

What is the Difference Between a Realist and a Gramscian Understanding of Hegemony?

Written by Christopher Grundy

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CHRISTOPHER GRUNDY, JUN 8 2012

"Politics is the central human activity, the means by which the single consciousness is brought into contact with the social and natural world in all its forms."[1]

– Eric Hobsbawm

On the 22nd of January 1891 Antonio Gramsci was born into a working-class family on the Italian Island of Sardinia. Despite his short life, he died in 1937, Gramsci's writings, his actions as the Italian communist leader, his imprisonment at the hands of Mussolini, and the subsequent publication of *the Prison Notebooks* have led to him being considered one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century. John Hoffman, author of the sublime *The Gramscian Challenge*, eloquently specifies the reasons for Gramsci's importance: "His preoccupation with the problem of consent, his 'broad' view of the state as the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the consent of those over whom it rules." [2] This leads succinctly on to the Gramscian concept of hegemony which will be covered in detail below.

The question examined in this essay is one of startling complexity. At first it appears to simply invite the reader to contrast two different ideological interpretations of a pertinent feature of politics and international relations. On closer inspection, however, it questions the foundation of the political landscape, international cooperation and interaction, and human nature itself. There is a myriad of implications, associations and connotations both scholastic and emotional attached to the reasoning behind this question and the answer which must be provided. In order to discuss this inquiry effectively these must be illustrated and illuminated from the start, thus providing a lucid and equitable analysis.

The question posits the term "realist" without specifying exactly which type of realism it is referring too. It should be made clear therefore that this text will be discussing realism in the classical sense, as envisaged by Machiavelli, Hobbes and Bismarck. Classical realism places specific emphasis on the state as a unitary actor pursuing its own national interests, and the obviation of values and morals within the framework of international relations.

It is of vital importance for the effective completion of this essay to understand and highlight the realist and Gramscian conceptions of the state, in order to better understand the theory of hegemony. Chris Brown, author of the seminal *Understanding International Relations*, remarks that "realism offers quite an elaborate description of the state," expanding, "the state is a territorially- based political unit characterised by a central decision-making and enforcement machinery; the state is legally sovereign' in the sense that it recognises neither an external superior, nor an internal equal; and the state exists in a world composed of other, similarly characterised, territorial, sovereign political units." [3] This contrasts starkly with the Gramscian notion of the state which Gramsci develops to: "the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules." [4] There are therefore fundamental differences between the Gramscian and the realist view on the nature of the state. Again, more details and discussion will be included below but a clarifying of terms is essential at this point.

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Finally, the term “hegemony” will be applied in this text in its realist conception, namely “the ability to establish rules of action and enforce them, and the willingness to act on this ability,”[5] while accepting “a state-centric view of the world”[6] and “a clear distinction between the domestic and the international.”[7]

This essay will discuss the key interpretations concerning divergences between the realist and the Gramscian understanding of hegemony, drawing from a wide range of prominent scholars and eminent thinkers on the subject. Broader analysis will be achieved by utilising historic and contemporary electronic, primary and secondary sources. Finally, it will conclude that there are many differences between the realist and the Gramscian theory of hegemony, but the most significant one being the gramscian exegesis of civil society.

Main Discussion

One of the key features of realism’s understanding of hegemony is the *hegemonic stability theory*. This particular facet concentrates on the distribution of power or the *balance of power*, within the international system. Classical realists argue that “imbalanced power produces peace,”[8] as Joseph Nye states. The *hegemonic stability theory* posits that “when there is a strong dominant power, there will be stability, but when a strong power begins to slip and a new challenger rises, war is more likely.”[9] Realists draw support for this theory from Thucydides’s explication of the Peloponnesian war and the international circumstances surrounding the manifestation of World War I. Furthermore, Charles Kindleberger, author of the highly influential history of economics *The World in Depression 1929-39*, describes the necessity for a state to possess “capacity, will and legitimacy,”[10] for the *hegemonic stability theory* to apply. He goes on to underline the lack of these three faculties in the British Empire, and propounds this to be the cause of its demise, as well as identifying the USA as being in possession of these vital attributes and therefore, having “the capacity to provide hegemonic leadership,” post 1945. Thus the realist understanding of hegemony focuses specifically on the workings of the state within the framework of international relations, and depicts the hegemon as the main agent of order in an anarchical inter-state system.

Scholars such as Joseph Nye and Alan James have succeeded in making forceful counter-arguments against the *hegemonic stability theory* however. Nye points out the erroneous “prediction of conflict,”[11] which the theory implies. He clarifies this argument by expounding the USA’s surpassing of Great Britain “as the largest economy in the world,” in the 1880s, without necessitating war and instability. Alan James also makes a purposive proposal, which identifies an international system comprising co-operating states, rather than a global hegemon establishing and enforcing rules and regulations. As James puts it: “Co-operative activity, in short, does not necessarily imply that the co-operating actors somehow fade into the background; in practice it does not have this effect and it is hard to see how it could possibly do so.”[12] This quotation therefore elucidates effectively, the interpretation that states will act on the necessity to co-operate with other states, but this by no means implies that the sovereignty of the individual states is compromised and a hegemon is established.

Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony does not incorporate the *hegemonic stability theory*. Instead, Gramsci advocates a revolutionary challenge to the role of state power as perceived in parochial military and economic terms. He propounds a more complex nature of the state, by introducing the “relationship between the dominant and dominated classes,”[13] into international relations. Thus “hegemony involves the successful attempts of the dominant class to use its political, moral, and intellectual leadership to establish its view of the world as all-inclusive and universal, and to shape the interests and needs of subordinate groups.”[14] Therefore, the state as an actor involved in international relations is, in the gramscian view, not a unitary actor, representing and acting on behalf of the interests of its collective peoples, but instead ensuring benevolent circumstances for “the dominant classes in civil society.”[15] This displays a clear distinction with realist understanding of hegemony as international relations are not conducted through application of power in an anarchical system for the benefit of the state, which is a unitary actor. Rather the gramscian view espouses the interpretation that there is “the ideological predominance of bourgeoisie values and norms over the subordinate classes.”[16] This statement gains significant support from economist John Sloman, who, in his seminal book *Economics* exposes the staggeringly unequal wealth distribution in the world’s industrial countries. Sloman provides evidence for his hypothesis through acquired data which specify that 97%[17] of all wealth in the UK in 2002 was owned by the wealthiest 50%[18] of the population. When extrapolating this theory onto the international system it becomes clear that instead of acting in a state of perpetual anarchy,

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Gramsci believes that individual States become bound together or held apart by their common bourgeoisie ideologies, values and morals.

Leading on from this point, Hoffman makes the astute supposition, that “the particularly cultural, moral and intellectualist emphasis that Gramsci injects into the notion,”[19] of hegemony was “something new”[20] from the realist interpretation. Hoffman is referring to the unprecedented challenge of the realist theory of the State as a unitary actor, in terms of class relations. This culminates in the characterisation of the State as “hegemony protected by the armour of coercion.”[21] What is meant by this statement is the domination of a subordinate group by an “ascendant class”[22] which “roots its political leadership in the realm of production.”[23] This is an exceedingly important point because it not only highlights Gramsci’s Marxist approach by including the capitalist condition of production, but it also strips away any specious moral superiority in the case of the leading bourgeoisie. Thus it displays the dominant class as being dominant by the virtue of its capital rather than any inherent ideological, moral or religious pre-eminence. Therefore, Gramsci, differing from the realists, interprets the theory of hegemony as affecting both the civil society within the State, and the actions of the State on the international platform.

A further salient feature of realist perspective on hegemony is the *Security Dilemma*. Lord Grey, former British Foreign Secretary, described this phenomenon as: “the increase of armaments that is intended in each nation to produce consciousness of strength, and a sense of security, does not produce these effects. On the contrary, it produces the consciousness of the strength of other nations.”[24] Lord Grey’s prudent observation is a profound argument as can be identified by the notorious arms race between the USSR and the USA (approximately 1945-1991), in which both states sought to intimidate the other with the accumulation of nuclear weapons. Furthermore, this argument strengthens the case of hegemony in the realist sense, as it illustrates effectively the necessity of a hegemon to establish and enforce rules and regulations in the international system. Nye supports this claim by stating: “The structure of international politics is an anarchic system of states.”[25] Evidence for this can be found in the fact that there has not been a nuclear confrontation since the key actors in international relations recognised the predominant strength of the US’s military, economy and soft power (cultural power), which effectively established it as a hegemon.

Spuriously, this could be seen as the undoing of the gramscian theory of hegemony but an alternative perspective on the cold war and the demise of the Soviet Union can be gained which leads neatly on to his theory of hegemony. One of the key aspects of gramscian hegemony is the importance of the “civil society.” Specifically, Gramscian theory identifies hegemony in terms of class-relations, rather than the realist view of “the wills of all are bound together,”[26] by the sovereign, as stated by Hobbes. Thus gramscian understanding of society is one which encompasses a dominant class which, controlling the State is, “at one and the same time, a primary instrument for the expansion of dominant-class power, and a coercive force (political society) that keeps subordinate groups weak and disorganised.”[27] Thus the use of hegemony in the state as well as in civil society is achieved, making it the coercive device of the bourgeoisie. The demise of the USSR should therefore not be viewed as an expression of American dominance over the Soviet Union but rather as a victory for the American bourgeoisie and its class interests and as totally separate from the interests of the majority of the population. The gramscian scholar would further argue that it was not the military and political power of the state which won the war for the USA, as a realist would argue, but rather a more proficient dissemination within the civil society of bourgeoisie ideology and values, which offered the social cohesion necessary to win such an attritive war. Thus, the *Security Dilemma*, which plays a vital role in realist understanding of hegemony, can be countered effectively through gramscian interpretation.

