the meaning of hegemony

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Throughout the world of Western capitalism, the Marxist Left has been characterised by a growing concern with the role of ideological hegemony in preserving the existing social order. The student movement correctly noted that one major characteristic of advanced capitalist society was its burgeoning ideological institutions -- particularly in education and mass media. Consequently, a major tactical focus of the new Left involved "demystifying" and "exposing" liberal institutions. In recent years, the concern with ideological hegemony has expanded as evidenced by the continuing influence of the Frankfurt school and the growing interest in the thought of Antonio Gramsci.

Unfortunately, the term "hegemony" has been used imprecisely and at least two divergent interpretations have been implicitly associated with the concept. Both interpretations start with the same initial premise (one that is common to almost all variants of Marxist analysis): the capitalist class has control over the means of production (and, consequently, the means of coercion) and thereby controls the ideational/ideological/intellectual/moral forces within capitalist society.

The two interpretations build on this common assumption in quite different ways. The first, which might be called the inculcation interpretation, asserts that the institutional propagation of bourgeois values shapes the consciousness (and sometimes even the need
structure) of the “masses.” Consequently, the exploited class (or classes) adopt and consciously accept bourgeois ideology, a process which creates a major prop of the bourgeois social order.

The second interpretation holds that ideological institutions impose parameters on the flow of ideas, debate, discourse, etc. The fabled “marketplace of ideas” is truncated. The result is not an acceptance of a capitalist world view by the exploited classes, but, rather, the circumscription and repression of perspectives which are critical or revolutionary. Within the exploited classes (and within each member of such a class) ideologies and “belief systems” are underdeveloped, fragmented, contradictory and internally inconsistent. The experience of daily life gives rise to dissatisfaction which might lead to class consciousness or revolutionary positions, on the one hand, or to cynicism, despair and apathy on the other. The ideological institutions operate in such a way as to forestall and prevent the articulation of class interests. Both within the working class and within individual members of the class bourgeois values and positions hostile to the capitalist order are held side-by-side (in a constantly changing mosaic) with little or no feeling of discomfort. In this view (the institutional interpretation) ideological hegemony is less of domination and manipulation of the minds of the working class than it is a structural condition which inheres in the capitalist organisation of society.

Without attempting any complete evaluation of Marcuse’s work, One Dimensional Man is clearly an example of the inculcation interpretation of the concept of hegemony. In that work, Marcuse speaks of a “happy consciousness” coming to prevail, “the self-limitation of thought,” and “the effective suffocation of those needs which demand liberation.” He also writes, “The novel feature is ... the depth of the preconditioning which shapes the instinctual drives and obscures the difference between false and true consciousness.” (1)

It is possible to maintain even more extreme versions of the inculcation interpretation than does Marcuse. Thus Mueller says, “A class which is linguistically deprived would hardly be able to generate, from its own bases, symbols and ideas contrary to the dominant ones... In short, the restricted speech code shared by the lower classes does not permit them to construct a defence system against dominant legitimations.” (2)

For Marxists, political activity must be conducted in the context of a precise analysis of the nature of the society and the socio-historical context. Acceptance of Mueller’s analysis would appear to lead to despair rather than activity. There are less extreme versions of the inculcation thesis but the point remains: a rigorous Marxist analysis of contemporary capitalism must conduct a critical evaluation of the two conceptions of hegemony insofar as each suggests a different political direction.

INCULCATION VERSUS INSTITUTIONAL HEGEMONY

Unfortunately the classical writings of Marxism offer no basis for evaluating the two conceptions. Marx first articulated the common premise of both conceptions (“the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force...”) (3) but has little to say about the form which the hegemonic process takes. Gramsci has written more on the topic than Marx, but his conclusions appear to be ambiguous. On the one hand, Gramsci speaks of a ruling class “losing its consensus”; (4) on the other, he describes common sense as “diffuse” and uncoordinated. (5)

The present discussion maintains that other criteria are less ambiguous than the “classics.” In spite of the greater exposure which the inculcation thesis of hegemony has received, it is less adequate than the institutional conception for two important reasons: 1) the latter provides a more accurate description of the hegemonic process in advanced capitalist societies than does the former; and 2) the inculcation thesis is based on a fixed, rigid, non-dialectical conception of consciousness which can be inserted into a Marxist perspective only with the greatest difficulty.

