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8 Entangled in power

IF ONE kind of activist entanglement is in stories, another kind of entanglement is in the tangible results of those stories. The stories – whether they are about individualism, or neoliberalism, or human separation from nature – have helped to create political structures and institutions that enforce power. We are entangled in the effect of those systems on our lives and our behaviour. The institutions and rules of the state, with repressive power at their disposal, are usually the first form of 'power' that we think of, but more fundamentally we are in thrall to capital, towards whose endless increase and protection the state is oriented. The institutions and rules that govern the state and the market are the ostensible target of most activism. Let's change them, activists say: let's change how the police operate; let's change landlords' powers, and fracking rules, and how banks create money, and let's shut down the arms trade while we're at it.

It is hard to perceive our entanglement in stories and ideologies when they have been turned into concrete reality, in the form of the systems we want to change. Being surrounded by, living in a world governed by all of the institutions created under the terms of the dominant imaginary starts to change how we think. It has changed our very perception of what we encounter; it has changed what we think is reality. For example, people in the most individualistic cultures, which psychologists call WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic) are more likely to perceive a world of separate objects, rather than relationships.[181] It is hard to see that we are doing this when it is the air we breathe. Even if we do see it, there's the immense practical difficulty of finding a way to do things differently. As the cultural and political theorist Jeremy Gilbert puts it, 'It's one thing to know all this in theory. It's another thing to undo all of our individualist conditioning and to negotiate a wholly individualist set of social institutions, without finding ourselves being forced to behave like competitive individualists despite ourselves, or without simply going crazy.'[182]

There are at least two ways that activists are entangled in the political and economic institutions that turn ideas into power. One is that our perceptions, behaviour and choice of strategies are influenced by the practical workings of these systems, as well as by the ideas behind them.

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The other – and it is not separate from the first – is that we are entangled by our positions in relation to the histories of pain and oppression caused by those institutions.

When I first started acknowledging rather than repressing my uncomfortable questions about whether my campaigning was effective, one of those questions was about why we were mimicking aspects of the economic system that we were trying to fix. I was keeping a quiet list of examples I was seeing around me in NGO-land, such as battles with unfair pay, a seemingly inexorable move towards more controlling and creativity-sapping management structures as the organisations I worked for grew, and fierce competition for funding. They seemed like problems from the commercial world: surely if we were trying to change aspects of that world, we should be avoiding them? There I was with my list, and it was a good starting place, but I found other activists who had been digging deeper to understand what might be going on. One of them was Ayeisha Thomas-Smith, a broadcaster and Director of Movement Building with the New Economy Organisers Network, a training and support coalition for activists working on alternatives to neoliberalism. She had studied for an MA and was now working on a PhD about the effect of neoliberalism on activism. She was looking at what happens when activist organisations are not vigilant about the possibility of being influenced by neoliberal ideology, and how they can resist it. Her research was initially prompted by questions about why activists were getting so burnt out, and she was concluding that trying to do the 'anti-work' of disrupting a system by using that system's methods led to 'cognitive breakdown'.

Her research into activism in the neoliberal era uses Michel Foucault's theory of 'governmentality', which describes the way that governments try to produce the citizens best suited to fulfil those governments' policies. Foucault, a French philosopher who was writing in the 1960s and 1970s, is helpful for thinking about activist entanglements in stories that have turned into power, because his work describes how knowledge (he used the term 'discourses', but we could also say 'stories' or 'ideology') shapes power through the functioning of institutions, especially those of the state. He described how power is wielded over people whose lives are shaped by those institutions – particularly those whose lives are made marginal by them,

Could we?

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including the mentally ill and criminals. When Foucault was speaking about 'governmentality' in his celebrated public lectures in the late 1970s, the neoliberal project had not yet been launched into practical action with the privatisations of the Thatcher and Reagan years.[183] While he discussed neoliberal theory as it stood at that point, he didn't see governmentality as a specifically neoliberal activity; he saw its roots 300 years earlier in the emergence of modernity.[184] But as an idea that describes how the citizen is shaped by the state to the state's own convenience, governmentality is a useful analytical tool for thinking about what neoliberalism, specifically, has done to our activism.

