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A Neo-Gramscian Analysis of Brexit

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On 23 June, 2016, 51.9% of the British electorate – or 17,410,742 individuals – voted to leave the European Union (EU), with 48.1% voting to remain and a turnout of 72.2% (BBC, 2016a). The morning after the Referendum, there was a ‘sense of shock and disbelief’, and in the months to follow there would be a proliferation of attempts to analyse and make sense of the result that few had foreseen (Hobolt, 2016: 1259). In the following essay, I contribute to this growing literature by arguing that a neo-Gramscian theoretical approach can offer valuable insight into this event. Throughout my analysis, I argue that Brexit was the result of several diverse, and often seemingly contradictory, ideas coalescing around the counter-hegemonic rejection of EU hegemonic ‘common sense’. In section 1, I introduce neo-Gramscianism and the concepts that I employ. In section 2, I conduct an in-depth analysis of the key *issues* that emerged in the Leave campaign and explore how their underlying ideas were supported by different actors. In section 3, I highlight the conflicting nature of these ideas, and propose that the counter-hegemonic movement was a symptom of an ‘interregnum’ but is showing signs of becoming a process of ‘*trasformismo*’.

Gramsci and Neo-Gramscianism

Antonio Gramsci, born in 1891, was an Italian Marxist theorist who wrote much of his work while imprisoned by fascist Mussolini’s regime (Jones, 2006). His thought led to the emergence of ‘neo-Gramscian’ theory in the 1980s, as a branch of critical international relations theories (Hoare and Sperber, 2016). Hegemony, one of Gramsci’s most influential concepts, was concerned with a state in which “‘spontaneous’ consent [is] given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group’ (Gramsci, 1971: 145). Historically, consent is established ‘through the continued prestige of intellectual concepts’, and is ‘actively reinforced through institutions that support and expand these concepts as the “common sense” of an era’ (Carroll and Greeno, 2013: 122). Rather than exercised through coercion or domination, then, hegemony – as a form of power – operates through *consent*; by affecting individuals ‘internally, by moulding personal convictions into a replica of prevailing norms’ (Femia, 1981: 24). Gramsci perceived hegemony as the most important form of power and, at the time, related ‘the strength of bourgeois rule in advanced capitalist society’ to its ability to rule through consent (*ibid.*: 31).

The ‘neo-Gramscian’ tradition was pioneered by the work of critical theorist Robert Cox, who saw hegemony ‘as the exercise of leadership within historical blocs within a particular world order’ (Robinson, 2005: 2). Cox argues that a stable hegemony, in this case a world order, necessitates ‘a particular configuration of forces’, a tripartite ‘fit between material power, ideas, and institutions’ (1981: 135, 136). Of key importance for this essay is Cox’s idea that the weakening of hegemony occurs when the balance between these three forces is destabilised.

Cox also made a significant contribution to our understanding of counter-hegemony. Put simply, counter-hegemony can be understood as movements or social groups who identify ‘alternate values and principles’, disseminate these amongst the subaltern classes, and attempt ‘to supplant the counterhegemonic discourse with the prevailing one’ (Cox and Schilthuis, 2012: 1). For a counter-hegemonic movement to be successful, it requires a ‘coalition of social forces’ to coalesce around the rejection of the ‘common sense’ of the prevailing hegemony (Cox, 1981: 132). Gramsci called this rejection of the common sense of an era a ‘war of position’ (as opposed to a ‘war of manoeuvre’); whereby ‘the key assumptions of a hegemonic order are challenged, most prominently in areas such as the media [and] popular culture’ (Worth, 2015: 151; see also Gill, 2000). In this essay, I do not simply ‘apply’ Gramscian and

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neo-Gramscian theory to the case study, which would arguably be problematic due to the specific historical context within which Gramsci wrote (Hoare and Sperber, 2016). Instead, I use a neo-Gramscian vocabulary as a conceptual *toolbox* to frame my analysis.

