

What if abnormal was normal?

When human behaviour in public life is shocking beyond your imagination, under what circumstances can the abnormal be seen as okay?

In society, we have **NORMS** – accepted ways of thinking, of how things happen, of distinguishing right from wrong ... or, at least, **shades of right and wrong**. In the simplest forms, they start with etiquette – manners, respect, standards of dress, of language ... for the many different contexts of daily life ...

They reflect our upbringing, what we see happening around us ... **normal!**

We see an open-topped cattle train taking animals to market. **Normal!** We may not pause to appreciate that the process will end up at an abattoir and then as meat in the shops. **Normal** – even if the heads above the wagon sides are lowing plaintively and the big eyes are staring in confused acceptance. **Normal** – because they are just cattle. We need to eat to live and ... simply ... cattle are not as important as we are.

What if it was in World War 2 ... and the trains were taking people to the death camps? **Under what circumstances could that be seen as normal?** Only if the people in those trains are seen as less important, having no value. Only if we, as observers, have come to disrespect them as being human like us – not valued as normal.

But how could that be?

There can be many slow processes involved ... watching, listening, puzzling, accepting, trusting ... being schooled, trained, praised, punished, re-trained, re-educated ... until the *ways we see and hear in our new emerging lived world* are absorbed as **right** ... sufficient to survive and to understand our 'superior' place in it all.

If everyone around us thinks in the same way, it must be **right**. **Yes?**

That is an *echo-chamber* of **self-righteousness** – especially if we are happy and comfortable ... and unquestioning. Everything we read, see, hear and feel reinforces that ... *confirmation bias* and the *availability heuristic* ... curated information feeds and algorithmic reinforcement.

Everyone you know and hear from ... thinks like you.

Of course, they do!

Anything to the contrary would just be ignored.

But ... what if we do hear **other** viewpoints or see things that disturb us – different ideas, challenging our understanding of right?

Oh no! Those others must be wrong ... because we know **our way must be right**. Those others must have been forced to think the way they do. No freedom of thought, like us. Suppressed. Persecuted. They must be lesser people, not as happy and free as we are. We laugh at their unfortunateness – their opinions must be demeaned ... because they are lesser ... and **other**.

We have many euphemistic names to pigeonhole their condition: brainwashed, hypnotised, indoctrinated, conned, duped, unworthy, valueless beyond their diminished status in our world ... conditioned by their ignorance to be disrespected. **Not at all like us!**

There are many '*isms*' that put their diminished thoughts into devalued boxes of ideology, belief and failure.

Robin Hood and **Ned Kelly** have prominence in our cultural narrative. The first was a fictional character from the 12th century England and the other was a real person from late 19th century Australia.

Both were outlaws. Each has a certain prestige in popular culture ... for resisting the laws of the land.

Yet, the loyalty pledge on becoming an Australian citizen requires everyone to **uphold and obey the laws** of the land. **Is there a disconnect somewhere?**

Democratic countries generally have a **constitution** that outlines the basic governing principles for operating an ordered civilised society within which individuals have rights, liberties and responsibilities.

The legislative part of government (politicians) **develop laws**, in keeping with constitutional principles, to manage customary behaviour.

National, state and local **governments administer** regulations within the laws ... to manage the operation of civil society.

Courts adjudicate breaches of such laws and administer penalties or re-education.

That is a normal process for communities to operate successfully.

Outlaws are in breach of laws and are therefore presumably, abnormal.
So why do they have any status in cultural narratives?

Because **ethics**, not just the law, play a major part of deciding right from wrong.

There are codes of conduct in most businesses and communities. **Norms** allow us to recognise who is reliable, where we will hear the truth ... particularly from people who are entrusted with public authority within governing institutions. That type of norm is known as **probity** – behaving with honesty and strong moral principles.

The opposite of probity is **corruption** – where people in authority are motivated by self-interested gain, disregard for accepted laws or regulations and ... even malice towards people without such power. The corrupt can abuse **power** ... concealed by deceit ... to look after themselves at the expense of others. That is **abnormal behaviour** in terms of correct norms.

When such abuse of legal or entrusted power is observed, people protest and resist. In popular culture, **Robin Hood** and **Ned Kelly** are seen as exposing oppression, injustice and the abuse of power. They are portrayed by the battlers as ‘heroic’; in standing up for freedoms ... but they were still outlaws ... abnormal ... others ... lesser.

Some ‘corrupt’ behaviours have been ingrained in the operating culture of societies – as normal behaviour. For example, minimise your tax to reduce payments to government in the countries of operation.

It’s legal to minimise. It is **not** ethical or legal **to cheat** ... to make the pursuit of money the main goal ... just to benefit self-interest. Courts can treat such actions as criminal offences.

In the USA, all States have their own processes for running elections to the Congress and an Electoral College process to elect the president. The lack of a consistent accepted process has enabled votes to be rigged by the unscrupulous, in past centuries. **That is very unusual today** and many processes are in place to counteract such nefarious tampering.

But **the old story has become part of a past public narrative** ... used by the dishonest to sow doubt about elections and to try to disenfranchise the ordinary voters. **That is not speaking truth to power.** That is **using power cynically ... to undermine** the checks and balances of democracy.

A fertile pit for influencers, intimidators, hustlers and confidence tricksters.

In Australia, the national, state and territory governments all now have **Corruption Commissions** to educate the public on codes of proper conduct in public life, to investigate all levels of potentially dodgy practices and, where necessary, to hold public enquiries to shine a light on behaviours that are not in the public interest – or even corrupt, in the criminal sense.

When trusted institutions and independent public servants can no longer operate according to the principles of the Constitution. When the checks and balances built into the long-standing systems are being ‘gamed’ by underhanded methods. When cynicism starts to replace reliable confidence in the probity of independent public officials and democratic institutions, then ... **a powder keg of dissatisfaction can grow.**

The **chaos of revolutionary resistance** is the likely outcome **if such abnormal behaviour becomes accepted as part of a public narrative** ... inevitable in a world where many people feel left out, unheard and unable to engage in the success that they see the obscenely rich apparently enjoying.

Alexis de Tocqueville in his 1856 historical work¹ highlighted the French nobility mocking old traditions, court rituals and institutional authority because they felt insulated by centuries of holding absolute power. They had no concept of the political danger ... from their cavalier hubris.

The oblivion to that blind spot evolved into the catchy modern proverb:

“The French aristocracy never saw it coming.”

Indeed, the result was the French Revolution from 1789 to 1799 in which so many of the aristocratic elite were beheaded on the guillotine, including the king, Louis XVI, in 1793.

The arrogance of trying to ‘game’ and undermine the transparent democratic processes is a clear sign that the **Abnormal** could become accepted as **Normal**. Investigative journalism and clear judicial thought, along with the checks and balances of constitutional processes ... are a major part of ensuring that a healthy democratic society can continue.

Vigilance is essential. History is full of nasty examples of the alternatives.

¹Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) *The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution* 1856