
Gramsci* on Ideological Hegemony** and Class Struggle

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Gramsci argued that the failure of the workers to make anti – capitalist revolution was due to the successful capture of the workers’ ideology, self-understanding, and organizations by the hegemonic culture. In other words, the perspective of the ruling class had been absorbed by the masses of workers. In advanced industrial societies hegemonic cultural innovations such as compulsory schooling, mass media, and popular culture had indoctrinated workers to a false consciousness. Instead of working towards a revolution that would truly serve their collective needs, workers in advanced societies were listening to the rhetoric of nationalist leaders, seeking consumer opportunities and middle-class status, embracing an individualist ethos of success through competition, and/or accepting the guidance of bourgeois religious leaders.

Gramsci did not contend that hegemony was either monolithic or unified. Instead, hegemony was portrayed as a complex layering of social structures. Each of these structures have their own mission and internal logic that allows its members to behave in a way that is different from those in different structures.

* **Antonio Gramsci** (Italian: 22 January 1891 – 27 April 1937) was an Italian Writer, Politician, Political Theorist, Philosopher, Sociologist, and Linguist. He was a founding member and onetime leader of the Communist Party of Italy and was imprisoned by Benito Mussolini’s Fascist regime. Gramsci was one of the most important Marxist thinkers in the 20th century. He is a notable figure within modern European thought and his writings analyze culture and political leadership. He is known for his theory of Cultural Hegemony, which describes how states use Cultural Institutions to maintain power in a Capitalist Societies.

He wrote more than 30 notebooks and 3000 pages of history and analysis during his imprisonment. These writings, known as the *Prison Notebooks*, contain Gramsci’s tracing of Italian history and nationalism, as well as some ideas in Marxist theory, Critical theory and Educational theory associated with his name.

** **Hegemony** was a term previously used by Marxists such as Vladimir Ilyich Lenin to denote the political leadership of the working-class in a democratic revolution. Gramsci greatly expanded this concept, developing an acute analysis of how the ruling capitalist class – the bourgeoisie – establishes and maintains its control.

Gramsci's hegemony refers to a process of moral and intellectual leadership through which dominated or substances classes of post-1870 industrial Western European nations consent to their own dominated by ruling classes, as opposed to being simply forced or coerced into accepting inferior positions. It is important to note that, although Gramsci's prison writings typically avoid using Marxist terms such class, bourgeoisie, and proletariat (because his work was read by a Fascist censor), Gramsci defines hegemony as a form of control exercised by a dominated class, in the Marxist sense of a group controlling the means of production; Gramsci uses fundamental group to stand in euphemistically for class. For Gramsci, the dominant class of Western Europe nation of his time was the bourgeoisie, defined in the Communist Manifesto as "the class of modern Capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage-labour". While the crucial (because potentially revolution-leading) subordinate class was the proletariat. "the class of modern wage-labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour-power in order to live". Gramsci's use of hegemony cannot be understood apart from other concepts he develops, including those of state and Civil Society.

Gramsci's ideas were based in Marx's notion of false consciousness, a state in which individuals are ideologically blinded to the domination they suffer. Simply, the masses can be duped into buying into a system which exploits them. For Marx, ideologies and especially religion were "opiates of the masses" because of the social complacency they produced while parasitically eating away at the soul and livelihood of the being. For Marx, class consciousness was the only true consciousness. Gramsci gave the term hegemony to this process of political domination through ideological domination. He showed how states use the popular culture, mass media, education, and religion to reinforce an ideology which supports the position of dominant classes—putting words in people's mouths. Importantly Gramsci showed how subtle the process of imposing hegemony worked, and that its effectiveness is in getting individuals to actively support a system which does not act in their own best interests.

The theory of Cultural hegemony explains how a democratic political system can be ruled by one class of society (or a coalition of interests), and their dominant ideology can provide the foundation, via their privileged access to institutions (such as the media and educational institutions), to become dominant. Despite, Gramsci's outward Marxist leaning, his Theory is quite different Classical Marxism, which often views the economy as the singular foundation in forming society and individuals. In contrast, Gramsci suggested the ideas of the ruling elite can be as powerful in forming society and individuals.

