

Assimilation and rebellion

by Aidan Cornelius-Bell

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Dear friends,

An attendee at a presentation I gave once said to me “it seems you just truly wish to belong in the academy” . This remains one of the most problematic and troubling interpretations of my work to date, something, at the time, I found deeply hurtful, and which has since sat with me as a space which demands further clarity in my thinking and articulation of positionality. Just a few days ago I met with a colleague who is doing research in an area of interest —student participation in direct democracy, and we discussed the dual notion of participation and rebellion; the way the counter-hegemony asserts different relations, challenges norms, and fights for transformation all while being exploited, stolen from, and dispossessed of knowledge, praxis, and possibility.

Let’ s do some theory, first, before I further disambiguate myself. If we understand that hegemony, in contemporary globalised colonial capitalism this can truly be understood as a global phenomenon, is a constantly evolving and moving beast. Hegemony, a tool of primarily coercive domination for a ruling class, configures the thinking of societies. Put plainly, the cultural hegemony reflects a relatively palatable projected cluster of norms, values, and practices which reinforce and produce benefit for the professors (qua “espousal”, not “an academic”) of that ruling class group. This is a radical simplification, necessarily, but the fundamental gist is that through carefully, and constantly, transforming the “acceptable” the 1% are able to manipulate, control, and enforce their views and values onto the 99%. Largely, hegemony is required to perpetuate capitalism, because nothing about capitalism is natural or human, and for the 1% to continue to benefit the messaging must constantly shift —even in contradictory ways —to ensure the continuation of capital.

Institutions, then, play key roles in this perpetuation, configuration, justification and so on, as we have discussed on many occasions here on mind reader. In my life, I have always accidentally found the limits of hegemony —as an activist, worker, thinker, person, I am constantly pushed against the edges. Labelled “justice sensitive” I find the superexploitation of friends, family, colleagues, and random strangers utterly unacceptable. Through becoming more familiar with theory, notions of cultural supremacy, the ongoing impact of colonial capitalism, and so on, I have only become more attuned to the deep injustice rendered upon this planet by the 1% in the name of “progress” : ecological, social, human, animal, planetary, and so on —the deep inequities of capitalism loom large and condition the way I think and act *against* the systems of this “progress” .

So then, amidst an activist depiction of higher education, a comment suggesting that my issue is simply that I do not feel belonging is fundamentally deeply opposed to my very nature. Not only do I not want to belong to an institution which is built on racist, sexist, ableist super-exploitation, but my entire communication has either sailed past the listener, or I have failed, fundamentally, to articulate the problematic nature of the system to which this particular group of listeners belonged. Indeed, while this one instance —an early one in my career —stands out, there are countless occasions across my academic and activist life where my abject abhorrence at the system has been misinterpreted as my need to belong. This depiction could not be further from the reality.

Proudly, I feel a part of a counter-hegemony which is emerging all across the globe which is fighting for better ways of being, thinking and doing. Ways which acknowledge history, but build bridges to better governance, relationality, ecologies, and economies. In situating ourselves in relation with each other, understanding the urgent and fundamental need to live in sustainable ways, to defund genocides, to centre democracy directly in the hands of those

systemically disempowered, disenfranchised and othered —this new way, which does not yet hold a concrete shape —is emerging as a strong, robust, working class and democratically distributive way forward. Now, there are so many of us that there is even a palpable feeling when you meet like-minded people, those who have fought, not to belong, but to transform a system that is cruel, exploitative, and unjust. This counter-hegemonic movement stands against capitalism, it is embodied in countless youth who face a system designed only to hand them shackles for their own ankles, it is lived in old activists who fought for deep social transformation in the 1960s, 1980s, 2010s, not gone, now finding footing for a new social order.

