Gramsci at the margins: subjectivity and subalternity in a theory of hegemony

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In strictly political terms, the Gramscian concept of subalternity applies to those groups in society who are lacking autonomous political power. In Gramsci's time these groups were easily identified, and much of the work around the concept of subalternity has centred on groups like peasants and the proletariat. But Gramsci also argued that subalternity existed on a broader scale than this, including people from different religions or cultures, or those existing at the margins of society. This aspect of Gramsci's work is often overlooked, because many writers are interested in Gramsci's political theory, which they use to analyse the way in which capitalism, as a structural system, has become hegemonic over time. The focus here is on the history of organised groups and their organised struggle. Hence, the emphasis is largely on white, male-oriented institutions of power. But Gramsci argued that hegemony did not exist merely at this level. Rather, he argued that hegemony comes from below, originating in the thoughts, beliefs and actions of everyday people who may or may not see themselves as part of organised groups. Hence, Gramsci was intensely aware of the way hegemony operated at a personal level. Capitalist hegemony was not, is not, possible, without a complete identification at the level of the self. This paper seeks to expand on some of Gramsci's thinking in this area, in an attempt to understand the connections between the self and society in a theory of hegemony, where hegemony is considered a process based on leadership, rather than a state built on domination. It is through an analysis of what hegemonic processes exclude (or make subaltern), that we can expand our understanding of how hegemony works, and of how it may be resisted.

Hegemony as process

The term hegemony has recently come to be synonymous with the idea of the domination of one group over another, especially in the field of international relations.[2] It is also most frequently linked to Gramsci's work on the political relations emerging out of the revolutionary ferment of early twentieth century Europe.[3] Yet these are not the only contexts

[1] The author gratefully acknowledges the helpful comments of the anonymous reviewers which provided much food for thought.

[2] The amount of work in this field is large – some examples include Cox R. W. (1993). "Gramsci, hegemony and international relations: an essay in method." *Cambridge Studies in International Relations* 26, Gill S., Ed. (1993). *Gramsci, historical materialism and International Relations*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Chomsky N. (2003). *Hegemony or survival: America's quest for global dominance*. Allen and Unwin, Sydney, Agnew J. A. (2005). *Hegemony: the new shape of global power*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia.

[3] Some examples of this work include Anderson P. (1976). "The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci." *New Left Review* 1(100): 5-78, Mouffe C., Ed. (1979). *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London,

in which Gramsci deployed the term, and more often than not it is now used in ways that are far removed from the original complexity with which Gramsci developed the concept. While it is true that there is no one place in which Gramsci defined and developed the term, nor is there one articulation of a 'theory of hegemony' as a coherent whole, it is the case that the concept informs most of Gramsci's wide-ranging philosophical, political and cultural prison writings. Early in the Prison Notebooks he gives a clear indication of how he understands hegemony operating:

The politico-historical criterion on which our own inquiries must be grounded is this: that a class is dominant in two ways, namely it is leading and dominant. It leads the allied classes, it dominates the opposing classes. Therefore, a class can (and must) lead even before assuming power; when it is in power it becomes dominant but it also continues to lead (Gramsci 1992: 136-137. Q1§44).

This emphasis on leadership stems from the term's original meaning of which Gramsci was clearly aware (Fontana 2000: 304-306). Fontana suggests that the key to understanding Gramsci's conception of hegemony lies in the use of the Ancient Greek 'hēgemoniā' (or 'egemonia' in Italian) meaning leadership[4], as different and distinct from domination (Williams 1960; Fontana 2000: 308-309). This does not mean that Gramsci used one definition of the term consistently; in fact he appears to use it in several different ways and on several different levels which sometimes appear to contradict each other (Fontana 2000: 307-8, 315). Given this, it is an almost pointless task to attempt to unravel this complexity and come up with one categorical definition. However, for the purposes of this paper a particular conception of hegemony is necessary if we wish to more deeply understand the connection between the individual and society. In this sense, a conception of hegemony that provides a framework of analysis that does not depend on deterministic categories, especially when it comes to the problematic of consciousness and subjectivity, is essential. Gramsci's theory of hegemony makes this possible when we conceive of it as a process, and based in civil society.

