**Colonial pedagogy and the nexus between the elite and intellectuals: Gramsci’s ‘organic intellectual’ and the formation of hegemony in postcolonial Sri Lanka**

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“A class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and intellect”

- British Colonial Official Macaulay

The public intellectual is an under researched subject in Sri Lankan academia. To get a sense of the role and the character of this figure one has to scrutinize other discourses such as nationalism, elitism and the legacy of colonial education policies. The colonial civilizing project put in place an explicit strategic plan to create a class of elite to serve as second tier bureaucrats in their administrative machinery. This resulted in the inevitable nexus between the bourgeois elite and the public intellectual, who came to occupy a central place in Sri Lanka’s political and ethnic conflict. Situating the role and character of the elite intellectual within a Gramscian analysis of traditional and organic intellectuals and the related concepts of hegemony and counter-hegemony, this paper will examine the nexus between elitism and public intellectualism in Sri Lanka, and the predicament it creates within a postcolonial state.

Keywords: *colonial pedagogy, Sri Lankan elite, public intellectuals, Gramsci, organic intellectual, hegemony*

There has been no intense debate on the role and character of the Sri Lankan public intellectual, who has gained increasing importance in many respects, particularly in relation to the country’s political and ethnic conflict (D. Bandaranayake, personal communication, March 16, 2015). While Europe and the West, over the last two centuries, has theorized and committed a significant body of literature to evaluate the role and character of the public intellectual (Bouman, 1987; Foucault, 1972; Gramsci, 1971; Karabel, 1996; Kurzman, 2002; Mannheim, 1956; Osborne, 1996; Posner 2001), there has been a marked paucity in explicit scholarship - anthropological, sociological or historical – on public intellectuals in Sri Lanka. In contrast, a specific body of literature has emerged on the subject of the public intellectual in the neighbouring regions of India, China and Taiwan (Hao, 2005; Marinelli, 2012; Ram, 1995; Subramanium, 1987).

Except for some scattered literature on public figures, such as political leaders, statesmen, artists, professionals and writers, there has been only a handful of analysis, which is limited in scope (de Silva, 2013; Ismail, 2005). Ismail’s (2005) polemical work is restricted to a critique of anthropologists and historians who have discursively intervened in peace and conflict resolution in Sri Lanka, and their tools of analysis - Western epistemology. As an alternative strategic measure, he presents postcolonial literature as a liberative force. On the other hand, de Silva (2013) singles out three public intellectuals-academics and exposes them for being organically linked to the status quo and endorsing ideologies of extrajudicial state violence in the civil society beyond the official battle zone in the aftermath of the war, which ended in 2009. In addition, some dated sketchy literature exists on the link between university, government, politics and public opinion (de Silva, 1978; Peiris, 1964). The corpus of non-polemical literature that is available constitutes biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, “life and times genre”, and felicitation volumes of former political and state leaders, popular Buddhist scholar-monks, leaders of the independence struggle, prominent members of linguistic and religious revivalist movements, philanthropists, elite artists, civil servants and professionals**.** The content of most of these non-polemical writings takes on a laudatory or sycophantic nature, offering little or no scope for analysis of the phenomenon of the public intellectual as a social category.

Hence, it is imperative to conduct our scholarly search for Sri Lankan public intellectuals in and through other discourses that seem to offer some reasonable prospects. A cursory survey of such literature will be useful here. The core of scholarly literature produced between the late 19th century and mid 20th century up to Independence in 1948 from the British colonial rule, occupies the national independence struggle and political reforms, and both Sinhala and Tamil religious and linguistic revivalist movements supported by intellectual input (Coperahewa 2012; de Silva 1981; Dharmadasa 1992; Kailasapathy 1979). In the first two to three decades after Independence, democracy and the postcolonial nation state, and an emerging elite politics made up a central portion of the literature produced by political historians and anthropologists (Wriggins, 1960; Kearney, 1967; Singer, 1964; Fernando, 1973; Robert, 1974). However, it was with the advent of the ethnic conflict and the consequent civil war that a plethora of discourses began to dominate the intellectual and research landscape.

Since then, for instance, there have been many studies on postcolonial Sri Lanka’s conflict, and they have encompassed histories and facets of Sinhala-Tamil ethnic enmity (Abeysekera and Gunasinghe, 1987; de Silva, 1986; Tambiah, 1986), constitutional arrangements and devolution of power in relation to the ethnic question (Marasinghe, 2004; Thiruchelvam, 1987), aspects of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim nationalisms that underlie the conflict (Cheran 2001; Jeganathan & Ismail, 1995; Manikkalingam 1995; Nesiah, 2001), militarization, human rights, civil society and popular culture (de Mel, 2007) and intervention of Buddhist communities in Sri Lankan politics and ethnic conflict, the nexus between Buddhism and ethno-nationalist violence and the role of radical Buddhist monks in revolutionary politics (Bastin, 2009; Kapferer, 1983, 1988; Obeyesekere,1984; Spencer, 1990a, 1990b, 2007; Tambiah, 1992). Although the above discourses tend to dominate the research scholarship, sporadic, yet important work on the Left Movement, the Labour Movement and the rise of the colonial bourgeoisie have been added (See Jayawardena, 1972, 2002; Fernando and Skanthakumar (ed), 2014).

