Canadian Journal of Educational and Social Studies
Vol. 3(6), 2023, pp. 63-79

Capitalist Reproduction and Student Politics in Higher Education: Pete Seeger Meets the Young Liberals, Hegemonic Stasis, and the Contemporary University

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DOI: 10.53103/cjess.v3i6.195

Abstract

In this article I discuss the role of universities in reproducing capitalist society and hegemony. I argue that, while universities were once seen as sites of radical thought, the institutions themselves have largely resisted change and reinforced the status quo. I examine student politics as a microcosm of this, with factions often more focused on political careers than meaningful activism. Even amongst student activists, the organic intellectuals who emerge from subaltern groups have struggled to challenge university hegemony. Drawing on empirical ethnographic study, I highlight the appropriation of working class culture by bourgeois student politicians as an example of this microcosmic relationship. I advance here that, while students bring diverse perspectives, real power has remained with conservative institutional leadership in political society. Moreover, gradually, corporate governance models have further constrained academic freedom and prioritised capitalist ends over social transformation for collective liberation. However, I maintain that higher education still provides hope for change if academics form strong relationships with civil society and centre marginalised voices in our teaching and research, staying humble, open and acknowledging the subaltern struggles, enabling organic intellectuals to thrive and dismantling the oppressive structures rife in higher education through collective action. Ultimately, following in the footsteps of Gramscian and Marxist thinkers before me, I argue that universities serve to reproduce capitalism and hierarchical political society, rather than enable radical thought, social transformation, better conditions for humanity or liberation. I argue, however, for new models of academic activism more genuinely connected to social struggles and able to challenge the destructive nature of capitalism, towards genuine social transformation.

Keywords: Academic Activism, Student Activism, Social Transformation, Hegemony, Capitalism, Liberation, Gramsci

Intensification, Capitalism, and Higher Education

Higher education is a site of reproduction. In the anglosphere, this reproduction is deeply imbued with capitalism. This conditions the relations between students, staff, and the institution broadly both internally and externally. Over the last 50 years, we have seen the emergence of new terms to explain the creeping modern tendencies of capitalism into

spaces where, historically, it was thought not to have influenced (Aronowitz, 2004; Olssen & Peters, 2005). Between marketisation, neoliberalism, managerialism, and so on, we have seen how capitalist logics affect even the most *public* of spaces (Harvey, 2005; Hassard & Morris, 2020; Humphrys, 2019; Molesworth et al., 2009; Zipin & Brennan, 2004). Universities around the anglosphere have differentially fallen prey to direct marketisation and managerialism of academic work and recently students' roles in higher education (Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2021; Gottschall & Saltmarsh, 2017; Molesworth et al., 2009; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Collectively, the era preceding this direct infiltration is misremembered as higher education's "golden age" (Connell, 2019; Cornelius-Bell, 2021a). In this collective delusion, those who were either very young, or indeed not yet born, idealise the university of the 1960s and 1970s as a booming 'public', a site of radical social transformation, and a democratic sphere. When the explicit politics of late stage globalised capitalism are brought to bear on the university, we tell ourselves things were better once, donning our rose-coloured glasses. Contemporary higher education is far from a utopia, and increasingly tied to precarious conditions, exploitation, direct extraction of academic labour, uneven exploitation of minorities, profiteering and corrupt corporate governance, these hallmarks, I will advance, are both imported wholesale from late-stage capitalism and inextricable from the academy of the "golden age".