The idea that the theory of hegemony is process-oriented is implicit in the dialectic approach which pervades the *Prison Notebooks* in both its method and content. The exact nature of Gramsci's dialectical method is a matter of debate (Finocchiaro 1988) however it is most evident in his insistence on understanding the *relationships* between objects of analysis to critique the basis of knowledge (Howson 2005: 15). The notion of hegemony as a process is also implicit in his rejection of deterministic economism; if lived experience is not simply determined by the categories of social analysis as imposed by abstract and idealist theorising,

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Adamson W. (1980). *Hegemony and revolution: a study of Antonio Gramsci's political and cultural theory*. University of California Press, Berkeley, Sassoon A. S. (1980). *Gramsci's Politics*. Croom Helm, London, Femia J. V. (1981). *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness and the Revolutionary Process*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, Holub R. (1992). *Antonio Gramsci: Beyond Marxism and Postmodernism*. Routledge, London: New York.

[4] It should be noted that most dictionaries do still use 'leadership' as the definition of hegemony, while others use dominance, or influence, especially of one state over another. Regardless, all dictionary entries consulted here refer the root of the word back to the Greek hegemonia, meaning leadership. Dictionaries consulted: *Macquarie Concise Dictionary*, the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Compact Oxford English Dictionary Online*, which interestingly defines hegemony simply as dominance.

then the theory of hegemony necessarily implies a conception of 'reality' constructed through multiplicity and indeterminacy.

For Gramsci, the practice of hegemony is nothing other than the waging of a war of position (Howson 2005: 129). If Gramsci's main thematic concern was an understanding of the philosophy of praxis, then the conception of hegemony developed in the *Prison Notebooks* stems from his consideration of the failures of revolutionary Marxism. He saw clearly that a frontal assault on the state bought only disaster, in fact it served only to reinforce and strengthen the repressive apparatus (Gramsci 1971: 229-246; Gramsci 1992: 217-220 Q1 §133, 134). The war of position, in contrast to the frontal assault or 'war of manoeuvre', is "the whole organisational and industrial system of the territory which lies to the rear of the army in the field" (Gramsci 1971: 234, Q13 §24). A war of position, must be carefully considered, carefully planned. It is "concentrated, difficult, and requires exceptional qualities of patience and inventiveness" (Gramsci 1971: 239, Q6 §117). And, as Howson argues, it is never really complete. If a war of position leads to a situation of ethico-political hegemony, then the maintenance of this hegemony is an on-going process, an 'organic becoming' (Howson 2005: 129). If aspirational hegemony, or ethico-political leadership, occurs through consensus, then this is a consensus won in the realm of ideas as much as through material practice. In this sense then, hegemony can not be separated from civil society.

Like all Gramscian concepts, 'civil society' and its relationship to a theory and practice of hegemony is a contested notion (Bobbio 1979; Buttigieg 1995). In many cases, the focus on the relationship between civil society and power at a formal state level has resulted in an abstraction of the concept out from the theory of hegemony as a whole. In the worst case, the tendency to theorise civil society as a separate sphere from the state results in the valorisation of neo-liberal conceptions of freedom (Buttigieg 1995: 4-6). In Gramsci's notion of the 'integral state' however, civil society does not sit separately from political society, but is rather an essential component of the making of power, and thus, the challenging of that power – the institution of a new, alternative 'power' (Howson 2005: 17). If hegemony is the result of ethico-political leadership, then civil society is the site of that hegemony. Gramsci's concern then is to expand the terrain of civil society, to "develop a revolutionary strategy (a 'war of position') that would be employed precisely in the arena of civil society, with the aim of disabling the coercive apparatus of the state, gaining access to political power, and creating the conditions that would give rise to a consensual society wherein no individual or group is reduced to a subaltern status" (Buttigieg 1995: 7).

