

## **SC Progressive Network Study Group**

**June 24, 2009: 7 PM, Network office 2025 Marion St. Columbia**

**Topic: Culture as a tool for social change**

**In discussing culture as a tool for social change, it is helpful to look at successful social movements in the past. The civil rights movement in the US certainly had a strong cultural component, songs, slogans, art and a strong addition of religion. Popular movements in South Africa, or more recent ones in South America, all had their anthems and colors.**

**The use of culture by today's dominate society is more complex. The readings below provide some classical understanding of how culture is used to maintain power, as well as overthrow it.**

**“Our emphasis must be on cultural transformation: destroying dualism, eradicating systems of domination.” ---bell hooks**

### **Culture**

Culture: is a shared, learned, symbolic system of values, beliefs and attitudes that shapes and influences perception and behavior -- an abstract “mental blueprint” or “mental code.”

Must be studied “indirectly” by studying behavior, customs, material culture (artifacts, tools, technology), language, etc.

- 1) Learned. Process of learning one's culture is called enculturation.
- 2) Shared by the members of a society. No “culture of one.”
- 3) Patterned. People in a society live and think in ways that form definite patterns.
- 4) Mutually constructed through a constant process of social interaction.
- 5) Symbolic. Culture, language and thought are based on symbols and symbolic meanings.
- 6) Arbitrary. Not based on “natural laws” external to humans, but created by humans according to the “whims” of the society. Example: standards of beauty.
- 7) Internalized. Habitual. Taken-for-granted. Perceived as “natural.”

### **Cultural hegemony**

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Antonio Gramsci, 1891–1937

Cultural hegemony is the philosophic and sociological concept, originated by the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, denoting that a culturally-diverse society can be ruled (dominated), by one of its social classes. It is the dominance of one social group over another, i.e. the ruling class over all other classes. The ideas of the ruling class come to be seen as the norm; they are seen as universal ideologies, perceived to benefit everyone whilst only really benefiting the capitalist class.

### **Cultural Hegemony: Gramsci's theory**

For Marx, a capitalist society's economic recessions and practical contradictions would provoke the working class to revolution in deposing capitalism — and then to restructuring the existing institutions (economic, political, social) per rational, socialist models; thus, beginning the transition to a communist society. In Marxian terms, the society's dialectically-changing economy determines its cultural and political superstructures, i.e. its social and economic classes. Despite Marx and Engels having predicted said eschatological scenario in 1848,

decades later, the workers — the economic core of an industrialized society — had yet to effect it. To achieve it, Gramsci posits a strategic distinction, between a War of Position and a War of Manoeuvre; the war of position is intellectual, a culture war in which the anti-capitalist politicians (communist leaders) seek to have the dominant voice in the mass media, the mass organizations, and the schools, in order to increase class consciousness, teach revolutionary theory and analysis, and to inspire revolutionary organization. On winning the intellectual war of position, communist leaders then would have, the political power, supported by the mass populace, to begin the war of manoeuvre — the armed insurrection against capitalism.

Although cultural domination first was analyzed in economic class terms, it is broadly applicable to social class; Gramsci suggested that prevailing cultural norms must not be perceived as either “natural” and “inevitable”, but, that said cultural norms (institutions, practices, beliefs) must be investigated for their roots in societal domination and their implications for societal liberation.

Cultural hegemony is neither monolithic nor unified, rather it is a complex of layered social structures (classes); each has a “mission” (purpose) and an internal logic, allowing its members to behave in a particular way that is different from that of the members of the other social classes, yet, as in an army, each social class acknowledges the existence of the other social classes, and, because of their different social missions, they will be able to coalesce into a greater whole, a society, with a greater social mission. Said greater, societal mission is different from the specific missions of the individual classes, because it assumes and includes them to itself, the whole. Likewise, does cultural hegemony work; although each person in a society meaningfully lives life in his and her social class, society’s discrete classes might appear to have little in common with the life of an individual person; yet, perceived as a whole, each person’s life contributes to the greater society’s hegemony. Diversity, variation, and freedom will apparently exist — since most people “see” many different life circumstances, but, they miss the greater hegemonic pattern created when the perceived lives coalesce into a “society”. Through the existence of minor, different circumstances, a greater, layered hegemony is maintained, yet, not fully recognized, by most of the people living in it.]