Universities have long been sites of knowledge creation and sharing. However, to accept this prima facie is to ignore the *cost* of our "ivory towers" and the exclusionary, classed, raced and gendered nature of the academy from its inception across the British-colonised world. Across the anglosphere, the 1960s and 1970s are marked in history as times of continued exclusion, division, racism and sexism and the academy was as much victim, as reproducer, of these attitudes and approaches (Cornelius-Bell, 2021a). Indeed, in Australia, while governments sought to open higher education to the working class in the 1960s, and subsequently to enabling women and *some* ethnic diversity to access a higher education in the early 1970s, it was commensurate with proto-neoliberalism and managerialism. In this way, the conflation of a golden era and this partial *opening* of the academy breeds an ill-informed view amongst some that by enabling diversity, higher education was polluted and brought with it the problems of the 'working class'. This conflation is not only false, but harmful to the fulsome participation of those traditionally excluded from higher education. However, this account does not go far enough to fully understand the nature of higher *education* in the reproduction of capitalist civil structure; we need a nuanced understanding of the role of higher education in producing *intellectuals*. In understanding the roles universities play in 'converting' or 'producing' intellectuals, we can understand how capitalism is reproduced, and simultaneously view the institutions of higher education as microcosms of the civil society (vis., proletarian) and political society (vis., the capitalist; the state).

In this article, I will advance a Gramscian understanding of higher education as a

site of capitalist reproduction, explore how recursive divisions of society (i.e., civil society and political society) are performed in student(s) politics, and assert a move towards an activist praxis for intersectionally inclusive educational transformation. By drawing on Marxist theorist and activist Antonio Gramsci as a basis for conceptualising hegemony, the structure and order of society under capitalism, and building on extant foundations in views of education in these complex political relations, I will move towards a transformative praxis (Cornelius-Bell, 2021a; Gramsci, 2007). Moreover, I draw on empirical work to illustrate the appropriation of proletarian culture in the emergent bourgeois political ascendency in Australian student politics. In doing so, I will signal *how* this appropriation demonstrates Gramsci's organic intellectuals from realising their transformative potential due to the reproductive modalities of higher education systems.

Hegemonic Complicity and Educational Systems

Society is stratified. Broadly, there are 'haves' and 'have-nots', proletariat and bourgeoisie, workers and capitalists. Class, race, locality and gender complicate this simplistic bifurcation, but do not subtract from the nature of 'rich' and 'poor'. In this understanding of society, Marxists advance, we must build unity, knowledge and collective action for systematic liberation amongst the 99%. The 'have-nots', or producers, must find common ground and work towards creating better conditions, freeing themselves from the bonds of wage-slavery (Marx, 1976, 1990, 1977). Gramsci, here, offers useful nuance to *how* political society (the state) creates and enforces its modus operandi (literal capitalism) through coercive and non-coercive control (qua hegemony). For Gramsci, political society, in its traditional sense, held two major systems for control (for the continuation and reproduction of capitalism), the first as directly coercive in the military and police, and the second in more subtle, propagandist, and non-coercive modes through civil society as schools, churches and the mainstream media (Gramsci, 2007). If we consider in late stage capitalism that 'the state', as the layered political structures of a given nation, is comprised of those servile to the celebrity billionaires and mega-corporations, we can connect this directly to the *how* of reproductive tendencies in education systems (our focus) and other non-coercive structures.

In Australia, the school curriculum is controlled entirely by government (Cornelius & Cornelius-Bell, 2022). Alongside the deprofessionalising of teachers nationally, the move towards a national curriculum commissioned directly by the Department for Education and Minister sees the *direct* influence of the state in the reproduction of culture (qua capitalist hegemony). Here, we can depict education as indoctrination into the norms, understandings, knowledges, attitudes and values directly stipulated by political society. This is one example of the direct control political society has over systems which are *legally mandated* to civil society – literally, students must attend school or are deemed truant. Naturally, this curriculum is classed, raced and seeks to reintegrate perspectives

under capitalist hegemony (c.f. Mackinlay, 2018; Peacock et al., 2015). Naturally, teachers' agency in this relation cannot be understated, where teachers exercise radical agency to advance anti-capitalist, anti-racist perspectives, however by and large this is not radical *enough* or widespread *enough* to suggest that the pre-tertiary education system is anything but imbued with capitalist hegemony and creates in young people an exclusively capitalist epistemology. Here, the *culture* valued by our school systems is one of capitalist culture, and increasingly explicitly tied to 'work readiness', with undertones of fascism.

