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Imperialism In The X-Factor Age

By Colin Todhunter

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In Vietnam, Agent Orange was dropped by the US to poison a foreign population. In Iraq and the former Yugoslavia, depleted uranium was used. In Western countries, things are a bit more complicated because various states have tended to avoid using direct forms of physical violence to quell their own populations (unless you belong to some marginalized group or hit a raw nerve, as did the Occupy Movement last year). The pretence of democracy and individual rights has to be maintained.

One option has been to use South American crack cocaine or Afghan heroin to dope up potential troublesome sections of the population. It's worked wonders: highly lucrative for the drug running intelligence agencies and banks awash with drug money (1), while at the same time serving to dampen political dissent in the most economically and socially deprived areas. Another tactic has of course been the massive ever-increasing growth of the surveillance industry to monitor ordinary citizens.

But drugs, surveillance and direct violence are kind of a last resort to keep a population in check. Notwithstanding baton charges, tear gas and the use of rubber bullets on the European mainland and that the US Government is not ruling out the use of violence on its own people (2), ideology via the media has and continues to be the choice of method for population control in Western countries.

Whether it's through the paranoia induced by the fear of terrorism or more general propaganda spewed out by the mainstream 'news' channels, political agendas and modes of thought are encouraged which seek to guarantee subservience and 'integration', rather than forms of critical thought or action that may lead to a direct questioning of or a challenge to prevailing forms of institutionalised power.

From trade unions to political parties, oppositional groups are infiltrated, deradicalised and incorporated into the system (3) and critical stances are stifled, ridiculed or marginalized. Consensus is manufactured both in cultural and political terms. The result is that presidential candidate TV debates, political discourse and much of the popular mass media is void of proper analytical discussion: public theatre scripted by speech writers and PR people, presented in manipulative, emotive, 'human-interest' terms.

From the TV news and commercials to the game-shows and latest instant fame programme, misinformation, narcissism and distraction pervade all aspects of life. Why be aware of the world's ills and challenge anything when you can live in the dark, watch X-Factor, wear Reebok and shop till you drop? It is an infotainment paradise where lies are truth and unfettered desire a virtue.

It's a world of crass consumerism and gleaming shopping malls bathed in designer lifestyle propaganda where people drown in their Friday night alcohol vomit, shop till they drop for things they don't really need or indeed want and bask in their emptiness by watching TV with eyes wide shut.

But this is 'free market' democracy. And the concept behind it is that the mass of the population are a problem, and any genuine debate or the electorate's ability to see what is actually happening must be prevented. People must be distracted – they should be watching millionaire footballers kick a ball around, mind numbing soap operas or some mindless sitcom. Every once in a while, at voting time, they are called on to parrot or back some meaningless slogans.

Politics is no longer about great ideas. The acquisition of power has become the core value in itself, not socialism or any other radical philosophy. What is required from mainstream political leaders is technocrat not, radical; middle manager, not firebrand. In an era of advanced capitalism, the role of mainstream glove puppet political leaders is to demonstrate competence when it comes to managing the machinery of state in order to fine tune the status quo, not overhaul it.

If 'serious' debate does even attempt to rear its head, it is increasingly to be found as part of a standardized, corporate TV news-cum-chat show format that is the same from country to country. There is usually some or other smug, user-friendly couple fronting the show, lying about how we may smooth away the wrinkles, according to the gospel of some grossly overpaid beauty guru to the stars.

But then, moving on to the next topic and with an anguished expression, no doubt well rehearsed in front of the mirror that morning, one of the hosts states: “A recent report says that high street fashion retailers use children in the developing world to make its clothes.”

A light and punchy studio debate among the show’s hosts and a ‘fashion expert’ will ensue, peppered with a certain degree of moral outrage. But only a ‘certain degree’ because hypocrisy abounds: “Stay tuned as next up you will be informed of how you too can dress like the celebs but for a fraction of the price.”

The next day it’s competition time. Win vouchers to go shopping for the latest high street fashion items. “Top of the range stuff... But the prices are so cheap... Just how do they do it?” one of the hosts remarks: the very same person from the day before who fronted the ‘in-depth debate’ about how they actually manage to do it by exploiting poverty and child labour.

It’s all very cosy and comforting, with its sanctimonious world view of sexed up infotainment and bland titillation. It’s TV to inspire. TV to inspire the masses into apathy, fatalism and acceptance.

“Next up, we have a man who swallowed a live rabbit and lived to tell the tale” is sandwiched between “How you can save on your weekly wine bill” and “Knife crime – lock ‘em up and throw away the key.”

Forget about informed debate when platitudes, simple emotion and ‘common sense’ outlooks will do. You will rarely find anything radical or challenging here or elsewhere on mainstream TV because that’s not the point of it. The point of it all is to convince the public that their trivial concerns are indeed the major concerns of the day and that the major world events and imperialist wars can be trivialised or justified with a few ridiculous clichés about saving oppressed woman in Afghanistan or killing for peace in Africa.

From Fox to CNN, the BBC and beyond, this mind altering portrayal of the world is devoured as avidly as the health-altering, chemically-laden TV dinner that accompanies it. How about can of pesticide-ridden, cancer inducing cola to finish off (4)? Feel the spray. It’s all so refreshingly toxic. No need for Agent Orange here. So many people are already swallowing the poison via their plates or TV. If that fails and the drugs no longer work, the drones are waiting overhead.

Notes

1) Afghan heroin and the CIA, Geopolitical Monitor:
<http://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/afghan-heroin-the-cia>

2) DHS to purchase another 750 million rounds of ammo, Press TV:
<http://www.presstv.com/usdetail/256028.html>

3) The influence of intelligence services on the British left, Lobster Magazine:
<http://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/articles/rrtalk.htm>

4) Things grow better with Coke, The
Guardian: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/nov/02/india.johnvidal>