

“Necessary and Sufficient” Ethics: The Theory of Hegemony in Antonio Gramsci

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Antonio Gramsci (1937) was the founder and main theoretician of the Italian Communist Party. Gramsci developed Marxism to explicate the Protestant Reformation, the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution of 1917 in greater detail, focusing on culture just as much as economics.

He created a new theory of the state and revolution for a modern society far more integrated than Marx could have imagined. Knowledge is more than power, it is force and control. This force can benefit anyone who has mastered any branch of knowledge and its application. His view of power was more diffusive than Marx. Escaping the economic determinism of Marx, Gramsci saw power in all forms of culture and thought.¹

This essay will argue that Gramsci's ethical theory was cynical. Hegemony was not a criticism of the system of rule he perceived around him, but a plan of action. In Gramsci's approach, there is no good reason to support capitalism over socialism, except in that the latter seemed inevitable given the number of workers versus the number of capitalists. There was no internal law that would bring this about, however. Gramsci was a cynic in that he realized the simple truth that all anti-communists realized: materialism is only about power. No Marxist can believe in ethics for that very reason. Materialism can know no ethics. Therefore, he was forced to argue that power and “inevitability” are identical with the ethically correct.

He argued, very much against his own reason, that there was no truth. That category is irrelevant concerning social life. What matters is which rhetorical formulation is best able to replace one pattern of brain waves (that is, thoughts) with another. Hegemony is a mechanism whereby, through material habituation, the mass mind is used to generating one set of social or ethical images. These images support the ruling class and scorned the revolution, or so he believed. Hegemony is tautologous in that ruling groups can create cultural hegemony because they are ruling groups. Gramsci, being more honest than Stalin, is willing to admit that the same forms of manipulation that any and all ruling classes require to rule will be used by him. Beyond this, there is nothing.

Revolutionaries thrive on vague sentiments usually in the negative. Their method is dishonest: they compare the daily grind of capitalist society to a vague ideal of the “future” that Marx did not bother to explain. Of course, vague ideals will always win. It is a rhetorical device. This is a foundational axiom of Gramsci and is congruent with the notion that materialism knows no ethic, only power.

Hegemony is one of the key elements of the Gramsci's work. According to him, the power of the ruling class rests not only on violence, but also on consent. Hence, the mechanism of power is not only the threat of force, but also of conviction.² No ruling class could rule for long based exclusively on physical violence. An element of consent had to be granted at any time.

Mastering the economic order is not enough, since the dominance of capital does not guarantee complete rule. Economic relations are but one of many communal experiences. Having

¹ Bates, TR. Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 36/2 (1975): 353-358

² Piccone, P. Gramsci's Marxism: Beyond Lenin and Togliatti. *Theory and Society*, 3 (1976): 460-462

visited the USSR, Gramsci saw such manipulation accomplished there as well. The revolution in his version would succeed because the ruled would not realize that they were anything but free beings. Of course, he knew that they were anything but.

It is true that the State is seen as the organ of one particular group, destined to create favorable conditions for the latter's maximum expansion. But the development and expansion of the particular group are conceived of, and presented, as being the motor force of a universal expansion, of a development of all the "national" energies. In other words, the dominant group is coordinated concretely with the general interests of the subordinate groups, and the life of the State is conceived of as a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria (on the juridical plane) between the interests of the fundamental group and those of the subordinate groups. . .³

Thus, the state, no matter what class is dominant, stands on two pillars: power and consent. This goes for the "working class" as much as any other class. When a society reaches a sufficient level of consensus on things, hegemony has been reached. Hegemony, once achieved, is a subtle and dynamic process. Moreover, hegemony involves not just consent, but active consent. Gramsci argues that the "state" is not mere bureaucracy, but an entire mechanism of cultural dominance.⁴

According to Gramsci, undermining this consent is a gradual process. It is not a mythical clash of forces in a violent revolution, but is about changing the mass mind over time. Hegemony is based on the cultural core of society, which includes a set of ideas about the world and man, of good and evil, beautiful and foul, symbols and images, traditions and prejudices and other ideas not so much true as habitual. It is difficult for Marxists to consider this idea because it is a universal, and one that is not instantaneously reducible to class. This is a stable "collective will." To undermine it is step one, to replace it with a new one is the very conception of revolution.

