

# Theorizing Realist and Gramscian Hegemony

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ANNE KONRAD, SEP 2 2012

Traditionally, Realist hegemony describes the dominance of one state over several others, while Gramscian theory defines hegemony as a combination of coercion and consent which is not merely exercised by the state, but by civil society as well (Howson and Smith 2008). This essay will focus on the Gramscian concept of hegemony and attempt to dissolve its complexity while relating it to the Realist view. Gramsci's writing will be put into its historical context and his concept hegemony will be defined and applied to the international system. An outline of the key aspects of cultural leadership and the expanded notion of power and the Integral State will explain why both coercion and consent are essential to achieve hegemony. To make the theoretical analysis of hegemony clearer and more applicable to International Relations practice, this essay will include examples of the United States as a hegemon in the Gramscian sense.

First of all, it is necessary to identify the origins of Gramsci's work, how he relates it to Marxism, and why he came to focus on the concept of hegemony. As Marx had predicted that revolution and the transition to socialism would primarily occur in the advanced capitalist societies, Gramsci aimed to investigate why revolutionary struggles had failed in Western Europe but had proven successful in Russia (Hobden and Wyn Jones 2008). He was primarily interested in how the working class is able to organise to achieve hegemony within a country and also wished to analyze the nature and form of bourgeois hegemony in the West (Engel 2008). According to Fontana (2008), the Russian state lacked a connection to civil society and hence could more easily be overthrown by revolutionaries as no autonomous socio-political institutions were in place. He argues that in the politically and economically advanced societies of the West, 'the strength [...] and persistence of civil society account for the failure of revolution'. Why civil society is so crucial to the powerfulness of a state will be analyzed in detail at a later stage.

Gramsci uses the concept of hegemony to explain power dynamics and the resilience of modern bourgeois society to revolutionary efforts (Fontana 2008). He compares Machiavelli's famous metaphor of a centaur – half man, half beast – with the concept of power as a combination of coercion and consent (Cox 1983). Doing this, Gramsci differs from Marxism which primarily focuses on the coercive practices and capabilities of the state to exploit the proletariat. He also rejects the Marxist view of economic determinism which considers economic relationships as the prime force to dominate the course of history (Hobden and Wyn Jones 2008). Gramsci argues that a social class emerges as hegemonic not only by coercing others but rather by establishing consent among subordinate classes, a concept that Cox (1983) later applies on a larger scale to world order in neo-Gramscian theory. He focuses on how global capitalism helps to maintain material inequalities (Linklater 2005) and finds that world hegemony starts off as an outward expansion of a national hegemony established by a dominant social class. Cox therefore sees the current global supremacy of the United States as an outward expansion of the American historical bloc and its legitimating ideology of neoliberalism (Engel 2008).

As Bieler and Morton (2004) point out, 'social forces may achieve hegemony [...] through world order by ensuring the promotion and expansion of a mode of production'. Within this context, we can take a closer look at US hegemony, which emerged after the Second World War, when it was evident that a new world order had to be established. Following this, Joseph (2000) argues that the post-war era is 'based on far reaching changes in the structure of society, the organisation of production and the related deep hegemony'. The United States thus gained global influence through the expansion of Fordist assembly plants, its assistance in the reconstruction of Western Europe and the establishment of economic world bodies at Bretton Woods, which all helped to manifest a historic bloc based

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around neo-liberal capitalism (Joseph 2000).

We will now continue to look at the disparities between the Realist and Gramscian concept of hegemony, which lie within the different nature of each theory. While Realism is a problem-solving theory which considers the international system as 'natural and immutable' and takes the existing world order as given (Hobden and Wyn Jones 2008), Gramscianism is a critical theory that questions the prevailing international system (Linklater 2005). Bieler and Morton (2004) see Realism as a conventional approach which reduces hegemony 'to a single dimension of dominance based on the economic and military capability of states'. Joseph (2000) agrees with this and points out that a group may not emerge as hegemonic simply because it exerts dominance over other groups, but that 'it must [also] have behind it the economic, political and cultural conditions that allow it to put itself forward as leading'.

To make a clearer differentiation between the Realist and Gramscian analysis of hegemony, we may use Nye's notion of hard and soft power. While Realists focus on the importance of hard power, Nye (2002) has established soft power as a crucial element of hegemony. He argues that instead of using its military and economic capabilities as hard power, a country may obtain desirable outcomes because other states 'want to follow it, admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness'. Following Gramsci's idea of cultural leadership, he emphasizes that an attractive culture, ideology and institutions can serve as power maximizers. Nye claims that American idols and icons today shape the world and cites Marlowe in saying that 'US supremacy today extends to the economy, currency, military areas, lifestyle, language and the products of mass culture that inundate the world, forming thought and fascinating even the enemies of the United States' (2002). According to Nye, it will cost the United States less to lead if it represents values that others aim to follow.