In the light of recent events, it is surprising that a conception of hegemony which is defined in terms of the internalisation of bourgeois values can be taken seriously, modern ideological institutions notwithstanding. Only the imprecision of previous usages of the concept of hegemony has prevented a full, critical scrutiny of such a definition. Certainly the actions of workers at Vauxhall, (6) Lordstown, (7) and four Kansas City mental hospitals, (8) however interpreted, can hardly be viewed as the acting out of internalised bourgeois values. Likewise, the events in
France in 1968, Italy in 1969-70 and Quebec in 1972 all illustrate that the inculcation thesis is more of a capitalist wish than a viable Marxist proposition.

If, in the face of such examples of working class rebellion, the theorist remains unconvinced of the inadequacy of the inculcation thesis, another (albeit unlikely) source of evidence is available. Empiricist sociological studies consistently refute the assumptions which are endemic to the inculcation perspective. (9) Protho and Grigg, for example, discover that what appears to be a general consensus on an abstract level disappears when specific issues are considered. (10) Even more powerful in this regard is the evidence assembled by Mann. (11) After reviewing a number of studies in the area, Mann concludes, "Value consensus does not exist to any significant extent." (12) This finding is further elaborated by two trends which Mann notes: 1) there is a greater degree of consensus within the middle class than within the working class; and 2) working class individuals exhibit less internal consistency in their values than middle class people. From this sort of evidence, Mann constructs two overviews which are quite relevant to the question at hand. First, he suggests that "only those actually sharing in societal power need develop consistent values." (13) Second, Mann concludes that working-class compliance with the political order is based upon a lack of consensus (within the class) and a lack of internal consistency that prevent working-class people from translating their experiences into a political framework. (14) Mann's position may be criticised for its tendency to ignore all of the economic, political and coercive forces which make compliance the pragmatic alternative. Nevertheless, its bearing on the two conceptions of hegemony is clear: Mann finds no evidence of an overall value consensus such as the inculcation interpretation would suggest. He does, however, find a lack of consensus within the working class and internal inconsistency in the values of members of the working class -- precisely what the institutional interpretation maintains.

The other areas where empiricist studies may be relevant is in the documentation of the extraction of "deviant" or rebellious perspectives from ideological institutions. The evidence regarding public schools in the U.S. is clear. Texts (15) and teachers (16) omit controversial perspectives. With reference to the latter, Dawson and Prewitt summarise: "The evidence about the public school teacher in the United States forms a consistent picture. Teachers are expected to, and do, propagate political views and beliefs appropriately labelled 'consensus values.' Teachers should not, and generally do not, use the classroom as a forum for discussion of 'partisan values' and controversial positions." (17) Thus the educational system eliminates exposure to any political framework which can provide a meaningful account of working class life. It would seem that the result, as has been suggested, may be confusion or disinterest, but hardly a thorough adoption of bourgeois values.

The sociological evidence pertaining to parameters which apply within the mass media is quite bountiful. (18) Morris Janowitz summarises the general point beautifully when he says, "The influence of mass media ... is not in dramatic conversion of public opinion, but rather in setting the limits within which public debate on controversial issues takes place." (19) [Emphasis is mine.] No available evidence contradicts the Janowitz statement.

The force with which such limits are maintained is clearly revealed in a recent study of television producers. Remarking upon the extent to which content is monitored Cantor remarks: "According to several producers, the networks are essentially apolitical and within certain limits seem little concerned with the ideology or philosophy of a show if the ratings are high and the advertisers are satisfied." (20) [Emphases all mine.] The three qualifications contained in this quote give ample insight into how, in Janowitz's words, limits are set.

Further insight is provided by observing the nature of U.S. government intervention into the broadcast industry. In an illustration of how the "fairness" doctrine is to be applied, the Federal Communications Commission cites an example in which a station broadcast a program entitled "Communist Encirclement" in which it was asserted (inter alia) that U.S. foreign policy, "the alleged infiltration of our government by communists and the alleged moral weakening in our homes, schools and churches have all contributed to the advance of international communism." The station maintained that since it did not know of any communist in its community it was unable to afford air time to
those who might want to present opposing views.