Neoliberalism is characterised not only by the fact that it is the *state* that is leading the reshaping of society in the image of the market, but that, by undermining community, removing social safety nets and turning everyone into an entrepreneur of themselves, it is intruding into the subjective experience of citizens. 'The aim of governmentality becomes not forcing the individual to act in a certain way, but creating the conditions within which he will want to act in that way, believing that he is exercising free choice in his own interest,' writes Thomas-Smith.[185] And this is exactly what neoliberalism has done. 'It's not just a way of thinking,' she says. 'Neoliberalism is a specific political programme that targets a way of being and feeling.' This was the famous Margaret Thatcher quote: 'Economics are the method; the object is to change the soul.'[186] I knew that quote, but I hadn't thought about it in the context of activism.

I was starting to make more sense of my troubled instinct that a modus operandi of providing facts and expecting power-holders to make rational decisions in response to them was gravely inadequate. Not only did this method not take account of our unconscious psychology, as I explored in Chapter 4, but it didn't take account of the fact that we were up against a system that had already been altering our perceptions at levels deeper than rational processing for nearly four decades! The people we were trying to influence in this manner might have had what they thought of as their 'choices' shaped in ways that were not visible to them. And so, of course, had we. I could now see, too, how activists could end up doing things that felt like the outcomes of our good rational choices, but that were actually fundamentally shaped by the environment we were now in. Neoliberalism's

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greater emphasis on the individual in their personal relationship with the market had made the seeking of achievement and status more of a practical survival necessity than they were a generation or two ago. People must compete more fiercely for jobs in order to live, must market ourselves as a brand both online and off, and this is the environment in which activists, who need to eat and pay the bills like everyone else, are operating. Like everyone else, activists must market ourselves and compete for status. 'If we're trying to destroy the capitalist system but we need enough security and income to be actors within it, it's really tough,' says Thomas-Smith.

O. Taiwo - Elite Capture (2025?)

What activists can learn from the idea of governmentality, then, is that unless we are very careful, the structures of a neoliberal system can end up producing the *activists* best suited to maintaining the status quo. This is the silent and invisible working of power. Foucault called it 'governmentality', and Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist who was imprisoned by Mussolini, called it 'hegemony'. Written from prison, his theory of hegemony describes how power is wielded not just by the force of the state, but invisibly by stories wielded in the culture by the dominant class.[187] There I had been at my NGO desk, using a few minutes of my lunch break to add to my list of ways that we were unwittingly reinforcing the system we were trying to change, and of course there was nothing new under the sun. (There rarely is, of course.) But now I could start to see it more clearly. The distinction between visible and invisible forms of power can help us to see how activists who are attempting to change the visible forms of power can still be reinforcing the invisible ways that power is manifested.

Activists maintaining the status quo is perhaps most obvious in professionalised campaigning NGOs. In a world where time has become money, the upside of NGOs is that, by raising money from the public, philanthropic sources or government grants to pay their staff, they offer a way for activists to commit proper time to the job of bringing change. They offer a means for activists to work together, to raise funds, to earn a living, to gain some status. Yet what often happens in these circumstances is that activists adopt approaches, attitudes and methods that look like those prevalent in the economic system they want to change, and in consequence limit the extent of the change they are asking for. Pressure from funders to demonstrate results cascades through campaigning organisations, requiring

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more managerial control, more planning, more reporting, less creativity and less time spent on activism.[188]

As we saw in the discussion of status needs in Chapter 5, activists internalise the unspoken rules about what is acceptable, and police them when colleagues propose something too radical: 'we're not dealing with that at the moment.' (This reminds me, having spent time in a Murdoch-owned newsroom at the beginning of my career, of observing how people who went into journalism to tell the truth may self-censor what they even try to write about when they end up working for a newspaper whose proprietor has known views.) Meanwhile, companies that are the target of activism like to improve their reputations by being able to point to 'NGO engagement', while simultaneously tying those NGOs up in endless consultation processes to prevent them causing actual damage to business-as-usual. It is well documented that in such circumstances, NGOs can end up supporting free-market capitalism and the interests of the wealthy. INCITE!, a grassroots activist collective in the US, describes such phenomena as the 'non-profit industrial complex'.[189]

