

Civil Society in Gramsci's Cultural Hegemony

Feiyan Xiao

School of History and Culture, Sichuan University, Chengdu, China

School of Foreign Languages, University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, Chengdu, China

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Abstract: Cultural hegemony put forward by the celebrated Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci advocates the persistent war of position within the enormous civil society, which, both as supplement and as substitute for the traditional political governance and military oppression, grants with priority ideological indoctrination and cultural control for the maintenance of the domination and for the subversion of the dominance. Therefore, cultural hegemony offers a new cultural interpretation of Marxism and establishes the foundation for the postmodernism theory.

1. Introduction

Cultural hegemony, proposed by Italian politician and theorist Antonio Gramsci, has been considered to be an efficacious contribution to the complementary extension and the cultural interpretation of traditional Marxism, which is limited within the economic determinism with the lopsided accentuation on the “economic-corporative” priority, in the twentieth century. “Power has been gradually transferred from the military and political clashes to cultural and ideological clashes and frictions, which further indicates the transition of modern power relations.”[1]Therefore, the transformation leads to the consciousness and perception of a more latent but more powerful strategy-cultural hegemony, which depends on culture and ideology to subjugate the masses to the unconscious compliance with and identification with the moralities, values, behavior codes of the ruling class in order to materialize the manipulation and control of the ruled.

The application and implementation of the cultural hegemony basically comprises two channels: “The ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. And the apparatus of state coercive power which ‘legally’ enforces discipline on those groups who do not ‘consent’ either actively or passively. This apparatus is, however, constituted for the whole of society in anticipation of moments of crisis of command and direction when spontaneous consent has failed.”[2]So the hegemony is more effectively achieved by the consent of the led, a consent which is secured by the diffusion and dissemination of the world view of the ruling class, with the supplementary assistance from military forces or political coercion in the contingent crisis.

Moreover, the cultural hegemony of the reigning class in a society has been guaranteed and confirmed by the heterogeneity of the dominant ideology, juxtaposed and interwoven with the cultural and ideological elements of the subordinate social classes, which, to some extent, suffocates and stifles the dissatisfaction and indignation of rivaling classes, effectively stimulates the spontaneous consent from the ruled population, and gradually indoctrinates the sense of obedience and cooperation into people's mind. Therefore, “Culture, in Gramsci's opinion, is an arena for the confrontation of the rivaling classes, not only an instrument for dominance. On the cultural platform, the way for them to engage and contend is not changeless and unvarying antithesis, but complicated and diversified. Furthermore, it can be a sort of negotiation, including bilateral compromise and provisional submission. In order to acquire the cultural dominance, the ruling class does not only oppress or even exterminate the opposite, but also have a better chance of negotiating with the

rivaling class or bloc, and further assimilating their opinions into its own systematic structure so as to adjust and modify itself. Here, Gramsci abandons the cultural essentialism based on the differentiation of classes and the simplified antithesis between ideologies, and maintains that culture is a place for classes to interact with or react against each other. In the confrontation, both sides are destined to contain and include the cultural elements and composition drawn from each other, which takes on complication and complexity of a sort”[3] In order to maintain and strengthen the ideological dominance over masses, the ruling class is striving for incorporating the adversaries’ interests into its own framework until a tolerable equilibrium, which would not pose a threat to the subsistent foundation of the ruling class itself, is reached, with the hope that, as a compromise and concession, the strategy of cultural integration and synthesis can pacify and conciliate different groups. Therefore, the stability and tranquilization based on this equilibrium can maximize the interests and benefits enjoyed by the dominant group although some losses and sacrifices are inevitable and unavoidable in satisfying the opposite. Cultural hegemony within a society eventually comes into being, as an effective strategy for governance and dominance, after a series of continuous and repeated confrontations, disputations, negotiations and concessions.

2. The Arena for Cultural Hegemony: Civil Society

Cultural hegemony has been undertaken to assimilate and unify people’s ideology through their active and spontaneous consent in order to maintain and consolidate the economic and political foundation of dominance. Hence, it is no doubt that Gramsci is more concentrated on the importance and significance of the superstructure within the whole social hierarchical construction with the denial and repulsion against the traditional economic determinism, alleging that superstructure is not the passive reflection of the prioritized socioeconomic foundation, but the powerful guarantee for the socioeconomic stability. In Gramsci’s political theory, social superstructure has been categorized into two fundamental and complementary parts-civil society and political society with the absolute emphasis on the former in which cultural hegemony has been materialized and exerted. “Civil society is composed of those public institutions-schools, churches, clubs, journals, and parties – which contribute in molecular fashion of social and political consciousness. Political society, on the other hand, is composed of those public institutions-the government, courts, police, and army – which exercise ‘direct dominion’.”[4] In massive civil society, the instruction and education indoctrinated into people’s minds since children in schools, the dogmas and convictions instilled into people’s hearts by the sermons delivered in churches, the speeches and public opinions absorbed into people’s consciousness in such public places as clubs, the discourses and comments impressed into people’s thoughts from various publications and the beliefs and regulations assimilated into people’s value systems from parties with respective interests are unexceptionally converted to maneuvers for cultural colonization. Therefore, civil society, the integration of millions of private organisms, propagandizes and publicizes the dominating culture in the whole society on a large scale, diffuses and disseminates the ruling ideology among the confusing and deceived people in a latent and invisible way, and eventually achieves and fulfils the cultural hegemony over the nation. With the necessary complement and supplement of political hegemony represented by Legislature, Judiciary and Executive which is constructed and established in the political society, cultural hegemony leads the ruling class to the throne with the absolute dominance.