Prior to taking up a comparative analysis of the literature concerning the elite in order to explore the nexus between them and the public intellectual, the next section will locate the debate within the Gramscian analysis of the organic and traditional intellectual as theorized through a Marxian framework. The concepts of hegemony and counter-hegemony, which are most fundamental to Gramsci’s thinking, will be discussed in terms of their relevance to the public intellectual. This will facilitate us to identify and classify the intellectuals as we encounter them within the larger discourse of elitism and workout the connections between elitism and public intellectuals

**Situating the intellectual within the tension of Gramscian hegemony and counter-hegemony**

Gramsci’s theory of the intellectual is useful in understanding the role and character of the elite middle class intellectuals that emerged within Sri Lanka’s social and political context during the colonial period. Gramsci identified two types of intellectuals, namely the organic and the traditional (Gramsci, 1971). However, for a fuller appreciation of Gramsci’s conceptualizing of the intellectual, it is essential to grasp the concept of hegemony, fundamental to his thinking (Nieto-Galan 2011). The concept of hegemony is tightly bound to the other Gramscian concepts such as intellectuals, consent, political and civil society, education, popular culture, the media, and subaltern social groups (Mayo, 2013; Nieto-Galan, 2011).

In formulating his theory of hegemony, Gramsci draws from the Marxian conception of ideology based on the assumption that “The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make one class the ruling one, therefore the ideas of its dominance” (Marx & Engels, 1970, p. 64). Not only does the ruling class produce the ruling ideas through its control over the means of intellectual production, but also the dominated classes produce ideas that do not necessarily serve their own interests. Larrain (1983) explains that these classes that “lack the means of mental production and are immersed in production relations which they do not control”, tend to “reproduce ideas” that express the dominant material relationships (as cited in Mayo, 2013, p.419). Thus, ideology is a key tool of hegemony, and it is the process by which meanings, signs and value in social life are produced and legitimized by the dominant political class in order to remain in power.

Gramsci’s notion of hegemony is closely linked to his enduring contribution to Marxism, which is his emphasis on the cultural dimension of revolution (Mayo, 2013). Hegemony was the result of Gramsci’s refusal to accept deterministic explanations for social inequalities; and he emphasized the limitations of reducing politics to mere socio-economic factors. Furthermore, Gramsci held the view that a full understanding of social stability through social control within a political society was not possible by merely examining its laws, police, army, prisons - the ‘official’ force and violence. This political stabil­ity had to be explained by other factors - further physical coercion and repression. Therefore, Gramsci’s theorizing on hegemony tries to explain how familiar institutions such as education, religion, familyand a range of other microstructures of everyday practices contribute to the production of meaning and values, whereby they maintain and ensure spontaneous consent of the various social classes (Nieto-Galan 2011).

Moreover, civil society becomes the space in which a dominant social group organizes hegemony or consent, and the dominated, in turn, work out their counter-hegemonic projects. Hegemony is a power-tool for any class or group that claims ideological superiority over subordinated groups. For instance, a privileged language may act as a tool to reinforce cultural influ­ence and control over weaker linguistic communities. This Gramscian notion became the most central and, perhaps, contentious issue in Sri Lanka’s conflict. Hegemony, therefore, refers to a social situation in which “all aspects of social reality are dominated by or supportive of a single class” (Livingstone, 1976, p. 235). Thus, hegemony is conceived of as a dynamic force, a continuous process of formation. In this sense, hegemony could change in different times and places and is historically contingent (Mayo, 2013). Scholars such as Raymond Williams have extended its subtle meaning further. His clarification runs thus:

hegemony is not simply the crude defense of the dominant opinions, nor the simple manipulation of things from above. It is much more than this: it embraces the whole of our reality, all our habits and hopes; it is our own perception of reality. (cited in Holub, 1992, p.6)

Therefore, social stability occurs when lower subaltern classes accept and consent to hegemony. For Gramsci, only a progressive construction of cultural counter hegemonycould act as a cultural weapon against that subaltern tacit and passive consent (Nieto-Galan, 2011). Gramsci associated hegem­onic values with the dominant industrial bourgeois class. As a result, its counter hegemonyhad to grow up from the popular culture of the working class, through an ambitious process of democratization of knowledge. As far as education goes, his was a project that extended far beyond an analysis and discussion of schooling and formal educational issues. One might argue that education, in its wider context and conception, played a central role in Gramsci’s overall strategy for social transformation since, in his view, every relationship of hegemony is an educational one (Mayo, 2013).

