

Hasta La Vista, Guardianista!

Ross Welcome to Renegade Inc. In an information age when most media brands deliberately nail their colours to the mast, one organisation that has just reached its 200 year anniversary still can't explain what it really stands for - the Guardian. Loved by some, hated by others, but when it comes to an editorial standpoint, its mercurial choices have left many, many more really flummoxed.

Ross Welcome to Renegade Inc. I'm joined by Dr Justin Schlosberg, senior lecturer at the Department of Film Media and Cultural Studies at Birkbeck University, and also Professor Des Freedman, Professor of Media Communication Studies. And he's also head of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies, Goldsmiths University. Welcome to you both. Thank you for coming by. Des, you edited, you chose to edit, Capitalism's Conscience: 200 Years of the Guardian, during lockdown. Now, lockdown was tricky enough for all of us, but you've gone and done this, created this. Well done. Great effort. Why do it? What's the intent behind it?

Des Freedman Well, first of all, I didn't have much choice over the date because 200 years is 200 years so I had to make sure that it was out before May 5, 2021 otherwise, the bicentenary, I wouldn't have met it. And I wanted to do it because it's an important argument, not just about a title, not just for the newspaper, not just about a news outlet, but about a particular relationship to liberalism. And that's what we wanted to explore throughout the book, is the role of the Guardian throughout history as a marker of a particular set of liberal ideas and the impacts that they have.

Ross Editors are changed by the work that they edit? What is the one thing, thematically, or one of the revelations, that came through this when you were editing it? What was the sort of light bulb moment, if there was one?

Des Freedman Well, the consistency of the arguments that were put, I think because, you know, you commission a series of chapters, you're not exactly sure what's going to happen. Some people you know well, some you don't. And I think there is quite a remarkable continuity, which is that the Guardian matters, but it matters because it has so massively disappointed so many people, and because it plays this really significant role in both trying to assuage some of the worst aspects of capitalism, yet at the same time utterly reproducing the conditions of capitalism itself. And that is something that you find in the different emphasis and in relation to different stories. But that comes throughout the book.

Ross Regardless of the writer of the chapter, you see that theme again and again?

Des Freedman I would say so, yeah.

Ross One of the writers of the chapters, Justin, you talked in the book about Corbyn and the Guardian's relationship with Corbyn. Just talk a little bit about that, because what I think a lot of people were confused about is when they saw Jeremy Corbyn come along, the stance that the Guardian, editorially, took towards him.

Justin Schlosberg Yeah, it was a really interesting, I think, historical moment, because the Guardian, not just as a kind of a liberal newspaper, but as a newspaper that kind of brands itself on sort of quality and serious journalism, was confronted with the spectre of radical socialist ideas becoming a part of mainstream political and public debate. And so in some ways, what's even more interesting to me than the way in which they covered the various kind of personality based scandals surrounding Corbyn, and whether or not you think that those were largely manufactured scandals or whether you think that there was something to them, there's an interesting question to be asked about how the Guardian engaged with the policies that were now being put forward by the opposition, the biggest political party in Britain. And I think it's very clear that an overall - I mean, you can't obviously generalise too much and there is exceptions in every to every rule - but both in their editorial sections and in their reporting, there was a very clear line that was either we're not going to pay much attention to these policies, partly because we're going to be distracted or our readers are distracted by the various scandals, or when they did pay attention to them, they did so from a largely critical perspective. And I think that is really what sets apart that period from the Guardian's wider history in the sense that they really did reject these kinds of challenges, if you like, to the established social and political and economic order.

Des Freedman I mean, I would say that the Guardian's coverage of Corbyn solidified Corbyn's base. I mean, it enraged them. So this is when you move from disappointment to outright anger. But the Guardian, editorially, took a decision, you know, which constituency do we want to most cater to? Who are our long term allies in this particular Guardianista project.

Ross And what was the motivation for that? Is that fully commercial? Is that defence of the establishment? Is that a purely a business decision?