If campaigning is funded, transactions are involved, and in the context of a market society, activism can start to look like a market. This can happen in at least two ways. One is that NGOs are selling success stories to the foundations that fund them, and competing with their peers to have the best stories to sell in order to win funding. 'The products sold include the organising accomplishments, models and successes that one can put on display to prove competency and legitimacy,' said Amara H. Perez in *The Revolution Will Not be Funded*.[190] Another is that citizens who support NGOs with a subscription or donation are able to purchase a good conscience. They are making themselves feel better with a market transaction. 'You are somebody who is finding it hard to navigate between your soul, and the ecological destruction you see around you or the human rights situation you see in the media,' says James Marriott, an artist who works with the campaign group Platform in the UK. 'Consumption is when you purchase other people's labour for your pleasure. You're not going to go and stop any fucking whalers, how the hell are you going to get out there? So you buy, off the shelf, somebody who's going to do it for you.'[191]

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'The language the corporates want you to talk, that some funders want you to talk, is of deliverables and outcomes,' complains Anders Lustgarten, a playwright who has worked in NGOs as well as taken part in direct-action protests. 'This is the infestation of the attitudes of the private sector into the public. The language they don't want you to talk is of the ruckus … Activism has become a crappy corporatised form of careerism for liberals. Most of the money goes on middle management and expensive offices. Why do you need an office that looks like a firm of Miami architects? A generation ago these people would have been in the public sector. The current system of professional activism is corporate soft power.'[192]

'Liberals' can mean lots of things, often depending on the point of comparison or which side of the Atlantic you are on. In America it can mean you are progressive rather than conservative; here in the UK it can mean you support a welfare state but are not a socialist calling for transformed economic power relations. More broadly, 'liberal' describes the foundation of Western democracies in ideas about freedom and equality of the individual, and freedom of the market. Lustgarten is using the word critically to suggest people who want a bit of change but not too much. I hear a suggestion in his words that 'real' activism would perhaps not be performed by such people; that these might be mutually exclusive categories. I'm not sure I agree that liberals – in whichever use of the term – can't do activism. And there are types of activism, such as protecting human rights, which can sit squarely in the realm of assuring the rights for all that liberalism has long promised. His point, though, which I came to see for myself as I reached the limits of my NGO job, is that if people working for NGOs are not vigilant, they are in danger of succumbing to corporate priorities.

The unwitting submission of NGOs to neoliberal market logic and the symbiotic relationship between NGOs, neoliberal states and corporations have been extensively investigated and written up by social researchers, but the resulting papers tend to hide, as academic papers do, behind the expensive paywalls of academic journals.[193] As an aside, I was struck, researching this book, by the chasm between the experience of the people working for NGOs, who are becoming conscious of the limitations of their approach but wonder if it is they who are going mad, and the wealth of

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research that makes some sense of this instinct about their entanglement in the dominant system, but which is largely inaccessible to them. (Although clearly, campaigners' preference for action over reflection is also part of the problem; I spent many years not wanting to think about these questions.) Here I am writing a book arguing for us to look into our own inner lives to improve our activism, but our work would benefit, too, from easier access to the research that is done on our struggles and the risks of being co-opted, as well as the plentiful research evidence on what facilitates behaviour change and how to communicate difficult subjects.

The literature on neoliberal manifestations in activism is not restricted to study of the NGO world. Practices of the market occur, too, in the kind of 'lifestyle activism' where lifestyle choices are used to make a point. The cultural scholars Sarah Banet-Weiser and Roopali Mukherjee coined the term 'commodity activism' to describe how people find a way to participate in social activism through the purchase of a commodity that is in some way connected, whether through supply chains or branding, to a good cause.[194] These are submissions to the market, but they are also submissions to individualism. The term 'the personal is political' was originally coined to suggest that seemingly personal problems *are actually structural*; that the problems experienced by individuals in their private lives are shared, are caused by institutions and rules, and need tackling at the level of systems and the collective. These days, this overused catchphrase can mean that what works is a personalised, individual intervention.[195]

Becoming aware of neoliberal entanglements does not require us to assume, however, that an activist is adopting neoliberal or individualistic ways simply because they appear to be doing something 'individual', like acting on their own, speaking of their personal experience, or naming the behaviour of another person who has exerted power wrongly. The feminist scholar Sara Ahmed is insightful here, discussing Audre Lorde's often-quoted statement that 'caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare'. Ahmed notes, 'As feminism teaches us: talking about personal feelings is not necessarily about deflecting attention from structures … Are you suddenly concerned with structures because you do not want to hear how you as an individual might be implicated in the power relations we critique? … how interesting: *the individual disappears at the very*

