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An Interview with Colin Jenkins

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This is a recent email interview I did with Hampton Institute founder and Social Economics Dept. Chair, Colin Jenkins, on the nature and problems with hierarchical structures, which he discusses in his article entitled Deconstructing Hierarchies: On Contrived Leadership and Arbitrary Positions of Power.

Brenan: Some people would argue that hierarchies are needed as people aren't really capable of leading themselves or that if they did, we wouldn't have a stable modern society. What is your response to that?

Colin: First, I would ask where this "stable modern society" is? For a majority of the world's population, life is incredibly unstable. For many, life is dire. Even in a so-called "advanced" society like the US, tens of millions of people suffer from homelessness, food insecurity, joblessness, a lack of reliable and affordable healthcare, and with no means to feed and clothe their children. Tens of millions must rely on government assistance. Tens of millions do not receive adequate education. Tens of millions live paycheck-to-paycheck and can't pay their bills. And millions are terrorized by police forces and government agents in their own neighborhoods.

Most Americans have less than $1,000 in savings, if any, and studies have estimated that more than half of all working Americans are one paycheck away from being homeless. And even those who appear to be getting by just fine are actually buried in debt, with credit card debt averaging $16,000 per household, mortgage and car payments that are barely doable, and student loan debt averaging at $49,000 per borrower, many of whom are in no position to ever pay that back. Our collective existence, despite a general appearance of comfort, is extremely fragile. And this economic reality doesn't even begin to touch on the compounded social realities lived by historically marginalized sections of the working class - people of color, women, immigrants, etc... The US is a ticking time bomb on the verge of exploding at any moment. Stability is a mirage.

Second, the idea that "people aren't capable of leading themselves" stems from a need to maintain fundamentally unequal societies where a very small percentage of the population controls most of the wealth and power. This has become part of the dominant ideology of most of the modern world. Because, quite simply, when a very small percentage of a particular population controls everything, there must be various ways to justify and enforce this control.

One way is through brute force or the threat of such force, which the modern nation-state holds a monopoly on. This is accomplished through the mere construction of a criminal justice system that has laws and ways of enforcing those laws. Over time, these laws become equated with some vague form of morality that is not questioned by most. You see the effects of this everywhere. For instance, when people try to condemn political struggles for doing things that are "illegal," they have subconsciously bought into the idea that written laws which have been drawn up by millionaire politicians, who are directly influenced by billionaires, should be revered as some sort of moral code. In reality, many of these laws are constructed to keep our extremely unequal

ciated, etc… even though these feeling are not consistent with reality. It is a form of coping for many, and corporate literature will certainly exploit that and drill it home. And we as workers, stuck in our miserable realities, will often accept it if it helps us cope. Because we need that paycheck.

society intact, and are directly tied to protecting those who own this illegitimate wealth and power . They are designed to keep most of us powerless and stuck in our increasingly precarious lives. Under such a society, a person who does not have access to food for themselves or their family is punished for taking food. A person who is homeless is punished for squatting in an abandoned building. A person who does not have medical care is punished (financially, if not criminally) for seeking medical attention. So on and so on… and all of this takes place in a very strict hierarchical arrangement where the appearance of ”stability” remains at the forefront. It’s an inherently unjust arrangement for so many, and the threat of force is constantly held over our heads to maintain this façade of stability.

Another way to justify and enforce this control is through what Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci referred to as ”cultural hegemony,” or dominant culture. Ruling classes throughout history have relied on both formal and informal channels to mold a dominant culture (ideology) that supports their rule. This can be established through a formal education system, through media sources, through organized religion and churches, etc… Under capitalism, this doesn’t have to be done in a conspiratorial kind of way because the basic inequities stemming from the economic system create a sociopolitical structure that mimics and protects these inequities through social, cultural, political, and ”legal” avenues. One of the results of this is a widespread, conditioned belief that we are not capable of caring for ourselves, our families, and our communities; and thus need so-called ”extraordinary” people (politicians) to do this for us. It is a lie.