Des Freedman I'd like to say all of them. I mean, there are multiple reasons. So, at one level, clearly, they're trying to build up a membership model. And I'm sure in terms of a much more long-term membership affiliations, people who will spend the cash every month, who will show up to King's Cross to join in with the membership classes.

Ross The hard left won't do that.

Des Freedman The hard left won't do that. So there's probably an assumption that if you're going to extract cash, the radical left, the hard left - maybe that's a phrase that is often thrown at the left. I would just say the radical left is probably less economically desirable from the point of view of a big news organisation. So there is certainly a commercial thought. But much more important is the ideological. This is the Guardian discovering its roots. This is the Guardian waking up to a serious electoral, and beyond electoral, challenge from the left and thinking this is a bit uncomfortable. Where do we stand on all of this?

Ross And this comes back to your relationship with liberalism, doesn't it which ultimately, is you know, as they call it the stepping off point for the book and re-examining that. Is it the case that it is in the Guardian's DNA, this liberal approach?

Des Freedman Absolutely. I mean, it is in the biography of the characters who founded it. It becomes wedded to its institutional culture and it plays out in lots of different ways and in

contradictory ways, and it chops and changes. But one remarkable, and again, aspect to its continuity is how when faced with a serious radical challenge, then the Guardian really nails itself to the mast of moderate reform, because, again, moderate form is what it would describe and all the time it committed in its own pages to moderate reform. I don't see that as moderate reform, actually, often, whether we're talking about some of its aspects of its coverage of slavery or more recently in terms of Corbyn, there's nothing moderate about that. Actually, it was fairly extreme in how it covered Corbyn. But it is absolutely part of a liberal DNA that was there back in 1821 when it was founded.

Ross John Edward Taylor founded it then supported by what we'd call now a consortium of businessmen, Mancunian, and the Guardian advocated parliamentary reform, religious freedom, fair trade, sorry, not fair trade, free trade. Easy mistake to make. Do you think that the radical left feels shunned and left behind because they haven't understood that DNA?

Justin Schlosberg Yeah, I think that's true. I think that also what is I guess slightly unique about the Guardian, historically, is that it's kind of paid, unlike other any other kind of major national newspaper, it's paid lip service to some of the ideas of the radical left. So there's always been a columnist or some occasional sections of op-eds that have actually been quite provocative in terms of putting forward ideas that kind of question the kind of capitalist social order. So I think that that's where the sort of illusion came into it, that somehow the Guardian was different, structurally, fundamentally, quintessentially from the rest of the mainstream press.

Ross But back in the day, it was taking on the militant left?

Justin Schlosberg Yeah. So, of course, I think that that difference was was largely illusory. And and in many ways, what we're talking about here is not something particular to the Guardian in relation to the coverage of Corbyn. There were quite, I think, strong parallels between how the Guardian responded to Corbyn and how the BBC did, for example. And a lot of it is, you know, as Des was saying, this kind of shared commitment to liberal values amongst much of the kind of world of professional journalism in this country. But what's also interesting is how it plays out in terms of day to day journalism and how they do journalism. And I think what's quite clear to me is that there's a certain kind of cultural orientation of journalists towards certain types of sources that perceives them as somehow more credible and more authoritative than others and anything really associated with Corbyn, almost from day one, was just not credible. It was not taken seriously.

Ross So it's a closed shop over there, really. And unless you agree, then we're not going to touch it or we're going to be hypercritical about it. And you can see that in a sense in the Twitter sphere, because the current crop of Guardian journalists don't really interact with anyone unless they sort of feel that they're on the same page or have been suitably vetted.

Des Freedman Well, that's Tom Mills' chapter in the book where he talks about the very insular networks, the insular Twitter networks of Guardian journalists, following lots of centre-right politicians actually, and lots of journalists. But I want to come back to this idea that it's a closed shop. I don't think it is a closed shop because it wouldn't operate well as a liberal institution, as a totally sealed closed shop.

Ross It's not hermetically sealed.