> *I learned our government must be strong,*
> *It's always right and never wrong.*
> *Our leaders are the finest men,*
> *And we elect them again and again* (Seeger, 1963).

Higher education, then, as a less concretely prescribed curriculum remains strongly influenced by political society. Historically, universities have served as a space for the pursuit of knowledge about the world. Teaching enters as a mode to inculcate students into the research methods of particular disciplines, and those who were 'intellectually rigorous enough' would succeed – these were by and large white men. We can clarify this facile assertion, however, showing that those who demonstrated collegiality with the university's hegemon (a particular subset of the traditional intellectuals) were most likely to succeed, and because historically this role had been offered to, nearly exclusively, white men of bourgeois and capitalist origin, that is what was valued and amplified by the academy. Here begins the simplest of reproductive strategies. Those who are "like those leading" could continue to be indoctrinated in. With the opening of higher education to the working class and women, there was a sudden influx of *others* who, in spite of layered structural disadvantage, were eventually able to succeed at entering the academy proper. This reformist, liberal view that "if we can see us, we can be us" requires sacrificial offerings to initially prove the ability to ascend against all odds, rather than recognising the potential of humanity collectively. Labouring the point, the meritocratic view that those who are most academically successful will become professors with time is a fallacy. Instead, accounting for the 1970s academic hegemony, we can see that "white men will become professors with time". So, as the people who "reproduce" knowledge *for* white men continue to enable white men to enter academic hierarchy the non-coercive reproduction of status quo (hegemony) is maintained. I wish to advance, here, that it was in fact the students who challenged the hegemony of the era, not, indeed, the staff, and therefore the notion of the golden era is a history written by the victors: the capitalist hegemon in universities, which is deeply classed, raced and gendered.

The academic institution serves primarily as a site of cultural reproduction. This culture, while contested, remains hegemonic. Academics may take roles in challenging the

status quo and transforming the research, learning and teaching environments of the institution, but are frequently bound by rules and norms which directly prohibit being "too radical". Over time, creeping managerialism and corporate structures in the academy have further locked down the freedom of academics to *be* radical in any direction (Bonnell, 2016). A brief detour through Gramsci's conception of the intellectual is worthwhile here to nuance this understanding. If we consider prima facie that higher education progresses students from novice toward intellectuality in some area, we can see that the fundamental bona fide role of higher education *is* the production of intellectuals. Gramsci bifurcates intellectuals (Gramsci, 2007). A traditional intellectual meets the depiction above and is someone educated into a position of privileged knowledge and holding a societal role which is deemed important by the capitalist class, but also reproduces hegemony through their positioning. Gramsci explicitly included academics in this group, alongside religious clergy, doctors and lawyers. An organic intellectual, however, is a person who emerges from the subaltern (literally a group of people in civil society who are not represented in, or are not members of hegemonic political society) and supports the formation and articulation of the worldview of their class actively shaping and constructing coherence, unity and direction from the subaltern's struggles (Gramsci, 2007). Organic intellectuals may exist on university campuses, but it would be exceptional to consider an academic staff member as one, even if they are broadly supportive of the struggles of the subaltern. Here, again, higher education reflects political society's hegemony and subaltern views are *literally* unrepresented in these spaces, except perhaps in knowledge "about". The extractive realities of capitalism are to blame (Fraser, 2022), and institutionally the systematic othering of subaltern, colonised and gendered, knowledge continues in a blind effort to pursue perfect capitalist hegemony (Arbon, 2008; Carbin, 2021; Nakata, 2002).

Radicalism and Collective Consciousness

The radical moments, remembered best in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, have largely vanished from contemporary universities. Student activism now is frequently concerned with divisions on the basis of equality and racism, and climate and ecology, rather than utter structural transformation. Importantly, I do not raise this disparagingly. Student activism of the 2000s-2020s has been powerful and relevant and takes different forms to the purely protest activism of the 1970s era. However, an important distinction must be raised. If the university campus of the 1970s era was a fermentation site for radicalism, then the university of the 2020s is a fermentation site for disengagement and disbelief. Student organising in the 1970s was hinged on a praxis connection between a relatively "bourgeois" student body and often workers, with students seeing themselves as a conduit for workers "liberation" from wage slavery (or just toward better life conditions for the less Marxian amongst them) (Hastings, 2003).