In a layered cultural hegemony, personal common sense, which is fragmented, helps the individual person cope with the minor activities of daily life; yet, common sense also inhibits the ability to perceive the greater, systemic nature of socio-economic exploitation that cultural hegemony makes possible. People concentrate their attention upon their immediate concerns and problems, i.e. their lives, rather than upon the fundamental sources of (their) social and economic oppression.[2]

### **Gramsci’s intellectual influence**

Although the concept of Cultural Hegemony has primarily been used by leftists, organized conservative social organizations (movements) also have used it in their politics. An example, in the US of the 1990s, were the efforts of evangelical Christian organizations to win election onto local school boards in order to have the power to dictate curricula aligned with their religious interpretation of what constitutes a proper public education. To wit, in 1992, at the Republican Convention, the rightist politician Patrick Buchanan addressed the convention-eers using the term Culture War in describing his perception of US politics, as being the socio-political struggle between conservatism and liberalism.

As a theory, Cultural Hegemony has deeply influenced Eurocommunism, the social sciences, and activist politics. In the social sciences, its theoretic application in examining major discourses (e.g. those posited by Michel Foucault) is an important aspect of sociology, political science, anthropology, and cultural studies; moreover, in education the concepts of cultural hegemony led to the development of critical pedagogy.

### **Contemporary political analysis: cultural hegemony’s influence**

In political analysis, cultural hegemony is a much-applied analytic model; for example, an analysis of US political power, from 1932 ’till 2006, addresses the dynamics of class struggle and cultural hegemony, documenting that, in the 1930s, the increase in trade union membership helped create the Democratic Party’s wide, popular political-base, that did not decline until 1980, when the Republican Party successfully learned to appeal to the working class, by means of the Southern Strategy, first articulated, and successfully effected, in the electoral

## **Culturalism**

Jens-Martin Eriksen, Frederik Stjernfelt  
Culturalism: Culture as political ideology

The controversy on multiculturalism has changed the political fronts. The Left defends respect for minority cultures while the Right stands guard over the national culture. But these two fronts merely constitute two variants of a culturalist ideology, argue Jens-Martin Eriksen and Frederik Stjernfelt.

Culturalism is the idea that individuals are determined by their culture, that these cultures form closed, organic wholes, and that the individual is unable to leave his or her own culture but rather can only realize him or herself within it. Culturalism also maintains that cultures have a claim to special rights and protections – even if at the same time they violate individual rights.

“If underprivileged groups can be persuaded to become more concerned with religion, culture and identity, they will be split, and the focus will be moved away from concrete political problems. The current configuration in Danish politics, in which many disadvantaged Danes support the culturalist Right, while immigrants and multiculturalists support the Left, is a striking example of this phenomenon. It probably constitutes one of the main structural reasons for the profound crisis in the Social Democratic Party, whose core voters are now distributed according to cultural affiliation rather than their own interests.

## **ANTONIO GRAMSCI:**

**SOME IDEAS FROM MARX** (<http://www.theory.org.uk/ctr-gram.htm> - numerous authors, cited at end)

Understanding Gramsci's theory requires a review of some basic Marxist arguments and assumptions.

## **ECONOMIC DETERMINATION**

Everything in life is determined by capital. The flow of money affects our relations with other persons, with nature and with the world. Our thoughts and goals are the products of property structures. Every cultural activity (culture in its widest sense) is reduced to a direct or indirect expression of some preceding and controlling economic content.

Men find themselves born in a process independent of their will, they cannot control it, they can seek only to understand it and guide their actions accordingly.

## **CLASS STRUGGLE**

The dynamic of a society can only be understood in terms of a system where the dominant ideas are formulated by the ruling class to secure its control over the working class. The latter, exploited by the former, will eventually try to change this situation (through revolution), producing its own ideas as well as its own industrial and political organization.

## **BASE / SUPERSTRUCTURE**

Marx's deterministic economic conception divides the society in two layers or levels: base and superstructure.

