



What Antonio Gramsci offers to social democracy

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Gramsci's notion of hegemony offers social democrats an analytical framework within which to better understand and challenge the entrenched interests of capital in society and a way of thinking about creating the conditions for political change

A key dilemma for social democrats today is to find a way of challenging the dominance of capital and business interests while remaining located within a gradualist framework that does not envisage any immediate prospect of fundamental change. If no serious alternative is on the cards, is there any point in critiquing the way that capitalism functions? If the left's influence appears to be diminishing, why not accept that there is no alternative to the market? Without contemporary answers to these questions, social democrats face continuing decline: throughout the current financial crisis their popularity has been plummeting, largely because they have been unable to make a principled stand against those responsible for what has happened – for indeed many have largely embraced the same policies. Social democrats lack a politics that can simultaneously both act as a critique of capitalism and yet accept that it is the system in which they will continue to operate for the foreseeable future.

I believe that Antonio Gramsci – a man who endured bitter defeat, prison and death in Mussolini's Italy – continues to offer the best answers to these questions, precisely because he was forced to confront the question of how popular resistance could continue to be marshalled at a time of defeat, and how to turn resistance into the kernel of a new society. His concept of hegemony offers a way of thinking about creating the conditions for political change while recognising that there is little immediate chance of a major breakthrough. In fact Gramsci has been described by Stuart Hall as 'our foremost theorist of defeat' – perhaps another reason to turn to him today! Gramsci's unrelenting realism, his 'pessimism of the intellect', did not prevent him from continuing to maintain an 'optimism of the will' throughout his political life.¹

Gramsci was a founding member and later leader of the Italian Communist Party, and thus was on the revolutionary side of the split in the Second International that took place after the first world war and the Bolshevik revolution. Born in Sardinia, by the time of these events he was living in Turin, the centre of industrial activity in Italy, and a city where at first there appeared to be the chance for a Bolshevik-style popular uprising. However after the defeat of the factory council movement and the rise of fascism, Gramsci sought to analyse how those in power continued to find new ways of maintaining their position. While he was in prison – from 1926 to 1937, when he died – he set himself the task of understanding the causes of the defeats suffered by the revolutionary left during the 1920s, and of theorising an alternative path of action in Europe and America. The key selection of these writings is *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, translated and published in 1971.²

Rather than a frontal war between dominant and subordinate classes, Gramsci saw a more protracted struggle taking place in civil society, within all the organisations of social and cultural life – and between political alliances around the fundamental classes. Each side in this 'war of position' would seek to attain hegemony, i.e. not just a temporary majority for a tactical programme, but a position of intellectual and moral leadership that would provide solutions to other classes and social groups, and unify them around a strategic vision and programme.

1. 'I'm a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will', letter from prison 1929 – this is one of the most famous quotations from Gramsci, but its origin is also attributed to Romain Rolland.

2. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, Lawrence & Wishart 1971.

This recognition that in countries with well developed civil societies the political battle takes place across a very wide terrain – and Gramsci’s unique way of exploring this terrain in all its complex inter-relationships of economy, politics and culture – remains crucial for the left today, including for social democrats (who remained in the Second International after the historic split, but whose weakness, in contrast to the leftists, has often been an apparent willingness to wait for ever for even the smallest of ‘reformist’ gains, and not to seek to grasp the essential contours of the battle). In his notions of a war of position, and the battle for hegemonic leadership, Gramsci speaks both to revolutionaries who long for change but recognise it is not on the horizon, and social democrats who reject oppositionalism but want to make headway against the political economic and cultural dominance of capital.