Another crucial issue for Gramsci was the problem of *intellectuals,* who, in his view, concep­tualized the direct reproduction of an effective hegemony. In the rural, pre-industrial and feudal world of the Ancient Regime, *traditional* intellectuals, such as clergymen, would have monopolized the construction of a specific hegemony, but in spite of their continuing influence, in the capitalist industrial world, other kinds of intellectuals became progressively more influential: new professionals, judges, experts, teachers, civil servants, and scientists (Nieto-Galan, 2011). For instance, during Sri Lanka’s colonial experience, an elite class was nurtured to serve the political, economic and social needs of the colonial rule and to create, in particular, new values, norms, and loyalties by recruiting these elite as civil servants to the colonial administrative machinery (Jayaweera, 1979). Very early in the British colonial rule, the indigenous elite realized the importance of English education and, as a result, they invested in their children’s English education. A clergyman noted this trend as early as 1814, when he commented that the children of the bourgeoisie “know that the acquiring of the English language is the direct road to temporal honours and emolument” (as cited in Malalgoda, 1976, p. 208). According to Jayawardena (2002), many members of the bourgeoisie emerged out of the petty-bourgeois class, their parents being clerks, teachers, journalists, and apothecaries, and then by the late 19th century, Sinhala and Tamil bourgeoisie increasingly entered the legal and medical professions, producing doctors, barristers, advocates and proctors, who were organic to the elite stratum. Thus, the Gramscian *organic* intellectuals emerge from these groups, who function directly or indirectly on behalf of a dominant social group to organize coercion and consent. In Gramsci’s words:

Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essen­tial function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, *organically*, one or more strata of *intellectuals*, which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its function, not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields. (Cited in Forgacs, 2000, p.301)

For Gramsci, the only hope of real social change was the progressive emergence of new intellectuals from the lowliest social classes, who would be capable of slowly subverting the élites’ hegemony. These new intellectuals had to create a new culture that, in theory, could challenge the power of a modern capitalist state like Italy in the early decades of the twentieth century. In his utopian view, any person was a potential intellectual who could fight against passive consent and acceptance of a specific cultural hegemony. As a result of this process, the more people engaged in mental tasks of organization, deliberation and leadership, the higher the level of democratization in a specific group or society as a whole.

**Rise of the elite, and creation of a hegemonic order**

Elitist analysis is concerned with how individuals are recruited into personal influence as part of a political process (Leach & Mukherjee, 1970). In Sri Lanka, soon after independence in 1948, a growing interest in elite studies emerged in anthropology, sociology and history (Fernando, 1973; Peiris, 1964; Roberts, 1974; Singer, 1964). In Bottomore’s (1964) words, the new scholarship provided “an excellent opportunity to examine the social forces which are creating new elites, as well as the activities of the elite themselves in the attempted transformation of their societies into modern, economically advanced nations” (as cited in Fernando, 1973, p.86). In 1964, Singer advanced the view that Sri Lanka’s (then Ceylon) emerging elite was a “synthesis” of traditional and western educated elite (p.144). Although essentially a middle class elite wedded to middle class interests, Singer (1964) contended that the post-independence elite was conscious of thenecessity to identify the interest of the Sinhalese population at large with the interest of the groups it represents. Singers’s (1964) central thesis is grounded on a comparative analysis of the controversial 1956 election and the resultant legislature with an antecedent legislature. He attempted to analyze the 1956 election spearheaded by Oxford scholar and former Prime Minister S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, based on an intransigent nationalist campaign to accord a pre-eminent position to Buddhism, and Sinhala language by making it the national language. In addition, he took drastic measures to restore the traditional Sinhalese society by elevating the social standing of Buddhist monks, native doctors, teachers, farmers and workers (de Silva 1981).

However, contrary to Singer’s conclusion, subsequent political historians have postulated that Bandaranaike, a shrewd politician and statesman, was manipulating the primordial Sinhalese nationalist sentiments to gain political victory for his newly formed Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) (de Silva 1981; Dharmadasa, 1974). Singer’s comparison of political elites in pre-independence and post independence legislatures and his conclusion have been further challenged by other class-based analyses of political elites (Fernando, 1973; Jayawardena, 2002; Robert, 1974).

Relying on Pareto and Mosca’s (1908) writings as a point of departure, Fernando (1973) asserts that one of the conspicuous features of Asian countries is the fact that they are governed by an elite, who are easily distinguishable from the non-elite masses. Writing about the Indian context, Leach and Mukherjee (1970) argue that political respectability depended on two criteria: a demonstrated hostility to the colonial power and professional competence of a kind, which the colonial authorities would recognize. Furthermore, Fernando (1973) identifies two distinct classes of elites in Sri Lanka – local and national elites, while Robert (1974), agreeing with this class division, attempts to analyze them along the two primary categories of power and status. According to Fernando (1973), national elites include those who make decisions or wield influences that have national effects, while the local elite operate at the village or municipal level. However, for Oberst (1985), although these two distinctions are slightly vague, they indicate that power in Sri Lanka exists at two different nodal points and that influence is wielded by different individuals at each level.