The first, upon which everything grows, is composed by the material production, money, objects, the relations of production and the stage of development of productive forces. The palpable and tangible world, plus the economic relations that capital generates.

The second, determined by the first, is where we can find the political and ideological institutions, our social relations, set of ideas; our cultures, hopes, dreams and spirit. The world of souls, souls shaped by capital.

According to Marx, we can understand the superstructure in three senses:

Legal and political expressions which expose existing relation of production;

Forms of consciousness that express a particular class view of the world;

The processes in which men become conscious of a fundamental economic conflict and fight it out.

Generally, it is believed that Marx proposed this “one way” relation between economics (down) and ideas (up) as a rigid and severe system. However, the fact is that this is not very clear in Marx and Engel’s books. Nevertheless, we can understand almost every Marxist author (and particularly these concerned with cultural issues) as people making an effort to conceive this dependence more dynamically, in order to assume that the analysis of history supposes a social and cultural approach, as well as an economic consideration.

## CONCEPT OF HEGEMONY

“It was Gramsci who, in the late twenties and thirties, with the rise of fascism and the failure of the Western European working-class movements, began to consider why the working class was not necessarily revolutionary, why it could, in fact, yield to fascism.” (Gitlin, 1994: 516)

Gramsci was concerned to eradicate economic determinism from Marxism and to develop its explanatory power with respect to superstructural institutions. So, he held that:

Class struggle must always involve ideas and ideologies, ideas that would make the revolution and also that would prevent it;

He stressed the role performed by human agency in historical change: economic crises by themselves would not subvert capitalism;

Gramsci was more “dialectic” than “deterministic”: he tried to build a theory which recognized the autonomy, independence and importance of culture and ideology.

“It can be argued that Gramsci’s theory suggests that subordinated groups accept the ideas, values and leadership of the dominant group not because they are physically or mentally induced to do so, nor because they are ideologically indoctrinated, but because they have reason of their own.” (Strinati, 1995: 166)

From Gramsci’s view, the supremacy of the bourgeoisie is based on two, equally important, facts:

Economic domination

Intellectual and moral leadership

What exactly is the meaning of “hegemony”?

“...Dominant groups in society, including fundamentally but not exclusively the ruling class, maintain their dominance by securing the ‘spontaneous consent’ of subordinate groups, including the working class, through the negotiated construction of a political and ideological consensus which incorporates both dominant and dominated groups.” (Strinati, 1995: 165)

A class had succeeded in persuading the other classes of society to accept its own moral, political and cultural values;

The concept assumes a plain consent given by the majority of a population to a certain direction suggested by those in power;

However, this consent is not always peaceful, and may combine physical force or coercion with intellectual,

moral and cultural inducement;

Can be understood as “common sense”, a cultural universe where the dominant ideology is practiced and spread;

Something which emerges out of social and class struggles, and serve to shape and influence peoples minds;

It is a set of ideas by means of which dominant groups strive to secure the consent of subordinate groups to their leadership;

“...the practices of a capitalist class or its representatives to gain state power and maintain it later.” (Simon, 1982: 23)

Can we conclude that “hegemony” is a strategy exclusively of the bourgeoisie?

No. In fact the working class can develop its own hegemony as a strategy to control the State. Nevertheless, Gramsci stated that the only way to perform this labour class control is by taking into account the interests of other groups and social forces and finding ways of combining them with its own interests.

If the working class is to achieve hegemony, it needs patiently to build up a network of alliances with social minorities. These new coalitions must respect the autonomy of the movement, so that each group can make its own special contribution toward a new socialist society.

The working class must unite popular democratic struggles with its own conflict against the capital class, so as to strengthen a national popular collective will.

How does the hegemonic class manage to maintain its ideology over time?

Hegemony is readjusted and re-negotiated constantly. Gramsci said that it can never be taken for granted, in fact during the post-revolutionary phase (when the labour class has gained control) the function of hegemonic leadership does not disappear but changes its character.

