




Educational Hegemony: Angloshperic Education Institutions and the Potential of Organic Intellectuals


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Abstract

In this paper we discuss the concept of educational hegemony, where education systems serve to reproduce the dominant ideology and culture of the ruling class. We draw on Gramsci's theories of hegemony and the distinction between traditional and organic intellectuals. We advance that education has pivoted towards developing human capital *for capitalism*, rather than developing human capabilities. We explore how capitalism is facing crises around inequality, environmental degradation, and financial instability and discuss how education continues to normalise these crises in capitalism and dismiss systemic critiques, conditioning human thought through its influence over major institutions. We discuss how social justice initiatives in higher education often fail to foster real change, as they are assimilated into existing capitalist structures. Instead, we advocate for approaches that cultivate critical thinking, exposing students to diverse perspectives, and encourage community activism to challenge hegemonic power structures. Ultimately, we call for radical transformations in education to empower students as organic intellectuals and foster counter-hegemonic thought.

Keywords: Hegemony, Gramsci, Organic Intellectuals, Traditional Intellectuals, University, Education, Radicalism, Academic Activism

Introduction

Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist philosopher, developed the concept of “organic intellectuals” to describe a kind of intellectual emerging from the working class or other subaltern social groups (Gramsci, 2007). These intellectuals, juxtaposed against the “traditional” intellectual originating in the bourgeoisie, are intrinsically rooted in and actively a part of their social group. In this sense, their intellectuality is not simply production of theory or research *about* their social group but is also an activist and

transformative leadership born from lived experience of the struggles of that group (Gramsci, 2007). Organic intellectuals serve to advance the aspirations of their social group, which is often done in a dialectical modality; they may, for example, simultaneously and relationally develop deep understandings of the needs, problems and desires of their social group while advancing modes of liberation and transformation that see their group freed from past struggles.

Traditional intellectuals have emerged, historically, from “educated” classes. Importantly, Gramsci articulates traditional intellectuals as identifying with an autonomy and independence from any social group (Gramsci, 2007). In this way, traditional intellectuals are trained in and emerge from bourgeois norms, culture and systems and are inherently imbued with tacit if not active participation in the reproduction and maintenance of these norms. Here, privilege, power and relationships between the status quo (vis. bourgeois culture) and these intellectuals are often inextricable. Traditional intellectuals, in Gramsci’s depiction, often view themselves as guardians of cultural values and critical thinking, however, these are always reproductive of the performative values and ideology of the bourgeoisie. Frequently, this relationship is not recognised overtly or acknowledged by the traditional intellectuals themselves, and, in conjunction with other structural powers, leads to the contemporary conditions in, for example, education systems where hegemonic Eurocentric knowledges, powers and norms are reproduced as gospel.

Transformation and liberation, Gramsci advances, is often forestalled by traditional intellectuals. This is not due to inherent lack of capacity, but because of the benefit traditional intellectuals receive from enforcement of the status quo. In a word, they carry enormous privilege and benefit therein. Therefore, from this privileged and relatively powerful positionality, they are dependent on the validation, legitimation and social structures which granted their “intellectuality” (Gramsci, 2007). Ultimately, this engagement and advantage provided by sheltering in bourgeois culture and ideology keeps traditional intellectuals safe, complacent and – if at all interested in social change – flaccidly interested in transformation and liberation through assimilation and subsumption. This is a far cry from the activist necessity of acting as a transformational thinker *for* a subaltern group (Gramsci, 2007).

Gramsci’s theorising of traditional and organic intellectuals forms the basis of his construction of the theory of cultural hegemony. Here, the dominance of a ruling class’s (i.e., bourgeoisie) values, norms and beliefs *over* other social groups is seen as essential (Gramsci, 2007). This is achieved not only through coercive means (manoeuvre), but also through the more subtle “consent” of the subaltern (position). The latter is inherently relevant to the argument of this paper, about education systems acting as consensual reproducer of the status quo. Dominance, then, is achieved by influencing (or maintaining) the cultural and ideological fabric of society, shaping the way people think and perceive and understand the world. Traditional intellectuals who function in an educative mode in

this milieu are conduits of, for example, oligarchical wishes for social consent to capitalism's reproduction. This control of knowledge, understanding, values, beliefs and attitudes ripples through systems and structures that are controlled by traditional intellectuals. Examples of hegemonic control of culture are readily seen in spaces such as monopoly news media (Herman & Chomsky, 1994).

