the dangerous and uncertain times we live in as conflicts roll from one decade to another and genocide is broadcast live onto our screens 24/7. The environmental emergency continues unchecked. The cost of living rises on a daily basis, whilst wages stagnate and working conditions deteriorate under a precarious labour market. Health services and education struggle under the strain of limited government resources whilst the private sector reaps billions in profits. Homelessness and child poverty persist as military spending increases, and billionaires post record profits.

The dark and grim outlook is reflected by political leaders across neoliberal nations. Brimming with pessimism, fatalism and narcissism, the leaders of the neoliberal world lack vision, and recoil from painting a positive future for society. The USA and UK suffer from crumbling social services, social divisions, corporate control, and a volatile mixture of political opportunism and toxicity that translates into the current circus that passes for political campaigning as their respective elections draw nearer. Both the political elite in the US and UK share a fetish for conflict which is demonstrated by their unwavering commitment to supply arms to the proxy war in Ukraine and to the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) as the genocide enters its ninth month.

The political leadership in Germany under Chancellor Olaf Scholz, and in France under President, Emmanuel Macron are devoid of vision and social progress. Both nations suffer from economic decay, a rise in social division and skyrocketing living expenses. Despite the unpopularity of both governments, they enthusiastically beat the drums of war and redirect taxpayer funds from social supports to the international arms industry. Neoliberal governments from Canada to the Czech Republic, Denmark across to Japan are facing similar issues as the grip of the neoliberal order is slowly but surely slipping.

Back in Australia, the public continue to endure the duopoly of mainstream political parties who demonstrate very little difference between one another. Both follow the neoliberal tune whilst attempting to differentiate their miniscule differences by amplifying each issue. The fact remains that politically and economically speaking, little has changed since the 2022 election. Australia continues to follow the neoliberal script handed down by the previous federal government. In terms of foreign policy, both major political parties are in lockstep supporting the world's largest superpower that thrives on a diet of perpetual war. Despite their minor differences in domestic policy, both major political parties share a keen interest in funding overseas conflicts and engaging in costly military alliances that expose Australia to potential international conflicts thousands of kilometres away from our shores. Furthermore, the major political parties have demonstrated a willingness to divert much needed funds into the coffers of international arms companies. Yet, little is communicated to the Australian public, as the dominant narrative distracts our collective attention onto trivialities and manufactured headlines.

Clearly, the political elite across the neoliberal world have lost their way. Devoid of vision, they are priming the public for uncertainty, international instability and hard times. This grim scenario is being socially normalised by politicians and senior bureaucrats reminding us of 'foreign security threats', cyber warfare by 'other state actors' and the prospect of conflict. We are regularly reminded of the rising price of resources, the prospect of uncertain economic fortunes, unstable financial markets which invariably translate to stagnant wages and precarious employment. All this is backed up by a plethora of dystopian movies that hit our screens. Whether they be based on environmental or biological disasters, global conflict, alien invasions or zombies. In effect, a dark future is being normalised by those who are comfortable with the status quo and seek to stay in power at any cost.

Reclaiming our future

For too long, the political and corporate elite have been manipulating our thoughts, desires and fears with the objective of manufacturing a collective illusion designed to hamper our ability to see clearly and to act decisively. Each news headline, sound bite and sms alert is a thread linked to the dominant narrative that is designed to entangle the public in an artificial reality that seeks to prolong the status quo. It also seeks to promote the view that the public is powerless in a seemingly complex world of politics and economics. Yet, so many views are manipulated to give the impression that they are supported by the majority when in fact they are merely the opinions of a small section of society.

Vital to challenging the dominant narrative and dismantling collective illusions is exercising healthy scepticism and critical thinking. Prevailing views that the free-market system creates free people, that the private sector operates more efficiently than public run organisations are simply false and should not be accepted as gospel. The deregulation of the workforce makes industry more flexible and more efficient are falsehoods perpetuated by corporations. The view that globalisation is a positive force, and individualism is far more beneficial than community and collaboration have been debunked. Yet, for decades, such ideas have been planted in the public's collective consciousness. However, the reality on the ground says otherwise.

As things stand, the prevailing neoliberal ideology shackles us to a cycle of dissatisfaction, conflict and consumerism that is presented as social norms and reality. Incarcerating journalists and whistleblowers for doing their job is not normal. Spending hundreds of millions on military equipment whilst our health care system crumbles and thousands go homeless is not acceptable. Nor is doing very little in the face of an active genocide conscionable.

By engaging in critical thinking, the public can look beyond the superficial reflection cast by the 1% and peer deeper into the waters that shape our world. By understanding that the dominant narrative is carefully constructed and orchestrated like a staged play, we can collectively dismantle the status quo. By talking to your friends, family and colleagues about social, political and economic issues, you can create ripples in the superficial reflection manufactured by the political and corporate elite.

Join PIBCI today, and reclaim our future.

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