In a social sense, why do you think that social hierarchies and larger societal norms still reign when we don’t seem to need them anymore? (Social norms were important in the early days of humanity as if one wasn’t part of the group, they often wouldn’t survive, but now it is rather easy to flourish alone or find people who you link with.)

Social hierarchies still exist because they are a natural extension from the more tangible/structural economic hierarchy. The dominant culture in this type of society needs such social norms. The Marxist theory of base and superstructure is useful in this regard. A materialist conception of history tells us that society is constructed on an economic base, or is based on the modes of production, because it is this fundamental arrangement that ultimately determines how people fulfill their basic needs. Everything else builds off of that arrangement. In a capitalist system, a large majority of the population is forced to rely on wage labor. This is an incredibly fragile and unstable existence because we are completely dependent on a privileged minority to provide us with jobs and living wages, things that capitalism inherently cannot provide to all. So, most of us are set up for failure from birth. This is why Frederick Douglass recognized that a "slavery of wages [is] only a little less galling and crushing in its effects than chattel slavery." Hence, Marx's focus on exploitation and alienation. This structural oppression created by capitalism explains the need for a Welfare State, because societal unrest would be inevitable without the state supplementing these inherent and widespread inequities.

So, according to this analysis, there is a superstructure that builds from this unequal base, and this includes social, cultural, and political realities. Naturally, the superstructure mimics the base, while it also helps to maintain it. In doing so, these corollary developments tend to take on the same characteristics as the base, which, as already noted, consists of a high degree of alienation and exploitation. This basically means that social systems stemming from an inherently exploitative base tend to become exploitative themselves. One of the best examples of this is white supremacy, which is an artificial system of valuing human worth based on skin color. White supremacy is a modern cultural phenomenon that extends throughout the superstructure in both overt and undetected or insidious ways. And it is a valuable tool used by the capitalist/ruling class to create division within the working-class

to downplay the coercive nature of this relationship. On the one end it provides bosses, supervisors, and managers with tools and tactics rooted in persuasion, to get workers to think, behave, and perceive themselves in a way that is detached as far from reality as possible. Since human beings don't typically react well to being treated and used as tools, to be manipulated, prodded, directed, etc, employers find its useful to mask this reality as best as possible.

So this type of literature is designed to give bosses ways to obstruct this reality. To interact with their workers in ways that mask the coercive power they wield over them. And they tend to be very successful in doing this… so much so that many workers truly believe they are vested in the businesses they work for, or at the very least will rep that business in a positive way to friends and family, if only to mask their shitty realities to themselves. A shitty reality that basically amounts to us spending most of our waking hours in a place we do not want to be in, doing something we would rather not be doing, so we can get a paycheck every few weeks, so we can pay our bills, so we can scrape out a living for another few weeks. For most of us, it's a never-ending cycle that we'll never escape. It's a miserable, inhumane existence where life is lived a week at a time, or two weeks at a time, essentially from one paycheck to the next. And the best we can hope for is to stay afloat until the next paycheck, so we can start over again. And to add insult to injury, we're told that we "should feel lucky to even have a job." That's the world capitalism brings us.

So this workplace literature, and the management tactics that come from it, plays into the cognitive dissonance that I mentioned earlier. On a structural level, the idea is merely to keep things churning by creating alternative realities that workers can be proud of. To use the plantation analogy, it really is a way to instill the house-slave mentality in each and every one of us. It won't work for some, but it works well enough for most. Even those struck with this cognitive dissonance will often lean toward that which makes them feel vested, secure, proud, respected, appre-

experiments were not beneficial to workers, at least from the workers' point of view. A study found that many workers are "frustrated by distractions" and lack of privacy, both sound and visual. And workers reported that these new floor plans did not ease interactions with colleagues, as intended, because this was never viewed as a problem to begin with.