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moment he is called to account [my emphasis].' As Ahmed is saying, it is a valid argument that structural inequalities can be deflected by being made the responsibility of individuals. 'But we can go too far with this critique,' she says. 'Neoliberalism sweeps up too much when all forms of self-care become symptoms of neoliberalism.'[196]

Another way that activists are entangled with systems of power is through our positions in relation to them. No one is immune. For starters, everyone living in a modern consumer society is involved, to a greater or lesser extent, in the systemic injustice of the supply chains that provide much of our food, clothing and other commodities at great cost to those involved in their production. The injustices, historical and current, that are baked into our material existence in long-industrialised countries are extensive and difficult to avoid without retreating from shared society. The philosopher Timothy Morton suggests we are now in a world of 'hyperobjects': phenomena that are vast, hugely distributed over space and time, and 'that can be thought and computed, but not directly touched or seen', which makes it hard for us to reckon with them. He includes global warming and nuclear waste as hyperobjects and, using his criteria, the injustice behind modern lifeways is arguably another.[197]

One response, commonly seen among activists, is the attempt at purity: trying to source all the necessities of life in a way that causes no pain or hardship to anyone. But this is hard; avoiding abuses in one supply chain may put you in the web of another. For Hilary Prentice, who took part in the women's anti-nuclear blockade in the early eighties at Greenham Common before training as a psychotherapist, this version of the quest for purity leads to what she calls the 'but you're wearing leather boots!' syndrome. She describes a friend of hers, who, 'despite his life teaching permaculture, living all year round in a yurt, growing his own garden and his own tree nursery, planting trees, and running deep ecology workshops', was attacked for his choice of footwear. 'The mistake lies, I think, in believing we can somehow separate ourselves from the global situation,' she writes. 'We are not separate, we are all part of the global situation, and so we are all either very isolated, or we are implicated in any number of ways.'[198]

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Another response to awareness of the injustices behind every aspect of our material lives is to try to live 'purely' outside the system. But that can end up reinforcing other aspects of the system. The choices of 'lifestyle' activism, for example, include producing or consuming ethical products, or not working in the mainstream economy. I've made brief forays into this kind of activism, volunteering over several summers 20 years ago on a back-to-the-land, self-sufficiency type project. But these options can be more available, observe critics, to those with the privilege and financial resources to make such choices. 'There are hipster-ish ways of doing politics of life,' said an interviewee in Laura Naegler's study of 'prefigurative' attempts to create alternatives outside of dominant power structures.[199] 'Cooperatives, chickens, whatever, that whole shit can sort of be resistance in a certain frame, but also is totally complicit with the lifestyle idea of gentrifying white people, or not even white, whoever, it's also about class privilege.' The activism of alternative lifestyles, in short, can reinforce existing class, gender and race dynamics. Laura Portwood-Stacer's research into 'lifestyle politics' in the US and the UK concluded that such activity was liable to 'reproduce white, male, heterosexual, middle-class privilege, leading to increased visibility and status for individuals who bring these kinds of privileges with them to activist scenes'. The irony, she observed, is that 'those radicals who are able to freely make "choices" about how to live their lives might, in fact, be seen as the greatest beneficiaries of the policies and ideologies to which they are so strongly opposed'.[200] Without attention to where we are starting from, the same old problems arise.

So activists are not just entangled in the systems we are trying to change; we are also entangled in them differently, depending on how we have benefited from them, or struggled under them, or both. We are not in identical relation to what we want to change. Where we start from makes a difference. And our position within the systems we want to change does not only affect our *relations* with those who are positioned differently, and our *understanding of what it is that needs to change*, both of which we saw in the discussion of saviour and status-seeking behaviours in Chapter 5. It affects our perception of *what kind of tools we think are going to work*.