Gramsci believed that a common set of ideas, also manifested by symbols and imagery, with a facilitating power structure, attempts to convince the rest of society that the dominant ideology is natural normal or inevitable and achieved by defining "the parameters of legitimate discussion and debate over alternative beliefs, value and world views. In addition, the dominant class attempts to universalize its interests. For example, the highly educated and well traveled ruling elite advantageous to their interests. However, the dominant class assumes every citizen prefers globalization, ignoring local/regional interests. Therefore, by virtue of the language used

and other means, the dominant ideology is established by fixing a number of common sense presuppositions, assumptions and axioms that are ultimately beyond challenge, helping to legitimize the dominant class, and win the support of enough citizens to rule democratically. As a result, cultural hegemony is not exercised through overt coercion by the military police but by consent.

However, Gramsci did not believe the hegemonic culture was monolithic or unified but a complex layering of a coalition of interests i.e. the convergence of many former Communists with lay Church people in Greece during the 1980's. Each of these interests have their own mission. Nevertheless, they can coalesce to produce a larger ideology with a grander overall mission. As a result, layered hegemony is maintained; although, not always fully recognized by many of the people within the smaller underlying interest groups.

Gramsci believed that change can only succeed when the culture of a nation also fundamentally changes, when the Cultural Hegemony of the dominant class is broken i.e. a cultural revolution is enacted to create a new hegemony. Again, he differs from Classical Marxists in that his culture changing idea implies a gradual takeover of society.

To counter this Gramsci proposes an ideological struggle as a vital element in political struggle. In such struggles for hegemony, struggles for the minds and hearts of the people, intellectuals clearly have a vital role. Gramsci conceived of his major work, the prison notebooks as an inquiry into the contemporary role of intellectuals in the wake of the Russian revolution, the defeat of the workers' movement in Western Europe (and in particular, in Turin), the rise of fascism and the general reorganization of capitalism in advanced industrial countries (which Gramsci saw as typified by Fordism). Gramsci vastly extended the concept of intellectuals until it seems to embrace anyone who exercises an organizing function in society. Gramsci evolved the suggestive idea of organic intellectual's to describe those who expressed and defined the ideas and the will of a class or group as it enters into historical intellectuals' by which he means those whose role is that of maintaining traditions and supporting an existing hegemony. Gramsci supports his analysis with minute and suggestive explorations of Italian and European history. In particular, Gramsci remained obsessed with the political and historical role of the Catholic Church. Gramsci was, pre-eminently, a revolutionary leader in a non-revolutionary situation. He distinguished between the 'epoch' (which was revolutionary) and the 'situation' (which was not). His Prison Notebooks are a sustained effort to understand not only the military triumph of facism but its ubiquitous 'hegemony'. The writing is episodic, uneven, sometimes contradictory. The notebooks were being constantly rework and were subject to at least three major revision. And they expand from the problems of great political urgency to embrace a perspective that is consistently long-term and allows Gramsci to explore a huge diversity of human experience.

Edward W. said once stated that "what one feels is lacking in Foucault is something resembling Gramsci's analysis of hegemony, of historical blocs and given relationships as a whole, constructed in accordance with the perspective of a politically active individual for whom the description of fascinating power mechanisms never becomes a substitute for the effort made

to transform power relationships in society. “ [E. W. Said: *The World, the Text and the Critic*, Cambridge (Mass) 1983].

If a reading of Gramsci in the light of current challenges is possible today, it is one that is able to relocate the general theory of the working class struggle to within a philosophical discussion of sovereignty and the paradigm of power in itself – the logic behind its construction and legitimization, its sphere of influence and operation, and its complexity- and therefore in contrast with every reductionist theory of power as a mechanism of the dominant class according to the classical Marxist tradition. However, such a reading does not have to renounce the right to present itself an operational discourse, a theory to be used both *for* and *in* practice, one that does not limit itself to analyzing and interpreting power, but works to change or negate it by means of political action.

In this sense, hegemony is one of the principal and most productive categories of Gramsci's inheritance today, not only because of the central position it has assumed within the current phase of capitalist development, but also because of the new types of strategy and composition recent global resistance movements have displayed and continue to display. Thus, on the one hand the category of hegemony becomes an interpretative tool in the social field of postfordism, its determining trait being the reabsorption of the differences between pure intellectual activity, political action and work. On the other hand, the intermittent, network structure of the movements that began in Seattle – the irreducibility of their components to the membership of any specific social class, the role assumed by new means of communication within them and the way they claim autonomous spaces for action – necessarily invokes the concept of hegemony in the Gramscian sense. But about all it is the current identification of political struggle and cultural output that cannot do without Gramsci's theoretical arsenal, which, in contrast to the traditions of Marxism, locates politics as a super structural dimension in such a way that it has its own full and specific autonomy. How then should hegemony be defined? What examples of power does it refer to? For which social class is the term synonymous with supremacy? What are the paradigms required in order to discussing hegemony?