In this article, we will explore how "social justice" research and praxis in universities is frequently participatory in hegemony and subsumptive of "the other", rather than working to challenge, break down and transform the norms and structures which perpetuate disadvantage. Throughout this critique we seek to identify the possibility of activist academic positionalities within and amidst mainstream academia, or the necessity for novel structures which enable the flourishing of organic intellectuals outside hegemonic structures. First, we turn to additional context for Gramsci's theory and an exploration of the education system as it exists today. Subsequently, we explore the need to capture, transform or revolutionise systems and structures which are oppressive in nature. Finally, we advance an inclusive liberatory perspective challenging privileged academics to create space for organic intellectuals.

Hegemony and the Education System

The ruling class maintains its control of civil society through a *projection* of its own way of seeing the world as *universal* and *neutral*. This "naturalised", "value-free", "universal" view is, effectively, the patrimony of enlightenment science. These projections are used to mask the true values, attitudes, beliefs and practices of the ruling class, which might otherwise be captured in an idealistic version of capitalism (c.f. Marx, 1990). This essentialised and value laden projection is so deeply pervasive that the subaltern classes frequently accept it as "common sense" and natural, even when it is against their interests (Gramsci, 1977, 2007). Importantly, the projected values, beliefs and culture is inherently different to the *actual* practice of those in ruling class positions. The manufacturing of consent amongst the citizenry requires an approach to developing understanding of the system without seeing its true exploitative and extractive nature (Gramsci, 2007; Herman & Chomsky, 1994). Here, following in Marx and Engels' footsteps, critique offers crucial insight into the contradictions, fallacies and failings of a system dependent on the extraction *from* and control *over* the majority in a society (c.f. Marx, 1976; Marx & Engels, 1970). Instead of this liberatory critical mode, however, the projection is treated, in education systems from preschool through postgraduate study, as *the truth* even when it depends on the expropriation, extraction and unequal treatment of humans and knowledge systems (Fraser, 2022). In maintaining the status quo, education's critical role is to enforce both a singular truth and knowledge system, and to commensurately adhere to the projected values, beliefs and attitudes which enable adherence to monotheistic worship of ruling class projection (as consensual capture of civil society).

Education plays a fundamental role in the development of human beings. Traditionally, these processes were “owned” *by* humans *for* the development of communities, production, practices, values and norms and were highly differential the world over. In recent times, particularly in the anglosphere, education has been pivoted towards development of human capital (Brown, 2015; Schultz, 1971; R. A. Slaughter, 2021). This simultaneously meets bourgeoisie aims of fostering a sense of commitment to capitalism as the only economic system of merit and builds a labour force which can enact and reproduce this work through individualist, competitive and marketised individuals. Fundamentally, schools, colleges and universities are key sites for the propagation of the ruling class’s ideology, an unquestioning and highly orthodox system which eradicates or assimilates “difference” into the singular advancement of capitalism as economic, educational, social, cultural, scientific hegemonic ontology. Through the education system, the values and beliefs of the ruling class are disseminated, naturalised and normalised (Cornelius-Bell, 2023; S. Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). This is not singularly achieved through formal curriculum, but also through the tacit socialisation processes in educational settings, where students learn what is considered “acceptable” knowledge, behaviour, values and thought, where complicity and “fitting in” with the projection’s mainstream is valued above *any* culture, knowledge or practice (Margolis, 2001; Rahman, 2013).