People who have largely benefited from existing systems of economic and political power can afford to assume that the ideas behind them will work to

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change them. They can afford to assume that a 'rational actor' approach, borrowed unthinkingly from classical economics, will work to change policies. They can afford to assume that policy change will be sufficient. They can afford to assume that putting facts in front of somebody will induce them to effect the changes they are asking for – and that those changed policies will be enough to change minds and behaviour. These were the assumptions that I made for a long time. And then I began my conversations with activists who had been starting from a different place. 'I was taught that liberalism was workable,' said Imani Robinson, the writer, curator and prison abolitionist we met in Chapter 5. 'And what we've seen in recent times, on a global scale, but also what Black and queer people and people organising from the margins who didn't have the privilege of being middle class and having that access to power and access to privilege, have always seen, is that liberalism doesn't work to fix the things that we are trying to organise around.'

'It's much more a way of life, to be interrogating this problem on a daily basis, that doesn't always look like a theory of change, that doesn't always look like a kind of message,' she said. 'But it's more a practice of surviving. We are led to believe that we can change the whole system, or change parts of the system in isolation, effectively, and – this is a key bit – sustainably, because policies have changed, and changes have been made. But within a system they can always be reversed or augmented or changed again. And so the level of impact that we can have is almost fleeting.' She finds it hard to speak about policy change as activism,

> because it's not an active role, it's a complicit role. It's the kinds of changes we're allowed to make, or rather, allowed to try to make. It's what most people in policy spend their lives doing, trying to make these changes, trying to get this one person to agree to put some pressure on this and on that. And it's really, actually, the level of the stake that we have to change and to transform the world that we live in, is much higher than anyone in the policy world, in my experience and from my perspective, has any idea of.[201]

Robinson has long known a version of this, albeit her experiences of trying out policy campaigning in her work on police stop-and-search powers, made its limitations even clearer to her. The tools of liberalism are necessary but

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not sufficient to deliver on liberalism's long and unmet promises of freedom and equality for all. Democratically agreed changes to the rules are necessary, but insufficient because structural injustice persists even after formal equality under the law has been achieved. Reasoned argument is necessary, but insufficient when the roots of the problem are buried deep in the implicit and unconscious assumptions that shape the behaviour of those with privilege and power; buried deep in the ways that people relate to each other interpersonally.

But it took me – working for an NGO using these tools, unthinkingly assuming that we could make progress through technocratic policy fixes – a decade to realise that what I was doing was insufficient. To truly understand, through painful experience, that some new rules for corporate behaviour requiring companies to disclose what they pay to governments to extract oil, rules that hundreds of us grafted for years to achieve, could be turned over in the time it takes for a new president to sign his name on an executive order. That those new rules had left underlying abusive and extractive economic systems in place anyway. Why did it take me so long to realise this? The simple answer is that I had entered activism from a place of privilege and in the course of doing a certain type of activism – a kind of policy change that appeared easiest to achieve, and therefore was least threatening to the system – my assumptions had not been challenged. It felt new to realise that what I was doing was not sufficient, but it was only new to me because I had been protected from having to think about it.

I had, certainly, absorbed the 'rational actor' assumptions that underpin economics and run through the liberal imaginary of modernity, founded as it was on ideas about the separation of emotion from reason. (I'd absorbed them while growing up, too. 'You're not being rational,' Dad would observe if any of us were expressing emotion about any issue.) During the two decades that I've been doing campaigning, these assumptions, that we make our decisions based on rational processing of cost and benefit, have been dealt multiple blows. They came from behavioural economics researchers who, in focusing on our less rational motivations, have been undermining the ideas that hold up the mythical 'homo economicus'.[202] They came from Trump's election and the Brexit referendum result in 2016, with their votes for lies packaged in effective emotional messaging. But I had absorbed, too,

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an unconscious way of relating to the people whom I thought I was helping when I was trying to alter the economic power structures that had such an impact on their lives. I had absorbed a way of relating in which I was attached, without realising it, to the idea of being the one with agency; the one who can help; the one who can make things happen. To some, these two sets of assumptions underpinning modernity – about our rational capacities, and about who has agency – might seem unrelated. But something connects them, and it is a form of thinking that lies at the heart of the liberal imaginary, inseparable from the violence and theft of colonisation.

