

ANTONIO GRAMSCI AND THE CONCEPT OF "HEGEMONY"

Dr.S.Balakrishnan

Executive Director, VERGAL Educational Trust, Madurai

Abstract

*The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci remains hugely popular today across the left as well as in academic circles where a neo-Gramscian school of thought crosses disciplines and generations. His most referred to works are his prison notebooks, a collection of articles and fragments that he wrote whilst languishing in Mussolini's jail. What people value in Gramsci is his contribution to political theory, including central concepts like hegemony and the war of position/war of manoeuvre. Gramsci was a leader and theorist of the Italian Communist party and editor of a popular Marxist journal called L'Ordine Nuovo. He was arrested by Mussolini's fascist police in 1926 and thrown into prison where he remained until 1937 when he was released, sick and close to death. He died a few months afterwards. A vigorous and energetic thinker, he refused to let the fascist prisons silence him. In his cell he wrote several notebooks where he outlined his thoughts on several topics from historical materialism to the revolutionary party to the political world perspective. He painstakingly reconstructed quotes of Marx and Lenin from memory as he formulated ideas which are still discussed and used today. Gramsci's position as a revolutionary communist is often downplayed by many of his modern supporters who tend to use him as a point of departure on their path to post-Marxism. They do this by addressing Gramsci as a left wing thinker, but removed from his revolutionary Marxist context, thus rendering him safe and palatable for the academic community. He is considered chiefly as a theoretician of the super structure already veering toward that cultural and linguistic turn that defines large sections of contemporary academia and this view has the result, as noted by Anderson in *The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci*, to single him out as an intellectual academic, and not as a party leader and theoretician. The benefit of Gramsci for academia is that since most of his writings on method are contained in his Prison notebooks, which by their very nature had to be written in a discreet almost coded language, it is possible to read his ideas in many different ways, including in a thoroughly revisionist way which guts the actual revolutionary project from his world view. This is a revealing insight into how academia likes its Marxism - the product of being trapped in a prison cell, with a fascist censor looking over your shoulder. Indeed, a lot of the contributions that Gramsci is credited with are directly taken from or developed out of the theoretical debates that had been going on in the second and third internationals. The concept of hegemony, which Gramsci is perhaps most famous for, was discussed by Plekhanov and Lenin before him. The concept of the war of positions² and war of manoeuvres² find their origins in the debates between Luxemburg and Kautsky over the mass strike. Gramsci was a Third International Marxist whose theories are grounded in the political debates of his international party, and developed in the context of the mental isolation of his imprisonment. As Emanuele Saccarelli argues, we can only understand Gramsci by rescuing him from academia, dusting him off, and then analysing his work in the light of the theoretical context of the Third international, namely the rise of Stalin and the collapse of revolutionary communism.*

Keywords: Marx, Lenin, Gramsci, Hegemony, Civil Society, Politics and historical materialism.

Introduction

Gramsci's life was dramatically affected by the forces he tried all his life to oppose. Born in Italy of working class parents in 1891, he dropped out of school in sixth grade to help his family after his father was arrested for opposing a local political figure's bid for re-election. As a child, he worked ten-hour days, though he was often ill and in pain. He had been dropped down a flight of stairs when he was six, and his body was so twisted by this accident that as an adult he appeared a dwarf-like hunchback. After some years spent carrying around accounting ledgers that weighed more than he did, Gramsci returned to school and then went on to college on a scholarship reserved for "peasantry of promise." Later, he worked as a journalist for a number of radical newspapers, got involved in workers' political education, and helped to found the Italian Communist Party. While Gramsci was traveling in Russia, the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini came to power in Italy. By now, Gramsci was well-known for his writing and political activity, and Mussolini commented that he had "an unquestionably powerful brain." But intellect and ideas are threatening to dictators, so in 1928 Gramsci was sent off to prison with the words of the public prosecutor echoing in his ears: "For twenty years we must stop this brain from functioning." Nevertheless, thinking was Gramsci's only solace in prison, and until he died in 1937, he spent his time working out his most valuable ideas in thirty-two notebooks -- 2842 pages of tiny handwriting -- which later became his most famous work.