Moreover, these elites are classed as a New Elite; nevertheless their origins went back to the pre-colonial traditional elite. However, in spite of their education and status within the colonial administrative structure, they were subordinate to the colonial elite who held the reins of power (de Silva, 1981; Fernando, 1973; Jayawardena, 2002; Roberts, 1974). According to Robert (1974), the elite derive power from surplus wealth and gain control of political power while their status emanates from a distinctive life-style and a consumption pattern that attracts emulation from other persons, as well as high caste status and access to valued intellectual and cultural activities in society (p.11). Moreover, he argues that a category of Ceylonese (now Sri Lankans) “at the top” who could be distinguished from the masses was not simply a product of historical writings, but in fact those who enjoyed substantial power and status had an image of themselves as a distinctive social group (p.3). In *Nobodies to somebodies: the rise of the colonial bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka* (2002), Jayawardena offers a meta-review of Sri Lanka’s bourgeois elite, rejecting the caste-based analysis and according primacy to class as the analytical category. Jayawardena (2002) corroborates Robert’s (1974) position when she argues that despite differences in ethnicity, religion and caste the bourgeoisie have acted as a classon many issues. Jayawardena’s (2002) observation was particularly evident during the National Independence struggle, when the elite of all ethnic groups acted as one class, in spite of caste differences, to effect political reform and legitimize their status within the colonial administrative machinery. All of them were affected by the same grievances, primarily the second-class treatment meted out to them by the colonial masters. As a distinct class, these elite with a multi-ethnic composition became progressively alienated from the lower classes as they won democratic rights, such as representation in the legislature and universal adult suffrage. Jayawardena (2002) argues that universal suffrage, although a liberal reform, proved to be detrimental to the minorities and the lower classes as it consolidated the dominance of the majority ethnic group and, within it, that of the highest caste. According to Jayawardena (2002), the demographic size largely determined voting power, especially, when the *goigama* caste formed the majority. For instance, in the 1931 State Council election universal adult suffrage was put into practice; however, its first Board of Ministers had no lower caste members.

Similarly, the 1936 State Council election returned an exclusively Sinhala, predominantly Buddhist and *goigama* Board of Ministers with just one lower *karava* caste member (Jayawardena, 2002). This has led Jayawardana (2002) to speculate whether in a hierarchical society such as Sri Lanka, based on caste and class, with glaring economic, educational and social disparities, political dynasties established by the dominant caste tend to maintain their power, in spite of universal franchise and other democratic practice. In many ways, there is consensus among these writers that through capital accumulation and investing in education the new rich have succeeded in building a “dynastic democracy” in Sri Lankan politics (Jayawardena, 2002, p. 355). However, dynastic politics reached its worst nadir during the rule of former President Mahinda Rajapakse (2005-2015), whose entire family had a stake in the running of the country, with despotic manifestations. Jayawardena (2002) warns that “this congruence of political and social power, it might be argued, stands in the way of full democratization of society” (p.355).

Although Jayawardena (2002) and others give primacy to class in their analysis, caste continues to play a crucial role not only in Sri Lankan politics, but also among the Buddhist clergy as it did in traditional Sinhalese society, and continues to plague the Tamil society as well. However, as a result of the colonial project, capital accumulation helped the previous ‘nobodies’ to become ‘somebodies’ and education gave this new class a “stamp of learning” (Jayawardena, 2002, p.353). In Jayawardena’s assessment, although the bourgeoisie was involved in politics through agitational campaigns for political reform and equal rights, these struggles were limited as they were grounded in a class-bound, caste-oriented, male dominated society where “economic privilege and political aspirations were closely linked” (2002, p.353).

Likewise, education became the process through which the bourgeoisie transformed part of its wealth into social and political ‘capital’ (de Silva 1981; Jayawardena, 2002). Thus, castes with greater access to capital and education were able to change the rules of caste hierarchy and invent myths of origin, adopt a feudal bourgeois lifestyle to emulate high status persons in society. Jayawardena (2002) contends that ‘low caste’ no longer became synonymous with ‘low class’ (p.356). Wealth and education, she claims, have redefined caste hierarchy, and conflicts seemingly on caste lines turned out to be inter-class bickering for political recognition and social acceptability. Moreover, the wealth-owning, educated bourgeoisie were in search of ‘identity’, and as a class emerged to assert their hegemonic superiority and exclusiveness through elitism. The following section will look at the role of education in the formation of an elite and what kinds of transformations occurred in the traditional “education” systems.