Cultural hegemony, here, is developed and enforced through the centring of bourgeoisie (projected) culture, ideas and education models as a mode of maintaining social dominance, not in a pluralistic sense, but in the hegemonic mainstream’s continuous advancement of the ruling class’s vision for civil society (the 1% over the 99%). Moreover, these systems are not simply about economic and political control, but a deeper shaping of perception such that spectrums of capitalist participation, engagement, action and experience are normalised as though they are *natural states* and are highly dependent on complicity in the status quo. In this way, we can understand cultural hegemony as the simultaneous belief in, for example, capitalist economies and western democracy *and* the belief that these systems are the only true and correct way to live. The fostering of elitism in these systems comes concomitantly with other fallacies of western ideals: meritocracy, fairness, civility, truth, justice, and so on. Gramsci’s theory is profoundly useful in understanding the organisation of society as a method of control and reinforcement of the status quo, and to recognise that social change must involve changing the dominant culture and ideology, not just the economic or political structure (Gramsci, 2007). Moreover, and significantly in our context, this system depends on education as a basis for continued control.

Capitalism in Crisis

Contemporary capitalism faces perpetual interconnected crises, which, when analysed, reveal deep imbalances, exploitation and extraction throughout the global

“economy” (Fraser, 2022). These are not, however, reducible to simply economic issues. Rather, these are deeper cultural and ideological problems requiring some attention at this juncture. Prominent among these is the staggering concentration of wealth, where an oligopoly controls a vast majority of resources, leading to severe income and asset disparities (Marx, 1990). Labour exploitation has intensified, particularly under the gig economy, resulting in precarious working conditions and income insecurity (Young, 2010; Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2021; Gandini, 2019). The relentless pursuit of growth in capitalist systems drives environmental degradation, including climate change and resource depletion, disproportionately impacting vulnerable populations (Calvão et al., 2023; Fraser, 2021; Klein, 2015). Financial instability, a recurring feature of deregulated markets and speculative practices, causes economic disruptions worldwide (Chowdhury & Žuk, 2018; Harvey, 2010). Healthcare commodification has led to stark health inequities, with marginalised groups often lacking adequate access to medical services (Deppe, 2010; Sturgeon, 2014; Timmermans & Almeling, 2009). Educational disparities are widening, with opportunities and outcomes increasingly dependent on socio-economic status, perpetuating cycles of inequality (Archer et al., 2003; Bagilhole, 2002; Huppertz, 2015; Slee, 2013). Furthermore, these economic challenges are fuelling social fragmentation and polarisation, eroding the fabric of social solidarity (Andreucci, 2018; Brabazon et al., 2019; Fraser, 2019; Müller, 2016). Amidst continued crises and catastrophe, through education we continue to normalise and perpetuate this system which warps, metastasises and subsumes *everything else*, decrying alternatives, to the point of collapse. Indeed, so powerful now is capitalist hegemony that it conditions human epistemology.

The influence of capitalism on human epistemology is profound and far-reaching, shaping not only how society functions, but also how individuals perceive and understand the world. This capitalist worldview has become so ingrained in modern society that many of its crises, including economic downturns, social inequalities, wars and even genocides, are often normalised or accepted as inevitable aspects of life. At the heart of this phenomenon is a developed dependence on capitalism which has been enforced through education systems: a senseless march towards “success”, “value” and “progress” for the ruling class. Capitalism, with its projected and often empty emphasis on profit, competition and market efficiency, has shaped a world where economic growth and material wealth are seen as the primary indicators of a society’s wellbeing. This perspective marginalises other values such as social equity, environmental sustainability and collective wellbeing. As a result, issues that do not directly align with the capitalist framework – such as income inequality, climate change or the human cost of conflicts – are often overlooked or minimised in mainstream discourse. Moreover, capitalism deliberately subsumes and assimilates to commodify various aspects of life, including those that challenge its tenets. For example, environmental concerns are often addressed within a capitalist framework through market-based solutions like carbon trading, rather than questioning the system’s

underlying principles which brought us to this point (c.f. Böhm et al., 2012; Lo, 2015).