Who is the protagonist in establishing or undermining this ruling consensus? Gramsci's answer is unequivocal: the intellectuals. The social function of the intellectual is to create a new hegemony – a new consensus – through the very act of undermining that of the ruling powers. The creation and dissemination of ideologies, establishing or undermining the hegemony of a particular class is the *raison d'être* of the intellectual.

Gramsci generally argues that the present class of intellectuals is connected to capital. In other words, they are bought and paid for. Yet, this cannot be true. Gramsci's problem is that, in creating counter-hegemony, communist intellectuals will have to occupy the same institutions the opposition occupies right now. Gramsci's intellectuals must become elites. It appears that revolution is either superfluous or identical with his group coming to have hegemony.⁵ Since the latter is a tautology, the former must be true.

Taken at face value, his view is inconsistent. The reader is to be meant to see "hegemony" as being vaguely menacing. It conjures up images of imperial colonial administrations. Again, this is purely rhetorical. While this is useful when arguing in the negative, when it comes for

³ Gramsci, Antonio. "Analysis Of Situations. Relations Of Force." *Prison Notebooks*. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell (eds, trans), Lawrence & Wishart, 1971: 406

⁴ Piccone, P. Gramsci's Marxism: Beyond Lenin and Togliatti. *Theory and Society*, 3 (1976): 460ff

⁵ Dirlik, A. The Predicament of Marxist Revolutionary Consciousness: Mao Zedong, Antonio Gramsci, and the Reformulation of Marxist Revolutionary Theory. *Modern China*, 9/2 (1983): 202

rebuilding, it is another matter. Hegemonies are equal in that they serve the interest of one group or another. The problem for Gramsci is that a) there is no reason to suggest that “labor” should rule at the expense of others, or that b) his movement represents these workers, or that c) his movement will continue to do so once he/they reach hegemonic status.⁶ Hegemony is not a criticism, but a method. Gramsci seeks to replace one with the other. He writes,

The decisive element in every situation is the permanently organized and long-prepared force which can be put into the field when it is judged that a situation is favorable (and it can be favorable only in so far as such a force exists, and is full of fighting spirit). Therefore the essential task is that of systematically and patiently ensuring that this force is formed, developed, and rendered ever more homogeneous, compact, and self-aware. The great Powers have been great precisely because they were at all times prepared to intervene effectively in favorable international conjunctures—which were precisely favorable because there was the concrete possibility of effectively intervening in them.⁷

Gramsci believed that if Communism was capable of reaching the domination of thought, then the death camps of the USSR would not be needed. This requires a substantial commitment over generations to subvert institutions in the very name of those institutions. The left needed to become the elite before the revolution took place, which is a total inversion of Marx and Lenin. Once this is done, then no opposition is possible.

As if to confirm this cynical thesis, one of Gramsci's supporters says:

For Gramsci, the analysis of the social location of ideas does not preclude the assessment of the truth and the validity of such ideas. Their validity is determined, as we have noted, by their capacity to mobilize and guide the masses toward the attainment of ideological and political hegemony. . . . By focusing on the problem of variations of the economic structure, Gramsci's historicism fosters thought and action in terms of different and alternative strategies rather than in terms of necessary, constant, or immutable economic laws.⁸

Dr. Salamini lets out more than he realizes here. Outside of the academic language, it is an admission that power is a good of itself and that the “strategies” used are no more than manipulation. When you claim that truth is unattainable, then this must be the conclusion. The theory of hegemony is tautology. It merely states that the ruling group rules. It rules thought, ideas, processes, procedures and, in addition, uses the more blatant elements of coercive power.

