Hegemony: Consensus, coercion and culture

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Abstract
Since the publication of the Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci's Prison Notebooks in English in the 1970s, hegemony is a concept which has been employed by many scholars, notably in Australia by Bob Connell, Terry Irving and Mike Donaldson. Recently, hegemony has become a popular word, used mainly to describe the state of international relations in the world today. In this context it is usually synonymous with descriptions of the alleged US supremacy. It is also a term that appears frequently in Cultural Studies, but usually devoid of any political, specifically class, context.

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HEGEMONY
Consensus, coercion and culture

Since the publication of the Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks in English in the 1970s, hegemony is a concept which has been employed by many scholars, notably in Australia by Bob Connell, Terry Irving and Mike Donaldson. Recently, hegemony has become a popular word, used mainly to describe the state of international relations in the world today. In this context it is usually synonymous with descriptions of the alleged US supremacy. It is also a term that appears frequently in Cultural Studies, but usually devoid of any political, specifically class, context.

As a response to these trends in thinking, the Hegemony Research Group was established in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Wollongong in early 2004 and attracted scholars (staff and postgraduates) from across disciplines including history, sociology, philosophy, politics and international relations. The founding commitment of the group was chosen as a way to articulate what seemed to be a common interest among many scholars—how class relations in Australia and around the world came to be established and maintained, how and where they are resisted, and what their future is. The group meets every three weeks to discuss recent readings from a variety of disciplines, starting with Antonio Gramsci himself and moving on to applications of his work in other areas. Readings for the past year have included works by David Bollier, Immanuel Wallerstein, E.P. Thompson, Stuart Hall, Robert Cox and Ranajit Guha as well as substantial sections of Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks, including sections on ‘war of position’, Americanism and Fordism, and the Southern Question.

Late last year, the group decided to hold a workshop with invited speakers at which members would circulate their work and have it commented upon by guest discussants and other members of the group. Papers were written and circulated via a website up to a month before the workshop, and the workshop itself was divided into panels with a guest discussant. The panels looked at issues such as Class and Consensus, Gender/Masculinity, Ideologies/Discourse, Culture and Hegemony, and Neo-liberalism as Hegemony at both the national and international level. Papers were selected to engage with the concept of hegemony and its relevance for both scholars’ work. We were very fortunate to have with us some of the world’s most pre-eminent Gramsci scholars, such as Professor Joseph Buttigieg, Professor Alastair Davidson, Professor Derek Boothman, and Koichi Ohara, as well as some excellent Australian-based scholars, such as Scott Poyning, Boris Frankel and Peter Beilharz, who acted as discussants of the papers written by University of Wollongong academics and postgrads. All the guests were exceedingly generous with their time and intellects, and their feedback along with the lively discussions at each panel, helped to clarify the usefulness of the concept of hegemony. It also revealed the complexity of the concept as Gramsci developed it, and this was the most significant issue to emerge from the workshop.

While current uses of the concept of hegemony do not necessarily reflect the meaning of the concept as Gramsci explored it, it is not possible to say precisely what Gramsci did mean by hegemony. Most work on Gramsci refers to his famous Prison Notebooks, which have only been available in English since the 1970s, and then in edited ‘Selections’. Gramsci himself was bound by the material circumstances of writing in prison and while very ill, so the Notebooks are not a clearly articulated manifesto, but contain many complex thoughts and explorations of a huge variety of issues that constrained him in the face of Italy’s succumbing to fascism. Since 1992 Joseph Buttigieg has been re-translating the Notebooks and they are being published by Columbia University Press. In these editions Professor Buttigieg is trying to retain the integrity of the notebooks as Gramsci wrote them. So while they seem more disorganised than a ‘Selection’ necessarily is, they provide greater insights into the breadth and depth of Gramsci’s thinking.

It is in these Notebooks that we start to get a sense of the notion of hegemony as Gramsci saw it, and it is in the complexity and inter-connectedness of his thinking that we see the usefulness of this concept for an understanding of the current world and its future trajectory. At one level, hegemony is about the play of coercion and consent—that is, the State is ‘hegemony protected by the armour of coercion’. In this view, Gramsci’s theories of the state detail the way in which a state is formed with popular consent. Hegemony at the state level is the way in which leadership is exercised through the ethical-political institutions of civil society, which is then translated into governance, which is in turn maintained by a continued consent as well as coercion. In states where this coercion takes the clear form of the control of the armed forces, this is not really hegemony. For a government to be truly hegemonic it must rule in the ethical-political arena before it even comes to power. For Gramsci then, the role of civil society is paramount. Without this, there is no hegemony. The question as to what extent consent is really coercion is one which remains highly pertinent.

If hegemony is not then ruled by force, it is a continual process or a situation of ‘unstable equilibria’. It is not something which is achieved and then resisted by ‘counter-hegemonic’ forces, but is something that remains in a state of flux at all times. This point cannot be over-emphasised, and it is of extreme significance for us in the world today. If hegemony is a process, then the ruling class, or state, must always react and respond to the movements of those whom it attempts to rule. Gramsci did not use the term ‘counter-hegemonic’, although today it is used to describe anti-system resistance. Rather, he encompassed resistance in his analysis of ‘war of position’ and ‘war of movement’. These concepts have much resonance for the contemporary situation, and for any future projects. A war of position, for Gramsci, is when there is an organic (through the operation of people), intellectual-mass nexus against those who would rule. This combination of ‘positions’ is capable of articulating and enforcing a clear hegemony of its own. For Gramsci, analysing this notion was part of his attempt to understand how the Italian Communists might move to power themselves. In his attempts to understand why they were unsuccessful, he articulated the concept of ‘war of movement’ which relates to what most of us would call ‘counter-hegemony’. This is a misnomer, however, because they are movements incapable of transcending their own ‘corporate’ interests and they never really challenge in any organic way the true ‘hegemonic principles’ of capitalism, which are, ultimately, property relations and capital, or profit, accumulation. Unless resistance movements are capable of articulating a clear, anti-system project, they can never and will never be hegemonic in their own right.

There are many possible ways we can utilise the complexity of Gramsci’s thinking, and much contemporary critical social and political thought can be seen as an attempt to develop a ‘war of movement’ into a ‘war of position’. In the face of a seemingly unstoppable neo-liberal hegemony, Gramsci’s work on the subaltern, which is yet to be fully explored, may be a way to develop a clear political program for the future. There is, still, much to be done, and The Hegemony Research Group is continuing its activities this year, with more interesting workshops planned, and we are keen to develop links with other scholars and activists around the country. Part of this process will be the establishment of an Australian branch of the International Gramsci Society. To find out more please visit our website at www.uow.edu.au/arts/research/hegemony/). Alternatively, contact Kylie Smith (kms12@uow.edu.au) or Richard Howson (rh Howson@uow.edu.au) if you are interested in being part of the Gramsci Society. Groups and workshops like these are a vital tool for the exploration and development of critical thinking that is connected to political action. This is the most significant aspect of Gramsci’s work for us today—the concept of praxis. We would do well to remember it.