Brexit

Whilst recent analyses of Brexit identify several explanations for the success of the Brexit campaigns, what is puzzling is that some of these interpretations are significantly different – ranging from the ‘cultural backlash’ and ‘economic insecurity’ theses to the relation between Brexit and the collapse of the British empire (Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Bachmann and Sidaway, 2016).[1] There seems, however, to be a gap in this literature concerning how Brexit was the result of a *combination* of diverse ideas, supported by a range of actors, which challenged the institutionalised hegemonic set of ideas – despite the acknowledgement that Brexit was ‘multi-causal and multi-faceted’ (Becker *et al.*, 2016: 2). I argue that a neo-Gramscian mode of analysis can fill this gap by shining light on this multiplicity of ideas and their seemingly contradictory nature. I contend that a neo-Gramscian vocabulary can help diagnose British membership of the EU as hegemonic common sense and Brexit as a counter-hegemonic movement. As such, the coalition of multiple and seemingly contradictory social forces was a necessary condition for the counter-hegemonic movement to successfully challenge the hegemonic ‘common-sense’ of EU membership.

After indicating some of the ideas that may have contributed to a EU ‘common sense’, I analyse three key ideas that were put forward by the Leave campaign, their supporters, and how these actors’ assertions of counter-hegemonic ideas led to the destabilisation of the current hegemonic order.[2]

Hegemony and EU ‘Common Sense’

To discuss the coalition of social forces that comprise counter-hegemony, it is first necessary to understand what the current *hegemonic* project may be/ have been. The question – on the ballot paper – of whether ‘the United Kingdom [should] remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union’, was a question of whether Brits ought to maintain or challenge the status quo (Calamur, 2016). Like counter-hegemony, this hegemonic ‘status quo’ of British membership of the EU – as common sense – was maintained through the ‘coalition of social forces’ that for different reasons supported British membership of the EU; for ‘hegemony in complex societies involves complex alliances’ (Cox, 1981: 132; Cox and Nilsen, 2016). The point could be made that the very act of ‘Remainer’ David Cameron taking the risk of holding a referendum, combined with the general confidence that Britain would vote Remain, reflects the common sense-nature of British membership of the EU.

The actors supporting ‘Remain’ included ‘a veritable “Davos A list” of world leaders, senior civil servants, business moguls and celebrities’, from David Cameron and George Osborne to Donald Tusk, Christine Lagarde, and Barack Obama (Clarke *et al.*, 2016: 24; Calamur, 2016). The wider institutions that supported Remain included the Conservative Government, Labour, the Scottish National Party, and the Liberal Democrats; the four largest parties in British parliament (BBC 2016b). These actors and their supporting institutions – who backed Remain – were perceived by the average British voter as ‘urban elites who prided themselves on their cosmopolitan sophistication’ (Calhoun, 2016: 53, 54). Cosmopolitanism, as I will demonstrate, was one of the ideas that faced a crisis of legitimacy.

The common sense of British membership of the EU was also the result of the consent to, and support for, European ideas, particularly those of the free movement of labour and capital – ideas enshrined within the tenets of the EU – which have become part of the ‘common sense’ of the EU (Bohle, 2006; Worth, 2016). These are ideas which ‘represent the implementation, on the European scale, of the doctrines of neoliberalism’ and globalisation (Rustin, 2016). They also evince the common-sense assumption that the free movement of labour is a necessary condition of economic globalisation. In sum, then, some of the ideas that dominated the hegemonic ‘common sense’ of EU-membership were cosmopolitanism, neoliberalism, and globalisation (Inglehart and Norris, 2016).

For a counter-hegemonic movement to emerge, hegemony must, according to Gramsci, be in a state of ‘organic crisis’, a crisis in which ‘the system faces a structural (objective) crisis and *also* a crisis of legitimacy or hegemony

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(subjective)' (Robinson, 2005: 14, original emphasis). The contemporary *structural* crisis is arguably epitomised by the European financial crisis and the 'wider social problems, such as increasing inequality and social fragmentation, that neoliberalism has created in abundance' (Worth, 2015: 107; Jessop, 2017). This is reflected in the 'shrinking welfare safety-nets and neo-liberal austerity policies deprivation', and has been exacerbated by concerns about the 'migration crisis' (Inglehart and Norris, 2016: 2; Goodwin and Heath, 2016). In the following section, I expose the *ideological* crisis by highlighting how the 'common sense' ideas of neoliberalism, globalisation, and cosmopolitanism, have been challenged (Worth, 2016).

To conduct a systematic analysis of the dominant narratives of Brexit, I take the key issues on the 'Vote Leave' campaign website – whose official slogan was 'Vote Leave, Take back Control' – as my starting point, and consider the key actors who supported these issues and how they challenged the hegemonic common sense.