**Educating the elite and the displacement of Sri Lanka’s traditional “educational” structure**

One of the key factors that led to the creation of a new class of elite in Sri Lanka was the social and structural transformation that took place in the traditional “education” system with the arrival of the European colonizers. With the arrival of the Portugese (1505-1658), the Ductch (1658-1796), and the British (1795-1948), the traditional structures were severely disrupted (Ames, 1967). In a nutshell, the term “education” was a colonial category. Within the traditional Sri Lankan society “education” was not perceived in the same way it was perceived and utilized by the colonial rulers.

Traditionally, the Sinhalese “education” was dominated by Buddhism and focused on the development of the moral and spiritual life with the primary aim of attaining enlightenment and becoming a good citizen (Ames, 1967). As Rahula (1956) explains, it was thought that “Mere learning devoid of this purpose was considered worthless” (p.290). Knowledge (*vidyava*) was valued, but the emphasis was placed on higher “wisdom” (*pañña*), a type of intuition, more than reason: “more concerned with the subject than the object, the inner than the outer world” (Mookerji, 1951, p. xxiii). Therefore, education was primarily evaluated based on its Buddhist content and spiritual goals, secondarily by its practical utility: crafts and trades were, consequently, less valued than spiritual or moral content and activities and, frequently, not taught within a strictly Buddhist monastic context (Ames, 1967). However, other writers hold that practical utility was not completely ignored; only relegated to a subordinate status (Pannatissa Thera, 1951).

The traditional “education” structure was pyramidal. The more “advanced” the level of education the more restricted the clientele and the more Buddhist its content (Ames, 1967). Sri Lanka, then Ceylon, achieved considerable eminence as a centre for higher Buddhist learning (Rahula, 1956; Ruberu, 1962). Only a privileged few – mostly monks and noblemen – advanced to these higher levels. Masses learnt just enough to read and write and some basic training in crafts and trade. Ruberu (1962) describes three types or levels of traditional “schooling” (see also Hevawasam, 1958). The most widespread was the training in apprenticeship offered in crafts, trades and skills provided by families and castes. This training, technical in nature, was not considered a part of “Buddhist education.” In the second level, village classes or “primary schools” operated by lay village literati (and sometimes monks) – children were taught how to read and write. Teacher’s home or the temple was usually the school; the method was rote learning, under strict discipline (de Silva, 1981). Formal education for the majority of folk ended at this level. The third level of education was provided by an organized and graded system of Buddhist temple (*pansala*) “schools” and “colleges” (*pirivena*) run by monks within a monastic context. These institutions educated students who were to become Buddhist monks, teachers, physicians, astrologers or cultured noblemen, who formed the traditional elite ranks, within the entrenched caste and kinship structures. Most laymen, especially those from the peasantry, apparently received a minimal amount of this higher education and frequently none at all (Ryan, 1961).

Similarly, the traditional Tamil educational system in the pre-colonial era did not deviate significantly from what we have seen in the Sinhalese society. Instead of the Buddhist temple, the Hindu *kovil* (temple) played a key role in perpetuating a hierarchized educational system, at the apex of which the upper caste Brahmin or the priest enjoyed his privileges and power. Traditionally, the kings were the patrons of literature and education. As Gunasingam (1999) describes, the priestly caste, who had the monopoly of literacy due to their access to religious texts, conducted temple schools or *gurukulam* classes on verandahs (known as *Thinnai Pallikudam*) to promote basic education in religion and languages such as Tamil and Sanskrit among the upper classes. On the other hand, the other lower castes pursued crafts and trades as was the practice in the Sinhalese society. Thus, the above hierarchized levels of education and learning process was ideally based on a traditionalized, diffuse, personal, and an authoritarian “apprenticeship” relation between the master and a few select pupils (Mookerji, 1951, p.xxv, 413-415). The differences were primarily in the structural contexts of the relationship (kinship, village, or monastic organization) and in educational content (occupational skills, rudiments of literacy, or traditional Buddhist or Hindu and Sanskritic literati culture) (Ames, 1967).

However, with the arrival of the European colonizers, government and missionary schools were established (de Silva 1981; Jayawardena, 2002). Western culture, the Christian religion, and a more formal, impersonal and less diffuse style of education came into being (Ames 1967). Consequently, indigenous practices and traditional religious culture were relegated by depriving privileges and prestige enjoyed by Buddhist monks and Hindu priests. As European colonial educational structures took hold, village temple schools faced the threat of extinction or were forced to adopt Western government certified procedures. As Ames (1967) states, “Europeans gradually attempted to organize and professionalize the training of crafts and trades and to increase the utilitarian nature of education” (p.26). Such transformations must have gradually freed the lay education from the control of the monks and priests, who acted as traditional intellectuals. An immediate upshot of this transformation could have been the recognition of lay status and lay education within the Westernized educational system. These gradual changes would have exposed the Buddhist and Hindu upper class laity, for the first time in Sri Lankan history, to non-monastic, Western-Christian oriented education that transformed them into a distinct class of people, anglophile, ultra-Anglicized and alien to Sri Lanka’s traditional way of life (Jayawardena, 2002).

