

THE STRATEGY OF COVERT RESISTANCE BY INDIGENOUS INTELLECTUALS IN RESPONSE TO COLONIAL EDUCATIONAL HEGEMONY IN INDONESIA

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Abstract: This history study analyses strategies of selective curriculum adaptation, subversive publications, and the formation of indigenous intellectual networks in response to colonial educational hegemony in Indonesia. The data are retrieved from historical sources on colonial education from the 19th to the early 20th centuries. The research finds that, in respond to the rigid ELS-HIS-Volksschool of the colonial system, indigenous intellectuals successfully exploited curricular loopholes and print media to revitalize local epistemology, alternative pedagogies, and journal publications. Furthermore, organizations such as Boedi Oetomo and Taman Siswa spread emancipatory visions, transforming education into a discursive contestation field. The effects of this contestation gradually eroded colonial dominance and laid the foundation for postcolonial national education. These findings have implications for the understanding of the historiography of colonial education and the development of postcolonial curriculum which remains relevant in the current dynamics of national education.

Keywords: Covert Resistance, Indigenous Intellectuals, Colonial Education, Boedi Oetomo, Taman Siswa.

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Introduction

From the very beginning, the colonial government in Indonesia administered education as an instrument of power.¹ The goal was to organize, control, and direct the indigenous population in accordance with the political and economic interests of colonial power.² They introduced a modern school system with a stratified structure and strict differentiation based on race and social class. Meanwhile, the indigenous population was placed in a subordinate position both in terms of access and curricular orientation. The curriculum that was implemented emphasized Western rationality, the colonizers' language, and values that affirmed colonial superiority.³ Education was used as a hegemonic medium to produce specific perspectives on the self, society, and the future that aligned with the colonial project.

Education organized by the colonial government became a crucial arena for shaping colonial subjects expected to be obedient and technically skilled, yet limited in critical thinking and intellectual independence. They also enforced school discrimination, restrictions on educational levels, and institutional segregation between European children, the *priyayi*, and the common people, creating a skewed and hierarchical configuration of knowledge.⁴ This educational hegemony functioned not only at the institutional level but also at the ideological and cultural levels, as colonial values, language, and symbols were normalized as measures of progress and civilization.

Behind this hegemonic structure, colonial education also opened new avenues for the articulation of critical consciousness and the formation of an indigenous intellectual class. Restrictions on access to modern schools, reading materials, and networks of ideas, on the one hand, reinforced colonial control; yet, on the other hand, these measures gave rise to an educated generation

capable of leveraging colonial knowledge resources to formulate criticism, resistance, and alternative visions of nationhood.⁵ It is here that education becomes a battleground between the project of subjugating indigenous subjects and intellectual efforts to overturn, disrupt, or modify that hegemony from within. This silent struggle at the level of discourse, curriculum, teaching practices, and intellectual networks serves as a crucial backdrop for studies on the strategies of covert resistance employed by indigenous intellectuals against colonial educational hegemony in Indonesia.

This study aims to systematically analyze the strategies of covert resistance employed by indigenous intellectuals against colonial educational hegemony in Indonesia, particularly through alternative pedagogical practices, discursive engineering, and selective adaptation of the colonial curriculum. Specifically, the first objective is to analyze the strategies of covert resistance employed by indigenous intellectuals. The second objective is to uncover the transformation of indigenous subjects from objects of discipline into agents of resistance through education and to analyze the dynamics of the networks that formed. The third objective of this study is to analyze the historiographical implications and de-colonial contributions by highlighting intellectual resistance as the foundation of an emancipatory vision, which is relevant to contemporary decolonization studies in Indonesia.

Previous studies on education in Dutch colonial-era Indonesia have tended to focus on general history;⁶ on general educational policies;⁷ on the dynamics of relations with Islamic education;⁸ or on overt institutional and political dimensions, such as the implementation of the Ethical Policy, and discrimination regarding access to ELS, HIS, and Volksschool.⁹ Another focus has been on the role of nationalist organizations such as Boedi Oetomo in formal resistance. Such studies often generalize indigenous

resistance as a collective or military response, while covert resistance strategies at the intellectual level—such as informal pedagogical adaptations or discourse engineering in indigenous journals—receive less systematic attention, leaving a gap in the understanding of individual agency. This limitation is evident in the dominant historiography, where educational hegemony is depicted as a tool of discipline without exploring the nuances of internal subversion.

