

Antonio Gramsci:
(1891-1937)

Antonio Gramsci was an Italian philosopher, writer, politician and political theorist known as one of the most important Marxist thinkers of the 20th century. As the founder and leader of the Communist Party, he was imprisoned in 1926 by Mussolini's fascist regime. In prison, he wrote 30 notebooks and 3000 pages of history and analysis. These writings, known as Prison Notebooks (from which we are reading an excerpt), contain Gramsci's thoughts on topics such as Marxist theory, critical theory, economic determinism, philosophic materialism, and **cultural hegemony**.

Hegemony:

Hegemony can be defined as "the dominance or leadership of a social group or nation over others".

Historically a political term, Gramsci applies it to class structure and culture in order to explore how a social class exerts cultural dominance over another class and how this dominance works towards maintaining a socio-political status quo. Marx and Engels predicted a socialist revolution occurring before the 20th century. Gramsci wanted to explore reasons why this revolution, which was considered to be inevitable, never occurred and why capitalism seemed more entrenched than ever

Terms:

Hegemony/Cultural hegemony

Fundamental social group - Class (either proletariat or bourgeoisie)

Organic Intellectuals – Intellectuals that are born out of their original class and remain invested to it.

New Intellectuals – Organic intellectuals generated by the subordinate class (proletariat).

Traditional Intellectuals – Intellectuals either born out of the dominant class (bourgeoisie) or assimilated into it.

Superstructure – Includes culture, institutions, power structures, roles and rituals of society. Enforces a set of constraints and guidelines on a human activity; to this end Gramsci describes hegemony as a superstructure. It is a veil used to distort the relationship between intellectuals and the world of production.

Key Points From the Reading:

1. Gramsci saw that classes, or "strata of intellectuals," arose organically upon coming into existence. Once class exerts its dominance on the rest.
2. Historically, every new social group "emerges into history out of the preceding economic structure" and as such is merely "an expression of a development of this structure". This creates what Gramsci calls "historical continuity" that cannot be interrupted by even the "most complicated and radical changes in political and social reforms"
 - Gramsci sees everything as being born from a preexisting structure. Even perceived radical changes are linked to what came before and merely mark the structure's evolution over time. *QUESTION: If we believe this, can any idea, ideology, social/political movement, piece of art or culture be considered truly "original"?*

QUESTION: When discussing the relationship between intellectuals and new social groups, Gramsci sees a historical continuation. Who would classify as today's dominant intellectuals? Unions? The Chamber of Commerce? Universities? Government? And why?

3. "All men are intellectuals...but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals"
 - There is not one group of people or one class that is more intellectual than another. However, society does not reflect this. In reality, only a certain class of intellectuals actually function as intellectuals in society. They are the decision makers.
 - Gramsci outlines two types of intellectual, the "muscular-nervous" and the "intellectual-cerebral", or "Man the maker" and "Man the thinker", or the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. He suggests that the intellectualism of the bourgeoisie is given more value in society than that of the proletariat. It is from this equality that the bourgeoisie get and maintain their dominance on society.
 - *QUESTION: In today's society, which type of "intellectual" do you think is valued most, "Man the maker" or "Man the thinker"?*
4. Gramsci saw a need for a "new type of intellectual" One born out of the working class that he refers to as organic. He states that "one of the most important characteristics of any group that is developing towards dominance is its struggle to assimilate and to conquer 'ideologically' the traditional intellectuals, but this assimilation and conquest is made quicker and more efficacious the more the group in question succeeds in simultaneously elaborating its own organic intellectuals."
 - Gramsci often saw that "the person of peasant origin who becomes an 'intellectual' (priest, lawyer, etc.) generally thereby ceases to be organically linked to his class of origin." (footnote, p. 6) Essentially, once someone succeeds in moving into the dominant social class, they assimilate into it and adopts its values and ideologies. If the subordinate social group could succeed in generating "organic" intellectuals of its own, then they can create their own cultural values and begin to overthrow or replace the values held by the current dominant group.
 - *QUESTION: Why would Gramsci be critical of the "American Dream" which is based on class mobility and the nothing of "moving on up" in society?*
5. Intellectual specification is as divisive as traditional historical processes.
6. Hegemonic power, a superstructure, is realized when the general public gives "spontaneous" consent to the dominant group, and through the state's legal action against those who do not consent.
7. Urban intellectuals lack the hegemonic power of rural intellectuals, and so they only help facilitate the development of traditional intellectual ideas.
8. Among urban intellectuals, the masses may in fact enact political influence on its leaders; so no hegemonic power is exerted.

Connections to Concepts Previously Discussed in Class:

The concept of cultural hegemony can be seen as ideology played out on a larger scale. Within society, a dominant class or group exerts their power on the rest. The values (or ideologies) of that class become so pervasive in the culture that they become the “common sense” values of all.

- i.e. “Nutritionism” dominates nutritional thought.
- “Nickel and Dimed” really illustrates where society places values – things like education, money, appearance, etc.
- *QUESTION: The ideologies of the dominant class pervade society to such an extent that they become common values, how is this accomplished? Through what institutions or modes of thinking?*

The notion of “value” as discussed by Marx saw the value on commodities as being abstract and as having “absolutely no connection with their physical properties.” The same can be said for the values dictated by the dominant social class – certain types of intelligence are valued over others, despite their actual worth in society.

Cultural Examples:

The power of cultural hegemony lies in the dominant group’s ability to undermine the values of other groups and replace them with their own. This transfer of ideology from one group to another is not done overtly, which might lead to violent revolt, but occurs seamlessly, so that one does not notice. Gramsci describes dominant intellectuals as putting “themselves forward as both autonomous and independent” and it is through this duplicity that they are able to pervade other cultures so easily.

Wal-Mart

Wal-Mart presents itself as the supermarket for average, middle Americans. They pretend to have the interests of the working-class in mind and provide one-stop shopping at the lower possible prices for the benefit of regular American’s. Thus, they appear to be “autonomous” with their shoppers, when in reality Wal-Mart is owned and operated by members of higher class and thus are “independent.” They come into small towns, with the irresistible lure of lower prices, and run small, locally owned businesses out of business. This is not for the benefit of Wal-Mart’s target customers. The people who benefit are the dominant class: CEO’s, shareholders, upper management, and the like.

America (i.e. McDonald’s, Hollywood)

The United States, as the world’s only remaining superpower, has an incredible influence on the politics and culture of the rest of the world.