One of Gramsci's ideas was the concept of "hegemony," or ideological domination. When one ideology, or world view, dominates, it suppresses or stamps out, often cruelly, any other ways of explaining reality. Actually, hegemony can contain a variety of ideologies. Some are artificial -- theoretical explanations created by academics or political activists or philosophers. Other ideologies are "organic," which means they come from the common people's lived experience. These consist of a culture's way of seeing and believing, and the institutions that uphold these beliefs, like religion, education, family, and the media. Through these beliefs and institutions, society endorses the ethical beliefs and manners which "the powers that be" agree are true, or right, or logical, or moral. The institutions and beliefs that the dominant culture support are so powerful, and get hold of people when they are so young, that alternative ways of envisioning reality are very hard to imagine. This is how hegemony is created and maintained. According to Gramsci, hegemony locks up a society even more tightly because of the way ideas are transmitted by language. The words we use to speak and write have been constructed by social interactions through history and shaped by the dominant ideology of the times. Thus they are loaded with cultural meanings that condition us to think in particular ways, and to not be able to think very well in other ways.

Concept of Hegemony

Gramsci's most popular idea, the concept of hegemony, refers to how a class exerts influence over other classes in such a way that they will follow its political and economic project. It comes from the need to answer the question; when faced with a system when so many people are exploited and alienated by tiny elite, how does the ruling class maintain its rule. Gramsci answered it thus; two major super structural 'levels': the one that can be called 'civil society', that is, the ensemble of organisms commonly called 'private', and that of 'political society' or 'the state'. These two levels correspond on the one hand to the functions of 'hegemony' which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of 'direct domination' or command exercised through the state and 'juridical' government." "The "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group" and "the apparatus of state coercive power which "legally" enforces discipline on those groups who do not "consent" either actively or passively." So it is not simply through the repressive powers of the state - though this is obviously an important aspect of their control - because in advanced capitalist countries many people accept the order of things. Gramsci argues that the bourgeois class has a form of ideological hegemony over the rest of us, that their power is both centralised in the state apparatus proper but also diffused across society, through the media, family traditions, religious institutions and so on. These hegemonic ideas are the ideas of the ruling class; it is an acceptance or at least a toleration of forms of inequality and oppression. This point is entirely related to Marx and Engel's position in the German Ideology that "For each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it, is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society, that is, expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones."

Hegemony is also important for those forces or social classes which do not rule. If the working class intends to replace the capitalist class as a new ruling class then it must achieve what the bourgeoisie did in 1789 in France, turn the narrative of their revolution into a popular revolution. The idea of a hegemonic bloc refers to the ability for a class to transcend their own narrow sectional economic interests and project themselves as possible leaders of the nation, or political-social leaders. The Russian revolution was a situation where the Bolsheviks became a hegemonic force in the October revolution through their slogans marshalled the Russian working class to itself become the hegemonic force, bringing the soldiers, sailors and peasants in behind them. This was done by the working class coming to the head of the nation and promising bread, peace and land, demands which encapsulated the needs and wants of many millions of Russians in the subaltern classes. Gramsci had this in mind when he wrote "among the subaltern groups, one will exercise or tend to exercise certain hegemony through the mediation of a party".

The idea of hegemony as a form of analysis within Marxism is nothing new. Plekhanov and Axelrod raise the concept of hegemony first unite sub-alterns social groups behind the working class, Lenin talked about it in relation to the urgent need for the small Russian working class to form an alliance with the peasantry and bring them under their hegemony, i.e. the leadership of the revolutionary workers movement. The idea can be traced back even further to Marx and Engels where they argue in the Communist Manifesto that the working class must become the universal class and come to the head of the nation by winning the battle of democracy.