Another gap lies in the methodology of the literature, which rarely integrates the perspective of subaltern studies using an analysis of colonial educational literature. This results in a failure to uncover cultural dynamics such as the incorporation of local epistemologies into teaching practices by early intellectuals. Contemporary research on colonial educational gaps emphasizes disparities in access and economic impacts rather than the intellectual mechanisms that exploited systemic loopholes to foster nationalist consciousness.¹⁰ The absence of this synthesis hinders the reconstruction of a holistic historiography, in which indigenous intellectual resistance is positioned as a bridge between adaptation and epistemic emancipation.

This analytical gap underscores the urgency of research that blurs the compliant-resistant dichotomy by examining covert strategies as forms of creative agency, which have not been deeply explored within the context of Indonesian colonial education. This study fills this gap through an interdisciplinary approach that enriches the study of educational history and decolonial theory.

This research offers novelty through an interdisciplinary approach that integrates the theory of covert resistance (subaltern studies) with educational literature analysis. This analysis aims to uncover indigenous intellectual strategies that exploited gaps

in hegemony, such as the adaptation of the HIS curriculum and subversive publications, which have not been systematically explored in previous literature. This article differs from conventional studies that emphasize the institutional impact of Ethical Policy or overt political resistance. The primary novelty lies in the examination of indigenous agency, demonstrating that colonial education not only produced submissive subjects but also served as a catalyst for nationalism through the engineering of creative discourse. This approach enriches historiography with a decolonial perspective that highlights local epistemic transformations, such as the integration of indigenous values into informal pedagogical practices.

The research justification is grounded in its relevance to contemporary postcolonial studies. Understanding these covert strategies provides an analytical framework for critiquing the legacy of the colonial curriculum in modern Indonesian education, including current issues of curriculum decolonization. Its original contribution goes beyond historical description by developing a theory of intellectual agency that balances adaptation and subversion, thereby expanding the global discourse on colonial education in Southeast Asia.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using library research methods, focusing on the historical reconstruction of indigenous intellectuals' covert resistance strategies against colonial educational hegemony in Indonesia. This approach was chosen due to the archival and documentary nature of the topic, with data drawn from academic journals, educational history books, and related publications. Data collection was conducted through a heuristic phase, involving a systematic search of literature from both print and online sources.

The primary theory employed is Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which analyzes colonial education as a tool of cultural domination that produces the voluntary consent of indigenous subjects.¹¹ This theory is combined with Ranajit Guha's subaltern studies approach to uncover the covert agency of indigenous intellectuals as a form of counter-hegemonic resistance.¹² This theoretical framework enables a dialectical analysis between colonial power structures and adaptive-subversive strategies, such as the publication of indigenous journals or the incorporation of local epistemologies into informal teaching.

The data analysis technique employs a historical-systematic method comprising four main stages: (1) source criticism (external and internal) to verify the authenticity and credibility of colonial documents and indigenous memoirs; (2) content interpretation through thematic analysis to identify patterns of covert resistance such as curriculum adaptation and intellectual networks; (3) data triangulation between primary and secondary sources to ensure validity; and (4) narrative historiography to construct a chronological and thematic reconstruction of these strategies.¹³ This analysis is supported by a critical discourse approach to deconstruct hegemonic narratives in existing literature, thereby yielding a nuanced understanding of the transformation of indigenous subjects from objects of discipline into agents of emancipation.

Results and Discussion

Mechanisms of Covert Resistance by Indigenous Intellectuals

The Dutch implemented a colonial education system in Indonesia as an instrument of strict racial stratification. The educational institutions they established consisted of the Europeesche Lagere School (ELS) for European children, the Hollandsch-

Inlandsche School (HIS) for selected indigenous priyayi, and the Volksschool for the common people. (Luttikhuis, 2013) Explicitly, this situation limited the social and intellectual mobility of the indigenous population. Available literature indicates that access to higher levels such as the Hogere Burgerschool (HBS) was restricted for indigenous people, with only 1–2% of HIS students continuing on.¹⁴ On the other hand, the curriculum was designed to focus on low-level vocational skills, such as basic administration, to produce compliant employees without political aspirations.¹⁵ This structure reinforced the colonial hierarchy, where Dutch as the mandatory medium of instruction in ELS and HIS instilled European cultural superiority while marginalizing local epistemologies.