However, he describes two different modes of social control:

Coercive control: manifested through direct force or its threat (needed by a state when its degree of hegemonic leadership is low or fractured);

Consensual control: which arises when individuals voluntarily assimilate the worldview of the dominant group (=hegemonic leadership).

How does the process of mutation from a dominant “hegemony” to a new one occur?

Periodically there may develop an organic crisis in which the governing group begins to disintegrate, creating the opportunity for a subordinate class to transcend its limitations and build up a broad movement capable of challenging the existing order and achieving hegemony. But, if the opportunity is not taken, the balance of forces will shift back to the dominant class, which reestablishes its hegemony on the basis of a new pattern of alliances.

“The key to ‘revolutionary’ social change in modern societies does not therefore depend, as Marx had predicted, on the spontaneous awakening of critical class consciousness but upon the prior formation of a new alliances of interests, an alternative hegemony or ‘historical bloc’, which has already developed a cohesive world view of its own. (Williams, 1992: 27)

Is violence the only way to subvert dominant “hegemony”?

No. The way of challenging the dominant hegemony is political activity. But we must understand a distinction

that Gramsci proposed between two different kind of political strategies to achieve the capitulation of the predominant hegemony and the construction of the socialist society:

**War of manoeuvre:**

Frontal attack;

The main goal is winning quickly;

Especially recommended for societies with a centralised and dominant state power that have failed in developing a strong hegemony within the civil society (i.e. Bolshevik revolution, 1917).

**War of position:**

Long struggle;

Primarily, across institutions of civil society;

Secondly, the socialist forces gain control through cultural and ideological struggle, instead of only political and economic contest;

Especially suggested for the liberal-democratic societies of Western capitalism with weaker states but stronger hegemonies (i.e.: Italy);

These countries have more extensive and intricate civil societies that deserve a longer and more complex strategy.

“The revolutionary forces have to take civil society before they take the state, and therefore have to build a coalition of oppositional groups united under a hegemonic banner which usurps the dominant or prevailing hegemony.” (Strinati, 1995:169)

In this context, how do we understand the notions of culture and ideology?

Culture: a whole social process, in which men and women define and shape their lives.

Ideology: a system of meanings and values, it is the expression or projection of a particular class interest. The form in which consciousness is at once expressed and controlled, as Raymond Williams has defined it: “...a mistaken interpretation of how the world actually is.” (Williams, 1992: 27)

“ ‘Hegemony’ goes beyond ‘culture’, as previously defined in its insistence on relating the ‘whole’ social process to specific distributions of power and influence. To say that ‘men’ define and shape their whole lives is true only in abstraction. In any actual society there are specific inequalities in means and therefore in capacity to realise this process. In a class society these are primarily inequalities between classes. Gramsci therefore introduced the necessary recognition of dominance and subordination in what has still, however, to be recognised as a whole process.” (Williams, 1977: 108).

Hence, having everything we just said in mind, one could take it that, first, you have a class “building” a specific and concrete ideology -- based in its specific and concrete interests -- that will dominate the rest of the society because of the unavoidable influence of capitalist relations. This set of ideas will constitute the hegemony that will be expressed as the nucleus of culture. If these assumptions are correct, we can conclude that the media are the instruments to express the dominant ideology as an integral part of the cultural environment.

## THE ROLE OF INTELLECTUALS IN SOCIETY

Historically, different intellectuals have created the ideologies that have moulded societies; each class creates one or more groups of intellectuals. Thus, if the working class wants to succeed in becoming hegemonic, it must also create its own intellectuals to develop a new ideology.

“Because of the way society develops, different groups of individuals will be required to take on particular tasks. Gramsci suggests that although all tasks require a degree of intellectual and creative ability, some individuals will be required to perform tasks or functions which are overtly intellectual. In the first instance, these

occupations are associated with the particular technical requirements of the economic system. Subsequently, they may be associated with the more general administrative and organizational institutions which synchronize the activities of the economy with those of society as a whole. In the political sphere, each social group or class (which is itself brought into being by the particular way in which economic practices are organized) generates a need for intellectuals who both represent the interests of that class and develop its ideational understanding of the world.” (Ransome, 1992: 198)

For Gramsci, the revolutionary intellectuals should originate from within the working class rather than being imposed from outside or above it.