Hegemony, Lenin and Gramsci

The distinction between Lenin's theory of Hegemony and how Gramsci's has come to be used is clear. Lenin used the term hegemony (which in Russian can also be synonymous with the word vanguard) as a political orientation resulting from his analysis of the revolutionary strategy he outlines in *What is to be done*. The working class must form alliances with the peasantry (must bring them under their hegemony) as a crucial stage in the revolutionary struggle against Tsarism. Lenin wanted the working class vanguard to be the tribune of the oppressed, taking up the cause of all people who suffered under autocratic Tsarism. Lenin's hegemony was intimately connected to the struggle for working class power, it was radical and posited from below - the end result was the acceptance of the leadership of the revolutionary party. Indeed this is how the concept was historically understood, even by Gramsci, but more recent interpretations vulgarised it by seeing it as a form of reformist 'building confidence' through alliances with trade union leaders and reformist or even liberal politicians. In this sense the counter-hegemonic alliance becomes conflated with the tactic of the united front which is morphed into a strategy which could last many years. A permanent political bloc between revolutionary workers, reformists and various subalterns was certainly not the vision of Gramsci.

Politics and historical materialism

Whilst society has regular crises and political or social upsets which cause movements to arise in response, the real struggle only emerges when an organic crisis emerges. For Gramsci an organic crisis is something which Challenges the continued rule of the capitalists because they lose legitimacy in the eyes of the masses: "In every country the process is different, although the content is the same. And the content is the crisis of the ruling class's hegemony, which occurs either because the ruling class has failed in some major political undertaking for which it has requested, or forcibly extracted, the consent of the broad masses (war, for example) , or because huge masses (especially of peasants and petty-bourgeois intellectuals) have passed suddenly from a state of political passivity to a certain activity, and put forward demands which taken together, albeit not organically

formulated, add up to a revolution. A “crisis of authority” is spoken of: this is precisely the crisis of hegemony, or general crisis of the State.”

This idea of mobilising the ‘subalterns’ makes up an important part of Gramsci’s analysis of the development of the modern nation state in Italy. His criticism of nationalist revolutionaries like Giuseppe Garibaldi and the Action Party is that they failed to really connect with and mobilise wider layers of the Italian peasantry and urban poor. This led to the failure of Risorgimento as Italy was born a weak state with a lethargic ruling class and huge disparity between the north and the south of the country. Whereas the French revolution, which was a much more energetic bourgeois revolution which united the peasants, the sans-coulette and the artisans in overthrowing the monarchy was a much better model for how a revolution should occur. Gramsci also developed an idea the idea from Marx of the revolution from above. Marx wrote in 1851 ‘The period of revolutions from below had come to an end, at least for the time being; this was followed by a period of revolutions from above’. He was referring to shifts in the dominant wing of the ruling class, either caused by movements from below or from ‘palace coups’ among the bourgeois class. Gramsci termed this phenomenon “Passive Revolution” denoting a massive structural or social change which occurs from above, for instance the formation of Germany as a nation state under Bismark. Such an event occurs at the moment of interaction between international and national, as a result of the combined and uneven nature of the world economy and nation states, whereby productive techniques or new social concepts and formations are imported from abroad by a ruling class. A passive revolution is also a revolution-restoration and indicates the post revolutionary phase when the working class has risen up but failed to take power. Clearly a counter revolutionary orgy of violence is possible, but so is a top down reform by the bourgeois class to restructure the economy and society as they wish. An example would be the Meiji restoration in Japan which saw a split in the state bureaucracy, a brief civil war, and then a modernising section of the ruling elite under the Emperor Meiji take power to implement western style reforms of the army, trade and state. ⁵ In the 1930s Trotsky saw two possibilities opening up if the working class did not take power, fascism or Corporatism (Americanism), based on the advanced productive techniques of Fordism and the increasing disenfranchisement of the working class from its unions and political parties. Both fascism and Corporatism are examples of passive revolutions and emerge because of the failure of the revolutionary forces to create lasting stable change.