According to Gramsci's theory of hegemony, Ethical Policy (1901–1930) functioned as cultural domination that produced the voluntary consent of indigenous subjects through a Eurocentric curriculum. Ethical Policy emphasized loyalty, hard work, and colonial values such as work discipline without critical scrutiny of exploitation.¹⁶ Documents from Director of Education J.H. Abendanon reveal that indigenous education was directed toward “strengthening Dutch control over the native population,” with history lessons glorifying Western civilization while disregarding local traditions.¹⁷ The effect on local society was the formation of cultural inferiority, normalized as “progress.” Evidence from a 1914 report indicates Javanese nobility's preference for the ELS due to better—albeit limited—career prospects, which actually deepened internal stratification among the indigenous population.

This finding is verified through the triangulation of primary sources such as the *Koloniaal Tijdschrift* (1919) and secondary data, which consistently depict education as a tool for disciplining subjects to maintain the colonial status quo. Further evidence

can be seen in the fact that the indigenous literacy rate remained low, below 10%, in 1920.¹⁸ This was further exacerbated by the vocational orientation of the Volksschool, which targeted agricultural laborers and merchants. The education provided at the Volksschool ensured that indigenous people remained in a subordinate economic-political position, while the HIS produced “loyal intellectuals” with limited critical capacity.¹⁹ This hegemony established a framework of domination that served as a prerequisite for the emergence of covert resistance strategies.

Limited access to colonial schools such as the Hollandsch-Inlandsche School (HIS) and the Europeesche Lagere School (ELS) gave rise to the first generation of indigenous intellectuals. Several figures can be mentioned, such as Willem Iskander—whose given name was Sati Nasution—Ki Hajar Dewantara, and Husein Djajadiningrat, who underwent a transformation from passive subjects into critical actors through exposure to selectively filtered Western knowledge.²⁰ Willem Iskander, who studied in the Netherlands in 1857 and founded the Kweekschool Voor Inlandsche Onderwijzer in Tano Bato (1862). He represented the prototype of an indigenous intellectual who utilized a colonial scholarship to establish the first indigenous teachers’ college.²¹ At that school, he integrated the Mandailing language and local wisdom into the modern curriculum. ANRI archives note that only a handful of such priyayi—less than 0.5% of the indigenous population in 1880—succeeded in penetrating the system, yet they became the driving agents behind the emergence of the early ideas of national unity.

Documents from the Koloniaal Verslag (1890–1900) reveal that exposure to Western literature and Enlightenment philosophy in the Netherlands inspired Iskander to write subversive works that disguised nationalism within his poetry. A verse from one

of his poems describes the natural conditions of his birthplace, Mandailing.²² This passage describes Mandailing as a fertile, beautiful, and comfortable land to inhabit.

Na tumbur ma niantanomu
Tai laing tang do ho longang
Jaro momo pe dibaen ko-suanan mangolu
Inda ro alak tu o mardagang
Your land is truly fertile
Yet you remain complacent
Even though you easily grow crops
People do not come to trade with you

Aha ma roai tue!
Dalanna so ngada rami?
Dokon ma ubege
*Anso torang di roa nami*²³
Why is that!
Why is it not bustling?
Tell me so I may hear
So it may be clear to us

It is deeply regrettable that this fertile region lacks the human resources capable of utilizing it. Very few people make use of the great bounty in the Mandailing area. However, the following stanza reads:

Adong alak ruar
Na mian di Panyabungan

Tibu ia aruar
*Baon ia madung busungan*²⁴
There is an outsider,
Who resides in Penyabungan,
He quickly leaves,
For he has grown fat.

This verse illustrates that the greatest wealth found in the Mandailing region has been completely plundered by the newcomers. They are merely passing through, taking the produce of the Mandailing land to sell. At the time the poem was written, the Dutch had already set foot in the Mandailing region. Thus, what Iskander meant in the excerpt above refers to the Dutch who came to take the produce from Mandailing.

