

Fight the Power

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Gurri's World

...the elites that ran our institutions had the authority to provide information, frame it and explain the world. That's completely gone, and with it there's been a bleeding away of expert authority, and a public has been created that's essentially very angry...

– *Martin Gurri*, author of “The Revolt of the Public and the Crisis of Authority”

Martin Gurri wrote his seminal book in 2014, to explain the public revolts against authority in the early part of the 21st century, such as the Arab Spring. But as the century wears on, the book becomes even more timely than when it was written, the events proceeding exactly as he described them. Trump, Brexit, the fall of old media, culture war in academia — all are revolts by a newly informed public against established authorities and gatekeepers of information.

In Martin Gurri's world, it is no surprise that we are seeing protests and revolts on a global scale right on the heels of the first wave of a global pandemic. COVID exposed what few authorities made claims to credibility beforehand. The government, the media, acronym bureaucracies like the CDC and FDA — they all abdicated their responsibilities, lied at every turn, and failed to do much of anything about a disease that has been killing 1,000 Americans a day for months.

The collapse of authority, even for those who yet cling to one of those I mentioned in the previous paragraph, provokes anxiety and anger. They intuitively seek epistemic authority, to tell them what is true and false. They seek moral authority, to tell them what is good and evil. And they want someone to blame, someone to take their anxiety and anger out on. It can't be the virus. It has to be a person, and they have to be within reach of a fist.

The Grab

Humans did not evolve to tell very well what is true or false, or to think clearly about good and evil. But we evolved to be good at tribalism, to divide into “us” and “them”, to be on the winning side when “us” gain an edge in power and jump on “them” to take their stuff, their status, or their lives. We do this subconsciously, even as our brains confirm our moral righteousness to ourselves.

Coordinated grabs for status, wealth, and power need a coordination mechanism. This mechanism consists of a shared language and ideology, anything from common jokes to a holy text. Then an opportune moment arrives, often when the public is galvanized by a

mass movement. The grabbers strike under the cover of the movement's worthy cause.

A clear demonstration of this happened during the Arab Spring itself in Egypt from 2011-2014. The revolution started with a protest organized mostly by student activists and liberal youth movements. They protested curtailed freedoms, unchecked presidential powers, and police brutality. Several months and dead protesters later, the president of Egypt was deposed only to be replaced by the head of the Muslim Brotherhood, Morsi. Morsi immediately proceeded to curtail freedoms further, remove checks on his power, and sent the police to brutalize protesters.

While the students faced the police in Tahrir Square, the Brotherhood coordinated a power grab. Now Egypt has a different dictator still, and the young activists are wondering what happened to their cause that seemed to enjoy such popular support.

A lot of the Egyptians who brought Morsi and then Al-Sisi to power did not do so out of a desire to see their country sink further into despotism. They just got swept up in the angry revolt, and then intuitively supported the side that seemed poised to gain power. Anger leads to chaos, chaos leads to fear, fear leads to submission to whomever is strongest, whoever grabs for power most forcefully.

Everything so far was just setting the stage, outlining a general model of how revolts erupt in anger and how this anger is repurposed for grabbing power and settling scores with the outgroup. This model informs my argument below, an argument about free thought and expression in an adversarial environment. This is not an argument about protests, black lives, or police reform. If you're looking for hot takes on these topics, I don't have any.

The Fear

George Floyd was killed, protests erupted, "Black lives matter!" rings from Minneapolis to New Zealand. You want to express something too, write something, say something. What should you say?

First, ask yourself: *What **can't** I say, even if were true? What am I afraid to say, and **in front of who** am I afraid to say it? What do I feel I **have to say**? What could be said **yesterday** that is scary to say **today**?*

This fear is not a sign of truth. You cannot reason back to reality from human emotions. Galileo was right because he carefully watched the stars, not because he said things that made the church angry.

This fear is a sign that someone is gaining power over you, aiming a weapon your way. The things you can't or must say are the battle lines being drawn. Those you're afraid to speak in front of are those preparing to grab and strike. The accelerating speed of change in what is forbidden or mandatory is a sign that war is looming.

Consider not saying things that will fuel the war and give power to those you're afraid of.

One way to give them power is to make them your enemy directly, to focus your energy on fighting them on their own terms. Direct enemies are very useful to those people, and you serve them by becoming one.

Some people I know have been possessed by a strong urge recently to quote black crime statistics. There are two groups of people who talk about black crime statistics: criminal justice activists, and racists. If you only start talking about black crime statistics when a white cop kills a black civilian you are probably not a criminal justice activist. Consider not repeating the talking points of racists if you're worried about being called a racist.