Marxism and Gramsci

Gramsci’s contributions to Marxism from the Prison Notebooks are essentially rooted in the failures of the Italian Communist Party to stop Mussolini and the fascists from taking power. On a wider level it was the failure of the German revolution and other workers uprisings in Europe which cemented the “pessimism of the intellect”, seeming to

confirm the overwhelming strength of bourgeois ideology and institutions and the apparent relative weakness of the working class in its capacity to overthrow capitalism. The reality is that the problem does not lie the hegemony of bourgeois ideas in isolation from the crisis of leadership of the working class. The failure of the German revolution of 1918-23 was not that the German capitalists were ideologically supreme or there was no counter-hegemonic mass movement arraigned against them - the problem was that the leadership of the KPD made serious strategic and tactic errors which led the struggle to defeat.

For those who use hegemony today as an excuse not only for the weakness of the left but also as a replacement for the failures of the left, it is important to historicise the regressive steps that occurred since the 1930s. In Western Europe it was the collapse of the Third International into centrism and then eventually reformism and counter revolutionary politics which was the most powerful subjective factor in either preventing revolutionary outbreaks after the Second World War or demobilising them. In Eastern Europe and China it was the creation of new Stalinist states which to some proved the historical inevitability of socialism, but to others only demonstrated that it came at the cost of individual freedom. It is impossible to understand the strengthening of capitalist 'hegemony' after the Second World War without integrating it into a critical analysis of the errors of the communist movement to implement the kind of revolutionary methods that the Bolsheviks pioneered. Gramsci, who died in 1937 would remain blissfully unaware of these tragedies, but he was also unable in his own lifetime to really engage in the debates in the Communist International over the rise to power of Stalin. We know that in prison he never asked for copies of Stalin's books and he only mentioned Stalin once in his prison notebooks, but he never had the opportunity to develop a critique of the leader of the world communist movement, so it is impossible for us to judge his anti-Stalinist credentials.

Conclusion

Gramsci's insights about how power is constituted in the realm of ideas and knowledge - expressed through consent rather than force - have inspired the use of explicit strategies to contest hegemonic norms of legitimacy. Gramsci's ideas have influenced popular education practices, including the adult literacy and consciousness-raising methods of Paulo Freire in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), liberation theology, methods of participatory action research, and many approaches to popular media, communication and cultural action. The idea of power as 'hegemony' has also influenced debates about civil society. Critics of the way civil society is narrowly conceived in liberal democratic thought - reduced to an 'associational' domain in contrast to the state and market - have used Gramsci's definition to remind us that civil society can also be a public sphere of political struggle and contestation over ideas and norms. The goal of 'civil society strengthening' in development policy can thus be pursued either in a neo-liberal sense of building civic institutions to complement (or hold to account) states and markets, or in a Gramscian sense

of building civic capacities to think differently, to challenge assumptions and norms, and to articulate new ideas and visions.

Reference

1. Crehan, Kate. *Gramsci, Culture, and Anthropology*. University of California Press. 2002.
2. Dante L. Germino, *Antonio Gramsci: Architect of a New Politics*, Louisiana Press University, 1990 ISBN 0-8071-1553-3
3. Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from The Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. NY: International Publishers, 1995 [copyright 1971].
4. Gramsci, Antonio (1971): *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence & Wishart
5. Heywood, Andrew (1994) *Political Ideas and Concepts: An Introduction*, London, Macmillan.
6. Hoare, Quentin & Smith, Geoffrey Nowell, (1971). "Introduction". In *Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, pp. xvii-xcvi. New York: International Publishers, p. xviii.
7. Strinati, Dominic (1995): *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*. London: Routledge (Chapter 4: 'Marxism, Political Economy and Ideology'.)

Web Sources

- <http://marxisttheory.org/antonio-gramsci-theories-of-hegemony-civil-society-and-revolution/>
- <http://www.powercube.net/other-forms-of-power/gramsci-and-hegemony>
- <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~hfox/gramsci.html>