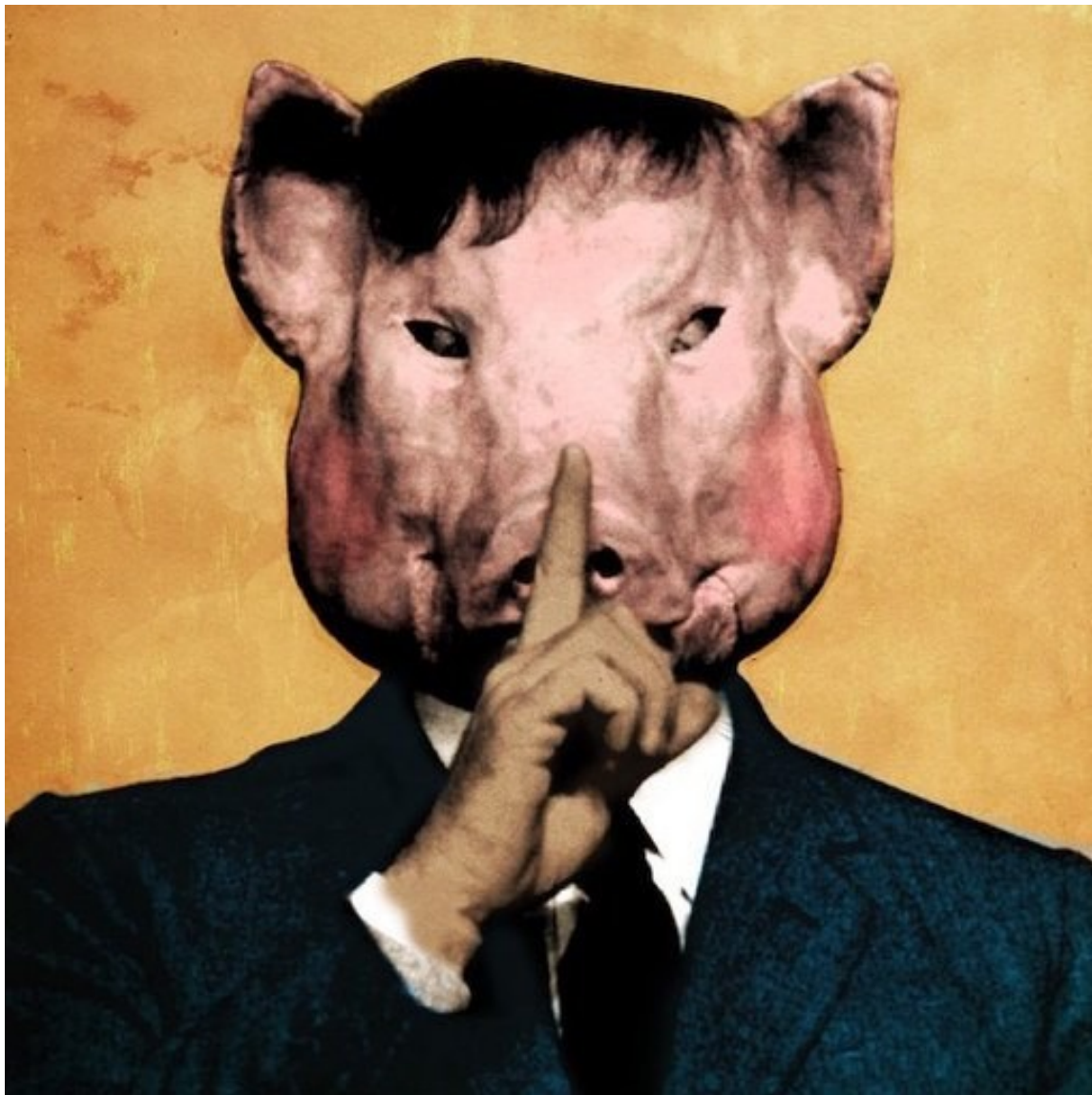


Hiding in Plain Sight: Why We Cannot See the System Destroying Us¹

by Jonathan Cook - 20180924 -



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I rarely tell readers what to believe.

