

# The Concept of Hegemony

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There is revival of debates on ‘power’ and ‘civil society’, ‘domination’ and ‘hegemony’ etc. There have arisen new concepts and aspects such as ‘global civil society’ and ‘global hegemony’. Antonio Gramsci, the originator of the contemporary concept of civil society and hegemony only mentions these concepts and aspects but hardly explores them in detail. The Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) ranging from charity organisations like Oxfam and many others to trade organisations like WTO and financial organisations IMF and World Bank are referred to as civil society organizations. Many scholars are very critical of the functions of these global organizations in economic and political international relations. They are said to have been functioning as stabilization of global unjust system rather than helping the poor people or underdeveloped kept countries. Political aspects of new developments in ‘global civil society’ regarding the concept of hegemony are explored in various debates on global and/or cosmopolitan democracy. This revival of the debates on civil society and hegemony as form of domination necessitates reminding of and reflection on some of the key ideas about civil society and hegemony. This is the aim of this short essay.

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## The origins and meaning of the term hegemony

The term ‘hegemony’ etymologically derives from Ancient Greek ‘hegemon’. Hegemon means chieftain or leader of a tribe, that is, a group of people with the same language and customs. Hegemony means then first of all leadership and denominates a certain form of the exertion of power. There are many forms of the exertion of power, i.e. the domination. Exertion of power aims at producing one’s own will in the other. This may be said is the general aim of the use of power - from most peaceful to the most violent use of power. The other should act the way the user of the power wants it to be. However, for this, the other, the one who is subject to the exertion of power must be able and also willing to re-produce the will of the one who uses the power.

Hegemony differs from other forms of domination in that that it is achieved usually by means of ideology in the broad sense of the term. This is to suggest that hegemony is usually exerted beyond what may be accounted for as coercion, law, force and direct physical violence. Hegemony is then an indirect form of domination. In this sense it is sometimes described as an indirect form of dominance of a hegemon state which rule geopolitically over other states – not by means of force, military force for example, but rather by implied means of power. If a state achieves the dominance over other states by means of the threat of force it is then seen as the hegemon state.

### **Modern genesis of the concept of hegemony**

The use of the concept of hegemony in social and political theory is relatively new and signifies the domination of one social class over other. It has been introduced into modern social and political thought by Russian philosopher Plekhanov to describe the relationship between a political party and the social class which the party aims to represent. The broader meaning of the concept to refer to the domination of one social class over others by cultural and ideological means has however been explored by Italian philosopher and communist politician Antonio Gramsci. He is said to have developed the concept of geopolitical hegemony into a theory of cultural hegemony. In the Western countries when Gramsci is referred to as the originator of the concept of hegemony there usually drawn a sharp distinction between his conception hegemony and that of Vladimir Lenin. But Gramsci referred to Lenin explicitly as the source of his conception hegemony.

### **The history of the concept of hegemony**

It is suggested that the concept of hegemony in Ancient Greece described a political and military dominance of a polis over others. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century however the concept of hegemony described no longer just a politico-military dominance of a city-state over others. Beside the geopolitical dominance it denoted above all cultural dominance of one country over others. The sources of the idea of hegemonism derive from this and it is in many respects a new notion. In modern times the concept of hegemony is then used in a more specific sense to describe the domination of one country over others.

In the period of Napoleon's reign, for example, the French control over the rest of Europe and beyond is referred to as a hegemonic relationship. In this sense of the concept it is used to refer to Britain's political influence and economic domination beyond its formal boundaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the United States' after 1945, though there are many signs of challenge to this domination from Europe and Asia. This meaning of the concept comes very close to the core meaning of the concept of imperialism, namely the great power policies intending to expand and establish economic and political predominance. This meaning of the concept of hegemony is still current in the debates among the theorists of international relations in the United States and in Europe among political theorists on imperialism (new imperialism, euro-imperialism) exploring European Union's policies, especially since the monetary union in 1999. The policies of cultural imperialism as a form of indirect rule since the end of the World War II, which signifies also the end of classical colonialism, have to be seen in the light of these new developments.

### **Gramsci's aim in developing a conception of hegemony**

Antonio Gramsci worked out a conception of cultural hegemony in Lenin's sense to explain how and by means of what a social class may dominate over the rest of the society without using direct force. The question that Gramsci aims at to answer when he develops his conception of hegemony is often ignored or forgotten about. But it is of great importance. His central category is civil society as distinct from political society. When Gramsci develops his conceptions of civil

and political society, he explores a long-standing tradition. On the one hand, he looks back to the scholarship on civil society starting with Thomas Hobbes, but in particular with John Locke and culminates over J.-J. Rousseau and I. Kant in G.W.F. Hegel. On the other hand, he aims to develop the concept of hegemony as has been explored in European communist movement in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his exploration both of these traditions he endeavors to answer the question why the revolutionary uprisings in Western Europe would not succeed, whereas in Russian it would.