Fundamentally, we acknowledge that the education system, media and popular culture largely influenced by capitalist interests, play a crucial role in shaping public consciousness (Brown, 2015; Gramsci, 2007; Herman & Chomsky, 1994). These major institutions regularly propagate a narrative that reinforces the status quo, presenting capitalist principles as natural and unchangeable. This narrative is so pervasive that alternative viewpoints or systems are frequently marginalised or portrayed as impractical. So normalised is this worldview that even the most severe crises are either downplayed or ignored (c.f. Raworth, 2022). The effect is a kind of epistemological closure where the capitalist mode of thinking becomes the default lens through which people interpret and interact with the world – the Capitalocene (Malm, 2016).

The Capitalocene, here, is not just about human activity, but specifically the activities and processes driven by the capitalist system responsible for the significant environmental degradation and crises of the twenty-first century (Moore, 2016). Unlike the traditional Anthropocene viewpoint, which tends to homogenise human impact without adequately distinguishing between different socio-economic systems, the Capitalocene offers a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding. It goes further in conceptualising capitalism not just as an economic system, but as an onto-epistemology – a dominant, pervasive way of knowing and being that permeates human civilisation. In a sense, the Capitalocene as a concept offers a more holistic capturing of the nature of capitalism in its onto-epistemologic form, the hegemonic modus operandi of human civilisation, and accounts for inaction, stasis and continued extraction and exploitation. Education, then, in the mainstream seen as a series of benevolent institution, plays a significant role in shaping individuals' worldviews and, in the context of the Capitalocene, supports and reproduces the ideologies and practices intrinsic to the capitalist system. The education system in this context is not merely a conduit for knowledge transfer; it becomes a tool for inculcating a specific onto-epistemology that aligns with capitalist ideals. We will now turn attention to education as a key institution in perpetuating knowledge, and particularly, research.

Education and “Social Justice” in Response

Inside the hegemony of capitalism as an encompassing and mutating economic and social system, it is necessary to conceptualise the specific ways education has changed in the twenty-first century to enable acritical reproduction of, for example, the Capitalocene. If we understand, as raised above, that the education system is a tool of both social and epistemic reproduction deeply imbued with traditional intellectual adherents to and supposed beneficiaries of capitalism, then we can begin to unpack the rippling transformation of ideals and practices in our education systems as a result of the dominant ideology. There has been a proliferation of discourse on the neoliberalisation of the university, and of schools, and the requirements for performativity, corporatisation and

other buzzwords as the laissez-faire capitalism of the late 1980s began to be reformed (Archer, 2008; ~~L~~-Arthur, 2009; Ball, 2012; Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2023b; Harvey, 2005).

However, if we recognise that these “public institutions” have always been adherent to advancing the ruling class’s hegemony, we can see these manifestations as expressions of hegemonic control, rather than novel regimes. Indeed, following Gramsci, education systems have rarely been sites for the production of agents for social transformation (Gramsci, 2007). Rather, the activist response *to* curriculum often emerges as a form of social extracurricular, deploying the tools and methods of the bourgeois education system and epistemology against it to strive for change (Freire, 2014). When we look to the mainstream tools and methods of the education system, focussing on higher education, it is evident how curricula and teaching methods prioritise market-oriented skills, competition and individual achievement (Brown, 2015; Connell, 2019; Marginson, 2016). This reinforces success as measured in economic terms and that continuous growth and consumption are desirable and natural states. Furthermore, education systems, particularly in higher education, have increasingly embraced a market-driven approach. This is seen in the commercialisation of research, the emphasis on fields of study that are deemed economically valuable, the treatment of education as a commodity, and so on (Ball, 2012; Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2020). These trends align with capitalist values and entrench the idea that education’s primary purpose is to serve the economic system rather than foster critical thinking, social consciousness, or alternative ways of knowing, being or becoming.