Des Freedman It's not hermetically sealed. That's really important because otherwise we will have thrown at us, and quite rightly have thrown at us, what about the Guardian's coverage of the Boer War? Sorry to talk about something that happened 120 years ago but still.

Ross Do we have to go back that far?

Des Freedman No, no, no. I mean there are other takes on the British establishment in an occasional and haphazard way. You know, it's reporting over Windrush was great. I'm very glad it did that. It was very bold in its phone hacking coverage. The tragedy in all of this, you know, in terms of phone hacking is - and it is a bit of a tragic story - is why it completely changed its mind about independent press regulation. That was because of the concentrated power of the rest of the press and the government. And in terms of the Boer War, it did pay a price for it. You know, circulation went down and it lost lots of advertising. The tragedy is those are the exceptions. And it does that - partly again, this is where it's a conscience. I mean, the one thing that has, I think, been quite interesting is people have said, that is the world's worst title, Capitalism's Conscience.

Ross Well, I was going to come to that because does it have one?

Des Freedman But I think it misunderstands the whole point of it, which is a conscience isn't just a good thing. The whole point of the book is that it's a capitalist conscience. In other words, it is presenting itself as having a moral sensibility. But the point that I was trying to make is it's a capitalist sensibility. So for every time that it stands up to power, you know, the rest of the time it is so utterly intertwined with power and so utterly determined to head off any revolt. That IS a capitalist conscience.

Ross All media organisations are equal, but some are more equal than others.

Justin Schlosberg Yeah, I mean, I think what we're touching on here is the kind of paradox of media power, which is that on the one hand, the Guardian as an institution that is willing sometimes to carry stories that are perhaps supportive of the Corbyn policy agenda or that are very critical of the national security state as they were over Snowden. You know, in some ways, this is really, really valuable to the left or to anyone with or with a kind of radical critical perspective, political perspective. And on the other hand, it's also really useful, paradoxically, to the interests of power precisely because it is this good brand for capitalism and precisely because of that sensibility. And also because by being nuanced in that way, that's what shores up the Guardian's credibility and its brand based on its kind of trustworthiness.

Ross Welcome back to Renegade Inc. Dr Justin Schlosberg is with me, as is Professor Des Freedman. This is our Book of the Week, Capitalism's Conscience: 200 Years of the Guardian. You've explained why capitalism has a conscience, but now pitch the book to us.

Des Freedman Let me clarify, capitalism has a capitalist conscience. That's my point. Otherwise, I would be quite rightly crucified about it. But this is a book that is dedicated to making sense, both historical and at the contemporary level of the politics and the culture of

the Guardian. And I think it matters precisely because of the Corbyn experience, precisely because of the phone hacking experience. It's just a lesson, I think, in media power.

Ross Capitalism's Conscience: 200 Years of the Guardian edited by you, Des Freedman, we highly recommend it. Let's talk about this reaction, the often visceral reaction, to the Guardian. A lot of people we talked about in the first half are disillusioned by the editorial stance. We've talked about the DNA. Why is there such hatred, in your view, aimed at the editorial stance now? And why do people speak so passionately about it because other newspapers, media organisations don't seem to me to elicit the same kind of passion?

Des Freedman Anger is not unique to the Guardian. There are many, many millions of people who genuinely hate the Sun. You got to Liverpool, the story is often told about its role in Hillsborough. People really hate the Sun.

Ross Right. But with the Sun, just quickly on that, Hillsborough and the 96, that was a very open lie. The editor working in cahoots with the police at that time, you can really crystallise that as a moment in time.

Des Freedman Absolutely.

Ross It's stacking jellyfish with the Guardian because you can't actually grab hold of the real reason there's that visceral hate.

Des Freedman Well, it's it's not one moment. It's been 200 years of anger and disappointment. And so when I was doing my research on the founding of the Guardian, it was really interesting to look at some of the letters. And it really wasn't long in the Guardian's history before you had groups of workers writing to the Guardian back in 1823. I found this great letter saying it was just so resonant of 2021, saying I can't believe you're doing this. Where are your loyalties? You know, why do you not have any support for the working class struggle?

