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### Conformism 101

#### The Apathy of Middle-Class Conformism and Intellectual Impotence

“That’s just wrong,” someone demurred. “You’re reading too selectively. School works. It prepares kids for adulthood.”

“It also embeds zealous conformism with consequences for democracy while jeopardizing the marginalized,” I replied, asserting that the byproduct of mechanical uniformity is an albatross of indifference and intolerance. Simply put: school conformism today, yoked citizenship tomorrow.

In a recent webinar on Gatto’s “Against School,” a view emerged that he was harsh in judging education. Some felt that Gatto was biased – that he may have been motivated by revenge. Others felt that the education system does what it says on the box. I find these views somewhat milquetoast. Gatto delineates a convergence of orthodox education and middle-class values. It ensures fixed ranking on a life/destiny matrix, resulting in distraction and fetishized retail therapy at the expense of ipseity.

Pedagogic compliance is prolific in the accouchement of a corralled society: obedient but susceptible to calamitous manipulation. Ingrained compliance leaves the door ajar for a Machiavellian swindler who with barren pledges, deception, and schismatic speech, may just wreck the dream.

My point is that a punch-drunk populace doesn’t take notice. It cares even less. John S Mill nutshelled it when he said that “bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing.” We piously muse *how* the Holocaust or apartheid happened while pontificating that “it couldn’t happen here.” Until it does.

It is feasible that my analysis may be viewed as a reach but ask why a 2019 Public Religion Research Institute survey found that one in five Americans think it's fine to deny service to Jews, on moral grounds? Or, why the survey detected elevated discrimination against the LGBTQ community, Muslims, atheists, and African Americans (Dolsten)? Or why Administration 45 parties like it is 1789 by redefining human rights with the Commission on Unalienable Rights (Ruffini)? And if you still don't hear the alarm bells, you may have been schooled to yoke yourself. You're not the first though.

Sounding remarkably contemporary when addressing the New York City School Teachers Association in 1909, Woodrow Wilson coughed up a furball: a vision to shape society by cultivating group insulation at school. The idea produces virtuous *bien-pensants* for whom any chagrin at their station in life is assuaged by being able to lord it over plebs. The result is a construct: a plump pudding with the faux glow of a pseudo-society imitating a class system. It comes complete with an ostentatious crust smothering suspended layers of meh in connective artifice, congealed into coalition.

The effectiveness of systemic conformity shows when someone is just too yucky to deserve a place at the table. Prejudice is clubby, caustic, and coded. It peers over spectacles when asked the price. It doesn't get up for just everyone entering a showroom. It "doesn't notice color" except when "some of my best friends are black." It runs a co-op with more Pecksniffian rules than a soused round of Monopoly. It wants its rainbow back. And it nurtures the tolerance of bigotry in the finest hoi-polloi manure at the 'do what I say, not what I do' fountainhead: school.

From Picasso pilfering African forms to Paul Simon "borrowing" Burundi drumming, the patriarchal Eurocentric default is to cannibalize culture. Alpha cultures have never learnt to consider the significance of their appropriations. Take Al Jolson, a Jewish singer in blackface, performing to white audiences in the early twentieth century. The incongruity was stunning as the public didn't care for Jewish or African American performers, and Jolson managed to appear as neither as he rendered clangorous versions of "Swanee." Compromised and reassembled, Jolson's minstrel act personified the denial of "otherness" while cherry-picking funny bits to point at.

Unless one is on the margin of acceptability, it is hard to grasp the perils of variance. At 94, my friend Noah is a living history book. He tells how on leaving school, his Odessa-born mother gave him a pearl of wisdom: hide the Jewish. He registered as Episcopalian, becoming instantly employable. Drafted to fight in two wars, euphemism-allergic command noticed Marvin had studied dance and posted him as typist: twice. Nowadays Noah celebrates his “aberrations” with Chrismukkah cocktail parties and klutzy flirtations with doormen. Refusing to hide, he will not let anyone demean the rest of his life. Noah still gaily types over 120 words per minute.

Toxic groups depend on petit-bourgeois indifference to proselytize. Calls for LGBTQ extermination at a church-sponsored Make America Straight Again event in Orlando, were peppered with expletive-laden slogans (Miller). Polling barometers barely shifted. The bridled and bellicose are packed for a Roman holiday while the good remain tellingly silent. The Who-Does-Jesus-Hate-More heresy is fueled by anti-LGBTQ legislation permitting workplace discrimination, denial of medical treatment and housing protection removals. Court opinion has denied wedding cakes, flowers, and nuptial pizzas, *pizzas*, proving that they have clearly never been to a gay wedding.