With these results in mind, it seems such attempts have been a failure. And it makes you wonder why they were attempted in the first place. Was it really to create a "friendlier" atmosphere, or was it rooted in something more sinister? Understanding the way capitalism operates, it's safe to assume the latter. Either way, despite the motivations, the capitalist structure still remains - which means that most workers are creating massive amounts of wealth for executives and shareholders in exchange for wages and salaries that do not equal their contribution. If they make enough to lead comfortable lives, they may be more willing to overlook this structural exploitation. But it still exists. Bosses still remain, and workers are still treated as commodities, no matter how glossed over the physical workplace appears. There are still those who make more, in many cases a whole lot more, for doing much less (the pursuit of "money and idleness" that I referenced in the piece). And some who rake in large amounts of money for doing absolutely nothing, and without even stepping foot in the workplace. That is the fundamental nature of both capitalism and hierarchies. No amount of makeup can change this.

What is your take on the literature and ideas surrounding employee relationship management? What do you think is the actual idea around it on a structural level?

This type of literature is designed to address the inequities by essentially covering them up as best as possible. Their purpose is two-fold: to teach bosses how to get the most from their workers; and to get workers to buy into a "team approach" that convinces them they're vested in the mission in some way. This is accomplished basically through propaganda, or a conscious effort

majority. This is why Malcolm X once proclaimed that "you can't have capitalism without racism."

Other cultural phenomena like patriarchy and homophobia work the same way. These things easily catch on within the working class because they are a source of empowerment for an otherwise powerless group. We're all economically disenfranchised, but poor and working-class white men can still grasp on to whiteness, "manliness," misogyny, and homophobia as sources of power and social dominance. You see this psyche develop not only in white people, but also throughout the working class. Some black men, despite their own intense structural oppression, will become misogynistic or homophobic as a source of empowerment. A particular immigrant community will dehumanize another immigrant community as a source of empowerment. American workers across the board will target and dehumanize immigrants. So on and so on. What we're seeing here is the formation of social hierarchies within the working class, all of which mimic the hierarchy created by the economic base. Tragically, this perceived power over others within the working class is easily accessible, and it's a cheap and toxic source of empowerment. But it is a good thing for the capitalist class, as it keeps working-class angst directed within its own ranks and away from the real culprits - the rich. It's the ultimate distraction.

On a related note, these social hierarchies are worthy of examination to all of us who oppose the capitalist system. When we look at developments within the superstructure, we can strategize and build liberation movements that will ultimately break them down, which will in turn allow us to build a formidable resistance against the economic base. This is why intersectionality is crucial. But intersectionality only works if it is based in a fundamentally anti-capitalist orientation. Because if we don't approach this with the ultimate goal of attacking and destroying the economic base, it won't matter in the end. We'll find ourselves in the same position, only under a multi-cultural, multi-sex, non-gender-descript

boot, as opposed to a "white, cisgender, male" boot. And this is the pitfall that identity politics fall into. Capitalism has the ability to accommodate these types of political movements by simply allowing individuals from hyper-marginalized sections of the working class to assume positions of power within these hierarchies. This approach is only about assimilation; and because of this, it only demands that the power structure become more inclusive, not that the power structure be eliminated. Capitalism can and will seek to appease this kind of tokenism without changing its inherently authoritative and exploitative structure.

People seem to be (at least somewhat) against hierarchy, from having an intense dislike of their bosses to wanting a level playing field. Why do we not see more people moving away or speaking out against hierarchy? So many times, it seems that the very people at the bottom are the ones who argue in favor of it.

Yes, definitely. This is a form of cognitive dissonance that we all experience from time to time, and I reflect on it briefly in the piece: "...organizations are often able to stoke a cognitive dissonance among its workforce, which simultaneously puts forth a healthy dose of faith in the 'team approach' by day while complaining about the incompetent and overbearing bosses by night."

This particular line refers to the contradictions we feel in the workplace. The daytime mentality is one that is a product of constant conditioning, which tells us that hierarchies are needed, that we are naturally dependent on bosses, and that we would be lost without them. The nighttime mentality is more natural and will creep into our heads at times, causing us to question everything we're conditioned to believe during the day. Daily interactions with bosses plant the seed for these realizations, as we recognize their incompetence or at the very least their lack of exceptionalism. This will inevitably bring us to consider that maybe we don't need them, maybe we are just as (if not more) competent, that there

How does your argument regarding hierarchy creating a lack of trust square with this modern idea that work places need to be 'open areas' so that people can 'bond?'