“They are not only thinkers, writers and artist but also organizers such as civil servants and political leaders, and they not only function in civil society and the state, but also in the productive apparatus...” (Simon, 1991: 90)

## GRAMSCIANISM ON COMMUNICATIONS MATTERS

From a “Gramscian” perspective, the mass media have to be interpreted as an instrument to spread and reinforce the dominant hegemony... although they could be used by those who want to spread counter-hegemonic ideas too.

“...Pop culture and the mass media are subject to the production, reproduction and transformation of hegemony through the institution of civil society which cover the areas of cultural production and consumption. Hegemony operates culturally and ideologically through the institutions of civil society which characterizes mature liberal-democratic, capitalist societies. These institutions include education, the family, the church, the mass media, popular culture, etc.” (Strinati, 1995: 168-169)

Different authors (Foucault, Althausser, Feminist theories, etc.) have taken Gramsci’s idea of a prominent discourse, reinterpreting and proposing it as a suitable explanation about our culture, the construction of our beliefs, identities, opinions and relations, everything under the influence of a dominant “common sense”. Eventually, we can suggest that the media could operate also as a tool of insurrection.

## MERITS OF GRAMSCI’S THEORY

Every author who has studied or developed the writings of Gramsci has something different to stress from his theory; by way of illustration I have chosen some of these opinions:

David Harris: He is responsible for the emergence of a critical sociology of culture and for the politicizing of culture.

Raymond Williams: The forms of domination and subordination correspond much more closely to the normal process of social organization and control in developed societies than the idea of a ruling class, which are usually based on much earlier and simpler historical phases.

Paul Ransome: Gramsci resolved two central weakness of Marx’s original approach:

- That Marx was mistaken in assuming that social development always originates from the economic structure;

- That Marx placed too much faith in the possibility of a spontaneous outburst of revolutionary consciousness among the working class.

Todd Gitlin: Gramsci’s distinction of culture was a great advance for radical theories, it called attention to the routine structures of everyday ‘common sense’, which work to sustain class domination and tyranny.

Dominic Strinati: Gramsci suggested that there is a dialectic between the process of production and the activities of consumption. He also displayed a lack of dogmatism, unlike some other Marxist authors.

## FLAWS OF GRAMSCI'S THEORY

As in the previous section, there are a number of critical views about Gramsci's ideas that we could review. Here I have taken some of the more common ones; especially those connected with a communications angle. Nevertheless, there are entire libraries dedicated exclusively to Gramsci and his theories from heterogeneous perspectives; they seem to be an unlimited source of inspiration. Only the most fertile ideas can provoke this amount of analysis.

Dominic Strinati:

From Strinati's point of view the main problem with Gramsci's ideas is the same as with the Frankfurt School's theories and Althusser's work: their Marxist background. A class-based analysis is always reductionist and tends to simplify the relation between the people and their own culture, that is the problem of confining a social theory within the Marxist limits. The deterministic framework does not allow history to contradict the theory, and the interpretation of reality becomes rather elementary.

"People can accept the prevailing order because they are compelled to do so by devoting their time to 'making a living', or because they cannot conceive another way of organizing society, and therefore fatalistically accept the world as it is. This, moreover, assumes that the question why people should accept a particular social order is the only legitimate question to ask. It can be claimed that an equally legitimate question is why should people not accept a particular social order?" (Strinati, 1995: 174)

Raymond Williams:

Williams understands that culture is not only a vehicle of domination, he finds preferable a definition of culture as a language of co-operative shaping, of common contribution. He also thinks that Gramsci proposed the concept of hegemony as a uniform, static and abstract structure.

"A lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure. It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits. In practice, that is, hegemony can never be singular. Its internal structures are highly complex, as can readily be seen in any concrete analysis. Moreover (and this is crucial, reminding us of the necessary thrust of the concept), it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own." (Williams, 1977: 112)

Williams finds a third theoretical problem: how the modern citizen can distinguish between alternative and opposed initiatives, between the independent and the reactionary ideas. Because everything in society could be tied to the hegemonic thoughts, one can say that the dominant culture produces and limits its own forms of counter-culture. The notions of revolution and social change have no sense in these circumstances.