Gramsci’s notion of hegemony

Perhaps Gramsci’s most important concept for contemporary politics is his notion of hegemony – rule that is secured through the broad consent of the population, rather than through domination. This is secured partly through making concessions to subordinate groups, but most crucially through seeking to make the ideas of the interests represented by the dominant classes appear to be the obvious ‘common sense’ of a whole society. (‘Common sense’ is another key Gramscian term.) The idea of hegemonic rule helped to account for the difficulties that had been faced by socialist parties of all kinds in the 1920s, but also, even more importantly, it opened up the possibility of thinking about ways in which socialists could try to develop counter-hegemonic strategies, to build alliances based on a different kind of common sense. The working class needed to find a way of representing their interests in terms of ideas that would strike a chord across society, to show that they could represent the whole of society and not just their own sectional interest. Capitalist hegemony – which of course takes different forms in different times and places – was something that much work went into securing, work that was carried out by the ‘organic intellectuals’ (another key Gramscian term) who do the cultural and ideological work that seeks to secure consent for the class they serve – for example priests or journalists. A contemporary example would be those working in corporate PR. Hegemony is never stable, and this means that, however strong it appears to be (however much, for example, the market is presented as the only way of organising society), it is possible to intervene to disrupt that hegemony and put forward an alternative way of looking at the world, an alternative moral and political philosophy.

Gramsci understood that capitalism would always encounter crises of finance and production (i.e. boom and bust can never be a thing of the past), and he sought ways of understanding how the crises within hegemonic rule that are possible consequences of such crises could be taken as opportunities for counter-hegemonic forces to put forward their new solutions. He saw that specific forms of hegemonic rule could be remade in such moments of crisis – so that either the existing dominant class would regroup to piece together a new hegemonic strategy, or a new challenge could be made to their whole way of thinking and doing. Thus fascism represented a new configuration of alliances and ideology within Italy that allowed business interests to continue to predominate after the battles of the first world war. (To be sure force was also involved, but the support of large sections of the population was secured through fascist rhetoric and social organisation, and a new articulation of different interests and ideas.)

The concept of conjuncture was crucial in this analysis. ‘Conjunctural analysis’ is pitched at a level that looks at cultural, ideological and social forces, as well as at the underlying economic structures, of any given moment. A conjuncture is a coming together into a particular articulation of all the complex forces operating in a society during a given period, to form a settlement that is able hold for that period;

3. David Cutts, Robert Ford and Matthew J. Goodwin (2011) ‘Anti-immigrant, Politically Disaffected or Still Racist After All? Examining the Attitudinal Drivers of Extreme Right Support in Britain in the 2009 European Elections’, *European Journal of Political Research*, vol.50, no.3, pp.418-440

4. For a more technical discussion of the data and analysis see M.J. Goodwin (2011) *New British Fascism: Rise of the British National Party*, Abingdon & New York: Routledge, Chapter 5.

and it can partly be characterised by the particular nature of the common sense ideas that help hold together its specific hegemonic alliance of dominant interests. When a crisis disrupts such a settlement – such as the recent financial crisis – there may be an opportunity to intervene to put forward a whole new way of thinking about and organising society. That is clearly something that has not happened during the recent financial crisis – and one reason for this is the huge amount of work put in by organic intellectuals of the corporate world in support of their way of making sense of the world, and the lack of a parallel strategic vision by social democrats.

Stuart Hall and Gramsci

Stuart Hall, the intellectual who has most creatively deployed Gramsci's insights for the analysis of contemporary society, made one of his most important contributions to British politics when he analysed Thatcherism in these terms. He saw Thatcherism as a new hegemonic project, which intervened in the stasis of the 1970s – a time when the postwar social consensus was no longer secure, and for a while no government appeared to be able to solve Britain's problems – to redefine the political terrain and secure consent for a new set of common sense ideas about how to run a country. Drawing explicitly on Gramsci, he discussed the shift to the right ('the great moving right show') as a response to an 'organic phenomenon' – a process of long-term deep structural changes and contradictions in economy and society – and argued that political forces in favour of the status quo had intervened to create a new balance of forces – a new 'historic block' – in order to maintain their power. As he also argued: 'these new elements do not "emerge"; they have to be constructed. Political and ideological work is required to disarticulate old formations, and to rework their elements into new ones. The "swing to the right" is not a reflection of the crisis: it is itself a response to the crisis.'³