Increasingly, there is a growing call for education systems to adopt a more critical and reflective approach. This “social justice” approach purports to challenge capitalist hegemony through fostering critical thinking and use of pedagogical modes to engage students in more diverse projects and practices. The purported aim of these projects is to see education as a platform for exploring sustainable, equitable alternatives to the Capitalocene, or capitalism specifically (Apple, 2008; Francis et al., 2017; Goodall Jr, 2016). Problematically, “social justice” initiatives in higher education specifically are often assimilatory and subsumptive in nature.

In the realm of higher education, social justice initiatives aim to address issues like diversity, equity, and inclusion. However, under the pervasive influence of capitalist hegemony, these efforts inadvertently align with the very structures they intend to challenge. This happens when social justice is framed in a manner that is palatable and non-threatening to the capitalist hegemony. For instance, diversity initiatives may focus on increasing *representation* within existing systems, without challenging the systemic inequalities that underlie the issues. This assimilatory approach can be seen in how institutions often integrate social justice into their curricula and campus culture. While there is a growing emphasis on topics like multiculturalism, globalisation, sociological understandings of climate change and social equity, the treatment of these subjects can be

superficial, avoiding a deep engagement with the systemic causes of inequality. This approach aligns with the capitalist ethos of individualism, competition and market logic, framing social justice in terms of individual success stories or marketable skills, rather than as part of a broader struggle against systemic oppression.

Academic Privilege and Shedding Organic Intellectuality

Academic privilege is situated within capitalist hegemony, which exerts a significant influence over academic institutions and practices. The pressure to secure funding, publish in prestigious journals, and gain tenure or promotion incentivises academics of proletarian or subaltern backgrounds to align their work with the ruling class's norms and expectations of the academic system (for capital), often requiring a shedding of their values and broader social group goals (Gramsci, 2007). For academics from diverse or less privileged backgrounds (subaltern), the journey to academia involves a process of navigating and adapting to the dominant culture and norms of the institution, while facing constant rejection, bullying and disenfranchisement. This process can lead to a form of assimilation, where embracing the values and practices of the academic establishment, which are often intertwined with capitalist ideologies, becomes a means to success and acceptance in the field. It also manifests deep-seated psychological issues around belonging, conformity and complicity in oppression. This assimilation can be particularly pronounced for those seeking to establish themselves and secure their positions in a competitive and hierarchical environment, a fundamental requisite in contemporary capitalism.

The academic pursuit of objectivity and universality can also inadvertently downplay or dismiss the importance of subjective, localised and marginalised perspectives. This creates tension for academics from diverse backgrounds who are forced to conform to mainstream Eurocentric academic standards, expectations and methodologies thereby distancing themselves from, and being critical of, their own cultural or class-based epistemologies (c.f. Bresnahan, 1998). Unfortunately, the allure of participating in the capitalist system is dangled like a carrot for those who are already recipients of prestige, recognition, security and financial rewards from generational accumulation and exploitation. For subaltern academics, especially those who have experienced economic hardship or cultural marginalisation, these rewards may seem enticing at a surface level. The desire for stability and recognition can lead to a prioritisation of personal advancement over collective class interests or the pursuit of transformative change. Moreover, this yields individual subservience to the academic hierarchy and disempowers radical or transformative agency. Ultimately, challenging the status quo, or even advocating for change, often leads to professional marginalisation, expectations of emotional and cultural labour, additional work pressures and reduced career prospects (Biggs et al., 2018; Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2021; Grant & Elizabeth, 2015; Thunig & Jones, 2021). As a result,

even well-intentioned academics might opt for a more pragmatic approach, focusing on achievable goals within the existing system rather than advocating for more fundamental changes that might align more closely with their original class interests.

Human agency, then, is constrained through a desire to participate in academic structures (for liberatory ends or otherwise) due to requisites for capitalist performativity. In addition, the social structures of education themselves inherently reproduce and focus on Eurocentric and capitalistic epistemologies. Between these constrictions of agency and possibility, both the individual (with potential for organic intellectuality) and the systems and structures of a society, including cultural institutions, educational systems, and in some cases family units, may be captured by the ruling class to reinforce and reproduce their dominance (Gramsci, 2007).