The FCC's ruling is instructive and worth quoting at length:

"In situations of this kind, it was not and is not the Commission's intention to require licensees to make time available to communists or the communist viewpoint. But the matters listed above raise controversial issues of public importance on which persons other than communists hold contrasting views. There are responsible contrasting viewpoints on the most effective methods of combating communism and communist infiltration." (21)

The above interpretation of the "fairness doctrine" in no way challenges the assumption that communism (however defined) must be fought or that communist infiltration is a realistic threat to national security. Consequently, the interpretation not only prevents the airing of communist perspectives but also the presentation of the perspective of any revolutionary opposition, not to mention a pacifist perspective. In sum, the evidence presented here clearly suggests that Janowitz correctly described the role of the mass media: to set the limits which that Janowitz correctly described the role of the mass media: to set the limits within which public debate on controversial issues takes place.

It should now be clear that the inculcation interpretation of the concept of hegemony is quite inadequate in its analysis of modern capitalist society. The various workers' rebellions, major and minor, cannot be understood at all if one assumes that the workers involved have thoroughly adopted bourgeois ideology or (in Marcuse's words) been so deeply preconditioned that their need structures have been shaped to reflect bourgeois interests. Further, even empiricist sociology is unable to find the society-wide consensus which would exist if bourgeois values were inculcated. Rather, such studies describe a pattern: the ideological institutions of capitalist society systematically remove any political frameworks which might contribute to the development of class consciousness. Consensual values are, consequently, able to develop to a much higher extent among "only those actually sharing in societal power." (22)

Such a pattern is precisely what an institutional interpretation of the concept of hegemony would allow one to predict. It is an integral extension of the legal apparatus which systematically expelled revolutionaries from the trade unions in the late 'forties and 'fifties -- and for exactly the same reasons.

CONSCIOUSNESS

It is probably not accidental that theorists who utilise the inculcation perspective on hegemony tend to rely heavily on Freudian theory. Freud's emphases on early character formation and the role of instinctual drives create a rather static view of personality which lends itself to an inculcation interpretation.

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that a static view of personality is unique to the Freudian Left. The entire process of abstraction and generalisation exerts pressures to construct a stable image of consciousness which can thus be used in shorthand form: this sector of the working class is conservative, that sector of the working class is militant. Such summaries of mass consciousness are inevitable and necessary. Their value is undermined, however, the moment that revolutionaries forget such terms are only shorthand terms to refer to what appears to be the most important characteristic of a specific group at a specific point in time and that this shorthand abstracts from and obscures a far more complex world. In the latter, we find that conservatism in this worker does not mean the same thing as it does in that worker, that it applies to voting but not to shop floor issues (etc., etc.), that it has different characteristics today than it did yesterday, that the same person may hold apparently inconsistent views with no visible sign of discomfort. Such complexities could be listed endlessly. Therefore, although abstractions are necessary to make sense of complex phenomena, one cannot forget that the richness and complexity of lived experience is partially lost thereby (this is the lesson that positivist social science has never learned). It is when the complexity of real history is forgotten (or ignored) that theories lose their roots and drift off into meaningless abstraction. It makes sense to describe the dominant ideology of seventeenth century Europe as Christianity if the geographical and temporal variations, the religious conflicts (and their relationship to national and class conflicts) and much more are not forgotten or ignored in the process.

The preceding considerations apply to con-
sciousness as well as ideology. Human consciousness must always be viewed as a complex and historical creation. Because it continually interacts with its social and material environment it is constantly in flux. Because of the diversity of social experiences it is never totally uniform or integrated (not even among Marxist revolutionaries) and therefore can never be totally described and understood.

(23) It is precisely these characteristics which allow for the radical reinterpretation of events that results in a Vauxhall revolt or a France of 1968.