David Harris:

He has mentioned that Gramsci's ideas about the role of intellectuals in society are rather elitist, and all the theory is too political and partisan to be credible. He adds later that another problem of Gramsci's thought is the lack of empiricism, there is no room for studies of audiences, surveys or something related directly with the people and their behavior.

"...A suitable theory must be capable of avoiding determinism and prioritizing struggle; it must contain, or be capable of containing, a suitable linguistics; it must be flexible enough to license, as proper politics, the women's movement, black activism, and any other new social movements as may be announced by the management; it should be able to function in the absence of a strong Communist Party; it must be capable of being applied to an infinite range of specific circumstance; it must be fun to work with, with witty and well written arguments,



and intriguing neologism.” (Harris, 1992: 198)

Todd Gitlin:

Gitlin’s opinion is that Gramsci’s ideas, and the later works based upon them, propose a debate that is rather abstract with a concept of cultural hegemony as a “substance with a life of its own” settled over the whole public of capitalist societies to confuse the reality. A kind of evil power seeking to colonise our consciousness. But, Gitlin wonders if the fact that the same film (or the same advertisement, or the same article, or the same t.v. programme) is subject to a variety of interpretations, may suggest a crisis of hegemonic ideology, a failure in the cultural programmed minds. Moreover, the success of media in modern societies implies a certain sensitivity to audience tastes, desires and tolerances, in order to perpetuate the system. From Gitlin’s perspective the relationship between audiences, media products and culture structures is less inflexible, and more collaborative.

“The cultural hegemony system that results is not a closed system. It leaks. Its very structure leaks, at the least because it remains to some extent competitive.” (Gitlin in Newcomb, 1994: 531).

## GRAMSCI IN HIS OWN WORDS

(Selection from the Prison Notebooks)

“What we can do, for the moment, is to fix two major superstructural ‘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.” (12)

“A social group can, indeed must, already exercise ‘leadership’ before winning governmental power (this is indeed one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power); it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to ‘lead’ as well.” (57)

“A crisis occurs, sometimes lasting for decades. This exceptional duration means that incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves (reached maturity) and that, despite this, the political forces which are struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure itself are making every effort to cure them, within certain limits, and to overcome them. These incessant and persistent efforts ... form the terrain of the ‘conjunctural’ and it is upon this terrain that the forces of opposition organise.” (178)

“This criticism makes possible a process of differentiation and change in the relative weight that the elements of the old ideologies used to possess. What was previously secondary and subordinate, or even incidental, is now taken to be primary – becomes the nucleus of a new ideological and theoretical complex. The old collective will dissolves into its contradictory elements, since the subordinate ones develop socially, etc.” (195)

“Critical self-consciousness means, historically and politically, the creation of an élite of intellectuals. A human mass does not ‘distinguish’ itself, does not become independent in its own right without, in the widest sense, organizing itself: and there is no organization without intellectuals, that is without organizers and leaders... But the process of creating intellectuals is long and difficult, full of contradictions, advances and retreats, dispersal and regrouping, in which the loyalty of the masses is often sorely tried.” (334)

“So one could say that each one of us changes himself, modifies himself to the extent that he changes the complex relations of which he is the hub. In this sense the real philosopher is, and cannot be other than, the politician, the active man who modifies the environment, understanding by environment the ensemble of relations which each of us enters to take part in. If one’s own individuality means to acquire consciousness of them and

to modify one's own personality means to modify the ensemble of these relations." (352)

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Intellectual Affairs

The Bulldozer and the Big Tent

October 3, 2007

By Scott McLemee

<http://m.insidehighered.com/views/mclemee/mclemee124>

"Now, to be frank, I am enough of a "left conservative" to wish that we were discussing nationalizing the oil companies instead."

Can Gramsci's theory of hegemony help us to understand the representation of ethnic minorities in western television and cinema?

By Reena Mistry

<http://www.theory.org.uk/ctr-rol6.htm>