The idealism, driven by an influx of Humanities students accessing free education,

in Australia, is relevant here. With growing numbers of first in family students, free access to education and readily available scholarships to study, students were bringing increasingly diverse perspectives to university spaces. Universities became booming sites of activist activity, organising protests, creating petitions, lobbying and rallying, holding moratoria, and so on, which connected the university as a physical place (a town square) to the broader public. Here, students partnered with workers and politicians alike to create conditions for structural transformation. At some moments, these even verged on liberatory movements, but these conditions were not brought because their academics (vis. teachers and supervisors) were radicals inspiring action. Rather, students brought the cultural ferment of civil society with them to the higher education classroom and demanded a seat at the table (Cornelius-Bell, 2021a).

Academic staff of this era were frequently criticised for their stasis in the face of social change post-1960, and while the institutional spaces themselves were often home to radical happenings, the institutional leadership remained staunchly conservative (Forsyth, 2020; Murphy, 2015). Indeed, curricular shift was famously slow and saw students erupting in activism against archaic examination methods, the teaching of neo-colonial histories, and the disempowering modalities of assessments in the university (Cornelius-Bell, 2021a). As a result, students began to demand a seat at the table to negotiate transformation of education at a structural level. Eventually, in Australia, academic hegemony adapted, enabling limited student "voices" in governance and decision making and with rising corporate governance of universities, students were eventually legislated into limited governance positions (Cornelius-Bell, 2021b). This incorporation of students into governance and decision making bodies has also been mirrored globally (c.f. Bateson & Taylor, 2004; Borg, 2019; Klemenčič, 2011). However, this inclusion hardly heralds a seismic shift in governance modalities away from hegemony, rather hegemony subsumes student voices by outnumbering and invalidating their experiences and disenfranchising radical perspectives. Overall, in spite of perceptions as a knowledge frontier, the glacial pace of change in the academy remains a constant, even in 2023.

The rise of student politics and unionism requires further explication in light of stasis and students' role in bridging workers' rights, radical movements and social change with the academy. Accepting that students are in a process of becoming intellectuals, even in the loosest sense, through their participation in higher education, we can see the conditioning effects of capitalist *and* university hegemony on students' activist movements. With rising student unionism across the angloshpere during the 1970s, and the inclusion of students in the structures of university governance since, this phenomena has been the attention of several studies (Altbach, 1989; Eaton, 2002; Rochford, 2006). However, incorporating a Gramscian perspective on the way in which a political society directed education forestalls organic intellectuality remains missing from this space. Students who engage in activism, unionism and student politics broadly are likely to brush

against formalised structures of organised activism. Importantly, students who participate in activism are not necessarily student unionists or politicians and vice versa. Indeed, in my research, I have found that many student unionists were not activist, and were instead seeking political ascendency, seeing the student union as a practicing ground for their future interactions with constituency and political hierarchy. However, by and large, student unions were formed in Australia as a result of student activism. By uniting students under a union banner, or at least varied membership in associations and societies, students had a formal structure which could be funded, organised and governed.

The 1980s student societies were often a form of distributive democratic governance, using the society as a banner under which key issues could be debated, nuanced and (political) strategy formed (Cornelius-Bell, 2021a). Concomitantly, student political factions began to take interest in controlling these relatively informal groupings for the same reasons as contemporary students interested in them – the chance to develop political skills ready for their self-idealised trajectory of politician and member of parliament. Between in-fighting, the erosion of the power of unions broadly under the Liberal/National Coalition in Australia and the insistence from university hegemony that unions were a distraction from students' studies, saw conditions shift in the early 2000s. These structures, which were briefly formalised as unions and held significant power, operations, and potential, have since been eroded in Australia as a result of Voluntary Student Unionism, laissez faire student politicians, and powerful university hegemony (Rochford, 2006).