So it is clear that the emergence of elite in the colonial era was no mere accident. Deliberately tailored colonial educational policies attempted to nurture a westernized element among the indigenous population. In the immediate post-independence period power first came to the hands of men who were educated in accordance with the cultural and political conventions of the oppressors whom they had helped to overthrow (Leach & Mukherjee, 1970). Colonial rule and its economic and political objectives gave rise to a middle class composed of a multi racial group of people educated in English, Christianized and emulating English values, adopting prevalent British social and political attitudes (Jayawardena, 2002). As Misra (1961) points out, this group of Westernized Sri Lankans conformed to Macaulay’s vision of “a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and intellect” (p.307). Thus, the education imparted had a Christian, Western bias and was modeled on the English public school system, and prepared students for Cambridge Senior examinations (de Silva 1981; Jayawardena 2002). As Jayawardena (2002) notes, St. Thomas’ College (a school modeled after a British public school) had a “boarding with house masters and prefects, and the subjects taught were English, Latin, Greek, Christianity, mathematics, English, history and world geography” (p.71). Similarly, Peiris (1964) lists the life-style activities of the indigenous counterparts of the Victorian London in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) as documented in the contemporary newspapers: “… the balls given by well-to-do families, the clubs, games, race meetings, dog carts, morning coats, evening dresses and top hats, the whiskered males and corseted females in Western attire” (p.438)

Prior to the establishment of a university in Sri Lanka in the mid 20th century, rich students and scholarship winners went abroad for university education, mainly to Oxford, Cambridge and the Inns of Court in London (Jayawardena, 2002). On return, they may have joined the administrative service or taken care of inherited wealth. It seems that unlike the professions in law and medicine, professional qualifications were tailored to fit local elite into the lower positions in the colonial administrative service while colonial elite always held the top positions. Fernando (1973) believes that economic pragmatism was the primary motive in introducing Western education to the colonies. It also had a missionary overtone – civilizing the uncivilized - as is revealed, for instance in Macaulay’s pronouncement: “a single shelf of a good English library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia” (as cited in Worsley, 1964, p.27). Even the first ever National University in Sri Lanka set up in the mid 20th century was designed in terms of curricula and architecture after Oxford and Cambridge (de Silva, 1978). In spite of some progressive thinkers envisaging a university that reflected the cultural needs of the country, de Silva (1978) says that the national elite leaders who took over the reins from the colonial masters and the university officials appointed by the government decided otherwise. According to Peiris (1964), leading academic Coomaraswamy envisaged the ideal university as “an institution which would impart an education and not merely “estimate the amount of knowledge possessed by the examinees”; one in which students would acquire “culture and independence of thought”, … institution which would revitalize and promote indigenous culture and oriental languages, while at the same time providing instruction” in modern science, medicine, commerce and agriculture” (p.441). However, contrary to such expectations, the government of the day had its own vision as Jayasuriya (1965) claims: “since education is at the expense of the state … it would be difficult to justify the provision of university education beyond the employment needs of the country” (p.119).

Thus, education remained a privilege of the elite, until nationalist politics brought in sweeping changes in the 1950s when the vernacular or *swabasha* became the island-wide medium of education (Dharmadasa, 1992). The promulgation of the *Sinhala Only Ac*t in 1956 sealed the linguistic domination of the Sinhalese, and this became one of the key grievances of the Tamils in their political and military struggle in the subsequent years. In Jayawardena’s (2002) evaluation, the majority Sinhala community that developed a consciousness of being ‘sons of the soil’ positioning itself against minorities (regarded as aliens) and more importantly, making claims to represent the ‘nation’ (Jayawardena 2002, pp. 356-7). This stance instigated movements among Tamils, Muslims and Burghers who asserted their identity and exclusivity, demanding recognition in politics: thus sowing the seeds of future conflict. Thus, intellectuals became organic to each of these ideological posturing; Sinhalese intellectuals began to legitimize the hegemony of the majority and Tamil intellectuals engaged in counter-hegemonic campaigns. Despite cleavages between the Sinhala rulers and minority groups widening, within each community, the elite fortified their hegemonic position and acted as champions of the masses. However, these ideological, hegemonic consensual structures within both Sinhala and Tamil polity ruptured and erupted time to time in the form of youth uprisings and insurrections (Weis, 2012). The following section will investigate the nexus between the elitism and public intellectuals in light of Gramsci’s organic, traditional intellectual and the concepts of hegemony and counter-hegemony.