From a Realist point of view, hegemony may ultimately lead to war. As Nixon claimed in the 1970s, 'it is when one nation becomes infinitely more powerful in relation to its potential competitors that the danger of war arises' (Nye 2002). Within the context of the widely known realist concept of the balance of power, hegemony leads to imbalance within the world order and thus has to be prevented. Dunne and Schmidt (2008) consider the balance of power as a mechanism to ensure an equilibrium of power in which no state is in a dominant position. They also find that 'if the survival of a state or a number of weaker states is threatened by a hegemonic state, [...] they should join forces, establish a formal alliance, and seek to preserve their own independence by checking the power of the other side'.

While a balance of power was predominant during the Cold War years, the United States emerged as a hegemon after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. However, some realists follow the Hegemonic stability theory and argue that this imbalanced power may too produce peace, meaning that stability can also occur when 'one side has a preponderance of power and others dare not attack it' (Nye and Welch 2011). Hence, for some realists, the emerging US hegemony was not considered a threat to peace. This argument is supported by Hobden and Wyn Jones (2008) who claim that, by taking the international order as given, Realists aim to legitimate the status quo and reinforce the hegemony of ruling elites in the current world order.

Since American economic and military power appears to be in decline today, we could argue that, in a Realist sense, the United States are losing its hegemonic status within a global context. Notwithstanding, Cox (1995) points out that although US economic power has experienced a relative decline, 'the American way of life has never been a more powerful model' and 'American pop culture has projected an image of the good life that is a universal object of emulation'. Hence, we can assume that the Realist perspective is not sufficient to explain the complex nature of hegemony and that the Gramscian analysis serves as a more appropriate approach, which shall therefore now be explained in more detail.

Despite the fact that Nye (2002) is not a Gramscian theorist, some of his arguments can indeed be related to the Gramscian concept of power:

'Today the foundations of power have been moving away from the emphasis on military force and conquest. [...] [T]he absence of a warrior ethic in modern democracies means that the use of force requires an elaborate moral justification to ensure popular support.'

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Instead, Nye (2002) claims that economic power has become more important as 'all countries are to some extent dependent on market forces'. He emphasizes that military power remains crucial, but agrees with Gramscian theorists in so far that it 'is a mistake to focus too narrowly on the military dimensions of American power'. Political and economic coercion do not constitute a complete picture of hegemony, but the state has to establish consent within its society. Howson and Smith (2008) point to 'the vast resources that must be mobilized in civil society – such as the media, education, the family, religion, law, communities and markets – to ensure that the political economy can be and is maintained'. This leads us to Gramsci's expanded notion of the state as a combination of political and civil society, which Gill (1983) explains in detail:

"Political society includes the "public sphere" of government, administration and law and order, as well as security. Civil society includes those elements normally considered "private", such as free enterprise, political parties, Churches, trade unions, and so on."

As Howson and Smith (2008) point out, the integral state is 'the dialectical synthesis of both political and civil society and represents hegemony as never simply the operations of political power'. In other words, as explained earlier, this means that coercion can never operate without consent. Fontana (2008) notes that hegemony does indeed mean the supremacy of one social group or class over others, but that it is established 'by means other than reliance on violence and coercion'. Instead, the supremacy of a group 'manifests itself in two ways, as "domination" and as "intellectual and moral leadership"' (Gramsci 1971). This leads us back to Gramsci's comparison of power with Macchiavelli's metaphor of the centaur. Fontana (2008) cites Gramsci in saying that power is constituted by a combination of 'force and consent, violence and persuasion'. He also contends that coercion and consent require each other: 'Without consent or persuasion it would be impossible to wield effective force or violence – in the same way that force is necessary to guarantee or secure the use of persuasion' (2008).

Engel (2008) notes that consent may be obtained through compromise and persuasion or 'by combining the interests of various social forces around particular populist causes such as struggles for democracy'. This consensus is achieved by the dominant social group thanks to its position and function in the world of production. Additionally, the state may use its coercive power to enforce discipline among those who do not immediately consent (Engel 2008). As Hobden and Wyn Jones (2008) point out, successive powers 'have shaped a world order that suits their interests [...] because they have managed to generate broad consent for a that order even among those who are disadvantaged by it'.