Sovereignty

The first key issue over which Leave campaigners wanted to 'take back control', was sovereignty. This issue arguably resonated best with voters, as it was the biggest single reason that Leave voters (49%) voted for Brexit (Ashcroft, 2016).^[3] Most prominent Leave-campaigners supported this issue. Boris Johnson, for example, argued that through Brexit, '[w]e would be able to take back control of our democracy' and that '[w]e'd be able to set our own laws' (2016a). Michael Gove argued that Brexit would be a 'vote for democracy', as UK membership of the EU 'prevents us from being able to change huge swathes of law' (cited in Ross, 2016; Gove, 2016). The rejection of EU on the grounds of legal supremacy, then, was – to an extent – a reflection of the crisis of legitimacy for the 'common sense' idea of the delegation of legal power to a regional supranational institution.

Immigration

The second key issue mobilised in the Brexit debate was immigration. Brexit was argued to mean that '[w]e'll be in charge of our own borders' and '[w]e'll be able to control immigration' (Vote Leave, 2016). Immigration was the biggest issue for 33% of those who voted Brexit (Ashcroft, 2016). Commonplace social media engagement by anti-immigration politicians are exemplified in UKIP leader, Nigel Farage's Tweet, 'EU open door migration has put huge pressure on our public services' (Farage, 2016a). The controversial UKIP poster – depicting a queue of immigrants with the caption: 'BREAKING POINT: The EU has failed us all. We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders' – epitomised the anti-immigration sentiment associated with factions of the Leave campaign (Farage, 2016b). In opposing the free movement of labour, 'far-right Eurosceptics' expressed a rejection of the European 'common sense' of economic globalisation (Worth, 2016:12).

Economy and Trade

The final issue discussed in this essay – that featured prominently in Brexiteers' narratives – was to 'take back control over our economy and trade' (Vote Leave, 2016). Daniel Hannan, for example, rejected the EU because, amongst other reasons, the EU's custom union erects 'a common tariff wall around their members, who surrender the right to strike individual trade deals' (2016b). As such, Leavers criticised the EU because the UK has 'no power to make free trade deals with fast growing economies like India and China' (Vote Leave, 2016). ^[4] 'Market Eurosceptics' such as Tice *et al.*, argue that 'the UK will [be able to] remove all trade tariffs on imports from other nations... [and] will thereby become a beacon for global free trade, encouraging cross border trade and investment' (Worth, 2016: 6; 2016: 16). In short, it could be argued that 'market Eurosceptics', who rejected the EU common sense of a single market, rather than *rejecting* the neoliberal policies of the free movement of capital, were favouring a *more* free-market centred approach to trade, and favoured the increased globalisation of British trade. Endorsing some of the principles of economic globalisation (notably the free movement of capital), but rejecting others (such as the free movement of labour) may seem somewhat contradictory (see Cadywould, 2016; BBC, 2016c). It could be argued, however, that this seeming contradiction is testament to the common sense-nature of the idea that the free movement of people is a necessary condition of economic globalisation. This hegemonic idea is one which the counter-hegemonic movement has challenged.

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Gramsci: Coalition of Social Forces

The Leave campaign, as I have shown, was fuelled by several issues, including sovereignty, immigration, and trade. These were underpinned, however, by varied and often seemingly contradictory ideas. What brought the coalition of social forces together, nevertheless, was their rejection of the current status quo and the common sense of UK membership of the EU. Sovereignty-supporters found a common interest with far-right Eurosceptics and market Eurosceptics, as they all ultimately wished 'to take back control'; regardless of whether this was control over British legislation, British borders, or the right to independently negotiate free trade deals.

The power of these ideas coalescing is evinced, for example, in the issue of immigration often being invoked in combination with a critique of cosmopolitanism, illustrated by David Davis: 'It's the elite in their cushy, chauffeur-driven lifestyles, insulated from the reality of mass migration... telling [the people] they had better back the so-called status quo... Our people are paying the price for mass migration – no jobs, or low paid jobs, wages depressed by the influx of cheap labour' (Davis, 2016). Multiple EU common sense ideas, thus, were destabilised through the coalition of counter-hegemonic ideas, which together bolstered the overall weakening of the hegemonic order. A Neo-Gramscian analysis of Brexit enables us to appreciate that only together were these diverse issues capable of waging a 'war of position' against the hegemonic status quo.