Joseph Grieco, Professor of Political Science at Duke University, suggests in his work *Cooperation Among Nations*, that the difference between *absolute* and *relative* gains is one of extreme importance for realists. He propounds the notion that a state will always value *relative* gains over *absolute* gains, ergo favouring comparative power to fulfilment of potential power. This is because, in the eyes of the realist, more emphasis should be put on the position of the individual state in the international system, instead of maximising its domestic abilities overall. More specifically, the desire for relative gains makes cooperation extremely difficult as a trusting relationship cannot be established between two sovereign nations. The father of realism, Niccolò Machiavelli, exhibits allegorically yet effectively why this is the case: “Appearance is everything... Consequently a prince must manipulate the way he appears, even if, behind the mask, he is something quite different.”[28] Here the prince is used as an allegory for the State and

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conveys effectually why there is an explicit need for a hegemon to utilise its power in order to prevent anarchy within international relations.

Gramsci on the other hand, believes that states favour absolute gains because it is in the class interest of the dominant group to maximise domestic production. This provides a stark contrast to the realist interpretation yet, as the author of *The State and Political Theory*, Martin Carnoy posits: “the state becomes an apparatus of hegemony, encompassing civil society and only distinguished from it by the coercive apparatuses pertaining only to the state.”[29] Thus, Gramscian interpretation of hegemony logically concludes that the state favours absolute gains, in order to maximise “the permeation throughout civil society- including a whole range of structures and activities like trade unions, schools, the churches, and the family- of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs, morality, etc/ that is one way or another supportive of the established order and the class interests that dominate it.”[30]

This illuminating quotation helps to provide an explanation of Gramsci’s complex theory of hegemony by giving an insightful deliberation into the role of political coercion. Furthermore, Gramsci distorts the realist use of the word hegemony, which applies almost exclusively to the condition of states in the international arena, in its original sense, to encompass domestically held political control. Gramsci contrasts “the functions of ‘domination’ (direct physical coercion) with those of ‘hegemony’ or ‘direction’ (consent, ideological control), which correspond roughly to the Hegelian distinction between political society and civil society.”[31] Here, Carnoy lays bare the inner workings of the gramscian theory of hegemony by expounding Gramsci’s revolutionary application of the concept of hegemony, onto civil society. Specifically Gramsci distinguishes between the ‘dominant’ and the ‘subordinate’ classes which he proposes to be bound together by coercion, through the former, and consent, by the latter. This is the truly revolutionary aspect of Gramsci’s theory and the facet which most distinguishes it from a realist conception of hegemony.

Conclusion

“Man is by nature a political animal”

-Aristotle

The concept of hegemony was revolutionised by Antonio Gramsci. Within his short life-span he effectively transfigured hegemony from a rather one-dimensional feature of international relations to “an organising principle, or world-view (or combination of such world views), that is diffused by agencies of ideological control and socialisation into every area of daily life.”[32] He furthermore successfully detached the theory of hegemony from the murky and impenetrable philosophical contention of human nature, which realists ineluctably incorporate into their theory. Thus the absence of an incorporation of human nature into Gramsci’s theory of hegemony is one of the most salient differences to the realist understanding. It must also be stated that the contrasting concepts of *relative* and *absolute* gains, and their desirability, are marked divergences between the two hegemonic theories. Lord Grey’s description of the *Security Dilemma* and the gramscian dismissal of it, offers further disparity. A further striking dissimilarity is presented by Gramsci’s acceptance that “no regime, regardless of how authoritarian it was, could sustain itself primarily through organised state power; in the long run, its scope of popular support or ‘legitimacy’ was always bound to contribute to stability, particularly during times of stress or crisis.”[33] In this he sees the necessity for the bourgeoisie to disseminate their ideologies and values throughout civil society, in order to achieve a type of social cohesion, or as Gramsci puts it ‘coercion’ and ‘consent’. Finally, the most significant characteristic distinguishing the realist and the Gramscian understanding is Gramsci’s inclusion of ‘civil society’ in his theory of hegemony in contrast to the realist explanation of the state as an actor both unitary and equitable in representation of its peoples. Thus, in Gramsci’s view the bourgeoisie classes establish a “prevailing consciousness”[34] which “is internalized by the road masses, it becomes part of ‘common sense’; as ruling elites seek to perpetuate their power, wealth, and status, they necessarily attempt to popularize their own philosophy, culture, morality, etc. and render them unchallengeable, part of the natural order of things.”[35]

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