Gramsci's theory of hegemony has considerable autonomy compared with Lenin's strategic conception, and for Gramsci, the problem of the cultural affirmation of the workers' movement acquires a greater importance than for any other Marxist thinker. However, the intention is not to give more importance to the superstructure than to the structural, and even less to over-estimate superstructural elements. What is intended, rather, is to reduce them to the level of structure. That is to say that all those elements pertaining to the sphere of civil society – such as ideologies – acquire an objective and operational reality, and assume functions that orthodox Marxist thinking attributes to the economic structure. If it is true that the economic basis is the determining factor, the great material conflict only become politically relevant for Gramsci when they enter “the realm of ideologies”. (prison note books, p.1249).

In this sense the new area of conflict opens on cultural and ideological ground, which is where hegemony, as a form of power, is constructed. This is the source of the general theory of the relationship between the organic intellectual and social classes throughout the prison

notebooks. In fact, “every social groups, - Gramsci writes – coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one more strata of intellectuals which give homogeneity and awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also on the social and political fields.”

But what form of power does hegemony exercise? What relationship does it define between the leaders and the led? Gramsci identifies two main forms of power where hegemony differs from dominance, which correspond to two different spheres: civil society, and political society with the State as its synthesis. If civil society is constructed from spontaneous rather than coercive affiliations, political society is formed from institutions whose function is connected to forms of dominance within society. Hegemony would be situated within civil society, which would establish itself as an area for constructing a political subjectivity that depended on consensus rather than coercion. Thus hegemony would operate as a *de facto* power whose popularity and persuasive capacity would depend on the strength of the ideas it represented. In this sense, for Gramsci, a society can only be profoundly changed if all the conditions are already in place for its takeover.

Therefore – through a redefinition of the revolutionary process – the proletariat has to become the hegemonic class before it becomes the ruling class, which is a logical consequence of hegemony. Gramsci’s concept is rooted in the analysis of the historical bloc’ as the relationship between economic forces and ideology, in which the reciprocal influence of structure and superstructure is manifested. There can be no dominance without consensus, and consensus can only be gained from ideological and cultural struggle. Gramsci’s radical change of direction, even compared with Lenin, is exactly that of gaining consensus before the actual conquest of power. It is not by chance – as has been said – that for Gramsci, a social class does not *take State power, it becomes State.* (E.Laclau and C.Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 1985). “A social group can, and indeed has to be the directive on before seizing government power (indeed this is one of the primary conditions for the takeover of power). Afterwards, when exercising power, even if it holds it tightly in its fist, it becomes dominant, but it also has to continue to be directive (*dirigente*).” (prison Notebooks, p. 2010-2011). With regard to this objective, intellectuals, as the organizers of hegemony, must commit themselves to a long-term task that is firmly bound to prevailing historical conditions. Gramsci calls this the war of position, in that it is the unprecedented concentration of hegemony in contrast with the war of movement, the frontal attack of the Trotskyist matrix.

In the continual transformation of the composition and interrelationship between rulers and the ruled, another Gramscian category exhibits its extraordinary vitality today: the concept of subalternity. Such a category is, however, not solely the conceptual counterpoint to either hegemony or the ruling class. In fact, this category, inherited today from the subaltern Studies project, is characterized by its focus on the territorial, spatial, and geographic basis of social life. If Gramsci originally coined the term subaltern as a substitute for proletariat, the concept has since come to assume the wider Gramscian meaning of a revolutionary construct that transcends the urban working class – the sole subject of orthodox Marxism. To a greater degree than either

Marx or Engels, Gramsci emphasizes the importance of cultural and spatial coordinates in the correlation between the tendency towards world unification and the political plan. To some extent we are dealing with the introduction of geo-social parameters within a general reflection on the subject of power. Space and territory burst forth from texts on the Gramscian analysis of the Southern question, the 'agrarian bloc' and the division of the world into North and South. Here too, one cannot fail to see a certain relationship between the subsequent Foucaultian discussion on geography, and ideologies and strategies concerning space, as we as with projects for the deconstruction of existential theories of culture. Despite great differences, and not only those linked to historical circumstances, that separate Gramsci as a representative of fordism (to which we owe the formulation, if not the introduction of the term itself) from the current situation, what characterizes the postfordist multitude is the direct link between structure and superstructure, between material development, social conflict and culture. In this sense, the Gramscian toolbox appears to be not only still useful but absolutely necessary in these times of the power of the Empire.

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