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The War on Disruption

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What makes dynamic cultures lose their dynamism? My starting point may appear obvious: the pursuit of stability is incompatible with economic and cultural dynamism. And yet, today's dominant narratives are very much concerned with pursuing stability. This pursuit comes in a very particular form: it focuses on pattern anomalies. Inequality is an example of such a pattern abnormality, but you could also include concerns about disequilibrium in the economic system. Why is it that whenever there is even a slight economic downturn or when the economy might be overheating, demand arises for it to be corrected? There is an overarching concern with the idea of stability across today's dominant narratives. This is inherently antithetical to ideas of entrepreneurship and individual freedom because creativity requires a certain level of destabilization.

My recent book on Michel Foucault, *Foucault and Liberal Political Economy: Power, Knowledge, and Freedom* (2025), addresses this question about what closes the space for creativity and dynamism. Foucault pays a great deal of attention to the concept of discourse: what are the ruling discourses or narratives that govern our age? In his view, discourses are narrative frames or interpretive grids; they condition the way people see the world. They produce various sorts of relationships between actors, relations of power, authority, and expertise. Foucault argues that bio-political discourses are one of the dominant discourses that characterize many contemporary societies. These discourses construct the world or construct social problems through a frame which links all societal problems to some notion of disequilibria; there are pattern anomalies, he argues, and the population's welfare is dependent on correcting these various anomalies.

Macroeconomics, public health, or environmental sustainability are all forms of this kind of discourse. They are all concerned with the identification of anomalies that we must correct. Foucault's view is that these narratives or interpretive grids have power effects. If we understand what power effects are associated with some of these discourses, we can understand some of the threats to economic dynamism that exist in contemporary societies.

What are these power effects? The first one is the idea that these narratives tend to generate an expert class which has an interest in monopolizing claims to expertise. The premise of these bio-political discourses is the idea that society is a knowable or legible object that the actors who have the relevant expertise can manipulate to produce various outcomes. If you are positioned as an expert, you are incentivized to ensure that few people will challenge your claims to expertise, because the minute people start to consider that competing expert views exist, faith in any particular set of experts or the expertise they profess to have is undermined.

What these situations produce is a kind of monopolization process. There is a reduction in the dynamism of opinion, much in the same way that the medieval church restricted the range of religious opinions to preserve its authority. These expert narratives have a similar dynamic.

The second power effect that these narratives generate is a whole network of surveillance and regulatory mechanisms that purport to correct for various pattern anomalies. The regimes these kinds of narratives govern generate techniques which bring things into line with some desirable equilibria or state of affairs.

What might these techniques involve? They might be performance management indicators. They might be auditing requirements. They might be equality and diversity audits. They might be sustainability audits, or they might be public health audits. In these kinds of narrative arrangements, people are incentivized to police their own conduct and, crucially, that of other agents. These narrative arrangements offer incentives to police and survey other people in the name of achieving abstract targets or goals, including reduction of this or that inequality, reduction of this or that health impediment or requirement that is considered to be anathema to public health, reduction of this or that behavior which is considered to be incompatible with sustainable development or some other abstract target or goal.



In societies where these narratives reign, you have a whole network of agents who have an interest in generating a surveillance apparatus. If we want to understand why societies like contemporary Britain are choking under the weight of multiple forms of regulation, we have to understand the power these narratives have. There is an idea that we cannot allow disturbances. In macroeconomics these disturbances would be considered a kind of instability, but elsewhere, they take the form of obsession with equalities of various kinds. If you give people freedom, if you allow them to be entrepreneurs and creative agents, they will disrupt patterns and create inequalities and all sorts of messiness. These societal narratives, on the contrary, are concerned with imposing order and generating a network of agents who police that order to keep people in line.

This explains why the U.K. has seen a massive expansion in human resources managers; they are the agents who police other people's conduct, even within firms and organizations. It explains government's sensitivity to all kinds of pressure groups that demand this or that form of regulation. It explains the proliferation of bureaucratic agencies that are tasked with achieving various targets and proliferating regulations which will supposedly deliver on these targets. This underpins the stagnation that we see in Britain and arguably many other Western societies.

The only way we can challenge stagnation is by attacking the underlying narratives. What today's societies need is a celebration of messiness. We need to attack the idea that we should prioritize stability, celebrate messy places like London, and recognize that it is through messiness and instability that creativity and ultimately economic progress thrive.

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