3. The Organizers and Leaders of Cultural Hegemony: Organic Intellectuals

Cultural hegemony is not automatically achieved and realized in a specific society, but intentionally organized and promoted by the concerted efforts of a special group – intellectuals in civil society, which is contrasted with the political hegemony implemented by the coercive and imperative forces. From Gramsci’s perspective, the intelligentsia is composed of two categories, “In the first place there are the ‘traditional’ professional intellectuals, literary, scientific and so on, whose position in the interstices of society has a certain inter-class aura about it but derives

ultimately from past and present class formations. Secondly, there are the 'organic' intellectuals, the thinking and organizing element of a particular fundamental social class. These organic intellectuals are organic intellectuals distinguished less by their profession, which may be any job characteristics of their class, than by their function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong.”[2] Organic intellectuals are contrasted with traditional intellectuals in the way that the former ascends the social stage as the representatives of a new historical class with the development of more advanced economic production but the latter gradually withdraws and retreats from the historical vision with the deconstruction and collapse of a relatively underdeveloped and backward economic form. Organic intellectuals have exerted paramount and unparalleled importance in stimulating the unification and growth of the new class as an ideological linchpin and fulcrum in order to accelerate the social development, but traditional intellectuals, with the intrinsic and interior connection with the previous economy, would always obstruct and resist the progressive advance. Therefore, the contrast between organic and traditional intellectuals represents and symbolizes the conflict and confrontation between the new and old classes, between the progressive and regressive forces, and between the future or present and past. In this sense, though the traditional intellectuals “seemed indeed to represent an historical continuity uninterrupted even by the most complicated and radical changes in political and social forms.”[2] “An independent class of intellectuals does not exist, but rather every social group has its own intellectuals.”[4], so intellectuals exceptionally belong to a certain social class, whatever the ruling or the ruled, the ascending or declining, the being-constructed or the having-been-demolished. For Gramsci, the organic intellectuals are the unquestionable and indisputable leaders and organizers for cultural hegemony, first and foremost, they have to convert the traditional intellectuals and eventually assimilate them into the organic structure with the indoctrination and instillation of the advanced and progressive ideology and culture. “One of the conspicuous characteristics of any group which is dedicated to establishing and consolidating its dominion is that it would strive for ‘ideologically’ assimilating and defeating traditional intelligentsia,— The better and sooner the assimilation and conquest is, the more successful this group will be in cultivating its own intellectuals.”[2]

“All men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals.” “The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, ‘permanent persuader’ and not just a simple orator; from technique-as-work one proceeds to technique-as-science and to the humanistic conception of history, without which one remains ‘specialized’ and does not become ‘directive’(specialized and political).”[2] Therefore, the definition of intellectuals is not only contingent on the knowledge and techniques they possess and acquire, but, more significantly, on the function and contributions they could exert and make. “The functions in question are precisely organizational and connective. The intellectuals are the dominant group’s ‘deputies’ exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government.”[2] Intellectuals have occupied a pivotal and therefore irreplaceable position in civil society, where they are devoted to exploring and elaborating the fundamental ideology embedded within the intrinsic interests and benefits of the dominant group, converting and remolding it to a comprehensive world value based on the necessary compromises they have done in the exclusion and inclusion of some trivial details, and promoting and propagating it all over the society by means of molecule organisms in civil society—the publications, churches, modern media and so on. Intellectuals affiliated with the dominant class become the symbol and incarnation of sovereign in civil society, who aim to subjugate all the people to their ideological manipulation and their psychological control.

Compared to the bourgeois intellectuals, from Gramsci’s point of view, the proletarian intellectuals are construed to be organic intellectuals, the embodiment of the developmental tendency of economy and society. The proletarians have to wake up from the ideological intoxication, break away from the psychological constraints and cultivate their own organic intellectuals, who take on the responsibilities for competing against the stale and morbid bourgeois ideology with the fresh and healthy proletarian culture on the battlefield constructed in

civil society.

4. The Strategy of Cultural Hegemony: the War of Position

Whether the burgeoning and progressive social group can succeed in the warfare against the obstructive bloc seems to be a little doubtful and pessimistic in the first place, especially based on the fact that the former, as the oppressed, is minority in terms of relative number and vulnerable in terms of strength, and conversely the latter, as oppressor, possesses the absolute advantages in terms of quantity and quality. Besides political society protected by the military forces, the enormous and complicated civil society is consolidated and safeguarded by the persistent and permeating diffusion of the dominant ideology. It has to be admitted how difficult and arduous the task the proletarian intellectuals are confronted with is in front of such a formidable enemy. In order to fulfill the eventual triumph, the choice of different strategies and maneuver has been attached great importance to with accordance to varied situations. Compared to the traditional war of maneuver, Gramsci has endowed the war of position with absolute priority in the bourgeoisie society, which is the strategic application and realization of cultural hegemony led by intellectuals in civil society.