**The nexus between elitism and organic intellectuals**

Since the time colonial intervention transformed Sri Lanka’s social structures and paved the way for the emergence of an elite class through a carefully tailored western education programme, intellectuals, organically connected to this class, have occupied centre stage in politics, economics and cultural activities. Although they come across as public intellectuals, these organic intellectuals have played a significant role in the construction of the elite hegemony and obtaining consent of the masses for such an elite status quo (Robert 1974; Jayawardena 2002). In the pre-modern traditional Sinhalese society, Buddhist monks and Hindu priests, as Gramscian traditional intellectuals, constructed a specific hegemony for a social system characterized by caste and kinship through the authority of the sacred texts, chronicles of origin stories and folklore (Ames, 1967). Buddhist architecture and temple paintings flourished further reinforcing their status and reminding the masses of their prescribed station in life. Art did not exist as an autonomous regime, but as a “way of life” through caste and kinship relations (Coomaraswamy, 2003, p.34). Similarly, the elite organic intellectuals, created in the image of the white colonial master, took it upon themselves to produce ideas and myths that guaranteed their class’s survival. As Gramsci theorized, intellectuals, organic to the elite class in Sri Lanka, realized that political stability and social control could not be realized by mere socio-economic factors, but by other factors, such as language, education, family and religion (Jayawardena, 2002). When Gramsci developed the concept of the hegemony, he meant the way in which a ruling group or class exerted its own moral, political and cultural values by a mixture of force, fraud, or persuasion (Nieto-Galan, 2011). In the Sri Lankan context, the ruling elite class were convinced that persuasion and education was critical in the struggle for gaining and maintaining power. In that sense, as Gramsci reminds us, knowledge, and the intellectuals who produce and diffuse it, are not ornamental butterflies but central ideological agents (Nieto-Gala, 2011). As such, they were in the centre of elite conflicts and ethno-nationalist politics that created the scope for manipulating language and culture (Dharmadasa, 1992).

In the aftermath of Independence, in spite of exposure to a liberal education, caste rivalry played a key role in generating conflict among the Sinhala elite who clamoured for political dominance in the lead up to National Independence in 1948. De Silva (1981) asserts that caste, a rigid hierarchical social formation, was a divisive force among the Sinhala elite in the election campaigns held in the early decades of the 20th century. Moreover, alongside caste divisions, regional differences too came to the surface among the Sinhala elite. For instance, tension between up-country Kandyans and low-country Sinhalese became a “noteworthy ingredient in elite politics” (de Silva, 1981, p.389). It was no different among the Tamil elite who consolidated their position as the sole representatives of the marginalized Tamil masses. Similarly, ethnicity emerged as a decisive force in elite competition, mainly creating rivalry and rift between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils (Dharmadasa, 1992, de Silva, 1981), which gradually escalated into a civil war that had claimed more than 100,000 lives when it ended in 2009 (Hoole, 2015).

With the onset of the civil war, intellectuals organic to the majority Sinhala elite and minority Tamil elite resorted to language and cultural politics (Coperahewa 2009). As Gramsci has explicated, a privileged language may act as a tool to reinforce cultural influ­ence and control over weaker linguistic communities, which, for instance, became the most central contentious issue in Sri Lanka’s conflict. The politicization of the linguistic scholarship, which began in the second and third decades of the twentieth century continued into the next half a century; the connection between language and nation became increasingly close and the nationalist ideology became linked to language (Coperahewa, 2009). Language consciousness, as a hegemonic strategy, paved the way for controversial language policies and divisions between Sinhalese and Tamils (Coperahewa, 2009). Former Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, a product of Oxford University, spearheaded the Sinhala official language campaign and eventually facilitated the passage of the *Sinhala Only Act* in 1956, marginalizing other minority languages (de Silva 1981). Furthermore, education, particularly national curricula pertaining to history, social science and language, became the government’s hegemonic apparatus. In this regard, organic intellectuals made substantial contributions to these practices. The language disparity became the fulcrum of the Tamil ethnic struggle and the consequent armed insurgency and civil war (de Silva 1981).

In the same vein, electoral politics allowed the majority Sinhalese to capitalize on Sinhalese nationalist consciousness, constructed by linguists and historians, among the increasing rural voter base in the periphery, consequently sidelining their Tamil counterparts. Bandaranaike, who gave up his suit and tie to don the Sinhala national dress, rose to power by claiming that he would reinstate the social standing of Buddhist monks, native doctors, teachers, farmers and workers on a platform that pedaled religion, language and race (de Silva 1981). This pledge created euphoria and the utopia that he was going to restore the traditional Sri Lankan society (Singer, 1964). Similarly, organic intellectuals and ardent Sinhala nationalist leaders tapped into nationalist historiography that legitimized the “founding race theory” or the mono-ethnic narrative extracted from the *The* *Mahawamsa*\*, a mytho-historical chronicle (de Silva 1981). Through such exegetical and hermeneutical interventions, nationalist archeologists such as Paranavithana (1967), legitimized the origin of the Sinhala race and the uninterrupted Sinhalese national consciousness, thereby subordinating other minority counter-narratives (Vaitheespara, 2011). Subsequent historiography continued to reinforce Paranavithana’s origin narrative, especially during the civil war when Sinhalese historians intentionally abstained from critiquing the founding race theory (Vaitheespara, 2011), probably because they endorsed the government initiated military campaigns against the Tamil rebels.