The major innovation that Gramsci makes to our understanding of civil society, which make it so important for a theory of hegemony, is the way in which he reconfigures the concept of the 'superstructural' (Texier 1979). Whereas Marx posited a base/structure conception, with civil society being the 'superstructural' site of historical development (but ultimately 'determined' by the base), Gramsci extends the distinction to argue that civil society is more than just superstructural, but is the essential terrain of historical development. Instead of justifying ideologies emerging from the base into the realm of civil society, for Gramsci the 'ideas' are contemporaneous, emerging in civil society, so that man acts on structures rather than structures acting deterministically on man. Bobbio argues that "it is the active subject

who recognises and pursues the end, and who operates within the superstructural phase using the structure itself as an instrument. Therefore the structure is no longer the subordinating moment of history, but it becomes the subordinate one" (Bobbio 1979: 34). In Gramsci's words: "Structure ceases to be an external force which crushes man, assimilates him to himself and make him passive; and is transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethico-political form and a source of new initiatives. To establish the 'cathartic' moment becomes therefore, it seems to me, the starting point for all the philosophy of praxis" (Gramsci 1971: 367, Q10II §6i). This is the practice of hegemony, a hegemony that occurs in the realm of ideas, in the "minds of men" (Gramsci 1971: 367, Q10II §6i). Thus, man is an active subject, and the structures of human life do not exist separately from the thinking of them, and so the question of consciousness, the nature of human subjectivity, is essential to understanding society as it is, and what it can become.

If hegemony is constituted in civil society, and if civil society is superstructural, than the means of civil society is language. Peter Ives's recent work on language and hegemony has shown the complexity of Gramsci's thought on the topic of language, on linguistics, on its relation to social practices and to the creation of a national-popular 'sentiment'(Ives 2004a; Ives 2004b; Ives 2005). This paper can not be a comprehensive analysis of Gramsci's varied approaches to the '*questione della lingua*' but it does seek to make particular connections between language and hegemony, linking language back to civil society and its role in the construction of subjectivity. In a way, Gramsci makes this link himself:

> We have established that philosophy is a conception of the world, and that philosophical activity is not to be conceived solely as the 'individual' elaboration of systematically coherent concepts, but also and above all as a cultural battle to transform the popular 'mentality' and to diffuse the philosophical innovations which will demonstrate themselves to be 'historically true' to the extent that they become concretely – i.e. historically and socially – universal. Given this, the question of language in general and of languages in the technical sense must be put in the forefront of our enquiry.[5]

Three themes emerge from this paragraph. Firstly, that seemingly incoherent and non-rational conceptions of the world are not to be dismissed in the analysis of society and history. Secondly that these conceptions of the world, including the nature of self-identity, are constructed and contested on the terrain of civil society, through language, in all its forms. And thirdly, that this is the essence of the hegemonic process – the struggle over meaning, over conceptions of the world, over what is normal, acceptable, truthful, 'universal' in social relations. Of course, in an ethico-political hegemony, this 'truth' exists in the form of unstable equilibria, where meaning is never settled, nor even universal, but firmly grounded in the specific and particular conceptions of the world. In the philosophy of praxis, where the aim is the 'hegemony of the proletariat' this is the process of 'war of position': the careful and patient articulation of a conception of the world which does not disconnect groups or

[5] Gramsci A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. ed Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith. London, Lawrence and Wishart.p348. Q10II §44. The editors of the SPN have noted that 'language' for Gramsci here has two meanings, lost in the English translation, which is the differentiation between language as a system of verbal signs and language as the 'faculty to transmit messages, verbal or otherwise, by means of a common code". Note 32, p. 348.

individuals from power, where interests can be expressed and commonalities uncovered, without the imposition of one corporate interest over all.