Rather I try to indicate why it might be wise to distrust, at least without very good evidence, what those in power tell us we should believe.

We have well-known sayings about power: “Knowledge is power”, and “Power tends to corrupt, while absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely.”

These aphorisms resonate because they say something true about how we experience the world. People who have power – even very limited power they hold on licence from someone else – tend to abuse it, sometimes subtly and unconsciously, and sometimes overtly

and wilfully.

If we are reasonably self-aware, we can sense the tendency in ourselves to exploit to our advantage whatever power we enjoy, whether it is in our dealings with a spouse, our children, a friend, an employee, or just by the general use of our status to get ahead.

This isn't usually done maliciously or even consciously. By definition, the hardest thing to recognise are our own psychological, emotional and mental blind spots – and the biggest, at least for those born with class, gender or race privileges, is realising that these too are

forms of power.

Nonetheless, they are all minor forms of power compared to the power wielded collectively by the structures that dominate our societies: the financial sector, the corporations, the media, the political class, and the security services.

But strangely most of us are much readier to concede the corrupting influence of the relatively small power of individuals than we are the rottenness of vastly more powerful institutions and structures. We blame the school teacher or the politician for abusing his or her power, while showing a reluctance to do

the same about either the education or political systems in which they have to operate.

Similarly, we are happier identifying the excessive personal power of a Rupert Murdoch than we are the immense power of the corporate empire behind him and on which his personal wealth and success depend.

And beyond this, we struggle most of all to detect the structural and ideological framework underpinning or cohering all these discrete examples of power.

Narrative control

It is relatively easy to understand that

your line manager is abusing his power, because he has so little of it. His power is visible to you because it relates only to you and the small group of people around you.

It is a little harder, but not too difficult, to identify the abusive policies of your firm – the low pay, cuts in overtime, attacks on union representation.

It is more difficult to see the corrupt power of large institutions, aside occasionally from the corruption of senior figures within those institutions, such as a Robert Maxwell or a Richard Nixon.

But it is all but impossible to appreciate the corrupt nature of the entire system. And the reason is right there in those aphorisms: absolute power depends on absolute control over knowledge, which in turn necessitates absolute corruption. If that were not the case, we wouldn't be dealing with serious power – as should be obvious, if we pause to think about it. Real power in our societies derives from that which is necessarily hard to see – structures, ideology and narratives – not individuals. Any Murdoch or Trump can be felled, though being loyal acolytes of the power-system they rarely are, should they threaten the necessary maintenance

of power by these interconnected institutions, these structures.

The current neoliberal elite who effectively rule the planet have reached as close to absolute power as any elite in human history. And because they have near-absolute power, they have a near-absolute control of the official narratives about our societies and our “enemies”, those who stand in their way to global domination.

No questions about Skripals

One needs only to look at the narrative about the two men, caught on CCTV cameras, who have recently been

accused by our political and media class of using a chemical agent to try to murder Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia back in March.

I don't claim to know whether Alexander Petrov and Ruslan Boshirov work for the Russian security services, or whether they were dispatched by Vladimir Putin on a mission to Salisbury to kill the Skripals.

What is clear, however, is that the British intelligence services have been feeding the British corporate media a self-serving, drip-drip narrative from the outset – and that the media have shown

precisely no interest at any point in testing any part of this narrative or even questioning it. They have been entirely passive, which means that we their readers have been entirely passive too.

That there are questions about the narrative to be raised is obvious if you turn away from the compliant corporate media and seek out the views of an independent-minded, one-time insider such as Craig Murray.

A former British ambassador, Murray is [asking questions](#) that may prove to be pertinent or not. At this stage, when all we have to rely on is what the

intelligence services are selectively providing, these kinds of doubts should be driving the inquiries of any serious journalist covering the story. But as is so often the case, not only are these questions not being raised or investigated, but anyone like Murray who thinks critically – who assumes that the powerful will seek to promote their interests and avoid accountability – is instantly dismissed as a conspiracy theorist or in Putin’s pocket.