The other way to give power to those grabbing for it is to mindlessly repeat their slogans. Slogans are rarely innocuous. They are often start reasonable and then escalate to absurdity. Once someone gets you to chant absurdities you start believing them, and once you believe in absurdities you're ready to commit atrocities.

You probably remember this strange thing that happened at Trump rallies throughout 2016. In the early days, Trumpers were chanting "*Make America great again!*" Even if you quibble with the "again" part, this isn't terribly objectionable. But in short order they started chanting "*Lock her up!*" instead, a direct threat to Trump's opponent and to democratic norms. A person who chanted "*Lock her up!*" in public, even if they didn't *literally* mean it, cannot go back and vote for Hillary no matter what information comes out about the candidates. They have enlisted in an army, and declared Democrats to be their enemy.

This happens a lot to movement slogans — they start of positive and uniting, then suddenly find an enemy to turn on. Solidarity turns into hate. "Black lives matter" turns into "All cops are bastards". "We stand against hate" turns into "Abolish the police".

Now, perhaps it is not absurd to abolish the police in some way. I'm not expressing an opinion on the matter here. But a lot of people are repeating that slogan not because they thought independently about a world without armed law enforcement but because they started chanting with a crowd and that's what the crowd ended up chanting. This is made clear by the fact that many of those saying "abolish the police" are hastening to clarify that they do not literally mean that the police should be abolished. And yet they're chanting it.

Again, if you have formed an independent opinion that the police should be abolished then you're not feeding those that are building the war machine. You can discuss your plans for police dissolution, and realize those plans in a democratic way if you convince enough people through argument. Hopefully, it means that if the slogan switches tomorrow to "kill all cops" you would not switch with them, and will retain your

independence. But those who repeat a slogan they do not really endorse and cannot defend with argument have given up the power of their independent thought to those who write the slogans.

“It’s just a slogan” is the same as “I’m just following orders”. It makes you complicit. It will not protect you.

The War

When the enemy is marked and the soldiers are enlisted under banners of absurd slogans, the war will come. Those who are in the war to grab what they can for themselves will grab a lot. Those who are in it for a higher cause will find that a lot is lost and little is gained.

Primarily this will happen because the ostensible enemy is far and hard to strike at. Those who grab for power and status will grab it in their institutions, their workplaces, their social networks. But in our world of bubbles people don’t often share those with their ideological enemies. Instead they will strike at those near them, at whomever fails to learn the latest slogan and repeat it quickly and loudly. Or at those who fail at nimbly shifting the blame to their former friend or colleague, to let her take the hit in their stead.

This is already happening. People are getting mobbed, fired, and cancelled, often by their ideological allies. Relationships and friendships built over years are destroyed in seconds. It will be terrible and painful for all involved, even the people inflicting most of the harm. As I mentioned, a lot of this violence especially in the social sphere is not motivated by conscious malevolence. People will experience anger, anxiety, fear, and then submit to those with power unless they protect their independence.

The Cause

While this war rages in workplaces and on Facebook, the poor remain poor, the oppressed remain oppressed, and the corporate PR departments are going brrr to feed the flames and their own profits. This is not an unfortunate collateral of fighting for the cause. It directly undermines the cause.

What’s wrong with people being afraid to say something racist, you may ask? When people are threatened, whether they’re racist or not, their energy becomes entirely dedicated to self preservation, not to fighting for racial equity or police reform. If people call you racist, that accusation will not disappear the moment minorities achieve equal treatment by the law and law enforcement. Those who feel threatened will shout all the right slogans publicly but spend all their time privately sabotaging others around them. Cancel first, lest ye be cancelled.

People who were scared to speak voted for Trump, and will do so again.

If you believe in a cause, your main tools must be truth and reason. What do you know and how do you know it? How can you help and how will you check that it's helping? Did the people giving confident orders ask themselves those questions or are they merely asserting dominance over you?

Those who try to come up with their own plans to reform the police are interested in feedback and discussion. They want dialogue and inclusion. Those who are using anger at the police to grab power are interested in obedience and submission. They want outrage and exclusion.

So what *should* you say? **Whatever you actually believe in and thought through.**

If you care about racial equity and police reform and say what you think will help, you are making the conversation smarter and more effective. If you say what you think will cover your ass, the conversation is making you stupid and vulnerable. If you protest because you believe in the protest, you are making the protest principled. If you protest so as not to be seen not protesting, the protests are making you corrupt. It takes some courage to think for yourself, but what do you think happens when everyone betrays that courage?

And if you're not sure what you believe, it's OK not to say anything. Even the police allow you to remain silent under arrest, informing you that whatever you say can be used against you. Think for yourself, or shut up.