

The new opium of the
people: hegemony
and false
consciousness in the
circle



George Carlin famously said “ When fascism comes to America, it will not be in brown and black shirts. It will not be with jack-boots. It will be Nike sneakers and Smiley shirts”. This quote couldn’t be more relevant in Dave Eggers novel *The Circle* in which the company of the same name is able to usher in capitalist totalitarianism not through force, but through the consent of the masses in the form of zings and smileys. This consent is manufactured through *The Circle*’s hegemonic control of the superstructure of society where, as the gatekeepers of information they are able to control the narrative and give rise to a false consciousness in which people enthusiastically participate in their own exploitation. In this way, *The Circle* can be seen as a parable for the dangers of neoliberalism left to its own devices and its need to justify the contradictions and absurdities that are inherent within it.

Historically, one of the most prominent ways in which leaders and societies justified exploitative systems is through religious ideology, which Marx famously called the opiate of the people. So it comes as no surprise that Eggers consistently links religion with *The Circle*. Rather than daily prayers in order to get into heaven *Circle* users must send zings and smileys in order to get their hit of dopamine and hopefully ascend the ranks of internet stardom. Instead of worshipping God they worship the mysterious triumvirate of the wise men and instead of being watched by God there is mass surveillance and big brother. Perhaps one of the most direct connections can be seen in the opening line, “ My God, Mae thought. It’s heaven”(Eggers 1). These connections are not coincidental and primarily serve to bring attention to the fact that both the cult like following of *The Circle* and religion are forms of

what Gramsci would call cultural hegemonic control. These ideologies exist to justify and naturalize the absurdity of the system and make exploitation not only the norm but hidden from plain view.

One major aspect of Gramsci's definition of cultural hegemony was an institutions ability to modify a society's core beliefs, values, and morals. This is something The Circle is constantly doing. Not only is The Circle a dominant and powerful company in monetary terms, but also in their dominance of the media. By having almost total control over the internet and media they are able to become the gatekeepers who control what information is broadcasted. As a result, they are able to define the dominant narratives and control what is defined as moral and immoral. This becomes more than evident as The Circle comes up with the set of 1984-esque mantras "SECRETS ARE LIES SHARING IS CARING PRIVACY IS THEFT"(Eggers 350). These ideas about morality that The Circle preaches are strikingly similar to the moral code that nearly all religions.

These moral imperatives that The Circle preaches are strikingly similar to the moral code that nearly all religions lay out, and both exist to justify exploitation. In The Circle their mantras are seen as objective moral truths that should be followed by any upstanding citizen. This means that The Circle's constant expansion and its mass surveillance systems are seen as an extension of morality rather than an exercise in oppression. A religious parallel would be the idea of holy wars and specifically The Crusades. Those in power at the time wanted to increase their territory and wealth so they simply framed imperial wars as God's will and so brutal acts of violence were seen as moral. So because The Circle has control over what is defined as <https://assignbuster.com/the-new-opium-of-the-people-hegemony-and-false-consciousness-in-the-circle/>

moral they can essentially shape their own reality and justify any of their exploitative actions and reframe them as progress.

Another important aspect of the company's moral ideology is the inherent missionary aspect of loyal users of The Circle. If those around you are not participating in and embracing The Circle then they are standing in the way of progress and morality itself. This is unsettling to Circlers and so they embark on what is essentially an evangelist mission to convert those who have yet to see the light. Mae is constantly trying to convert Mercer but he remains fiercely opposed no matter how she makes her argument. This reaches its conclusion in the chase scene where Mae proclaims " something about his inability to give in, to admit defeat, or at least acknowledge the incredible power of the technology at Mae's command...she knew she couldn't give up until she had received some sense of acquiescence"(Eggers 464). Mae goes so far in her attempt to convert Mercer that he ends up dead at the bottom of a ditch because he felt he had no other option.