This issue of language is bound up with Gramsci's thinking about the nature of philosophy and its relation to what he called 'common sense', and the problem of how people made sense of themselves, and their place in the world. In this sense then, there is a 'subjective' element to the theory of hegemony which often gets overlooked, but with which Gramsci was intensely concerned. Gramsci saw clearly the potential for capitalism to reach right into the heart of the human self, and his emphasis on the importance of understanding hegemony through civil society is because he recognised the implications of hegemony for personal, social and political life.

In his note on the "Problem of Collective Man", for example, Gramsci wrote that the aim of the state "is always that of creating new and higher types of civilization: of adapting the civilization and the morality of the broadest popular masses to the necessities of the continuous development of the economic apparatus of production: hence of evolving even physically new types of humanity" (Gramsci 1971: 242, Q13 §7). This was not a simple process, firstly because Gramsci saw quite clearly that people were not determined simply by the economic circumstances into which they were born, rather people were made at the intersection of many different influences on thought and action: "man cannot be conceived of except as historically determined man – i.e., man who has developed, and who lives, in certain conditions, in a particular social complex or totality of social relations" (Gramsci 1971: 244, Q15 §10) and that this social totality consists of the variety of influences and associations which are sometimes contradictory (Gramsci 1971: 265, Q14 §13) but which all contribute to the formulation of a particular conception of the world (Gramsci 1971: 324, Q11 §12). Secondly he argued that people were still free to choose their way of being in the world and that this complicated the matter further, that is "the will and initiative of men themselves can not be left out of account" (Gramsci 1971: 244, Q15 §10). In the same way that Marx argued that men made themselves but not in circumstances of their own choosing, so Gramsci was aware of the tension between structures and human agency. But for Gramsci, the situation is more complex because of the importance he gave to the dialectic in hegemony. While it may be the case that a particular hegemony may require a particular kind of person, it is also true that people themselves shape hegemony: "Every man, in as much as he is active, i.e. living, contributes to modify the social environment in which he develops (to modifying certain of its characteristics or to preserving others); in other words, he tends to establish "norms", rules of living and of behaviour" (Gramsci 1971: 265, Q14 §13) and in so doing "reacts upon the State and the party, compelling them to reorganize continually and confronting them with new and original problems to solve" (Gramsci 1971: 267, Q17 §51).

In some notes on "The Study of Philosophy", Gramsci differentiates however, between ways of thinking and being which he classifies as common sense as opposed to philosophy. If common sense is the world view which a person takes uncritically from their environment, philosophy is the ability to be self-reflective, self-critical:

> is it better to think, without having a critical awareness, in a disjointed and episodic way?...to take part in a conception of the world mechanically imposed by some external environment, i.e., by the many social groups in which everyone is automatically involved from the moment of his entry into the conscious world…or...is it better to work out consciously and critically one's own conception of the world and thus, in connection with the labours of one's own brain, choose one's sphere of activity, be one's own guide, refusing to accept passively and supinely from outside the moulding of one's personality? (Gramsci 1971: 323-324, Q11 §12)

Gramsci shows here an understanding of the complex forces that go into the making of human subjectivity. More than this, he recognises that subjectivity, consciousness, is key to action. Through questioning the range of possible identifications presented to individuals from the outside, Gramsci sees here the potentials for the questioning of normativity, and for a radical re-energising of the human self. The individual must start from this level of self-knowledge, self-awareness, and move outwards in ways that challenge neat categorisations. In a detached or dominative hegemonic situation, challenges to meaning are always closed down – transformed or eradicated. Conceptions of the world are restricted and limited by the grammar of the dominant group, creating exclusion and subalternity. For this reason, Gramsci was intensely interested in groups that were considered problematic for the dominant, or mainstream, society, and this emphasis on collective alternative subjectivity formed the basis of his work on subalternity.