That is no meaningful kind of critique. Many of the questions that have been raised – like why there are so many gaps in the CCTV record of the movements of

both the Skripals and the two assumed assassins – could be answered if there was an interest in doing so. The evasion and the smears simply suggest that power intends to remain unaccountable, that it is keeping itself concealed, that the narrative is more important than the truth.

And that is reason enough to move from questioning the narrative to distrusting it.

Ripples on a lake

Journalists typically have a passive relationship to power, in stark contrast to their image as tenacious watchdog. But more fundamental than control over

narrative is the ideology that guides these narratives. Ideology ensures the power-system is invisible not only to us, those who are abused and exploited by it, but also to those who benefit from it. It is precisely because power resides in structures and ideology, rather than individuals, that it is so hard to see. And the power-structures themselves are made yet more difficult to identify because the narratives created about our societies are designed to conceal those structures and ideology – where real power resides – by focusing instead on individuals.

That is why our newspapers and TV shows are full of stories about personalities – celebrities, royalty, criminals, politicians. They are made visible so we fail to notice the ideological structures we live inside, which are supposed to remain invisible. News and entertainment are the ripples on a lake, not the lake itself. But the ripples could not exist without the lake that forms and shapes them.

Up against the screen

If this sounds like hyperbole, let's stand back from our particular ideological system – neoliberalism – and consider

earlier ideological systems in the hope that they offer some perspective. At the moment, we are like someone standing right up against an IMAX screen, so close that we cannot see that there is a screen or even guess that there is a complete picture. All we see are moving colours and pixels. Maybe we can briefly infer a mouth, the wheel of a vehicle, a gun.

Before neoliberalism there were other systems of rule. There was, for example, feudalism that appropriated a communal resource – land – exclusively for an aristocracy. It exploited the masses by forcing them to toil on the land for a

pittance to generate the wealth that supported castles, a clergy, manor houses, art collections and armies. For several centuries the power of this tiny elite went largely unquestioned.

But then a class of entrepreneurs emerged, challenging the landed aristocracy with a new means of industrialised production. They built factories and took advantage of scales of economy that slightly widened the circle of privilege, creating a middle class. That elite, and the middle-class that enjoyed crumbs from their master's table, lived off the exploitation of children in work houses and the labour

of a new urban poor in slum housing.

These eras were systematically corrupt, enabling the elites of those times to extend and entrench their power. Each elite produced justifications to placate the masses who were being exploited, to brainwash them into believing the system existed as part of a natural order or even for their benefit. The aristocracy relied on a divine right of kings, the capitalist class on the guiding hand of the free market and bogus claims of equality of opportunity.

In another hundred years, if we still exist as a species, our system will look no less

corrupt – probably more so – than its predecessors.

Neoliberalism, late-stage capitalism, plutocratic rule by corporations – whatever you wish to call it – has allowed a tiny elite to stash away more wealth and accrue more power than any feudal monarch could ever have dreamt of. And because of the global reach of this elite, its corruption is more endemic, more complete, more destructive than any ever known to mankind.

A foreign policy elite can destroy the world several times over with nuclear weapons. A globalised corporate elite is

filling the oceans with the debris from our consumption, and chopping down the forest-lungs of our planet for palm-oil plantations so we can satisfy our craving for biscuits and cake. And our media and intelligence services are jointly crafting a narrative of bogeymen and James Bond villains – both in Hollywood movies, and in our news programmes – to make us fearful and pliable.

Assumptions of inevitability

Most of us abuse our own small-power thoughtlessly, even self-righteously. We tell ourselves that we gave the kids a

“good spanking” because they were naughty, rather than because we established with them early on a power relationship that confusingly taught them that the use of force and coercion came with a parental stamp of approval.

Those in greater power, from minions in the media to executives of major corporations, are no different. They are as incapable of questioning the ideology and the narrative – how inevitable and “right” our neoliberal system is – as the rest of us. But they play a vital part in maintaining and entrenching that system nonetheless.

David Cromwell and David Edwards of Media Lens have provided two analogies – in the context of the media – that help explain how it is possible for individuals and groups to assist and enforce systems of power without having any conscious intention to do so, and without being aware that they are contributing to something harmful. Without, in short, being aware that they are conspiring in the system.