We can therefore assume that hegemony is the higher form of domination. Coercion exercised by the political society, or the state, is merely domination, while hegemony is the moment of consent and cultural leadership, achieved by the civil society (Fontana 2008). Subaltern social groups which exist within the civil society may lack political autonomy and therefore adapt to the activities and interest promoted by the elites (Howson and Smith 2008). The state exercises its power to maintain these interests by keeping the subordinate groups fragmented and passive. This persuasion and consent is exercised by intellectuals, who make up the connecting agents between political and civil society (Gramsci 1971).

We can apply this theoretical analysis to the cases of Russia and the West during the 1920s and 1930s. Gramsci notes that the government apparatus and coercive organs were extremely pervasive in Russia, while social and cultural activity was not autonomous which made it easy for the Bolshevik revolutionaries to overthrow and reconstruct the civil society in what Gramsci calls a 'war of movement' (Fontana 2008). In the West, however, there is a 'proper relation' between political and civil society, meaning that they cannot be separated from one another, and revolution thus fails as it cannot break the strength, resilience and persistence of Western civil society (Fontana 2008). Fontana emphasizes that 'only a modern democratic state has the resources to develop systems of mass persuasion to ensure that force will appear to be based on the consent of the majority, expressed by the so-called organs of public opinion – newspapers and associations'.

While the balance of coercion and consent is crucial to the Gramscian understanding of hegemony, the importance of material power should also not be neglected. Although his work is an essentially ethico-political concept and lacks a detailed economic analysis, Gramsci emphasizes that hegemony 'must necessarily be based on the decisive function

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exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity' (1971). Material capabilities, referring to 'accumulated resources' (Bieler and Morton 2004), are a necessary basis for states to establish and maintain power. This proves the point that Gramscian theorists consider material wealth an essential condition to achieve hegemony.

Once consensus is achieved and the material conditions have been satisfied, the state is able to act as an educator in the sense that it presents itself as a 'cultural, as well as a moral and intellectual hegemon' (Fontana 2008). Neo-Gramscian theorists agree that a country with a powerful culture and ideology will last much longer as a hegemon. As Nye (2002) states, 'the universality of a country's culture and its ability to establish a set of favourable rules and institutions that govern areas of international activity are critical sources of power'. This argument is proven by the fact that the ideological promotion of American liberalism, based on individualism and free trade, which is also spread by international political economic institutions such as the WTO and the UN, assured American supremacy through the 1970s and was reconstructed in the 1980s (Bieler and Morton 2004). Nye (2002) agrees with this by claiming that the values of democracy, personal freedom and upward mobility, which are all expressed in US culture, education and foreign policy, have benefited the American status as a global hegemon.

Besides cultural leadership and material capabilities, institutions can be considered another essential part of the neo-Gramscian perspective on hegemony. Linklater (2005) identifies a close cooperation between powerful elites and international economic and political institutions in order to maintain hegemony. He argues that global governance exercised through political conditionality and international pressure allows for the expansion of global capitalism. According to Nye (2002), hegemons create institutions to legitimize their power in the eyes of others. In the case of the United States, the creation of international economic organizations such as the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund has helped to establish international rules that are consistent with the liberal and democratic structures of American capitalism. Similarly, Engel (2008) claims that 'the World Bank both reflects and constructs the current neoliberal hegemony'. As long as the institution's rules are accepted by its member states, the hegemon 'will encounter less resistance to its wishes' (Nye 2002). International institutions thus serve to 'legitimate rules, engage social forces in developing countries in an order, and assimilate ideas' (Engel 2008). However, neoliberal principles can also be enforced through coercive policies, such as the World Bank's Structural Adjustment Programmes which give out loans only to developing countries that agree to privatize and liberalize their national economies (Gill 1983). International institutions do therefore not only adopt consensus-based strategies, but may also retain to coercion, 'particularly in defending the hegemonic principles of the Washington Consensus' (Engel 2008).

Following this detailed analysis of the Gramscian understanding of hegemony, we can conclude that the Realist approach is reductionist in limiting hegemony to economic and military dominance. Following Gramsci's dual power notion of coercion and consent, Cox (1983, 1995) and other neo-Gramscian theorists have broadened the concept of hegemony, which is first established by leading social forces within a state but later applied on a world scale. Bieler and Morton (2004) point out that hegemony filters through structures of society, economy, culture, gender, ethnicity, class and ideology and is therefore not simply limited to military as claimed by Realists. The Gramscian concept considers hegemony as the highest synthesis of coercion and consent, that is 'the working together of political society with civil society; of freedom with constraint; of superstructure with structure – always under a new moral and intellectual leadership' (Howson and Smith 2008) and emphasizes the importance of the universality of ideas, supported by material resources and institutions (Bieler and Morton 2004).

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