When I became a campaigner nearly 20 years ago, I thought I knew a lot about how colonisation worked. Specifically, I thought I understood how the colonisers used knowledge as part of their project of domination; how the knowledge of colonised people was degraded and dismissed to justify the theft of their land and labour. But I hadn't applied this understanding to me, and to my approach to campaigning in the present. I had understood it as something historical. When I studied history at Cambridge in the mid-nineties, I felt drawn to learn about processes of colonisation and decolonisation. I became interested in postcolonial studies, read Edward Said's *Orientalism* and the literature it generated, learned about the epistemic domination at work behind the realities of political and economic dominion. I wrote my undergraduate dissertation on the clashing thought-systems of Hindu pandits and Christian missionaries in the decades that the British were tightening their political and economic grip on India. I had an offer to publish it in a peer-reviewed journal which I turned down because – I thought, rather arrogantly – I was too busy trying to 'get out into the world' and become a journalist to do the work of revising it for publication.

The point is, I probably knew about as much on the subject as any other white British person who was not a scholar of it might. (Descendants of those who were colonised would know rather better, of course.) I had learned how knowledge and culture get caught up in power-projects. I could see how the thinking of those historical figures I had studied was affected by their position in the colonial entanglement. And I could see that the economic structures of colonialism – the flows of money so much vaster from poor to rich than the other way round – were, long after formal

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political aspects of colonialism ended, now being perpetuated through financialised global capitalism and the use of tax havens to re-route and sequester the loot. I knew, in short, that economic imperialism was still the order of the day and, as a campaigner, I was fighting the tax havens that facilitated it through my campaigning for more financial transparency. I really thought I got it. Yet what I couldn't see, as I turned to activism to try to undo these legacies, was how the thinking behind them might still suffuse my own. Nothing in the teaching I received pointed out the ways that I might have internalised some of the colonial system's assumptions, and I certainly hadn't figured it out for myself. (Indeed, the teaching itself was suffused with those assumptions, starting with the name of one of the courses I took: 'The West and the Third World'.)

In intellectual terms, what I missed, studying in the mid-nineties, was the then only just-emerging idea of *decoloniality*. If political decolonisation is sending the settlers home, and postcolonialism is the recognition that knowledge and forms of knowing have been displaced – an 'epistemic violence'[203] – then decoloniality is *reclaiming* the forms of knowing, conceptualisation and representation that the colonisers replaced with their own. It is the unravelling of coloniality, a mode of thinking that outlasted the end of political colonisation. Decoloniality, then, is the epistemological stage of decolonisation. It is the decolonisation of how we think.

Decoloniality builds on the foundational understanding that the creation of modernity was inseparable from the colonial project, and that there is no modernity without a way of thinking called 'coloniality'. Two of the field's key thinkers have been Aníbal Quijano, a Peruvian sociologist, and Walter Mignolo, an Argentine semiotician.[204] In their account, the new scientific worldview of modernity could see the world from a supposedly objective viewpoint, a viewpoint that permitted knowledge of whatever it viewed, and an ability to manipulate it. This capacity for knowing and manipulation was simultaneously put into practice, in the Americas, in European domination of the people and cultures who had lived there.[205] Paul Gilroy, a British historian, had described the same relationship in his 1992 book *The Black Atlantic*, linking the 'foundational moves' of philosophical modernity with the terror and brutality of enslavement.[206] The political colonies might have

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gone, but coloniality, in the form of ongoing racism and ways of viewing the world hierarchically, has not.

At the heart of this understanding is that colonialism, enslavement and patriarchy create hierarchies of ways of knowing. The way of knowing and understanding the world of the colonised people is, in the view of the coloniser, not worth knowing; it is inferior, less than fully human, and is suppressed. The way of knowing particular to the coloniser tries to take its place; tries to become 'knowledge' itself, rather than just being one form of knowledge among many. But that is not all. The way of knowing of the coloniser, the one that gets elevated, *is itself the tool for this process to take place*. The way of knowing that becomes dominant is based on the very possibility of an individual who *can* know, objectively, things about the 'other'. This duality of subject and object, 'doer and done-to',[207] which is at the heart of the modern imaginary, helps to make possible the knowledge displacement, the epistemic violence as well as the physical violence. It is individualism, in this view, that creates the duality of a knowing individual subject who can have knowledge of an 'other', a one-way kind of knowledge that, in practice – and in opposition to the lofty egalitarian ideals of liberalism – was indivisible from the politics of colonial domination.