Student activist and student politicians are frequently divided. Student activists, as raised above, often originate in a subaltern: the working class, non-dominant sex or gender expression, non-White and so on and build allyship amongst the student body towards activism in varied forms, from vocal protest to petition signing, and from violent insurgency to letter writing. Student politicians, however, frequently skate across these issues and are *often*, though not always, bourgeois in origin seeking political power and notoriety. However, neither group can genuinely challenge university hegemony. Despite generations of challengers to the status quo passing through the higher education institution, the majority of "wins" in structural social transformation have been won from outside the academy with little effect on the academy to the point that academia still harbours rampant inequities in hiring not commensurate with legislative requirements for corporations and businesses. However, this account is not entirely fair to student activists, who are *more* likely to move towards organic intellectuality. In illustrating this, the next section introduces an ethnographic account of student politics as a bourgeois site of political society's direct reproduction and its role in appropriating the culture and experience of the bona fide working class (a microcosmic hegemonic subsumption).

The Dumpling House, Hegemony, Performativity and Student Politics

Student politics is rife with a prevailing unconsciousness. While, linguistically, these students adopt the language of the traditional intellectuals of social science and political philosophy to explain phenomena, their very modus operandi is a direct reproduction of political society. Students of the 2010s and 2020s are directly party to conversations about the structure and nature of higher education, the role of late stage capitalism in global exploitation and extraction, and the intersectional disadvantage increasingly faced globally by students, workers and others in civil society. However, the student politicians who borrow this language bring a vitriolic,, yet equally naïve complex, to their indoctrination of urban-Melbournian bourgeois would-be-unionists. Having not studied or experienced the changes to institutions either as traditional intellectuals, nor having felt the contemporary debt-laden experience of student being in the twenty-first century, they perform a care and ethic of interest, without a genuine basis for this understanding, often appropriated from their peers who are genuinely suffering under capitalism's extractive and damaging tail.

While student politicians, union leaders and the occasional radical left activist share stirring speeches of admirable essay-like quality, there remains a serious and endemic lack of mobilisation against hegemony. Rather than blaming this phenomena on students' apathy, we can see that those who purport themselves as leaders amongst the student cohort are, in fact, more interested in political *careers* than *liberatory ends* towards addressing the core issues actually facing students.

I was embedded, as an ethnographer, amongst a group of South Australian student politicians across 2019-2020 and observed the appropriation, bullying, distortion and hegemonic complicity driven largely by fulsome political parties (the Australian Labor Party, and its right wing faction) that turned student politics into a toxic and self-aggrandising space, rampant with militant individualism, and a lack of care for constituency, genuine issues, or any social change. While, this attitude is not *actually* experienced by students (partly due to contemporary disengagement with these self-serving politics) the coal face of student politics remains a prime example of how hegemony reproduces.

The excerpt narrative below comes from my doctoral research, where I studied student politicians, and illustrates two important phenomena; first, the performative factionality of student politics, where "left" and "right" are manufactured members of the same larger political party, and second, the appropriation of working class (proletarian) culture as a vehicle for self-aggrandising, division and distraction from bona fide movement towards social transformation. The particular narrative below came after being embedded with the group for three months and acting as a student representative myself. It is 2019:

I had already been in Melbourne for some weeks at this point, having attended the Tertiary Education and Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) student summit and conference, and the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) Annual General Meeting. There were murmurs amongst the CAPA attendees, an annual meeting of postgraduate association presidents from across the country, of 'the show' that NUS[1] put on each year. I was particularly attentive to the discussion of the NUS National Conference ('NatCon') and the 'nightmare of screaming reprobates and dogmatic espousers' which, apparently, saw 'student representation take a slide back into the primordial ooze'. Clearly, I was not sure what I was in for. In for a penny, in for a pound, as a keen 'innovator' of student politics and hopeful for substantive change of practice in the realm of StuPol, I largely tuned out any warning signs or alarm bells. It should have dawned on me that we were essentially set to attend a 'school camp lock in'. The NLS seniors had organised our accommodation, the transport, our food, and set a schedule of events that we were not to deviate from. Having already acclimatised to travelling on university funds, this was a stark change of pace. In addition, as someone who had almost always needed to 'go home' from school camps in the past, this whole experience was very novel – not to mention having significant travel and life experience on my undergraduate colleagues. I thought, treat this like field work – this is your field work – but I was barely prepared for what transpired.