The [first](#):

When a shoal of fish instantly changes direction, it looks for all the world as though the movement was synchronised by some guiding hand.

Journalists – all trained and selected for obedience by media all seeking to maximise profits within state-capitalist society – tend to respond to events in the same way.

The [second](#):

Place a square wooden framework on a flat surface and pour into it a stream of ball bearings, marbles, or other round objects. Some of the balls may bounce out, but many will form a layer within the wooden framework; others will then find a place atop this first layer. In this way, the flow of ball bearings steadily builds new layers that inevitably produce a pyramid-style shape. This experiment is used to demonstrate

how near-perfect crystalline structures such as snowflakes arise in nature without conscious design.

The system – whether feudalism, capitalism, neoliberalism – emerges out of the real-world circumstances of those seeking power most ruthlessly. In a time when the key resource was land, a class emerged justifying why it should have exclusive rights to control that land and the labour needed to make it productive. When industrial processes developed, a class emerged demanding that it had proprietary rights to those processes and to the labour needed to make them productive.

Our place in the pyramid

In these situations, we need to draw on something like Darwin's evolutionary "survival of the fittest" principle. Those few who are most hungry for power, those with least empathy, will rise to the top of the pyramid, finding themselves best-placed to exploit the people below. They will rationalise this exploitation as a divine right, or as evidence of their inherently superior skills, or as proof of the efficiency of the market.

And below them, like the layers of ball bearings, will be those who can help them maintain and expand their power:

those who have the skills, education and socialisation to increase profits and sell brands.

All of this should be obvious, even non-controversial. It fits what we experience of our small-power lives. Does bigger power operate differently? After all, if those at the top of the power-pyramid were not hungry for power, even psychopathic in its pursuit, if they were caring and humane, worried primarily about the wellbeing of their workforce and the planet, they would be social workers and environmental activists, not CEOs of media empires and arms manufacturers.

And yet, base your political thinking on what should be truisms, articulate a worldview that distrusts those with the most power because they are the most capable of – and committed to – misusing it, and you will be derided. You will be called a conspiracy theorist, dismissed as deluded. You will be accused of wearing a tinfoil hat, of sour grapes, of being anti-American, a social warrior, paranoid, an Israel-hater or anti-semitic, pro-Putin, pro-Assad, a Marxist. None of this should surprise us either. Because power – not just the people in the system, but the system itself – will use whatever tools it has to protect itself.

It is easier to deride critics as unhinged, especially when you control the media, the politicians and the education system, than it is to provide a counter-argument.

In fact, it is vital to prevent any argument or real debate from taking place. Because the moment we think about the arguments, weigh them, use our critical faculties, there is a real danger that the scales will fall from our eyes. There is a real threat that we will move back from the screen, and see the whole picture.

Can we see the complete picture of the Skripal poisoning in Salisbury; or the US

election that led to Trump being declared president; or the revolution in Ukraine; or the causes and trajectory of fighting in Syria, and before it Libya and Iraq; or the campaign to discredit Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour party; or the true implications of the banking crisis a decade ago?

Profit, not ethics

Just as a feudal elite was driven not by ethics but by the pursuit of power and wealth through the control of land; just as early capitalists were driven not by ethics but by the pursuit of power and wealth through the control of

mechanisation; so neoliberalism is driven not by ethics but the pursuit of power and wealth through the control of the planet.

The only truth we can know is that the western power-elite is determined to finish the task of making its power fully global, expanding it from near-absolute to absolute. It cares nothing for you or your grand-children. It is a cold-calculating system, not a friend or neighbour. It lives for the instant gratification of wealth accumulation, not concern about the planet's fate tomorrow.

And because of that it is structurally bound to undermine or discredit anyone, any group, any state that stands in the way of achieving its absolute dominion.

If that is not the thought we hold uppermost in our minds as we listen to a politician, read a newspaper, watch a film or TV show, absorb an ad, or engage on social media, then we are sleepwalking into a future the most powerful, the most ruthless, the least caring have designed for us.

Step back, and take a look at the whole screen. And decide whether this is really the future you wish for your grand-

children.

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