Whilst I do contend that Brexit was a rejection of the status quo, the question of its success as a counter-hegemonic movement is still up for debate. If we are to understand how *successful* a counter-hegemonic movement may be, Worth argues that we must assess the extent to which it offers 'a clear ideological alternative to the status quo' (2015: 150). Although the diverse social forces did come together in support of the rejection of the *current* hegemony, the lack of clarity as to what Brexit would entail in practice (evinced in recent debates about 'soft' and 'hard' Brexits) is arguably a symptom of the lack of capacity for these social forces to offer a coherent and viable alternative (BBC, 2017). This inability has been observed as a recurring symptom of the proliferation of counter-hegemonic (both 'nativist' and 'global justice') movements since the 1999 Battle for Seattle protests (Gill, 2000; Worth, 2013). Arguably, then, Brexit was caused by an organic – structural and hegemonic – crisis, but was also a symptom of 'interregnum', a period of crisis which 'consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot [yet] be born' (Gramsci, 1971: 556; see also Bauman, 2012).

Although the 'common sense' hegemonic ideas have been destabilised, it could be argued that the inability to propose a coherent ideological alternative (to neoliberalism, globalisation and cosmopolitanism) undermined the power of the counter-hegemonic movement. At the time of writing, Prime Minister Theresa May has announced that, upon exiting the EU, the UK will pursue 'a truly Global Britain', and, as such, recognises the need to achieve 'public consent for a globalised economy and the businesses that operate within it' (May, 2017). This vision arguably alludes to the strengthened pursuit of the ruling social groups' ideas of globalisation and neoliberalism; a sign that a process of *trasformismo* is underway. By *trasformismo*, Gramsci understands a process whereby the grievances of the counter-hegemonic project 'are incorporated into the dominant project' (Robinson, 2005: 14). The process of 'molecular *trasformismo*' has arguably already occurred, as 'individual political figures' from subordinate groups – such as Boris Johnson and David Davis – have been co-opted into the dominant hegemonic order, through their promotion into Theresa May's Government (Gramsci, 1971: 213, n.8). It remains to be seen whether the second stage of transformism will occur – whereby 'entire groups' become co-opted by the ruling elites – as May attempts to (re)gain the public's consent for globalisation and neoliberalism (*ibid.*).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has demonstrated that a neo-Gramscian vocabulary can offer an enhanced explanation of Brexit. I proposed that a neo-Gramscian analysis highlights and gives an account of the essential heterogeneity of ideas that challenged the common-sense idea of EU-membership. The coalition of social forces, I argued, was necessary for the hegemonic order to be challenged, but the counter-hegemonic movement's inability to offer a coherent ideological alternative indicates a period of interregnum. Whilst neo-Gramscian theory was not the only explanatory tool available to me, and my analysis omitted consideration of causes such as nationalism and populism, I have, nevertheless, demonstrated neo-Gramscianism's potential for expanding our understanding of the

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'unprecedented and earth-shaking decision' for Britain to leave the EU (Wallerstein, 2016). There is an imperative for future research into the extent to which the Brexit negotiations and post-Brexit Britain will entail either the identification of an ideological alternative to neoliberal hegemony, a process of *trasformismo*, or perhaps the weakened capacity for a neo-Gramscian vocabulary to predict the unfolding future.

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Notes

[1] The official campaign organizations in the British Referendum for Remain and Leave were 'Britain Stronger in Europe' (BSiE) and 'Vote Leave'. Other Leave campaigns included: 'Leave.eu', 'Grassroots Out', 'and the 'Campaign Against Euro-Federalism' (Calamur, 2016).

[2] Leave campaigners who appeared most frequently in the national press (between 6th May – 22nd June, 2016) included Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage, Michael Gove, Ian Duncan Smith, Priti Patel, Jacob Rees-Mogg, Chris Grayling, Gisela Stuart, and Daniel Hannan (LU, 2016).

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[3] The poll was conducted with 12,369 people on 23 June (Ashcroft, 2016).

[4] Despite this issue playing a key role in the Leave campaign *narrative*, only 6% of Leavers perceived the most important issue to be that the '... the UK would benefit more from being outside the EU than from being a part of it' (Ashcroft, 2016).

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