On Saturday, 7th December 2019 at 7pm, the Flinders University group of the National Labor Students[2] faction received a Facebook Message summoning us to a dinner to occur at 9pm in China Town. We weren't told exactly what we were going to, however secrecy was idolised amongst the faction leaders, and none of the greenhorns were actually 'party members' at this stage – not to be trusted with important information. It would be a shame, it was said, if The Right, or worse still SAlt[3], were to learn of our plans. Having not yet joined the rest of the Flinders faction in the Backpackers Hotel, and not really knowing what the plan was, uneasy

[1] The National Union of Students

[2] The left wing faction of the students of the Australian Labor Party

[3] The "Socialist Alternative" a progressive Marxist left party

about attending a dinner this late, I decided that I should eat first. Indeed, I was increasingly glad that I was staying in a hotel after hearing stories from my informants come friends in the backpackers. A string of messages instructing us on the 'where and when' of the event, what we should prepare, and what limited information we were to be privy to, slowly filtered in. I made my way towards Little Bourke Street. I am unfailingly early to events, and here I was fortunate to pick up some ethnographic insight. An avid walker, I have a tendency to 'walk the block' when I am early for an event. As an observational scientist, I cannot help but note and remember people, actions and customs, particularly rooted amid study. It was not a huge surprise to me, then, to see at 8:30pm a very large group of Student Unity[4] members making their quite meaningful way towards, what appeared, a large white colosseum-style building in the middle of China Town. I felt that a confluence of factors must have been on my side that night; not only was I narrowly escaping a potential, supposed, altercation with Unity, but I was able to get a bit of a head start on where 'they would be' should there be any post-dinner 'discussions' – sheer luck had rewarded the early bird. I was tipped off, particularly, to their presence when I saw my student from earlier in the semester. He had identified himself as a proud member of Unity, and had, at that time, intended to change up a stagnant FUSA[5]. While he ran for a position on FUSA's student council, he was unsuccessful – so here, in Melbourne's heart, was a Unity member without an elected position, attending NatCon. Of course, as much as it was clear I could see him, he could see me. Having been collegial – in as much as a tutor-student relationship normally allows – we exchanged subtle nods and a hushed 'hello' as he continued in orderly form with his faction entering the building. I felt more out of place than before. Questioning myself about my participation in student politics, and my reasons for undertaking fieldwork on this expedition, I continued pacing. Not long after, some NLS leaders arrived. Unlike my student, they did not recognise me, but they definitely played their best spy film impression looking around for snipers come rats before they, too, entered the towering colosseum. By around

[4] The right wing faction of the students of the Australian Labor Party

[5] Flinders University Student Association

8:50pm, some Adelaide University NLS members arrived: friendly faces who had clearly decided to come to Chinatown early for a smoke and a chat. There was a small distance between them and I, but I rounded the corner and gave a feign of surprise, 'oh, am I early?'. Unshaken by my arrival, the leader of their group, and a national office bearer for the NUS, responded 'nah, we're going in there in a minute, just having a smoko', gesturing towards the white building, which was now illuminated in neon and bright spotlights, and presented itself as the Shanghai Village dumpling house. Pretending not to know 'more than I should', we chatted. I stood my distance; as an asthmatic, smokers are something of a trade-hazard. Moments later, our President-elect arrived. He was obviously flustered by my presence but was in the company of his seniors and it seemed he felt he needed to account for my mere existence, something which felt entirely alien and unnecessary given the actual optics of the circumstances.