However, while there feels to be hope, this journey is no where near over. Lamentably, “new” institutions are formed to “take the cream” from the best of these new ways forward. This process, similar to class ascendancy (a contradiction worth further examination at another time), is how the hegemony maintains its vice grip on the 99%. By taking the best, palatable, and low-cost solutions to big problems, devouring them and regurgitating them upon a capitalist base is a pattern repeated across history by assimilationist thinkers —and vanguards of the colonial capitalist hegemony, of which, let me assure you as though you were under any illusion, there are far too many in our “great institutions” . Even purportedly new ways forward advanced by traditional intellectuals, those who seek to further the capitalist project, which verge on participatory, egalitarian, and equal are cast aside in contemporary times because division has seized the centre stage as political strategy. The “left” of politics has now, too, engaged in a divisive, hateful, and anti-factual movement in the name of advancing capital —ha, as though the liberal left ever wanted anything but a veneer of social inclusion.

This “social inclusion” is, however, both what I rally against, and among the largest threats to organic intellectualism in universities and public spaces today. Advancing narratives that simultaneously borrow the worst of capitalism’s hatred, and argue for “inclusion” , “incorporation” and “acknowledgement” are what your tax dollars fund in our institutions —particularly in disciplines such as education and social science, where radical philosophy, analytical social science, and activist and radical feminist studies have been stripped to the bone by funding changes, competitive creep, and other neoliberal and fascist notions of what is important. Instead of, what was undoubtedly a white mainstream, the 1960s radical, we have arrived at the “picture of a radical” whose research focus is on assimilation, incorporation and social inclusion —what is not said, but is deeply written, is that this “inclusion” is *for* fulsome participation in capitalism.

And here’s (another) the rub. A counter-hegemony is emerging. It takes many localised forms all around the planet, but it has one thing in common. It acknowledges the truth of the situation in which we find ourselves. Hegemonic colonial capitalism has destroyed the lives of countless people —regardless of culture, gender, notions of ‘able-ness’ —and left radically unequal super-exploitation in its wake. Importantly, here, I need to stress that at the intersections between these social constructs, capitalism has a very real and multiplicative affect on negative experience, conditions, and possibility at those interstices. But the driving and fundamentally common experience is that everyone in the 99% has been dispossessed from cultural expression (unless it serves capitalism), has been removed from connection to materials, land, histories, spaces (unless it serves capitalism), and has been stolen from to feed the bloated bourgeois leisure class who catch rockets out of the sky while millions starve, corporations and governments fund genocides, and countless daily injustices continue.

The damage, then, that assimilationists do is twofold. First, they suggest that you only really belong if you “belong” to capitalism. Second, through asserting you “should” belong, and *want to belong*, that any counter-hegemony is useful only so long as it serves capitalism. This is a sick, broken, and misanthropic position to hold —and I am tired of pretending that

“social inclusion” is anything other than a pro-capitalist washing of history to ensure that “difference” is exploited only by capitalists. The assimilationist agenda, then, serves as a tool of the hegemony to neutralise genuine counter-hegemonic movements. By co-opting the language of inclusion and diversity, it creates a facade of progress while fundamentally preserving the exploitative core of capitalism. This “inclusive capitalism” is nothing more than a more palatable version of the same system that continues to extract value from the 99% for the benefit of the 1%.

What we need, instead, is to nurture the radical re-imagining of our social, economic, and political structures. This re-imagining must come from the ground up, from the organic intellectuals emerging from the struggles of the working class, the marginalised, and the dispossessed —and, to be clear, progress here *is* being made. It will, necessarily, reject the false promise of assimilation into a system that is fundamentally built on exploitation and instead work towards creating new forms of social organisation that prioritise human needs, ecological sustainability, and genuine democratic participation. The academy, in its current form, is ill-equipped to nurture this kind of radical thought. Its structures are too deeply intertwined with the capitalist hegemony, its funding too dependent on maintaining the status quo. Yet, paradoxically, it is within these very institutions that we must continue to fight, to carve out spaces for counter-hegemonic thought and action. Not to belong, but to transform...But it’s hard fucking work.

In solidarity,

Aidan

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