### **Gramsci's conception of civil society**

#### **How does the concept of civil society relate to the concept of hegemony?**

In classical liberalism the distinction is made between civil society (consisting of passive citizens) and political society referring to active citizens in magistrates, councils and parliaments etc. Hegel brings in a third element into this conceptual distinction between civil society and political society and redefines the concept. He differentiates between society consisting of families (private sphere), civil society (system of needs) consisting of estates (*stände*) or classes and the state. When Gramsci uses the concept of civil society he points to Hegelian among classical philosophers on civil society explicitly as his main source. But he draws also on Marx's distinction between structure and superstructure. He introduces a new element into Hegelian and Marxian concepts. This new element refers to newspapers, journals, universities, churches, trade unions and all sorts of other associations upon which the state rests. The reason, then, why the revolution would succeed in Russia is that there was not any broad basis of civil society the state could rest on and had therefore to break down under the revolutionary pressure. In Western Europe, on the contrary, the state could activate all sorts of elements of civil society against revolutionary pressure and enjoy support from the base to resist and finally suppress revolutionary uprisings.

#### **What is new in Gramsci's conception of hegemony?**

This observation leads Gramsci to develop a new concept of hegemony which is in many ways an original one. On the one hand, he agrees with Lenin that a social class can acquire its leadership not only if it makes use of force but also if it is also able to convince other (subaltern) social classes by taking the leadership in science, culture, moral, religion and in all other fields of superstructure. Traditionally, the state has been explored in terms of force. Now, Gramsci insists that the role of the (bourgeois) state is not only to use force to subdue the subaltern social classes in society but also by manipulative conviction by using civil society. This conviction enables one social class to rule over other social classes and create an agreement of subaltern social classes with the values of the ruling class. This is to say that if subaltern social classes are in agreement with the values of ruling class this is then a clear sign of the fact that the ruling class has been able by means of manipulative conviction to produce its will in the subaltern social classes. This is, then, the real and primary strength of a ruling class or of the 'historical block' as he calls it rather than using force.

## **The new perspective in the concept of hegemony**

Especially in the 1970s there have been long debates about the meaning of Gramsci's conception of hegemony, in particular also from international working class's point of view. Many commentators concluded from what Gramsci observes about how the ruling class establishes its hegemony over the subordinated classes that one has to integrate or even assimilate into the elements of the civil society of the ruling class to lead them to implode from within. This conspiracy theoretical conclusion for hegemony, however, is and was too quick a conclusion without any further thoughts, considerations and reflections. Why should, for example, as Lenin insisted, the working classes not develop their own organs of 'civil society' in Gramscian sense of the term.

The situations and perspectives of both bourgeoisie and working classes are not the same. On the contrary, they are very different and they have to be different according to their different situations. Therefore their conceptions of hegemony respectively have to be very different from one another, even contrary to one another. One may start off reflecting on the difference between their conceptions of hegemony respectively by taking, for example, the term 'manipulative conviction' which the ruling class uses to establish her hegemony.

Manipulative conviction means convincing by manipulation. It means convincing by lying, that is, by not telling the truth. However, since Ferdinand Lassalle it has been pointed out that the working class has to develop a new quality of politics by telling people the truth, to say 'what is'. Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg pointed out permanently that the working classes politics has to present an entirely new quality and this would consist in the fact that the representatives of the working classes have to tell to people the truth. The politics of hegemony of working classes has to rest on the principle honesty and conviction by telling the truth rather than dishonesty and conviction by manipulation.

Where does this difference in establishing hegemony of bourgeoisie and international proletariat come from? It may be explained by pointing to their different social situation. The bourgeoisie as ruling class owns the means of production, whereas the international working class as the term proletariat already implies is a class without any property. Bourgeoisie is a class with particular interests as any other social class and layer. But since she occupies the power she has to present her own class interests as the interests of the whole of society. This is to say that she as the owning class of the means of production has in relation to power and consequently to hegemony only a one dimensional relation. Because of her social situation as the owner of the means of production she can and has to aim at power and hegemony for the sake of power.

As opposed to the bourgeoisie, the working classes, as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels pointed out, are classes which can strive for power to establish freedom on the world and emancipate humanity. This perspective on the emancipation of humanity enables international proletariat to be honest and tell people the truth when she seizes at the power and tries to establish her own hegemony against the hegemony of bourgeoisie. This perspective enables working classes to present also an entirely new quality in politics.