Radical Futures

To achieve a liberation from capitalism and reproduction of the destructive and exploitative status quo in academia, academic activists need to consider more than a political or economic change. Rather, there needs to be a recentring of cultural and intellectual tools and approaches. As Gramsci advanced, true liberation can only be achieved by overcoming the cultural and ideological dominance of the ruling class. Here, the possibility of the university as an “organic” sphere is perpetually frustrated by its bourgeois positionality. Indeed, as noted above, even those who may originate in working-class backgrounds are quickly assimilated (often “violently” in epistemological terms) into the traditional intellectuality of the academy, thereby prohibiting their organic capability to transform society *for* their social group (Gramsci, 2007).

Gramsci argued for an education that goes beyond the traditional curriculum to include critical thinking and the development of an awareness of social and political realities. This form of education, which he termed as creating organic intellectuals, is key to developing the leadership needed to challenge and eventually overturn the ruling class’s hegemony. In a revolutionary model, education becomes a revolutionary tool, enabling individuals to understand the historical and social forces at play, critique the existing social order, and envision more equitable and just societies. Gramsci also emphasised the significance of cultural institutions in framing hegemony, such as media, literature and art as arenas where the battle for intellectual and cultural liberation is fought. This cultural and ideological leadership is the domain of the organic intellectual and requires a commitment to transformation and radical thinking to challenge the social order. Liberation, then, is a comprehensive socio-cultural *and* economic process which involves overcoming the cultural and ideological dominance of the ruling class through the development of a counter-hegemony. Education is pivotal in this process, serving as a means to cultivate critical consciousness, develop organic intellectuals and empower the oppressed social groups to challenge and transform the existing social order.

Academics have the potential to play a pivotal role in nurturing a counter-hegemonic consciousness amongst each other, in their research community, and, of course, with students. In aligning with Gramsci's vision of cultural and intellectual emancipation, this requires significant commitment and a constant (un)learning. Here, looking beyond assimilatory and enculturating approaches, academics could embrace and implement tools and methods which enable themselves, their students, and their community to interrogate and dissect the underlying assumptions, values, and power dynamics inherent in the production of knowledge, resources, and social relations (c.f. Freire, 2014). However, given the multifaceted nature of societal issues, a deep understanding often requires insights from across various academic disciplines and can never be done in isolation. In fact, so ingrained is the capitalist epistemology and culture in the academy that the "doing" of counter-hegemonic activity cannot be achieved alone. Rather, a distributive and radically inclusive approach of hyper-local iteration on projects, approaches, and possibility may be better suited for the production of a perpetually evolving counter-hegemonic project. To be clear, authentic engagement beyond the academy is required as the vast majority of diverse perspectives have been sanitised, appropriated, or colonised by hegemonic academic knowledge systems. Moreover, academics must be careful not to reproduce this cycle of extraction and exploitation amongst those with whom work, who hold often "desirable" organic knowledge of liberation which can be easily appropriated to meet KPIs and publishing metrics.

As we know, exposing ourselves through our communities to a diverse range of narratives, particularly those that are marginalised or underrepresented, is key to taking the first steps towards grappling with the multifaceted, subsumptive and facetious nature of capitalism. This involves academics integrating texts, discussions and resources in their teaching from a broad spectrum of authors and thinkers, especially those from backgrounds and ideologies that challenge the mainstream, which is essential in deconstructing dominant narratives. As academics, we must also foster critical consciousness, activism, community engagement, and support student-led initiatives, discussions, conferences or workshops on topics of social justice and counter-hegemony. First, we must start with our own, continually evolving, understanding of educational hegemony and its role in reproducing the dominant ideology and culture of the ruling class. Through social relations, networks, and broad engagement, we can begin to immerse ourselves in more diverse contexts, taking the first in a long series of steps towards a counter-hegemony which works for (more) people and the planet, not a narcissistic fraction. Moving towards consciousness raising and shaking capitalist foundations, particularly amongst privileged academics, is an essential step in the right direction.

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