Gramsci has maintained that the state should be the direct target for attack in the underdeveloped nations, which is called as the war of maneuver; on the other hand, within the correspondingly developed societies, civil society has to be attacked as the primary target, that is, the proletarians have to launch a vehement and persistent cultural attack against the bourgeoisie ideology. [5]Therefore, it is easily perceived in Gramsci's theory that the distinction and demarcation between the underdeveloped and developed nations is not only based on the socioeconomic development, but also on the maturity of civil society, which determines the strategy the revolutionary class has to employ and utilize in overthrowing the oppression and dominance.

Gramsci has been repeatedly accentuating that the social ambience and the cultural circumstances in Russia are different from that in the West. "In Russia the State was everything, civil society was a primordial and gelatinous." So the unadulterated political and military confrontation with the authorities can lead to the collapse and destruction of the ruling without concern about the cultural and ideological obstruction presented by civil society. However, the occasion in the West has been another case. It cannot be denied that the political power originating from the public institutions – the government, courts, police, and army is considerable and powerful, which means that the revolution is destined to be an arduous and tough engagement; but the final victory and triumph can never be achieved by the military defeat in the West, behind it there is a huge and massive field to be occupied and conquered-"The superstructures of civil society are like the trench-systems of modern warfare. In war it would sometimes happen that a fierce artillery attack seemed to have destroyed the enemy's entire defensive system, whereas in fact it had only destroyed the outer perimeter; and at the moment of their advance and attack the assailants would find themselves confronted by a line of defense which was still effective." [2]

Due to the maturation and complication of civil society, which has gradually cultivated the immunity to the economic depression and crises and the resistance to the artillery attack, the conventional war of maneuver has to be complemented by and even substituted with the war of position, which would not be ended within a short-time fierce military engagement with the enemy, but only be accomplished by means of being immersed within the enormous and expansive civil society, being dedicated to the continual penetration and infiltration into the micro-organisms-schools, publishers, churches, parties of civil society sponsored by antithetic culture, and being devoted to the indoctrination and dissemination of revolutionary ideas and proletarian ideology, in order to launch a long-standing and extensive "spiritual revolution" in civil society and reform civil society for the eventual subversion of the dominator. "The dissemination of the new proletarian world value can transcend the subordination and submission of the proletarian to the bourgeoisie step by step and gradually establish a new bastion propped up by proletarian ideology until the leadership over civil society has been completely caught hold of, when the bourgeoisie nations would naturally lead to disintegration and decomposition." [6]

5. The Significance of Cultural Hegemony

Cultural hegemony, established and constructed by intellectuals through the war of position in civil society, directs attentions from the political governance guaranteed by the hegemonic conspiracy among legislature, judiciary and executive powers and the well-equipped and formidable military enforcement to the cultural dominance strengthened and consolidated by the spontaneous consent and consensus from people assimilated and intoxicated by the incessant and repeated indoctrination of the world value belonging to the ruling class; and directs focus from the dogmatic economic determinism with emphasis on the decisive influence of economic foundation over the passively reflected superstructure to the cultural priority with accentuation on the considerable and irreplaceable influence of ideology on the social turbulence, stability or development, which gradually realizes the transformation and conversion for western Marxism from the conventional economic analysis to the ideological interpretation.

The significance of cultural hegemony is not only limited within the new-perspective interpretation of Marxism, but also extended as the theoretical foundation for the influential postmodernism prevailing all over the world during the last decades of 20th century, initiated and motivated by Edward W. Said whose masterpiece-*Orientalism* has declared the commence of postmodernism. Said has given resonance to the core idea put forward by Gramsci that “the influence of ideological institution or others is not achieved by mechanical control but by active consent.”[3]Therefore, cultural hegemony which is originally applied to the ideological control of the bourgeoisie class over the masses within a specific society has been extended into a wider geographical and cultural area. The relationship between the Occident and the Orient has taken the paralleled resemblance to that between the bourgeoisie and the proletarian, in which the former dose not only depend upon the advanced and powerful military strength but also relies on the so-called more sophisticated civilization to conquer and control the latter, and in which the latter has been ideologically assimilated into and identified with the world values about others and themselves, belonging to the Occident, in both conscious and unconscious way though the latter has been engaged in the military resistance all the time. Said has insisted that “the Occidental culture has been characterized with a kind of irresistibility and penetration due to the ideological conquest of cultural hegemony, which makes the non-westerner thoughts imprinted with western culture and leads non-westerner self-identification closer and closer to Orientalism.” [3]In this sense, cultural hegemony brought forward by Gramsci has been construed as the theoretical inspiration and source for the construction of postmodernism.

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