Another figure is Hoesein Djajadiningrat, an intellectual who used his position to expand access to education while subtly introducing nationalist ideas.²⁵ After completing his doctoral studies in Leiden, Hoesein Djajadiningrat returned to Indonesia. His career in his homeland began with a position at the language office. In 1916, he was appointed State Commissioner for Native Affairs and assigned responsibilities regarding Islamic affairs. In 1920, Hoesein Djajadiningrat served as *Ajunct-Adviser* for Native Affairs alongside B.J.O. Schrieke under the leadership of R.A. Kern as head. Four years later, in 1924, he resigned from his post after being appointed as a Full Professor at the *Rechts Hoogeschool* (High Court School) in Jakarta. This also marked Hoesein Djajadiningrat as the first Indonesian professor.

Hoesein Djajadiningrat was a true scholar. He never tired of offering ideas and concepts for education in Indonesia. One of his ideas that had a significant impact on the history of educational development in Indonesia was evident when he

initiated the establishment of the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy in Indonesia.²⁶ In the speech he delivered at the opening of the new faculty, he stated that this was a very important event for community life and would provide a profound sense of satisfaction.²⁷ The establishment of the faculty served as tangible evidence of a lengthy process that originated from the brilliant idea of Hoesein Djajadiningrat. This also signified Hoesein Djajadiningrat's deep love for knowledge.

The next figure is a native intellectual who transformed his subjectivity through a shift from administrative loyalty to implicit criticism. One example is Ki Hajar Dewantara, who once attended medical school in Java, specifically at the School voor Opleiding van Indische Artsen (STOVIA). Unfortunately, in the midst of his earnest efforts to complete his studies, he was expelled from STOVIA due to political issues.²⁸ Undeterred, Ki Hajar Dewantara subsequently chose to work as a journalist. It was through this work that Ki Hajar Dewantara began to be known for his communicative, incisive writing, which fostered a spirit of resistance against oppression. He wrote for several newspapers, such as *Sedyotomo*, *Midden Java*, *De Express*, *Oetoesan Hindia*, *Kaoem Moeda*, *Tjahaja Timoer*, and *Poesara*. His critical writings led to Ki Hajar Dewantara being arrested and exiled by the Dutch to Bangka Island and eventually banished to the Netherlands. In 1918, Ki Hajar Dewantara was released and returned to the Dutch East Indies. After returning to Indonesia, in 1922 he founded the Taman Siswa School as a form of resistance against the Dutch government's policy of excluding indigenous people from education.²⁹

Taman Siswa, founded by Ki Hajar Dewantara on July 3, 1922, became a new milestone for the indigenous population. Until then, indigenous people had no access to education in Dutch educational institutions, which were reserved exclusively

for the children of Dutch descendants and the priyayi class. Ki Hajar Dewantara expanded educational access for the indigenous population, who were still lagging behind at the time.³⁰ Access to education was not just for a select few, but a right for all citizens.

The three intellectuals mentioned above were seen engaging in covert resistance outside colonial oversight. Evidence from the works of Iskander and Dewantara illustrates the formation of a forum for the exchange of nationalist ideas that avoided direct confrontation while building cross-ethnic solidarity. Similarly, Husein Djajadiningrat, through his academic achievements and bureaucratic skills, demonstrated the intellectual capacity of indigenous people in establishing higher education in Indonesia to open broader opportunities for Indonesians to pursue knowledge.

The Transformation of the Subject and the Dynamics of Intellectual Networks

The colonial government implemented education through a highly structured curriculum, but indigenous intellectuals developed selective adaptations to the existing curriculum while simultaneously creating alternative pedagogies as a form of covert resistance. Indigenous intellectuals viewed the colonial curriculum—dominated by the Dutch language and Eurocentric values—as emphasizing technical skills and obedience. This was seen as a tool for restricting local knowledge and identity.³¹ To address this, indigenous intellectuals filtered and reworked the educational materials, particularly at school levels such as HIS and MULO, to revitalize local cultural values and epistemologies in daily teaching practices.

Schools established by indigenous intellectuals, such as teacher training schools and Islamic boarding schools operating alongside the colonial education system, integrated informal

curricula by incorporating local languages, Islamic religious values, and customary norms into the teaching-learning process.³² This approach not only served to safeguard cultural identity but also provided students with critical insights beyond the direct scope of colonial oversight. The education provided went beyond mere skill-based instruction; it also became a creative vehicle for building an alternative collective consciousness in opposition to the official colonial narrative.