Decoloniality acknowledges the impact of the idea at the heart of liberalism. The primacy of the individual, the hallmark of modernity, was a powerful anti-authoritarian idea that helped to rescue Europeans from their premodern thrall to theocracy and monarchical terror.[208] But it got caught up – entangled – in what was happening across the seas, where the project of creating modern Western rationality was indivisible from the project of coloniality; as Europeans slaughtered, stole, enslaved and imposed their culture on the people of other lands. This, for Quijano, is what 'spoiled the liberating promises of modernity'.[209] Individualism, in this view, is inextricable from the duality of subject and object, and the seeming inevitability of our placing ourselves in the subject position. Missing from European thought about the individual, he argues, and what existed in some of the ways of knowing that it crushed, is 'intersubjectivity:' our mutual co-creation of each other through our relationality.[210] In this view, Enlightenment thought and liberalism not only brought rationality and the possibility of conducting politics (and, indeed, activism) based on reason

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and debate over facts; it also brought a fundamental re-orientation of how we understand our relationship to everything and everyone that is not us. Activists are entangled, then, in liberalism's paradoxical legacy. We wield the powerful and effective tool of individual rights to try to free people from oppression, while not always seeing that behind the very idea of the 'individual' is also a pattern of thinking that works in the opposite direction. It does so by excluding both the possibility of intersubjectivity (that we are created by our relations with each other) and of real equality (that we meet each other not as subject and object, but as two equal subjects). This pattern of thinking can exclude the possibility of solidarity with any 'other' who may be different to the activist, but is still in equal relation to them. It can exclude the chance of our seeing the other as equal in their capacity to know as well as to act. This pattern of thinking sees the people who are being 'helped' through modernity's subject-and-object-creating lens, a lens that identifies the activist – the person who is trying to help – as the subject, a subject who has the necessary knowledge.

You could say that this is a story, a mental construct rather than reality, but it is a story that has been made concrete through the workings of power, over several centuries of violence and oppression. This normalised pattern of thinking has infiltrated the perception and thinking of those who continue to benefit from those histories; those who have been shielded, by privilege and the daily reality of being able to move through the world relatively unimpeded, from having to think about them. It's why I had no idea about the paradoxes of what I was trying to do as an activist, despite and perhaps because of my elite education, until I followed the thread of my curiosity to educate myself further. This pattern of thinking is built into the operational structure of many NGOs and most of the 'development' industry, and is at the heart of the saviour complex I looked at in Chapter 5. And the activist is prevented from seeing this pattern of thinking by the very way that it works: by the way that it centres us, the activist, as the individual who subsequently moves into a relationship with everyone and everything else.

What this means, for activists who have not questioned the underpinnings of the liberal imaginary, is that while we are ostensibly focusing on the problem and those suffering from it, we are still implicitly constructing our

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response to the problem, with ourselves in the middle. We think that we know what is needed. And we so want the intervention that we are pushing for – the one that we *think* is the right one – to work, that it becomes very hard to acknowledge, even in the face of mounting evidence, that it is not. I used to think it was just our fervour to end injustice that made us so resistant to acknowledging failure or a lack of constructive impact in the NGOs I worked in. The insights of decoloniality, however, suggest that this resistance runs deeper. To acknowledge that we don't actually know what to do, or, following our intervention, that what we thought would work has not worked, feels existentially undermining. It would mean that we are not, in fact, the 'knower' that we have been told we are.

For activists shaped by the modern imaginary, the challenge of decoloniality is to admit that perhaps we don't know best. The stickiness of an imaginary that says 'you and whatever you know are at the centre' is what allows campaigners to put ourselves through endless strategic analyses to unpack our assumptions about the political, strategic and tactical aspects of our campaigning for change, while never seeing the need to grapple with our foundational assumptions about the nature of our interaction with the world. It is also what allows us to think that we are free of constraints – that we can, indeed, try to solve a problem that is 'over there', rather than right in here, entangling us. The very assumption of activism as something that is free of entanglements is a function of the dominant imaginary. The activist who is shaped by it – just as the politics and economics they are trying to change have been shaped – has a view of the world that not only puts us at the centre but also sees us as free from any influence, able to see objectively and to go out into the world to have an impact upon it. As liberation psychologists, who are drawing on traditions outside the European imaginary, suggest, 'that we are completely free of constraints may be the most widely shared fantasy of those who have been educated in Western Enlightenment thought'.[211] Activists who are trying to 'change the world' without acknowledging our own worldview and starting point are participating in that fantasy.