Ross You can transpose that directly.

Des Freedman Absolutely. And I think the real reason is that people are not just disappointed, but they really are angry because they understand that the Guardian has this particular role, which is unique in the left. It placed with a commitment to centrism that they think has a very pernicious influence on the ability of radical movements both in Britain but certainly internationally. And I'm sure we're going to talk about some of its international coverage. It's made the projects of the radical left that much more difficult, precisely because there is an expectation the Guardian represents the left. And actually what the Guardian does is often to bury the chances of the radical left.

Ross It seems at times it's sort of all things to all men, but no thing to anyone?

Des Freedman People say that now because they just go, Oh, I don't buy the Guardian now. It's just all lifestyle journalism. There's no meat. What it needs is investigative journalism. And it needs to do the job, which its editor, all in every manifesto that she writes promises to do, which is to hold power to account. And I think, you know, our argument is that holding

power to account once every however many years in an isolated fashion is not doing the job. And actually, again, just it lets the system off the hook. And instead, what you find much more systematically is its diminution of any systemic challenge. And that's so apparent when you think of some of its international coverage, when you think of its reluctance to actually investigate British government complicity in many authoritarian regimes across the world. So the Guardian is the classic example. There's some great stuff that it will write on Saudi every now and again. What it won't do is actually investigate the UK government's, you know, complicity in what's going on in Saudi or in Oman or in many other different countries.

Ross But it's not as if it doesn't have the ability to. All it has to do is go and hire Matt Kennard and Mark Curtis declassified and say, listen, we're going to give you a ten part series. Knock yourself out, boys. Why is that reluctance there? And also just bleed into this, the misreporting in South America, for instance, the myopic reporting in the Middle East, Israel-Palestine. Unpick that for us if you can.

Justin Schlosberg Well, this actually relates very closely to the question of why people are so angry. I actually want to suggest - I mean, I think the political context is obviously really important, if not central to this. But there's another related context, which is more about the professional ethics of journalism. And one of the reasons, I think, why people are so angry with the Guardian - and I think this transcends actually the left and the right to some extent - is that the Guardian brands itself on being the epitome of professional journalistic ethics, of being objective, balanced, authoritative, credible, etc.. Now, the problem with that is what we've seen, particularly over recent years, is quite a significant departure, not just from those kinds of higher level professional ideas associated with broadsheet newspapers and the quality news sector in general, but sometimes with pretty basic journalism 101 news values. The reliance, for example, on a single source with an obvious hidden agenda, such as the story about Paul Manafort's supposed visit to Julian Assange in the Ecuadorian embassy, which was very quickly debunked and exposed, is, I think, an example of the Guardian's reporting in recent years, which has really failed on some of the most basic journalistic standards. So a lot of the anger, I think, stems from this sense of, you know, who do you think you are branding yourself as this quality journalism? Why are you so viciously opposed to the kind of Fifth Estate leftist online media that has surfaced in recent years, typified by outlets like the Canary, when actually part of what they're doing is exposing your journalistic failings? The other thing related to that, I mean, Des talked about, you know, the Guardian seeing holding power to account as a sort of central to its mission. And I think a lot of the anger towards the Guardian is the fact that it itself has been so resistant to any form of meaningful accountability over precisely these sorts of mistakes, whether they were mistakes, whether they were something else, that there has been almost a kind of pathological institutional refusal to actually stand back and acknowledge, yeah, actually, we got that wrong.

Ross I think one of the plaudits - and there have been many - that typifies the book perfectly is this from Hilary Wainwright, founding editor of Red Pepper. 'Liberalism typically champions particular campaigns for social justice, but distances itself from challenges to the state and economy that produces these injustices. At last, a book, which reveals this serious problem - a must read for all Guardian readers'. That, for me, crystallises what you've done here.

Des Freedman Absolutely. It crystallises it beautifully because capitalism produces outrages and there is a good market. And if you're a liberal, it's important to say, well, they got that one wrong, you know, whether it's over inequality, war, there are occasional times when, you know, as a good liberal, you will say you've overreached yourself but the crucial thing is never to systematise that.