That a ruling groups subordinates some ideas and exalts others is as true in democracies as in oligarchies, monarchies and “worker's states.” Gramsci says elsewhere:

If every State tends to create and maintain a certain type of civilization and of citizen, and to eliminate certain customs and attitudes and to disseminate others, then the Law will be its instrument for this purpose (together with the school

⁶ cf. Chambers, Whitaker. *Witness*. (Regnery Publishing, 1987): 17ff

⁷ Gramsci, Antonio. “Analysis Of Situations. Relations Of Force.” *Prison Notebooks*. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell (eds, trans), Lawrence & Wishart, 1971: 406

⁸ Salamini, L. *Gramsci and Marxist Sociology of Knowledge: An Analysis of Hegemony-Ideology-Knowledge*. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 15/3 (1974): 372

system, and other institutions and activities). It must be developed so that it is suitable for such a purpose—so that it is maximally effective and productive of positive results. . . The conception of law will have to be freed from every residue of transcendentalism and from every absolute; in practice, from every moralistic fanaticism.⁹

States create civilizations? By “state” he really means “culture,” which is the traditional continental European conception of the term. Even still, there must be more than a tautology here. There is no morality in Gramsci's world, since the purely material conception of the universe knows no morality. Freedom is foreign to it. Gramsci and his movement need not be correct, he/they need only be powerful. What this means for the future society of equality and liberty is another matter, since these wispy ideals are certainly moralistic. Hence, quite conveniently, in this one brief quotation, Gramsci has shown the truth of this essay's contention: that Gramsci was a Marxist not out of any commitment to truth claims or moral ideas, but only as a means to gain power. There were more workers than owners. To be less cynical would be to say that Gramsci was a Marxist so as to be on the right side of history.

Since morality has no transcendent foundation and all things are reducible to material interaction, then power is all that can be. On the other hand, if history is moving towards a world run by workers or parties representing them, then Gramsci would be unwise to support any other. Whitaker Chambers famously quipped that he left the winning side for the losing side, but that he would rather die a loser than win with the communists.¹⁰

Determinism is the issue here. If determinism is true, then ethics, revolutions or moral ideals are nothing. There is merely history and its irrepressible march. Gramsci dances around the issue of determinism in “Regularity and Necessity,”

“Necessity” in the “speculative-abstract” and in the “historical-concrete” sense: necessity exists when there exists an efficient and active premise, consciousness of which in people’s minds has become operative, proposing concrete goals to the collective consciousness and constituting a complex of convictions and beliefs which acts powerfully in the form of “popular beliefs”. In the premise must be contained, already developed or in the process of development, the necessary and sufficient material conditions for the realization of the impulse of collective will.¹¹

This is obfuscation of the worst sort. He says that “consciousness” is where this premise (analogous to the “proximate cause”) resides. Thus, consciousness is not free. It must therefore, be a material thing. Its the Achilles Heel of materialism. Its not merely a proximate cause, it is a collective one and one that serves as an axiom for further actions. So not only does this abstract “collective” exist, it has a singular will that is necessary, that is, it cannot be otherwise. The argument is incoherent and seems to suggest that he wrestled with the question for some time, only to give up on it. No nominalist can use terms like “collective will” anyway, since this is a universal conception that is actually real, functional and totally determined by its axioms implanted from somewhere else. It is a poor and crude argument.

⁹ Gramsci, Antonio. “The Conception of Law.” Prison Notebooks. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell (eds, trans), Lawrence & Wishart, 1971, 508-509

¹⁰ Chambers, 17-18

¹¹ Gramsci, Antonio. “Regularity and Necessity.” Prison Notebooks. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell (eds, trans), Lawrence & Wishart, 1971: 756

Gramsci's rhetorical strategy prevents him from openly stating that human decisions are determined as all material things are. For something to be already "contained" in this process of development is identical to saying that acts are derivable from material arrangements and thus unfree. His key phrase is "necessary and sufficient" conditions for the "collective will." That "material conditions" are "necessary and sufficient" for the "realization of the impulse" of the will, whether collective or otherwise, is pure determinism. That Gramsci must couch it in such language is cynical to the extreme.

