

How Does Gramsci Develop Cox's Account of Hegemony?

Posted on September 18, 2018

Gramsci, Cox, and the Concept of Hegemony

Gramsci contributed a great deal to international relations theory. However, it has also been borrowed from post-Marxist thinkers such as Robert Cox, who has contributed to the critical theory of international relations. In this case, he has borrowed a lot from Gramsci to show the relationship of political power and transnational corporations on a global scale. Gramsci rejected Marx's narrow approach to economic determinism and viewed hegemony as one of the ways the capitalist class maintained its dominance. This approach views a dominant class as posing its economic, cultural, and social control in a way that is perceived as natural and beneficial to all. This paper details Gramsci's perspective on hegemony and further shows how Cox developed the account of hegemony.

According to Gramsci's understanding, hegemony is not just the process by which a dominant class is able to control the media and other political institutions and force them to serve their own interests. Hegemony is also a psychological process through which all individuals are socialized to accept the prevailing beliefs and ideas without question. Hegemony is accepted through common sense, which can also be imposed in a given historical process (Strinati 1995). This is the reason why a dominant class sustains and maintains itself even though it is a minority. Thus, Gramsci explains the dynamics of culture as both an individual and a social process, which is also related to the establishment of class identities.

Ideology, Common Sense, and Cultural Domination

Hegemony and ideology are linked, but the two are also distinguishable. Ideology is a coherent form of thought that is conscious and systematic, whereas common sense is basically a disjointed and incoherent set of ideas that can be unconscious. For Gramsci, it is a coherent ideologic system of thought that can potentially overthrow the common sense of capitalism. It can win out over an existing culture through a different set of beliefs, perceptions, and values. Thus, it can overthrow the prevailing dominant culture. Gramsci perceived that traditional Marxism relied primarily on economic and material forces and neglected culture as an important force that could bring change in a society.

Gramsci did not believe that economic forces would automatically lead to a revolution. Instead, he believed that cultural change was necessary before political change could occur. Workers and subordinate groups needed to understand how dominant beliefs had shaped their views of the world. If people accepted the ideas of the ruling class as natural or inevitable, they would be unlikely to

challenge the political and economic order. Therefore, creating an alternative culture and a new form of common sense was essential to changing society.

Civil Society, Consent, and the Integral State

A core concept in Gramsci's account is civil society. Civil society includes institutions and practices that exist between the formal government and the private lives of individuals. These include schools, churches, newspapers, cultural organizations, trade unions, professional associations, and families. Such institutions produce values, ideas, and social habits. The ruling class can use civil society to gain consent by presenting its interests as the general interests of society. This form of control differs from direct coercion because people participate in the system and accept its assumptions.

Gramsci distinguished between political society and civil society, although he considered them connected within the integral state. Political society includes formal state institutions such as government, courts, police, and the military. These institutions can enforce order through laws and coercion. Civil society, in comparison, primarily creates consent. Stable rule depends on both coercion and consent. A ruling group that relies only on force is vulnerable, whereas a hegemonic order has broad social support and appears legitimate.

Historic Blocs and Counter-Hegemonic Transformation

Another significant concept in Gramsci's work is the historic bloc. A historic bloc refers to the relationship between material forces, institutions, and ideas that together form a relatively stable social order. Economic structures do not operate separately from culture and politics. Instead, the organization of production, political institutions, and dominant ideologies reinforce each other. A class becomes hegemonic when it can build alliances and present a vision that incorporates the interests or aspirations of other groups.

A historic bloc can be challenged by a counter-hegemonic movement. However, this requires more than capturing formal state power. Subordinate groups must develop alternative institutions, ideas, and alliances capable of gaining public consent. Gramsci called this long-term struggle within civil society a war of position. It involves education, organization, cultural work, and the development of organic intellectuals who articulate the experiences and interests of subordinate groups. This differs from a war of manoeuvre, which involves a more direct assault on state power.

Cox's Critical Theory of World Order

Robert Cox developed Gramsci's account by applying it to international relations and global political

economy. Cox rejected approaches that treated the international system as a fixed arrangement of sovereign states. He argued that theories are shaped by historical circumstances and serve particular purposes. His well-known distinction between problem-solving theory and critical theory reflects this position. Problem-solving theory accepts existing institutions and power relations as the framework within which problems should be managed. Critical theory asks how that framework developed and whether it can be transformed.