Ross Explain that. What does that mean?

Des Freedman In other words, it's a kind of, you know, one bad apple. There are no links between these events. It's not about the system itself. It's all about capitalism itself.

Ross Right. So so the idea like Hollywood film storytelling method, if you take one bad apple out of the system, the system then goes back on and functions perfectly?

Des Freedman But the system then says, thank God we've got the Guardian to hold us to account. When all the Guardian is done is actually every now and again to point out some inequity. You know, I did lots of research over how the Guardian covers protests. So the Guardian covers protests, you know, quite a lot, obviously not as much as some of, you know, the billionaire press, who just want to put violent masked men on their front page. But it's always horrified by direct action, even in its anti-apartheid newspaper. But the fact is, you know, it would still be appalled by some of the tactics. You know, it's pro civil rights. When a more militant wing of the American civil rights movement emerges and has big marches, the Guardian is a bit nervous of what it calls the hard left. You know, it calls for moderate reform because that's in its DNA. That's the whole point of its particular brand of liberalism.

Ross Do you think that the establishment have had a strategy - certainly with Rusbridger, you know, do you love your country and komsat committee and all the rest of it? Do you think the strategy was strike the shepherd and the sheep scatter? So now there's a sort of collective neurosis within the Guardian saying we can't touch that. We won't touch that. You know, certain journalists, absolutely, I'm backing away from that. What's the establishment line on that? I'm going to fall in.

Justin Schlosberg I mean, I don't think it's possibly quite as crude as that. I mean, I think what is absolutely true, I think, is that from a kind of the perspective of an establishment power, you're going to be in some ways much more interested in what the Guardian is covering in relation to, say, Corbyn or Snowden than you are the Daily Mail, because in a sense, the Daily Mail's already preaching to an audience that, you know, is not going to be out on the streets calling for the end of capitalism as we know it, whereas the Guardian's audience possibly could or sections of its audience possibly could.

Ross Certainly not the Islington intelligentsia.

Justin Schlosberg Well, no but in a way, that's what I guess the interest is. If you were concerned purely with the preservation of the political and economic status quo, your interest will be in ensuring that the Guardian's readers conform as much as possible to that kind of Islington liberal intelligentsia rather than this kind of dangerous radical left mob. So I think that's an obvious big part of it. But I think that one of the things that is really, really, really the defining moment in the last five years in the Guardian's history was when it came out

against - and it did it quite subtly and quite quietly - against part two of the Leveson Inquiry. I mean, that just really, I think, revealed ultimately what the limits of the Guardian is, not just in terms of its kind of positioning politically or editorially, but as a newspaper that prides itself on investigative journalism, on uncovering the cover up. Here it was supporting the government's decision to stop an inquiry that was supposed to get to the bottom of institutional corruption between politicians, the press and the police.

Ross I have a suggestion. If we can get a decent consortium together, I think you'd make two great founders for a new newspaper/media organisation.

Des Freedman It's lovely of you to say, but I think we're probably two terrible businessmen. So I think it's a very bad idea.

Ross But we can get people to look after that and you just do the editorial content.

Des Freedman Love to.

Justin Schlosberg If you've got a spare 20 million.

Ross Is it that much? Golly gosh. Well, we can a whip round. All the crew in here were former Guardian readers. So we can use their subscriptions.

Des Freedman Without seeking to curry favour, I don't know if we need to because there's lots of great work that is being done by people who have moved away from the Guardian into independent journalism. So those other people, the de-classifieds of the world, that we need to support.

Ross Absolutely, and we really do support them. Capitalism's Conscience: 200 years of the Guardian. Des, congratulations. Justin, Des, thank you both for coming by. Always a pleasure to have you. That's it from Renegade Inc. this week. You can send the team a mail - studio@renegadeinc.com. Join us next week for more insight from those people who are thinking differently. But until then, stay curious.