It quickly became apparent that the towering roman building masquerading as a Chinese dumpling house was to be our destination, too. Very slowly, then all at once, members of NLS appeared from out of the woodwork, forming a soldierly queue outside Shanghai Village. It was clear to me, after witnessing the leading events, that this was a deliberate staging of a kind of battle: that Unity had arrived first, seniors had exchanged words, and that NLS had quite deliberately orchestrated meeting in the same building not half an hour later. As we entered, we were hurried by restaurant staff past the regular customers on the ground floor, up an incredibly narrow and surprisingly slippery staircase at the side of the sparsely decorated raw timber-clad building. Aside from the occasional Chinese lantern, there was little sign that this was, indeed, a dumpling house, except perhaps for the tell-tale smell. After climbing in a middle of the pack position and pausing on the – what I later determined to be beer-soaked – slippery steps for what seemed like an unreasonable amount of time, hurried instructions came back down from the top of the stairs. We were to sing.

Sing? There was only one NLS tune that I was even becoming aware of at that stage, a bastardised version of Pete Seeger's Solidarity Forever, though there had been no demand on us to actually learn the tune. That was of no matter, as it was clear that the

seniors were well aware of the lyrics and needed only the hum of the emergent members to support them.

Solidarity forever
Solidarity forever
Solidarity forever
For the union makes us strong

When the union's inspiration through the workers' blood shall run
There can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun;
Yet what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one
But the union makes us strong (Seeger, 1955)

It was after this verse that I finally emerged from the stairs, faced by a second-floor room full of Unity members booing and jeering back at us as we crossed, what was clearly their dinner, to get to the next staircase on the other side of the room. After a clear and deliberate bottlenecking of the room by NLS seniors, we began to cross Unity's floor, to my surprise, this time Unity sang back:

Solidarity forever
Solidarity forever
Solidarity forever
For the union makes us strong

Cause you don't believe in Unions and you don't believe in rights,
You couldn't win a working class electorate if you tried;
You only win a seat because it's middle-class and white,
Cause you're dirty, greeny[6]*, scum.*

It dawned on me that this was not an attack song, but indeed under its intended purpose, a song of solidarity repurposed to align Labor's two factions against the 'rest' – SAlt and the Grindies. Finally working our way up the final set of stairs, as the song continued, I could not help but drop into a kind of meditative state pondering the relationship which had been set up as strongly oppositional. Indeed, a vitriolic bitterness had been instilled during our early meetings and election cycle, which all of a sudden seemed to be taking a back seat as the two factions under one

[6] Positioning themselves as distinct from the Australian Greens, a left progressive political party.

> Party came together. Speaking to other newcomers at the 'vego' table that night, it became clear to me that their universities' NLS had led them to believe that Unity was, indeed, the enemy. Towards the end of the night, however, it became clear that through the drunkard singing and general rabble rousing for restaurant staff, that the leadership of NLS, through their 'farewell speeches' fully intended this event to not see the light of day. There were assurances made that our positions would become unstable, our terms made difficult, and that our stipends would disappear, should we speak to Honi[7] about the gathering. *(Cornelius-Bell, 2021a, pp. 280–283)*

The organising of students, the ability to organise a party, the confrontation and the learning indirectly about war of position are all necessary features for the government of a country, at least in Gramscian theory. However, this is not designed as a counter-hegemonic experiment. Student politics organises around a set of values which sees state political hierarchies reproduced amongst a diverse student body. In some senses, this has the endpoint of students moving into state politics. However, for the most part, student politics ends up with disappointed students with incomplete transcripts and deficient studies, destined to letterbox drop for state elections. An understanding of student politics as a space of reproduction for state hegemony adds a new light to the nature of students' positions of relative power and authority. In this regard, universities offer students paid opportunities to travel to national conferences, where large scale political narratives are played out "for show" to train students into undertaking political positions. This is not a space which creates the organic intellectual, nor one which authentically supports representational politics; it is a space which reinforces and rewards the disconnected, flashy, populist politics at work in the state. Indeed, this microcosm of political society's politics could certainly be seen as the grim future of state politicians, as increasingly demonstrative, performative and dictatorial leadership establishes "for show" confrontations, and leverages student monies to act as a purported functionary for students that has no bearing on students' actual needs.