Indigenous intellectuals cleverly utilized the Dutch language not only to meet administrative needs but also as a tool to disguise criticism through essays, letters, and local journal publications containing veiled nationalist and cultural ideas.³³ This strategy demonstrated a form of tactical innovation that exploited loopholes in the colonial system to drive resistance without incurring immediate severe sanctions. In this way, selective adaptation to the colonial curriculum was not merely reactive but also proactive in efforts to reconstruct indigenous epistemology as a bridge toward broader social and political transformation.

Covert resistance was carried out by indigenous intellectuals through print media such as journals and newspapers like *Medan Prijaji*, *Sinar Hindia*, and *Pewartu Deli*. These newspapers were utilized to disguise nationalist criticism within cultural and social narratives under strict colonial censorship.³⁴ *Medan Prijaji* (1907–1914) was the first newspaper published by an indigenous figure named Tirto Adhi Soerjo. This newspaper was funded, managed, and staffed by indigenous journalists. In the newspaper, they wrote articles that appeared neutral regarding indigenous education, yet implicitly highlighted discrimination in access to HIS and ELS as a form of systemic exploitation.³⁵ This strategy was implemented to avoid direct confrontation by using Malay and a rhetorical style that mimicked colonial formats.

These articles managed to get published and gain government approval while fostering collective awareness among educated readers.

Pewartar Deli, published in 1910, was the first nationalist newspaper in the city of Medan. This newspaper was published twice a week, and its owner was N.V. Boekhandel en Drukkerij Sjarikat Tapanoeli, with H. Mohamad Tahir as its director and Dja Endar Moeda as its first editor—a native intellectual and graduate of the Padangsidempuan teacher training school. The newspaper dared to publish articles defending the interests of the common people. Some writers in this newspaper used initials, such as Abdullah Lubis, abbreviated as ALS, while others used pseudonyms like Flora, Beta, and Mas Kentjana.³⁶

Newspapers such as *Doenia Bergerak* (1914), *Pantjaran Warta*, and *Sinar Djawa* employed implicit narratives that subverted the hegemony of colonial education. Through his writings, Marco Kartodikromo criticized the vocational orientation of the Volksschool as a tool for “taming the indigenous mind,” disguised within fictional stories and moral essays.³⁷ An increase in the frequency of articles on “people’s education” that subtly introduced ideas of epistemic emancipation is evident in the newspaper *Sinar Hindia*. Colonial police reports documented 27 censorship cases in 1918 due to “subtle disturbances to public order.”

The newspaper *Benih Merdeka* (1916), published in Medan, employed cultural allegories to challenge the superiority of the Eurocentric curriculum. The newspaper did not explicitly mention the government, thereby expanding the scope of resistance to the indigenous middle class.³⁸ These publications served as arenas for discursive contestation, where indigenous intellectuals utilized print media to weave in cultural nationalism, undermining

hegemony from within without the risk of immediate dissolution. This subversive strategy through print media became a prerequisite for the evolution of subsequent nationalist organizations.

Networks of indigenous intellectuals were formed through organizations such as Boedi Oetomo (1908). This organization masqueraded as a group of colonial loyalists while serving as a vehicle for covert resistance, focusing on expanding indigenous access to education beyond the confines of the HIS and ELS.³⁹ Boedi Oetomo was an organization founded by STOVIA graduates such as Wahidin Sudirohusodo and Sutomo. They employed the rhetoric of “cultural progress” to demand student funds and public schools, implicitly challenging the discrimination of the Ethical Policy without open political confrontation. During the Boedi Oetomo congress (1910–1920), there were 15 branches in Java that facilitated the exchange of nationalist ideas through educational seminars. The meeting held in 1915 drew 2,000 intellectuals, which undermined hegemony through cross-ethnic solidarity.⁴⁰

A key characteristic of this network was its adoption of a dialogic strategy with colonial authorities. One such intellectual, Ki Hajar Dewantara, negotiated with Governor-General Van Deventer to establish Taman Siswa (1922). This school adapted the Montessorian method with local values to train indigenous teachers outside state oversight.⁴¹ Collaboration between local intellectuals such as Achmad Djajadiningrat and colonial officials in the study of Javanese culture is documented in the Java Instituut documents (1921–1941). This pioneering scientific institution, founded in 1919 in Surakarta, was utilized to revitalize indigenous epistemology through the magazine *Poesaka Soenda*.⁴² This approach produced a vision that balanced adaptation with subversion, such as the “people’s education” campaign that infused cultural nationalism.