Subalternity and subjectivity

Like the other Gramscian concepts explored here, the concept of subalternity is a contested and appropriated one (Green 2000), for some authors coming to be synonymous with either the peasantry or the proletariat.[6] While it is true that Gramsci did refer to the proletariat as 'subaltern' this was not the only group he analysed under this rubric. His most famous analysis of subalternity is the millenarian sect of Davide Lazzaretti and the way in which bourgeois journalists like Bulferetti and the criminologist Lombroso dealt with this group, which he saw as the epitome of 'intellectual' attitudes towards subalternity. That is:

> instead of studying the origins of a collective event and the reasons why it spread, the reasons why it was collective, the protagonist was singled out and one limited oneself to writing a pathological biography, all too often starting off from motives that had not been confirmed or that could be interpreted differently. For a social elite, the members of subaltern groups always have something of a barbaric or pathological nature about them.[7]

[6] Examples of each include Spivak G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*. ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg. Urbana, University of Illinois Press: 271-313. and Guha R. (1982). *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian history and society*. Oxford University Press, Delhi.

[7] Gramsci A. (1996). *Prison Notebooks Volume II*. trans and ed Joseph Buttigieg. New York, Columbia University Press.Q3 §12. See also Gramsci A. (1975). *Quaderni del Carcere*. ed. Valentino Gerratana. Torino, G. Einaudi. Q25 §1. A detailed socio-political analysis of Lazzaretti can be found in Hobsbawm E. (1965). *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. W.W. Norton & Co., New York. pp. 65-73.

Particularly annoying to Gramsci is Lombroso's 'scienticism', or the biological determinism with which he analysed 'criminality'. This is particularly disturbing considering Lombroso's "leftist" orientation, which is indicative to Gramsci, and should be for us, of the state of leftist intellectuals whose valorisation of reason, rationality and science contribute to the construction of subalternity.[8] This is an important point – in a hegemonic process that is based on consent, the 'reformist' attitude of left social and political groups can make them actively complicit with a hegemony operating though civil society, thus closing down avenues for the expression of alternative hegemonies that are articulated in subalternity.

When it comes to the representation of subalternity, Green argues, "Gramsci was concerned with how literary representations of the subaltern reinforced the subaltern's subordinated position…In historical or literary documents, the subaltern may be presented as humble, passive or ignorant, but their actual lived experience may prove the contrary. Hence, the integral historian has to analyse critically the way in which intellectuals represent the conditions and aspirations of the subaltern" (Green 2000: 15). It is for this reason that the study of subaltern groups, in all their particularity, is of such importance for Gramsci. Thus, his interest in them is threefold: "he was interested in producing a methodology of subaltern historiography, a history of the subaltern classes, and a political strategy of transformation based upon the historical development and existence of the subaltern" (Green 2000: 3). In concrete historical situations, most hegemonies create and maintain subalternity, especially in the protection of hegemonic principles. Yet there is no possibility of an alternative hegemony without the involvement of subaltern groups. If Gramsci's project was to involve subaltern groups in a war of position on the terrain of civil society, then he was particularly concerned as to how subalternity was created through civil society in the first place.

Gramsci's concept of subalternity is most often used for an analysis of a group's position, and in these analyses subalternity is usually assumed to be a negative condition, based on a lack, that needs to be overcome by a confrontation with the structures of power. Yet this paper has argued that there is more to subalternity, and to a Gramscian conceptualisation of relations of power more generally, than this. Gramsci was keenly aware of the ways in which people were made, and made themselves, in relation to the circumstances in which they were born, and that in so doing they immediately affected those circumstances. Subalternity was not always a state of victimhood but was made so more often by historians or theorists who sought to impose pre-existing categories of analysis onto situations. In this scenario, subaltern groups are depoliticised or decontextualised. This way of thinking overlooks the subtleties in Gramsci's theory of hegemony, in which, if real social change is to occur, subalternity must be understood in its specific historical context, and the processes by which it is produced and reproduced exposed. To do so, it is essential to understand the ways in which people come to see themselves as subaltern, and to look for the ways in which they resist these sorts of power