The role of the elite cannot be synonymous with the pivotal role of the intellectual. However, in the Sri Lankan context, which is identified as an open elite system by Fernando (1973), the non-elite are not completely denied access to elite positions. However, the open elite system that Fernando has advanced does not automatically erase social inequalities, as differences remain entrenched due to the crucial intervention of caste in politics and social status. Fernado’s (1973) concept of the open elite system also creates the myth that an approximation to the elite status is synonymous with achieving the status of a public intellectual, defined in the contemporary Saidian lexicon as an intellectual who is identified as exposing unjust power structures that are not visible to the average citizen and seeks “to challenge and defeat both an imposed silence and the normalized quiet of unseen power (Said, 2002, p.31). Hence, being elite does not inevitably transform one’s role into the pivotal role of a public or critical intellectual.

A good case in point will be the leaders of the movements that sprung up during the national independence struggle: the Labour Movement, the Buddhist nationalist and Tamil purist language movements were all led by elite leaders. Time to time, these intellectuals became organic to certain sections of the subaltern groups as well as the urban constituencies, with a mandate to raise consciousness against the British occupation and salvage the cultural values and indigenous languages from the western influence and pollution (Coperahewa, 2009). The elite could not embody the traditional Sri Lankan society with their elite positions and status achieved through accumulation of capital and investment in western education and a tendency to dominate. So they had to turn to the peasants and rural masses, which represented the traditional Sri Lankan “essence”. However, it was not on their agenda to elevate the subaltern classes to the level of the dominant elite or challenge the despicable caste system. Neither did we witness a reconfiguration of the discursive subject formation of the elite group as a result of their practices. Central proposition of their project was to challenge the colonial rulers and the Western educated indigenous elite (Jayawardena, 2002). On the other hand, Orberst (1985) opines that the Western educated elite have persisted in dominating Asian societies like Sri Lanka in spite of having democratic structures, mainly a robust electoral process, in place. However, what Orberst misses is that the concept and practice of democracy itself is a problematic one, particularly in postcolonial contexts, such as Sri Lanka. Current critiques of democracy identify it as oppositional to politics. Ranciére in particular, problematizes democracy and holds it accountable for creating a consensual social order, which eventually acts as a “police order”. Ranciére uses this phrase to describe the typical exercise of power as it is organized through institutions and processes (Lambert, 2012). The police order, as Lambert (2012) elaborates, distributes and legitimizes the different social roles and subject positions that people are slotted into within an unequal social structure. In a Gramscian sense, democracy is akin to hegemony, a political society that organizes consensus and thereby docility and subordination to the ruling oligarchic elite and their ideology.

The last decade of Sri Lankan politics and conflicts saw the highest number of organic intellectuals rallying round the state and its military agenda *vis a vis* the ethnic conflict. Journalists, academics, artists, and professionals endorsed and acted as spokespersons to promote former president Mahinda Rajapakse’s authoritarian regime characterized by dynastic politics, nepotism, corruption and blatant abuse of executive presidential power (Gunasekera, 2014; Saravanamuttu 2014; Weliamuna, 2014). Through myth-making and historico-aesthetic projects, artists and historians were engaged in tracing the President’s genealogy to the heroic lineage of Sinhala kings in the past. This group was joined by diasporic Western educated nationalist intellectuals to further legitimize Rajapakse’s rule.

On the other hand, the dissent of the handful of public intellectuals and moderates who worked in the areas of human rights, good governance, and conflict resolution were silenced by public vilification, threats and intimidation (Wickremasinghe, 2009). Abductions, torture and disappearances of opponents became commonplace and were treated with impunity (Human Rights Report: Sri Lanka, 2010). A number of senior journalists representing Sinhala and Tamil communities were assassinated and several others incarcerated using draconian anti-terror laws. Public intellectuals who attempted to be organic to the silent majority of the population were subalternized and shunted to an Agambenian “bare life” within a “surveillance society” authored by the Rajapakse regime (Downey, 2009).

Thus, the subjectivity of the post-war public intellectual was discursively reconfigured as someone fundamentally patriotic and sides with the state’s nationalist programme. In short, she was either patriot or a traitor. Unlike in times of such harsh political realities, the overarching predicament of the public intellectual in Sri Lanka remains the nexus they have with the ruling elite and their overdependence on the Western model of academic education as their formative framework.

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