As Hall notes, Thatcher succeeded in translating free market economics into: 'the language of experience, moral imperative and common sense, thus providing a "philosophy" in the broader sense – an alternative ethic to that of the "caring society"'. He describes this as a 'translation of a theoretical ideology into a popular idiom'. Thatcherism articulated a new populist politics through drawing attention to the weaknesses of the current settlement, through addressing people as consumers rather than producers, and articulating together a set of disparate ideas characterised by Hall as 'authoritarian populism'.⁴ None of this analysis would have been possible without Gramscian concepts.

Stuart Hall also drew on Gramsci's essay 'Americanism and Fordism' as a good starting place for analysing the 'new times' that Thatcherism both responded to and nurtured.⁵ In this essay Gramsci was trying to analyse a new epoch – Fordism – and to assess the prospects for the left at that time. As Hall points out, in his analysis Gramsci considers a broad range of issues, not only new forms of capitalist accumulation and industrial production, but also a very wide range of cultural issues, and a discussion about the kind of person this epoch might produce. Hall takes this as an example of an approach that attempts to deal with the complexity and 'over-determined' nature of any given historical conjuncture, and thereby meets the need for a corresponding complexity of analysis.

Some critics have argued that Hall's analysis was too pessimistic – that he was so attuned to the brilliance of the Thatcherite project that all he could do was admire. This is to miss the point of the analysis. In understanding how Thatcher was able to respond to the conjunctural crisis of the late 1970s, we can see that Thatcherism was a political project that worked to secure consent of popular forces for its particular aims. The lessons from this are, firstly that hegemony was actively constructed – it was not inevitable; and, secondly, that the left could also set about constructing a project that tapped into popular thinking with a view to mobilising around a different set of aims. It is important to note that this is not the same as listening to focus groups and reflecting their views. The idea of a hegemonic

3. Stuart Hall, 'The Great Moving Right Show', *Marxism Today*, January 1979. Available at: http://www.amielandmelburn.org.uk/collections/mt/index_frame.htm.

4. For more discussion on authoritarian populism, see Stuart Hall et al, *Policing the Crisis, Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, Macmillan 1979.

5. 'Americanism and Fordism', *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, pp277-318.

project is to take the elements of good sense that already exist (for example social aspirations already present such as support for public services, or people's sense of hospitality towards strangers) and articulate them together to create new ways of making sense of the present, embodied in a political programme.

Since these writings of the late 1970s and 1980s, Hall has revisited these debates in terms of analysing Blairism and more recently Cameronism. He argues that both these later political formations did not represent new political conjunctures, but were phases within a wider settlement that can be characterised as neoliberal – the period of the resurgence of business and finance interests after their temporary (slight) taming after the second world war. The common sense of this whole period has been dominated by the idea that there is no alternative to the market. As Hall argues, market forces can be seen 'as a brilliant linguistic substitute for "the capitalist system", in that it erases so much of what capital actually does' (summoning up as it does a benign picture of colourful stallholders and vegetables). And:

... since we all use the market every day, it suggests that we all somehow already have a vested interest in conceding everything to it. It conscripted us. Now, when you get to that point, the political forces associated with that project, and the philosophical propositions that have won their way into common sense, are very tough to dislodge.⁶

As the work of Stuart Hall as briefly outlined above clearly demonstrates, thinking with Gramscian ideas allows us to get a much clearer understanding of the complexities that make up the current political situation – both in terms of the underlying features and the more subjective elements. It also alerts us to the need for intellectual work in countering the dominant current sense, but at the same time affirms to us that it is possible to do so. And, not least, it indicates that paying attention to cultural issues is a critical part of political life.

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6. Stuart Hall and Doreen Massey, 'Interpreting the crisis', Soundings 44.