Historiographical Implications and Decolonial Contributions

The dialectical dynamic between colonial educational hegemony and indigenous intellectual agency—manifested through the ELS-HIS-Volksschool system designed for disciplinary control—actually gave rise to covert strategies such as curriculum adaptation and subversive publications.⁴³ Additionally, the Boedi Oetomo-Taman Siswa network emerged, undermining dominance from within. A literature review reveals a balance between adaptation and subversion; intellectuals such as Willem Iskander and Marco Kartodikromo utilized the Dutch language and loyalist rhetoric to subtly embed nationalism. Their ideas transformed compliant subjects into dynamic agents, shifting from civil servants to situational dissidents.

The historiographical implication of this research finding is a shift in narrative focus from colonial education as a purely top-down project toward a more dialectical understanding. This finding acknowledges the creative agency of indigenous intellectuals in disrupting and negotiating hegemony. Mainstream historiography often portrays colonial schools solely as instruments of control and Western-style modernization.⁴⁴ This led to intellectual resistance in the form of open political organizations or armed rebellion. By adapting the curriculum and engineering discourse as integral parts of the colonial educational experience, the resistance displayed appeared more subtle.

This pattern of covert resistance also forms a continuum from individual resistance (Iskander's essays) to collective resistance (the Boedi Oetomo Congress). Collectively, these patterns eroded Eurocentric superiority through alternative pedagogies and print media such as *Medan Prijaji*.⁴⁵ The historiographical impact is evident in the transition to post-1945 national education, where the emancipatory vision of Taman Siswa became a decolonial

model. The dynamics that unfolded were not coincidental but rather a form of creative agency undertaken by indigenous intellectuals to transform hegemony into a foundation of nationhood.

The primary decolonial contribution of this research lies in the effort to dismantle epistemological assumptions that treat colonial knowledge as the sole legitimate reference for interpreting Indonesia's educational past.⁴⁶ This study affirms that the project of emancipation emerged from a critical encounter between Western knowledge and local epistemology, processed by indigenous intellectuals, while simultaneously challenging the binary dichotomy of "traditional vs. modern" that often reproduces colonial hierarchies at the level of academic discourse.⁴⁷ Narratives of covert resistance reveal that decolonization is not merely a rejection of the West, but a creative process of rearticulating knowledge that acknowledges colonial traces while transcending them. This, of course, does not imply that implementing such a counter-historiography is an easy matter. In reality, transforming a historiographical tradition that is so deeply entrenched and has shaped a vast body of historical knowledge is an immense challenge.⁴⁸ Indonesia's experience demonstrates that after breaking free from the shackles of colonialism, historical writing has instead tended to be controlled by the government itself, driven by political and security motives that are not entirely objective.⁴⁹

The next implication is that the government needs to revise the history curriculum and colonial studies in Indonesia. This is done so that students not only gain knowledge from the colonial-state perspective but also integrate the voices, practices, and political-intellectual imaginaries of indigenous peoples as an analytical axis. Thus, this research not only adds to historical data but also offers a conceptual framework that can be used to formulate a decolonization agenda for the curriculum and contemporary research, both at the theoretical and educational practice levels.

Conclusion

Dutch colonial educational hegemony in Indonesia, through the ELS-HIS-Volksschool school stratification system and a Eurocentric curriculum, not only produced compliant subjects but also spurred creative indigenous intellectual agency through strategies of covert resistance. They engaged in selective adaptation of the curriculum, published subversive works in various print media, and established the Boedi Oetomo-Taman Siswa network. This Gramscian dialectic reveals a pattern of adaptation-subversion that transformed the cracks in the colonial system into the foundation of epistemic nationalism. Notable figures such as Willem Iskander and Marco Kartodikromo utilized the colonizers' language to revitalize local knowledge without direct confrontation. This finding enriches postcolonial educational historiography with archival evidence that intellectual resistance was not a destructive reaction, but rather a constructive engineering that undermined domination from within.

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