To interpret human consciousness in this manner is, of course, only to treat it in a Marxist manner: to analyse it as an historical creation which emerges from concrete circumstances and which is ever in flux as it is dialectically related to changing circumstances. Lenin understood this dialectical relationship when he remarked:

"Cognition is the eternal, endless approximation of thought to the object. The reflection of nature in man’s thought must be understood not ‘lifelessly,’ not ‘abstractly,’ not devoid of movement, not without contradictions, but in the eternal process of movement, the arising of contradictions and their solution." (24)

However, a view of the hegemonic process which relies upon inculcation (whether Freudian or not) has a necessarily rigid and fixed conception of human consciousness which is more positivist than Marxist. In the institutional view of hegemony a dynamic consciousness interacts with its social environment a major part of which is the capitalist social structure which attempts to suppress political and class issues.

POLITICAL DIRECTION

At the outset it was suggested that the two conceptions of hegemony suggested different political directions. One possible direction which flows out of the inculcation perspective is inaction in one of its various forms: despair, cynicism or apathy.

A second possible direction involves what has come to be called “consciousness raising.” The rationale is as follows: since workers (and others) have adopted bourgeois values it is necessary to win them away from their present consciousness through a process of argument, study and proof. The difficulty with such a strategy is that it severs theory from practice, or, to put it another way, it recreates the bourgeois separation between intellectual activity and practical activity.

Marx, himself, took a very dim view of such a strategy. He observed that the Young Hegelians viewed the products of consciousness as “the real chains of men” and therefore they “have to fight only against these illusions of consciousness.” (25) What the Young Hegelians forgot, however, in Marx’s view was “that they are in no way combating the real existing world when they are only combatt[ing] the phrases of this world.” (26)

In contrast, acceptance of the institutional conception of bourgeois hegemony means that activities are not geared toward winning workers from coherent, internalised bourgeois views but toward building a coherent interpretive scheme (theory) that makes sense of the concrete life experiences of the class. Such a theory is not pre-given and cannot be built individually or in isolation from practice. From the first, the building of revolutionary theory (and revolutionary organisation) is a collective enterprise which must involve more and more of the class in the attempt to understand (and change) its concrete existence. Through its collective and practical/critical form it counters bourgeois institutions. To be successful, such a project must culminate in a society built upon the democratic control of the state and the economy. Without such institutional means, the rule of a class of tens of millions is impossible. In the same sense, we can now understand what the hegemony of the working class will look like. Whereas bourgeois hegemony requires the overt and covert monopolisation of ideational institutions by a tiny capitalist class, the hegemony of the working class will allow and require the democratisation of ideational institutions. Whereas bourgeois hegemony requires a one-directional communication flow, proletarian hegemony will occur through the opening of ideational institutions. The numerical superiority of the working class will outnumber (and overwhelm) the shattered remnants of the tiny bourgeoisie. Only in this way can the movement Marx described as “the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority” (27) safeguard its victory.
FOOTNOTES

5. Ibid.
7. The well-publicised revolt of young Ohio auto workers against GMAD, the new GM management team.
8. In 1968, the Kansas Health Workers Local 1271, after administrators refused to negotiate, assumed administrative control of the four Topeka hospitals and maintained control of them for 12 hours. See A. Efthim, 'We Care in Kansas: The Non-Professional Revolt,' 'The Nation,' August 5, 1968.
9. Insofar as empirical sociology has tended to reify collective attitudes (see footnote 6), it would seem that the failure of such studies to find consensual attitudes should be taken seriously.
12. Ibid., p. 432.
13. Ibid., p. 435.
14. Ibid.
23. In the words of Alfred Schutz, 'The stock of knowledge at hand at any particular moment of our conscious lives is by no means homogeneous or integrated. Its elements are neither consistent in themselves nor necessarily compatible with one another.' 'Reflections on the Problem of Relevance.' (New Have, Yale University Press, 1970), p. 76. For a critical introduction to Schutz, see David L. Sallach, 'Class Consciousness and the Work of Marx and Schutz,' 'Insurgent Sociologist,' forthcoming.
26. Ibid.

(-- The above is a modification of a paper presented to the Conference on the Thought of Antonio Gramsci at Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri, on February 4, 1973.)