

Hegemony, subalternity and subjectivity

Kylie Smith

Many words have been written about the concept of hegemony as Gramsci developed it in the *Prison Notebooks*, and many of these words explore the relationships between structures and superstructures in the making of hegemony. This paper argues that there is a subjective element to the theory of hegemony which is often 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 he expressed his ambiguity about this project and the implications for human social and personal life. The paper suggests that by exploring the relationship between structures and superstructures at the level of the subjective, we can see the way in which subalternity is produced and reproduced in both the theory and practice of hegemony. It is by exploring these links between subjectivity and subalternity in Gramsci that we can deepen our understanding of existing obstacles to social change.

The concept of hegemony itself is not an uncontested one, and a lot of ink has been spilled trying to work out 'what Gramsci meant' by hegemony. For me, there are two key elements to understanding the concept of hegemony. One is the idea of consent – the other is civil society. Gramsci makes it quite clear often enough that hegemony is only really hegemony if it is established through a war of position which comes before the seizing of power, and that legitimate power is only that which has active consent based on leadership. He also makes it quite clear that this process can and must happen through civil society – that no amount of economic or legislative coercion or military domination makes for hegemony. Hegemony lies in the relationship between the economic, political and social spheres and these can not be separated one from the other. More than this, hegemony is not static and fixed but a constant evolving process, which, if it is based on leadership and consent, must continually adapt to the organic demands of the people themselves. These demands are articulated in and through civil society – Gramsci has shown that where these demands are actively repressed or pacified and absorbed without effecting real change, than coercion comes to dominate and hegemony no longer prevails.

I would also add to this scenario the idea of hegemonic principles – that there are certain core values that characterize a particular hegemony, and it is the nature of these values that will determine to what extent the hegemony is open and based on consent and leadership, or where it has become coercive and dominative. It is around the hegemonic principles that subalternity is created, and this is especially so when considered historically.

My research is concerned with the creation of particular subaltern social groups in Australian history. The hegemonic principles of developing industrial capitalism in Australia were based on the creation of a particular kind of citizen – a wage worker, a consumer, a private property holder. These principles relied on a transformation at the level of the self – the sublimation and repression of so-called 'animalistic' behaviours, the internalization of discipline required for capitalist

processes, the creation of desire for the products of capitalist markets. This is the precursor to the processes Gramsci observed taking place under Americanism and Fordism – the rationalization of capitalist ways of being as a new form of morality requiring the transformation of animalistic energy away from sexuality, violence and drunkenness and into the productive and social relations of industrial capitalism. Hence, Gramsci argues that “the new type of man demanded by the rationalisation of production and work can not be developed until the sexual instinct has been suitably regulated” because “the history of industrialism has always been a continuing struggle...against the element of ‘animality’ in man. It has been an uninterrupted, often painful and bloody process of subjugating natural (ie animal and primitive) instincts to new, more complex and rigid norms and habits of order, exactitude and precision which can make possible the increasingly complex forms of collective life which are the necessary consequence of industrial development”.^[1] At the time in which he wrote this, that is, 1934, he noted that “the results to date, though they have great immediate practical value, are to a large extent purely mechanical: the new habits have not yet become ‘second nature’.”^[2] While Gramsci remained ambiguous about the long term success and consequence of these processes, he understood that they were not ‘hegemonic’ until they were ‘second nature’. He also noted that the increase in psychoanalysis could be seen as “the expression of the increased moral coercion exercised by the state and society on single individuals and of the pathological crisis determined by this crisis”^[3] So, while he may have seen some value in these new habits, he noted that there would be problems where they were imposed coercively and that resistance to them was not only normal but was significant and necessary, part of the usual historical process.

In Australia, resistance to this process was linked with the creation of subalternity. If these principles were not negotiable, they created a discourse in Australian society where people who did not comply were made subaltern but they are made subaltern at the level of the subjective – they are the wrong sort of PEOPLE, there was something inherently wrong with THEM, not with the system, or the society in which they lived. In his note on the “Problem of Collective Man” 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.”^[4] 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 – ie, man who has developed, and who lives, in certain conditions, in a particular social complex or totality of social relations”^[5] and that this social totality consists of the variety of influences and associations which are sometimes contradictory^[6] but which all contribute to the formulation of a particular conception of the world.^[7]

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.”^[8] 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 and that they do this based on the creation of philosophy, or through their particular conception of the world: “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”^[9] 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”^[10].