Transformation or Stasis: A Conception of Praxis for the Future

Higher education remains a site of reproduction. While challengers come and go, the overall positioning of the institution is that of reproducer: of knowledge, of research, of teaching and learning, and in the production of intellectuals. However, higher education, I believe, offers us significant hope for a transformative future. The tools of political

[7] A University of Sydney student media publication.

society have been incredibly powerful in shaping the contemporary globalised world. If nothing else, the colonial projects of Europe have been incredibly successful in spreading global "cultures". Sadly, these cultures are exploitative, extracting, divisive and dangerous to humanity and global ecology. Right now, the macro culture of political society is reproduced through the curriculum and research outputs of the academy, even if at times this is subtle. Amongst student cultures, student politicians continue to strive towards ascendency into a political system which itself reinforces this hegemony. In a sense, there is a dialectic movement of students out of student politics, often with unfinished degrees, into the political society which has increasingly more say in the governance of the university sector and a wholesale import of capitalist logics back into the institution, partly via students who have made this transition to formal "real" politics. While pockets of resistance continue to challenge the status quo, doing the important work of challenging the vice grip of the capitalist episteme and its divisive constituents, including sexism, racism, anti-LGBTQI+ tendencies, and so on, we remain integral members of a system which advances capitalist acceleration and intensification.

Challenging this hegemony is our greatest challenge. Academics, even under increasingly precarious conditions, hold enormous potential in the transformation of society, as we currently condition the thinking and working of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of students globally per year. Academic activism, then, must be leveraged as a theory + practice model to challenge the destructive and harmful nature of contemporary capitalism. Here, if we are able to respond to, form strong relationships with, and be influenced by civil society in our activism and academic work we can begin to, in part, work towards responding to social injustices, challenge the capitalist status quo and bridge the gap between the traditional and organic intellectual. Moreover, we can have a direct impact on emerging organic intellectuals in our charge – our students. Currently, even when we actively resist hegemony, our institutions end up advancing capitalist ends, we should take actions which enable students' connection with their communities (i.e., with the subaltern) to be imported into the higher education milieux *so that* systematic transformation can occur. Our institutions are crucial battlegrounds for ideological dominance. The "stuffy old professors" uphold the hegemony of political society, both explicitly and implicitly, and do untold damage to *all* who pass through higher education. Alternatively, academic activism can challenge hegemony. As discussed above, Gramsci emphasised the importance of *ideas* and *culture* in social transformation and struggle. In this sense, our institutions which have always been centres of hegemonic Eurocentric knowledge production and dissemination hold significant potential for societal transformation.

We cannot, however, blindly assume that academic activism can create the necessary conditions for challenging hegemony. Indeed, Gramsci warns against superficial and performative activism: similar to the illustration of student politics above, we cannot

be bound to empty rhetoric in the face of the need for substantive change. Our activism, as with all organic activism and intellectuality, must be genuinely connected with the struggles we champion, not decaying into a whinging state about the contemporary nature of higher education and how it has strayed from a "golden age". Rather, we must invite students who themselves can bring the authentic challenges of their lives and their experiences into our progressive praxis, ensuring that we share our knowledge, power, tools and skills, without denying, forestalling or forgetting that students bring a great deal with them to educational experiences. Here, our *collective* efforts are too often co-opted by the very hegemonic politics we seek to challenge. In a world where we have the opportunity to partner with and create grand scale communities with our students (enabled through technologies and a globalised world), allowing hegemonic narratives to continue cannot suffice as our role in the institution, even though this is the hardest to challenge. We should strive collectively toward aligning, listening to, learning from and empowering the subaltern through the enormous and commanding machinery of higher education.

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