Cox used the Gramscian concept of hegemony to explain how a world order can be sustained through a combination of material power, institutions, and ideas. International hegemony is not simply the dominance of one powerful state over weaker states. It involves a broader social and political structure in which the dominant principles of an order are widely accepted. A hegemonic world order appears legitimate and universal, even though it reflects particular configurations of class and state power.

Material Capabilities, Institutions, and Ideas

Cox identified three interacting forces in any historical structure: material capabilities, ideas, and institutions. Material capabilities include productive capacity, technology, natural resources, wealth, and military power. Ideas include shared beliefs about the nature of social relations and competing images of social order. Institutions stabilize and reproduce particular power relations while also providing mechanisms for managing conflict.

These three forces are reciprocal rather than mechanically determined. Material power helps create institutions and supports particular ideas, but institutions and ideas can also shape economic and political possibilities. Cox's framework therefore extends Gramsci's historic bloc beyond a national society. It allows analysis of the way production, state structures, social forces, and international institutions combine to create a world order.

International Institutions and the Universalization of Hegemony

Cox also applied Gramsci's insights to international organizations. Institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and other multilateral bodies can help stabilize a hegemonic world order. They establish rules, define legitimate policies, coordinate economic relations, and present particular economic principles as technically necessary or universally beneficial. International institutions may absorb representatives from subordinate countries and groups, giving them participation without fundamentally transforming the underlying order.

This process resembles the operation of civil society in Gramsci's national analysis. International institutions help generate consent and reduce dependence on direct coercion. They may also

transform national policies by encouraging states to adopt dominant economic practices. In this way, global hegemony is reproduced through institutions, professional knowledge, policy standards, and the internationalization of production.

Production, Social Forces, and Transnational Class Formation

Cox gave particular importance to production because changes in production create new social forces. Production does not refer only to the manufacture of goods. It includes the organization of labor, technology, ownership, and social relations. Changes in production can reshape classes, state forms, and world orders. For example, the internationalization of production may strengthen transnational corporations and managerial groups whose interests extend across national boundaries.

These transnational social forces can influence states and international institutions. Cox therefore moves beyond an account of international politics based solely on national interests. State policies are affected by domestic class relations and by social forces connected to the global economy. A hegemonic order may emerge when a coalition of states and social forces supports a common model of production and governance.

Differences Between Gramsci and Cox

Although Cox draws heavily on Gramsci, his account is not identical. Gramsci focused primarily on the formation of hegemony within national societies, especially in relation to Western European capitalism and revolutionary strategy. Cox transfers the concepts of hegemony, historic bloc, civil society, and social forces to the level of world order. He examines how national and transnational structures interact.

Cox also develops a more explicit framework for historical analysis through the interaction of material capabilities, institutions, and ideas. His approach links forms of state, configurations of social forces, and world orders. This provides a way to examine historical change without assuming that the international system is permanent. It also allows critical theory to consider possible alternative orders emerging from changes in production and social struggle.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Gramsci develops hegemony as a form of rule based on consent as well as coercion. A dominant group maintains power by shaping common sense, institutions, alliances, and culture. His concepts of civil society, the integral state, the historic bloc, organic intellectuals, and counter-hegemony explain why capitalist orders can remain stable and how they might be transformed. Cox

develops this account by applying it to international relations and global political economy. He explains world order through the interaction of material capabilities, ideas, and institutions and shows how social forces rooted in production operate across states. Thus, Cox's theory extends Gramsci's national analysis into a historical framework for understanding global hegemony and the possibilities for transformation.

References

Cox, R. W. (1981). Social forces, states and world orders: Beyond international relations theory. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 10(2), 126-155.

Cox, R. W. (1983). Gramsci, hegemony and international relations: An essay in method. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 12(2), 162-175.

Cox, R. W., & Sinclair, T. J. (1996). *Approaches to world order*. Cambridge University Press.

Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks* (Q. Hoare & G. N. Smith, Eds. & Trans.). International Publishers.

Strinati, D. (1995). *An introduction to theories of popular culture*. Routledge.