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. He does this in an attempt to grapple with the complexities of the formation of human consciousness, in order to understand how to transform that consciousness. 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” he asks, “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, ie, 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?”^[11]

In some of the work that has been written about subaltern social groups, there is a tendency to attribute this critical self-consciousness only to particular elements of society, for example the organized working class or the Party, and therefore to denigrate subaltern conceptions of the world as mere common sense, to assume that the personality of the subaltern is uncritical, passive, determined. In the Australian setting, this dichotomy is not so easy to sustain. The issue of common sense and subaltern social groups in Australia is made more complex by the historical circumstances in which there was no peasant folklore to be overcome but rather, an already potentially radicalized and coerced working class. In this situation, the creation of capitalist ‘good sense’ was based on an attempt to close down society around hegemonic principles and to negate the ensuing resistance to this project. This resistance took place at the level of the subjective because it was here that the hegemonic principles were aimed. Subalternity was created around subjectivity – the resistance to wage labour, to respectability and discipline, to consumption and commodification. The level of the subject, the self, was the last frontier in a war against a hegemony which had become dominative and coercive at the structural level and ideological at the superstructural. The self was the last

thing for sale, and many subaltern groups in Australia were made subaltern because they would not sell themselves, because they did not buy either the nightmare of production or the dream of consumption.

To dismiss subaltern groups for their rejection of these processes would fall prey to the tendency to assume that subaltern worldviews are nonsense, something that Gramsci himself warned us against. Too often, for Gramsci, subaltern groups are represented in ways that actively seek to diminish their importance, that is: "instead of studying the origins of a collective event and 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."^[12] In this way, subaltern groups are easy to dismiss especially where they operate at the level of the subjective.

This is a practice that has occurred in Australian history, and to some extent in international labour history more generally, largely because of an insistence on a split between the organized and the spontaneous elements of resistance to capitalist social relations. That is, labour history as a discipline has, and continues to, privilege the organized elements of the working class in the history of resistance to capitalism. Resistance is seen to emerge from the objective conditions of working class life, and to be worthy of study only when it takes the form of an apparently organized and disciplined frontal attack on the institutions of capitalist power as embodied in the state or workplace. Spontaneous elements who refused to be part of this process are seen as problematic, pathologised and dismissed, but Gramsci warned against this when he said: "ignoring, and even worse, disdaining, so-called spontaneous movements...may often have very bad and serious consequences"^[13] not only because spontaneous movements will be reacted to by the state (and that this reaction is in itself revealing) but because it is in spontaneity that the seeds of an organic hegemony – a war of position – can reside. Of course,

I don't mean here to romanticize subaltern social groups or to attribute to them politically revolutionary consciousness where there was none. It is the case that the groups I'm talking about can be said to have been in 'a state of anxious defence' and that their rebelliousness occurred through subjectivity at one level at least because they were given no other way in which to express themselves. But I do mean to say that their actions were consciously and overtly aimed at the symbols capitalist life as it was evolving in Australia and that, sensing the danger they posed, the state acted accordingly. Interestingly, in this scenario it was not just the state that sought to exclude particular groups from both political and civil society. The people I'm looking at were workers, but they did not form part of the 'glorious' labour activism of late nineteenth century Australia. This is because, at this time, the spontaneous element of working class resistance was actively marginalized by the organized working class as much as by the state because of the overt complicity between that organized working class as it was developing at that point in time, and the processes and institutions of capital themselves.

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.

[1] Gramsci, SPN, pp297-298.

[2] Ibid, p298.

[3] Ibid, 280.

[4] Ibid, p242

[5] Ibid, p244.

[6] Ibid, p265.

[7] Ibid, p324.

[8] Ibid, p244.

[9] Ibid, p265.

[10] Ibid, p267.

[11] Ibid, pp323-324.

[12] Notebook 25, Note 1.

[13] Gramsci, Prison Notebooks Vol II, Note 48, p51.