[8] Gramsci A. (1992). *Prison Notebooks Volume I*. trans J. Buttigieg and A. Callarri. Ed Joseph Buttigieg. New York, Columbia University Press.pp. 116-117, Q1 §27. See also Gramsci A. (1975). *Quaderni del Carcere*. ed. Valentino Gerratana. Torino, G. Einaudi.Q25, §8 and Buttigieg J. A. (1992). Introduction. *Prison Notebooks Vol I*. New York, Columbia University Press.pp. 46-49. and Green M. (2000). "Gramsci Cannot Speak: Presentations and Interpretations of Gramsci's Concept of the Subaltern." *Rethinking Marxism* 14(3): 1-24.pp. 14-15.

relations in everyday life. It can be argued then, that there is a strong link between subalternity and subjectivity, and this is particularly evident when we study in detail the way in which subaltern groups are classified and analysed in their own time. While Gramsci warned against making subaltern groups into individual pathologies, he was also aware of the ways in which subalternity could be constructed around particular personality traits and that values, or morality, were strongly related to changing social and economic circumstances. Gramsci made some headway in this line of thinking with his ideas about common sense, philosophy and personality formation, but there are limits to how far he could, and would, push his theories in this direction.

As is the case in a lot of historical and political writing on the left, there are some issues with the way in which Gramsci theorised alternative ways of being in the world. The traditional Marxist way of theorising marginality has been to categorise the 'deviant' as 'lumpenproletariat', to see them as somehow less than human, the refuse thrown up class struggle. The tendency to demonise such people comes from an intellectual preference for the recognisably political.[9] People who do not organise themselves, who do not actively seek to change their circumstances, or seem to prefer a life on the margins, are often accused of 'false consciousness' or dismissed for their alleged stupidity and passivity. In his writings about subalternity, Gramsci makes some very good points about the intellectual errors that can be made by judging some forms of social organisation by their appearances, rather than by attempting to discover their root cause, but it is still the case that he saw subalternity as a position to be overcome. As sensitive and nuanced a thinker as he was, he still privileged the rational over the non-rational. As the American academic Frank Wilderson notes, the Gramscian subject is, by and large, the white male worker. Relations of oppression are seen to happen largely within the paradigm of the capital-labour relation, and thus forms of resistance which occur within this paradigm are automatically privileged. He suggests "exploitation (wage slavery) is the only category of oppression which concerns Gramsci: society, Western society, thrives on the exploitation of the Gramscian subject. Full stop." (Wilderson 2003: 231). While we can not exactly chastise Gramsci for what he did not write about, Wilderson's point is a valid one to the extent that it points out that there is an absence in the theory of hegemony as resistance because not only is it based on white rationality (the articulation or organisation of consent) but it does not account for the silent, or non rational forms of resistance. Given the immediate historical and political situation with which Gramsci was confronted, the focus on class struggle means that there is a limit in Gramsci as to what might constitute human freedom.

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[9] For an extensive analysis of the concept of the lumpenproletariat in Marxist thinking see, for example, Fanon F. (1965). *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, New York, Draper H. (1972). "The Concept of the Lumpenproletariat in Marx and Engels." *Economies et Societies* 15(Dec): 2285-2312, Bovenkerk F. (1984). "The Rehabilitation of the Rabble: How and why Marx and Engels wrongly depicted the lumpenproletariat as a reactionary force." *Netherlands Journal of Sociology* 20(April): 13-41, Bussard R. L. (1987). "The 'Dangerous Class' of Marx and Engels" The rise of the idea of the lumpenproletariat." *History of European Ideas* 8(6): 675-692, Hayes P. (1988). "Utopia and the lumpenproletariat: Marx's reasoning in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*." *Review of Politics* 50(3): 445-465, Stallybrass P. (1990). "Marx and Heterogeneity: Thinking the Lumpenproletariat." *Representations* 31(Summer): 69-95.