I see a resonance here with Iain McGilchrist's study of the cultural consequences in the West of the creation of a worldview, and thus a world, in the image of the left-brain hemisphere's disposition towards what it

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experiences. McGilchrist is a psychiatrist and humanities scholar whose profound and extraordinary book *The Master and his Emissary* describes the differences in *how* the left and right hemispheres of our brains perceive the world and the consequences for the culture and society that we have created. This is different, he says, from the discredited neuro-myths of the last few decades about *what* the hemispheres do. Both hemispheres are needed for all of what we do, whether it is logic or creativity. The difference is that the left hemisphere, with its narrow focus of attention, breaks our experiences and observations down into pieces to understand them, while the right, with its broader form of vigilance and attention, perceives them as a whole. The left hemisphere should 'pass' its atomised analysis to the right, for reassembling as a whole. But our creation, particularly and increasingly in modernity, of a world in the image of the left hemisphere's disposition, is making it harder for us to access the perceptions of the right hemisphere. The right hemisphere's reality-checking function is undermined when all it can perceive 'out there' is the concrete world of institutions and rules that has been created (metaphorically and literally) by narrowly materialist left-hemisphere approaches that cannot see nor count all that matters.[212]

There is much of interest in McGilchrist's work for anyone troubled by the deep consequences of technocratic and homo-economicus thinking and what they leave out. Specifically, however, in terms of how we relate to each other, he uses the lovely term 'betweenness', which, in my view, describes the same phenomenon as intersubjectivity. He calls betweenness 'a reverberative, "re-sonant", "respons-ible" relationship, in which each party is altered by the other and by the relationship between the two'.[213] In his account, this characteristically right-hemisphere way of relating to each other is under threat in a left-hemisphere dominated world, where the social and intellectual structures that condition our thinking make it increasingly hard to perceive 'betweenness' at all. I was very taken by McGilchrist's book, by its compelling explanatory power and precise description of so many of the jarring features of life in a world increasingly constructed around what he is suggesting are left-hemisphere perceptions. I wrote him a long letter of appreciation, describing some of my personal experiences that now seemed to make more sense; we met and had an energising conversation. Still, I can also see how his work is an account of the problem

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that is rooted in describing the problem. He is describing – brilliantly – what has gone missing in the dominant imaginary, and how that is affecting us. What I have also found helpful in grasping the radical possibility of 'betweenness' is understanding that there are worldviews and philosophies that *begin* with it, and from whose perspective many aspects of Eurocentric individualism start to look like a rather odd deformation. Ubuntu, for example, the African philosophy that has been explicitly adopted in post-apartheid South Africa, describes how 'each individual's humanity is ideally expressed through his or her relationship with others and theirs in turn through a recognition of the individual's humanity. Ubuntu means that people are people through other people.'[214] For the South African philosopher Mogobe Ramose, we are 'only and truly human in the context of actual relations with other human beings'.[215]

I have come to see that intersubjectivity or 'betweenness', a sense that we exist only in our relation to each other, is what is so often missing in 'helping-others' activism. Being the subject and the doer, the one with agency, who knows something about the objectified other and can do things to them: this can be a description of how power is invisibly exerted; how some countries exploit others; how the classes in power exploit those who are not; how men seek to control women. Exchange the 'domination' frame for a 'saving' or even just a 'helping' frame, however, and it can also be a description of the dynamics involved in activism. I am not suggesting we abandon wholesale the tools of modernity. The point is not to turn away from human rights, least of all at a time when authoritarian politics are seeking to roll them back. It is not to turn away from the possibility of rational thought, least of all at a time when demagogues are appealing to fear and anxiety. Nor are other ways of knowing always necessarily egalitarian or otherwise laudable simply because they are not European in origin. And there are other processes at play in the world than coloniality.[216] But while acknowledging modernity's achievements, we can also begin to transcend its limitations, by learning the lessons of decoloniality. For some activists it will be about reclaiming knowledge and agency. For others, it will be about taking ourselves out of the centre, recognising other ways of being, doing and thinking, relinquishing the certainty that we alone know, and re-engaging with a new disposition towards our task.