Using even denser language, Urbanati writes,

Gramsci's novelty and merit consisted in changing the perspective of the politics of emancipation, and instead of focusing on the traditional and direct strategies of political inclusion, he opened up a broad inquiry over the social and cultural conditions of subordination and exclusion. He looked at modernity from the bottom of its peripheries.¹²

Both Samamini and Urbanati are clearly supporters of Gramsci. The two use the traditional arcana of academia to say the same thing: no ruling class has the right to rule. All of them, regardless of ideology, use forms of rhetorical manipulation. There is no ethical reason to prefer socialism to capitalism except that workers, making up a huge majority of the population under capitalism, will merely manifest material conditions in their overthrow of capitalism. These words are chosen carefully: they might think or feel that such action is their own, but Gramsci has shown us that they are not. They are, to state it plainly, only manifesting necessary and sufficient material realities. Material works through them, so to speak. They are not "acting" in the normal sense of that term.

According to this approach, a revolutionary in the street therefore, the typical white middle-class "mass-produced rebel" in a Che Guevara shirt, in this view, has no idea what he is doing. He is unaware of the axioms the revolutionary movement has implanted in him. In our case, it is the elite university professors, all major news networks, corporate philanthropists like the Rockefeller Foundation and publishing houses that serve this "hegemonic" idea.

Gramsci was an activist, not a philosopher. His era did not help him, since the Enlightenment came crashing down with World War I, Lenin, Versailles, Stalin and the inevitable response of Hitler. The era was dominated by materialism, technology, bureaucracy and control. This era, more or less, reduced man to a machine used to manipulate his environment for ends that belonged to his rulers. The ruling party, whoever they were, knew what these purposes were intellectually, but the profane were not to be told. This goes for socialist rebellion as well as capitalism. Gramsci is a victim of the same hegemonic machine as he's writing about the hegemonic machine.

Gramsci's method was to identify the mechanism that made a ruling group exert power. Then, he described how power can be taken, and, more importantly, maintained. Hegemony is about maintaining power already attained. Stalin's terror was not unethical, just unnecessary; it was a waste of resources. If the brain was reduced to mere necessity deriving from the material conditions currently operant in the world, then revolution can be reduced to the same. "Revolution" is then simply changing how the brain generates images so as to guarantee a set of images congenial to Marxism versus a set congenial to fascism or Stalinism.

¹² Urbanati, N. From the Periphery of Modernity: Antonio Gramsci's Theory of Subordination and Hegemony. *Political Theory*, 26/3 (1998): 371

If the world was purely material, then it is determined. If all is determined, then so is thought. If thought is determined, then political revolution, or political anything, is unnecessary. The simplest route to power is to manipulate how the average person generates images. This is a post-revolutionary strategy, since all revolutions are from above and derive from an elite vanguard party. This is done by and through the brain as faithfully representing the material conditions present at any time. After all, the brain is just one more aspect of these conditions, so the process is not that difficult, but it is painstaking.

Materialism is a negative judgment. It is not consistently believed by its adherents. It was a weapon to use against Christianity specifically, but any concept of the transcendent generally. The spirit is beyond the reach of science and is therefore beyond the reach of social or political regulation. Materialism implies that all things are malleable. It provides a wildly simplistic explanation of the universe. It is easy to grasp, argue and the simple-minded are easily swayed by it. It also, as this paper has argued, rejects any form of knowledge. CS Lewis famously argued this simple point:

Supposing there was no intelligence behind the universe, no creative mind. In that case, nobody designed my brain for the purpose of thinking. It is merely that when the atoms inside my skull happen, for physical or chemical reasons, to arrange themselves in a certain way, this gives me, as a by-product, the sensation I call thought. But, if so, how can I trust my own thinking to be true? It's like upsetting a milk jug and hoping that the way it splashes itself will give you a map of London.

In such a world, as Gramsci's, truth is irrelevant. It is not an important variable since all anyone knows is the succession of events that have inevitably and automatically presented themselves to "consciousness." Manipulating the stream of this "consciousness" still implies a superiority to it, that is, the idea that the vanguard party are somehow beyond the material world while still remaining material beings.

Revolution was now about manipulation, since all politics is and can be nothing more. Materialism also conveniently removes all ethical ideals (since ideals are not material things), and so, even judgments of cynicism can have no effect. Materialism made the world simple, and Gramsci was able to take advantage of it. Gramsci's argument is absurd, but so is the political world he acted within.