While it is the case that the idea of resistance is implicit in the theory of hegemony, it is still also the case that Gramsci, and many contemporary theorists, privilege certain types of resistance over others. In historical and political writing in particular, the emphasis on organised political collectives has resulted in these coming to be taken as the only legitimate form of resistance, and that those who do not resist in this way are not seen as resisting at all, or are seen as taking energy away from a 'true' revolutionary cause. It is a valid point to argue that real social change seems only possible where there is collective action, but this should not negate the power of the individual, who is ultimately the first site of resistance, nor should it negate actions that do not fit in with a predetermined idea of what resistance looks like. If hegemony operates at many levels of personal life, then it is important that we consider that resistance can take place here as well. In this sense, we need to deepen and reconfigure what we mean by resistance and to broaden our understanding of the possible forms of human agency.

Rather than relying on the structures and institutions of economic relations to tell us how people are 'made' in the world, a consideration of the 'subjective' adds depth and complexity to the 'problem' of identity. The point here is to see what we can learn about capitalist hegemony, by shifting the lens slightly from an emphasis on the politics of collective action to that of the personal. Subjectivity as an object of analysis can be related to broader issues of social formation through a theory of hegemony which does not consider hegemony as mere domination, but explores the multiple influences on human thought and action, as Gramsci suggested. That is, human beings are made at the intersection of various social relations which include family, location, religion, work and culture. In more recent times this can be expanded to include relations along axes such as sexuality, gender, ethnicity, race, age and subcultures, or specific cultural interests or identifications. In this sense then, people are not determined by a particular set of social relations, but are overdetermined by a number of causes, none of which can be separated from each other, nor can one be pinpointed as decisive. While at certain points in history, the range of identifications may have been smaller, or more limited, and 'decisive' points perhaps easier to identify, we should be careful about assuming that people in the past were more 'simple' than we are, or did not struggle about a sense of self in the way that we do. The forms in which they did so may have been different, but it is not necessarily the case that the processes were vastly different, that is, it is not simply the case that people were more easily determined by ideology in the past than they are today. Historical 'evidence' itself tells us that hegemony has always been a process of conflict and struggle, and that this conflict often took place at the level of the subjective. Human nature, the human self, has always been the terrain of conflict because it is first and foremost human beings who constitute social relations – these relations are not made by some invisible hand of god, or even of capitalists, without either the consensus or coercion of people themselves.

In this sense then, the greatest battle of hegemony has been on the terrain of consciousness, and it is because of this that Gramsci spent so much of his intellectual energy on attempting to understand language, culture and common sense. It is only possible for a system of social relations to become truly hegemonic, not merely dominative, if it has been successful in winning the hearts and minds of people at an everyday level. This is not simply the determinism of the means of production which people do not understand, or the determinism of ideology operating as false consciousness. If this were the case, there would be no conflict and marginalised groups would not exist. The fact that there is always resistance points to the capacity of humans to see clearly the choices with which they were faced, and to act accordingly.

Gramsci argues that 'true' hegemony resides in the process of a war of position. The idea that revolution lies in a war of movement has been proven false in theory and in practice, not least because a war of movement, in a frontal attack on the state, does not have a basis in leadership and consent through which power is maintained, but also because a war of movement does little more than ape the tactics of the enemy. If capitalist social relations seek to act on the heart of the self, and to exclude from political engagement those groups who do not conform to the new hegemonic principles, than to dismiss or overlook groups who resist at this particular level is to dismiss and overlook potentials for a truly organic hegemony. More than this, it is to overlook the fact that capitalist social relations have bought about a complete transformation in ways of thinking and being in the world to the extent that alternatives become unthinkable, and reformism remains the norm. Many of us are wary of individualism and identity politics, and sometimes for good reason, but if we continue to ignore the way in which capitalism seeks to transform human nature itself, we will continue to ignore possibilities for real social change.

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