That's a good question. We read a lot about this new-age sort of workplace organization stemming from Silicon Valley, Google, Apple, etc... This idea that workplaces should be more carefree, less constrained. I've read about such experiments where workers can take naps, bring their pets to work, have access to fun activities directly in the workplace. And when you look at workplace organization in some European countries, you see that many companies have attempted to do away with traditional hierarchical structures to make workers feel more "at home" in a relaxed environment.

The fact that companies are experimenting with these 'open areas' confirms, at the very least, that they are aware of the archaic and inhumane nature of traditional hierarchical workplaces. This move also reflects some studies that have been done regarding productivity, which have suggested that workers are more productive in environments that are less constrictive, and that workers typically are only productive for a few hours a day. So, if anything, it's an attempt by companies to adjust with the times and do away with old forms of organization.

Unfortunately, attempts like these only tend to create more internal contradictions to capitalism. Attempting to mask the inherent nature of capitalism only goes so far. And the "open-office model" that Google became known for is not really an effort to make hierarchical structures more horizontal. It is concerned only with literal workspace, not with the ways in which the hierarchy operates on a structural level. And while it may appear to be benevolent on the surface, it often has more insidious motives. A2014 article by Lindsey Kaufman touched on some of these issues, pointing out that "these new floor plans are ideal for maximizing a company's space while minimizing costs," and that "bosses love the ability to keep a closer eye on employees," with less physical barriers obstructing them. Studies cited in the article suggested that these open-office

Overall though, union membership has plummeted in the US, which is a very bad thing for the working class. Under capitalism, our only leverage against capital is either (1) the government, or (2) labor unions. The government is now owned by capital, and thus acts solely in its interest. So that's effectively out of the equation. And unions have not only eroded, but many that have endured have taken on a corporate hierarchical structure themselves, where union executives are often completely out of touch with membership. Union leaders tend to be in bed with corporate politicians, an arrangement that is contradictory to the purpose of unions.

We see this contradictory nature when unions routinely endorse corporate Democrats who represent capital. We see it when unions agree to no-strike clauses. We see it when so-called leadership gives concession after concession, year after year, until there's virtually nothing left to bargain for. And we see it in this bureaucratic, corporatized union culture of today, where demands have been replaced by requests. Unions will often take reactionary stands that defy international and universal solidarity. We saw this recently with the AFL-CIO endorsing the Dakota Access Pipeline. You see it with police unions or prison employee unions, all of which side with capital and the social hierarchies that extend from capital, ultimately oppressing large sectors of the working class.

With the erosion of authentic labor unions, we've become much more vulnerable to these extreme hierarchies as a whole. And without these types of unions, workers simply have no chance against the powerful interests of capital. So, yes, the degrees to which we are smothered by these hierarchies will only intensify in this environment, especially if we continue to place our hopes in the government, politicians, and corporatized labor unions. This is exactly why I'm a member of the Industrial Workers of the World, which is "one big union" that is rooted in revolutionary industrial unionism.

really is no meritocracy, and that if they happened to suddenly disappear one day they probably wouldn't be missed.

This is, of course, true. We don't need them. But the conditioning that we are subjected to in most aspects of our lives tells us otherwise, and this makes it difficult for many to realize that truth. To consider the very notion of "supervision" and "management" as anything but insulting is truly amazing, when you think about it, yet most struggle with this dissonance. And understandably so, since the conditioning is intense and begins at such a young age. This reminds me of the notion of " bullshit jobs " that David Graeber has talked about in length, and is in the process of writing a book about. His angle is more focused on working-class jobs throughout the system, but I think this same line of thinking can be applied to jobs that fill the hierarchy just for the sake of filling the hierarchy.