But this evangelism is not limited to individual characters in the book but is also applied to the masses. When Mae and Francis are at a bar celebrating DeMoxie a man sits down with them He explains how he thinks Demoxie is the final step in bringing God's will upon the people and bring forth a universal morality. He states that " This has been the work of missionaries for millennia"(Eggers 398) and that The Circle will allow everyone to cast down the wrath, judgment, and forgiveness of God. But much like in Christianity and other religions this will of God is no more than an amalgamation of ruling class ideology.

But The Circle does not just control the narrative through positively reinforcing notions that support their brand of ideology but also just as importantly by the silencing of any opposing ideology. The first opposition we see in the novel is by a congresswoman who states that The Circle is a monopoly that should be broken up. She goes further saying “ The dominance of the Circle stifles competition and is dangerous to our way of free-market capitalism”(Eggers 174). A few weeks later though authorities discover child pornography on her computer which was clearly planted there by The Circle to discredit her. It is the ultimate ad hominem attack in the modern age and completely discredits anything she said previously. This is also not an isolated incident and towards the end of the book, Ty even says in reference to Williamson “ That’s about the hundredth person Stenton’s done that to”(Eggers 488).

In addition, they are also able to frame those who don’t subscribe to their ideology as social outcasts who are unfortunately misguided through no direct action of their own. This is most clearly exemplified in the character of Mercer who is characterized as a backward thinking Luddite. When Mae is reading his letter that explains his principled opposition to The Circle and his withdrawal from society. As it’s being streamed through her camera there are immediate responses from the audience chastising him. One says “ Now the Sasquatch will return to his natural habitat!”(Eggers 437) while it’s also noted that four Mercer hate clubs form almost instantaneously. Mercer’s position is like that of an atheist in a Puritanical society. What’s interesting about this situation is the fact that, in opposition to the acts of blackmail,

these reactions were organic and not created by The Circle, but were an accurate representation of how people saw him.

So the result of this hegemonic control is that The Circle has no need to coerce or use force to further its agenda. The Circle has its base of fervent supporters, such as Mae, who believe they are essentially doing God's work. They see themselves as constantly improving the world and moving closer and closer to the "rapture" or completing the circle and creating a utopia. This helps to establish normative behavior in the society and makes it so those who do not participate become outcasts. While it may still be optional to participate, at least at first, non-participation comes with its costs and so most people end up conforming.

This is what Gramsci called "the manufacture of consent". For Gramsci true power comes from consent and not through the use of force. But just because there isn't use of force doesn't mean there aren't means of producing consent to the hegemony. Mae is repeatedly told that participation in social events and social media are optional but strongly encouraged. But they are encouraged to the point where they are only optional in theory. Non-participation means being reprimanded by management and human resources, potentially losing your job and a whole host of other negative consequences. So while technically you aren't required to engage in these behaviors your consent is manufactured and as a result, you will eventually have to give in.

This hegemonic consent is so important because without it The Circle, much like capitalism, which it comes to represent, would collapse in on itself. Both

of these entities have inherent contradictions and absurdities within them. This is clearly demonstrated when Bailey explains the effect the live stream cameras will have on the world. He claims that it could almost completely eliminate crime and justifies this by saying “ when there’s something kept secret, two things happen. One is that it makes crimes possible. We behave worse when we’re not accountable”(Eggers 299). But this explanation fails to understand the true base of what causes crime. People don’t steal due to a lack of moral fortitude but due to economic necessity. Bailey’s explanation makes it a personal moral failing but if a person is starving that is evidence of a failing and dysfunctional system, not a person’s personal flaws.

But all of these contradictions are concealed due to the hegemonic dominance The Circle has been able to so effectively institute. This is why hegemony is such an important part of the capitalist system because, without it, exploitation would be laid bare and seen for what it is. Crude and base exploitation with no real objective justification. So it comes as no surprise that The Circle spends so much energy and time on defining narratives because, in the end, it’s the only thing standing between total dominance and the complete and utter collapse of the system.