Sometimes neutered insouciance punches itself in the face. Anti-choice states have scored clinic closures and severe termination legislation against their residents. It behooves vigilance: miscarriage or stillbirth will be investigated with the burden of proof falling on the biological incubator. Pregnancies resultant from rape or incest must be carried to full term while out-of-state procedures may be prosecuted. Illinois won't expect apple pie from neighboring abortion-kiboshing Missouri this fall. Not after unprecedented legislation inoculating itself against Roe v Wade reversal. Loss of self-determination impacts equality while diminishing suffrage; it disproportionately affects women of color. The quasi-Sharia manifesto serves only to validate and arouse the acutely paleoconservative structure. Antebellum progeny and senators' mistresses will still be sent away on a “mum's *not* the word” weekend. Indifference to parish-pump politics flirting with a Supreme Court reversal is foolhardy arrogance. The unforeseen result may be impossible to abort.

Likewise, the parti-pris fraternity loathes “cultural communism,” convinced that it chafes at the tender white parts of racial superiority and family values. It seeks to rid society of “degenerate art,” words with ancestry in 1930s Germany where *Entartete Kunst* was suppressed in favor of “blood and soil,” another *Altreich* stinker defibrillated through alt-reich hate. Talk of gilded nonchalance must pause at the political goon putsch: a brew of jingoist theology and limber First Amendment hops circumventing truth. White supremacists and violent neofascists now tart up a sizable portion of the grand old-school party, which gladly acquiesces, having lost all centrist pretensions (Mathias). Conditioned by tax myopia and omnivorous greed, Everyman continues to furtively approve.

Defending the indefensible is normalized by shape-shifting vocabulary. Soft terms for harsh facts foster less resistance. Bogeywoman of the year, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, recently objected to the woolly “tender-age facilities” used by Administration 45. She preferred the term “concentration camps” to describe holding centers for migrant children. Some find it more fun to think about “kinetic action” than killing people. “Taking back our communities” is zestier than blurting out that more black boys will go to jail. “Right to work” sounds perky when it harms ordinary workers with a pesky no-rights-at-work act. Terms like “crisis actors,” “fake news,” and “death panels” obscure veracity. Verbal Potemkin villages constructed with truth-adjacent vocabulary are dispatched to mobilize compliant, well-schooled centrists.

Redefining school to an inclusive version of itself is anathema to some. It is however pivotal in a political climate incubating hostility towards civil liberties while coveting a school environment that could impose partisan values on a nascent herd. Bad news if you don’t resemble the herd, as evidenced by scant teaching of non-white histories. The abolitionist movement is sanitized since white knee-jerk is held in higher regard than teaching this most cautionary tale. Black history is only worth one out of twelve months (Turner). It is therefore alarming when emboldened baristas and beauty consultants call authorities reporting crimes of blackness; and when a white student at Yale calls campus police because a registered black student is napping in a common area.

Illustrating the disconnect: Charleston shooter Dylan Roof was given a Kevlar vest and Burger King by police after a twelve-hour chase because, you know, white. In contrast, Eric Garner suffocated while rasping “I can’t breathe.” No burger. No vest. “No big deal,” as texts between command and police officers described his execution for selling single cigarettes (Gross). Indifference green-lights the eunuchizing of Black Lives Matter by semantic refashioning and demeaning rhetoric. Names of police brutality victims are not said outside their communities – maybe black lives really don’t matter.

Black lives were indisputably disposable when in 1975, apartheid policemen handed Baba Mabuya an envelope with cash after her husband died in custody. They needed a new neighborhood mole. She responded by stuffing what she could in a small suitcase. The Mabuya family walked away and started a new life in self-exile. Twenty years later they would be invited by then-President Mandela to come back to their ancestral land.

I met Baba through her daughter while working in advertising. She wanted to introduce me to her aging mother. Baba was graceful with kind eyes. Her citrusy 4711 cologne always betrayed that she too wanted to look her best. Over many visits, palliated by jammy Cape Syrah, we bristled at how much we lost by white South Africans’ kowtowing to a compromised white government. Baba was a rock, hewn by inequality in the land of blood and money. She was a rebel against prejudice, sangfroid white detachment, and the bombast of occupation. We valued our new Benetton democracy. There was joy in the exquisite modesty of our shared moments. As Baba and I sat in the reluctant warmth of winter sun for the last time, her hand resting on mine, I found hope in shared humanity. We knew our truth. We saw each other.

The slate of injustice will cheerfully be wiped clean by what John Gatto identified as jaded and gung-ho conditioning. I bear witness that a swindled democracy demanding supine inertia is malignant to our humanity. From dogmatic school instruction to moralizing refusals of love letters in frosting, it is not about demanding special treatment. It’s about being respected as equals.

Intolerance is taught. Cultivated. It is a doing thing. It doesn’t have to be.

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