In addition to this conditioning, there is also a mentality that becomes fairly prevalent among those who exist on the lower end of the hierarchy, and it speaks to the old adage, "if you can't beat em, join em." It is the mentality that creates the toadies for bullies, that creates house slaves for the master, etc... it forms whenever someone has been psychologically beaten into submission. These are the folks who have given themselves completely to the system, to the powers, to their bosses and overseers because, quite frankly, they simply have no fight in them, no self-esteem, and no dignity left. They are the first to dish the dirt to the bosses, the first to scab during a strike, the first to call the police on their neighbor, the first to serve the powerful with whatever is needed, and always at the sake of their class peers on the lower end of the hierarchy. These folks will always argue in favor of hierarchy, despite their lowly position in it, because they've decided that it's easier to accept it, support it, and invest in it, rather than fight it. And, in many respects, they're right. Fighting power isn't easy. It often has disastrous personal consequences for those who partake in it. As the Russian anarchist Sergey Nechayez wrote in the opening of

his famous *Catechism of a Revolutionary*, "The revolutionary is a doomed man." There is a lot of truth to this.

How do people reinforce hierarchy in their everyday lives and how can they fight back against it?

I think basic daily human interactions reinforce these cultural hierarchies that the base relies on. There is an ongoing debate within the Left about the power and usefulness of language. This debate is intimately connected with things like "privilege discourse," "political correctness," "call-out culture," and identity politics. Many leftists who are loyal to materialist analysis, and who spend a lot of time railing against post-new left discourse, minimize the importance of language. Many younger leftists, who are more inclined to intersectionality or who enter the Left through a lens of identity politics, place a premium on policing language. While I realize the dangers that are associated with this type of " post-new left discourse " (primarily when it is not based in anti-capitalism), I also agree that there is something to language and how it reinforces the hierarchies that we are ultimately seeking to bring down.

Dominant vernacular is rooted in dominant culture, no? If we are to believe in historical materialism and the reciprocal relationship between the base and superstructure, then it seems consistent to also believe that all of the societal norms that development within this cultural hegemony stem from this same base. Because of this, language tends to be misogynistic, homophobic, white supremacist, and classist. This is reflected in media, Hollywood, advertisement, talk radio, and sports, and as well as in our daily interactions with one another.

It can be very subtle. Using the n-word reinforces white supremacy. Using the f-word reinforces homophobia. Claiming that someone has "no class" reinforces bourgeois culture. Using the term "white trash" reinforces white supremacy by implying that "trash" is defaulted as being non-white. Calling women "hoes" and "whores," while at the same time basing their human value in attractiveness or sexuality, reinforces patriarchy. Praising

someone as being "like a boss" reinforces capitalist hierarchy. Worshipping celebrities reinforces a capitalist culture that determines human value based in wealth, or the lack thereof. Being absorbed in consumerism reinforces a culture that determines human value on the brand of clothing or shoes one is wearing, or the kind of car they drive, or the house they live in. These types of things quite literally place varying degrees of value on human lives, thus reinforcing various forms of social hierarchy. And something as simple as language, or the ways in which we interact with one another, emboldens the power structure(s) that we as leftists seek to destroy.

In what ways do you see hierarchy expanding or intensifying now that the US has moved to a 'service economy,' apparently in which there will be an increase in hierarchical authority, compared to when the US was a manufacturing nation? How has the dismantling of unions aided (as of current) or helped to dissuade (in the past) workplace hierarchy?

I am not sure the service economy will necessarily expand or intensify hierarchical arrangements in any structural sense. But you're right in suggesting that a move away from an industrial/manufacturing economy has made workers more vulnerable and powerless within these hierarchies. Service-sector work is much more precarious, is typically low-wage with very few benefits, and often does not include any kind of healthcare coverage or retirement plan. And the service-sector environment leaves workers on a virtual island, in that it doesn't offer the same potential for collectivization as the traditional shop floor once did. Without collectivization, workers are basically powerless.

The dismantling of unions went hand in hand with the offshoring of manufacturing jobs. Since the neoliberal revolution that was ushered in by Reagan, the share of workers who belong to unions in the private sector has fallen from 34 percent to 7 percent. I believe 1 in 3 public sector workers are still in unions.