Social movements and hegemonic struggle

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Abstract:

Antonio Gramsci's *Southern Question* and *Lyons Theses*, written just before his imprisonment by Mussolini, are fundamental resources for social movements seeking to resist the rise of the far right and to construct a different social order. Here hegemony appears primarily in terms of broad social alliances, defining a particular form of capitalism under the leadership of a given "historic bloc". The task for activists in this context is to find ways of disrupting these alliances and to construct new ones on a different basis, "from below and to the left". The chapter draws on examples from Gramsci's own race-and-class organising practice and is illustrated with tools from activist training workshops.

Keywords: Gramsci, social movements, hegemony, revolution

Why does Gramsci matter for social movements?

The Italian communist Antonio Gramsci played an important role in early twentieth-century social movements, notably the "two red years" 1919-20. Poor, disabled and racialised, his understanding of the complexities of everyday struggle within capitalism is thought-provoking. The movements of the red years were defeated by the rise of history's first fascism; much of Gramsci's thought considers how movements could understand, resist and overcome this situation, a legacy which played a role in the anti-fascist Resistance and beyond.

The concept *hegemony*, which he adopted and reworked in the runup to his imprisonment in 1926, is key to a particular understanding of movement politics. Simply stated, it recognises that power structures go deeper in society than the most obvious levels of political offices and state violence, and that movements aiming at systemic transformation need to develop broad alliances around a different social project. This chapter unpacks hegemony from the perspective of praxis, "the unity of theory and practice".

The past century has seen many contested readings of Gramsci (Liguori 1996), from different social positions and for different purposes. He was always known to activists: those who treated him as an anti-fascist martyr, those for whom he was a major but not infallible figure in the first struggle against fascism and those who rejected the Gramsci used to legitimate postwar Italian communist politics.

In recent decades, this political Italian and Latin American reception has been overshadowed by Anglophone responses to the theoretical concepts of his *Prison Notebooks,* first translated in 1971. Already in 1984 Geoff Eley noted how this shift led to an ahistorical and abstract interpretation. The underground Party saw its imprisoned members as politically deactivated (Spriano 1979); this and prison censorship led to the

Notebooks being written *"für ewig"*, divorced from immediate political practice. This also avoided an open break with Stalinism (cf Daniele 1999) and ensured the transmission of his ideas via the postwar PCI far more widely than would otherwise have happened.

The prosecutor did not stop Gramsci's brain from working, but the prison apparatus did prevent him from acting, except for a brief period of adult education work. His frustration at this passive role pervades his prison letters (1965).

The *Notebooks'* hermetic language and contemplative situation, however, made them attractive to Anglophone academics. The UK saw far weaker movements in 1968 than many countries (except for the North of Ireland, oddly absent from discussions of hegemony). The US reception of this cultural studies reading was further depoliticised, very distant from Black struggles (Grossberg et al. 1992).

As Thatcher and Reagan kept winning, large-scale radical popular movements became less and less a practical point of reference for Anglophone reflections on hegemony. The continuing power of this specific reception history in globalising academia contrasts with the weakness of US and UK popular movements in recent decades, vis-à-vis the global South or even other Northern countries. This has not prevented US and UK academics from generalising their local experiences of strategic defeat[1], and developing purely top-down accounts of hegemony which write off popular agency.

In his prison writings on intellectuals (1991), Gramsci distinguishes both between organic and traditional intellectual positions and between "directive" (organising) and "contemplative" (purely explanatory) intellectual activity. As a Marxist he not only elaborates a conceptual architecture but also explores how people use ideas and language in social and political practice. This chapter thus approaches the relationship between social movements and hegemony not as timeless political philosophy but from a Marxist perspective, using history of ideas and movement research tools.

For English-speaking newcomers, the key sources are his "Notes on the Southern Question", the "Lyons Theses" and the *Prison Notebooks*, all available in many formats in Italian and English. Davidson's 1977 biography and Gramsci's prison letters give useful context. Authors who have used Gramsci to think about social movements include Laclau and Mouffe (1985), Carroll (2010), Cox and Nilsen (2014), de Smet (2015), Chalcraft (2021) and Nielsen et al. (2022). For pure theory, Thomas (2009) is widely-used.

The *Southern Question* and contested readings of Gramsci

Gramsci's last writings directly for political praxis were written in 1926 as the above-ground (elected) leader of a semi-clandestine party in a country heading for full-blown dictatorship. They are the *Lyons Theses* of the party congress in exile, and the *Southern Question* essay he was working on at the time of his arrest. The essay includes

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[1] The defeats of academic unions and rise in university managerialism in these countries provides a very local context of plausibility for this thinking, which intellectuals then naturally imagine as universal.

remarkable organising stories from his time as a migrant political organiser in Turin, connecting Sardinian migrant and working-class radical trends – in effect, given northern racism against migrant workers from the "South and islands", a race-and-class analysis focussed on alliance-formation and collective agency (Gramsci 1935).

These texts introduce Gramsci's use of hegemony within an argument which defined his party faction, around alliance-formation from below and unpicking existing social alliances which supported fascism. This would shape the party's contribution to anti-fascist resistance (Pavone 1991), positioning itself as central to a broad alliance.

Gramsci's prison notebooks show him developing the concept and way of thinking in extraordinarily powerful ways. However, it has another, equally important history, of contested praxis in Italy's remarkable postwar lefts, through popular struggles in the 1950s and early 1960s; the party's slow breach with Moscow in pursuit of electoral majorities – but also the development of an extra-parliamentary left outside the party, which equally pursued extensive alliances (workers and students, feminists and Marxists, popular struggles against the chemical industry etc). Here too there are multiple, contested "readings" of hegemony: when the PCI supported using armoured cars against the movements of 1977 in Bologna, would Gramsci have supported "historic compromise" or the movement alliance on the streets? (Balestrini and Moroni 2003).

The *Southern Question* and the construction of hegemony

The word hegemony appears only once in the *Southern Question*, but the figure of thought is everywhere – as an active process of alliance construction, "theirs and ours". Echoing Marx's *18th Brumaire* (1972), Gramsci writes that the peasant South is "one vast social disaggregation", where peasants in crisis operate through the village priest appealing to the landlord, thus reinforcing the local power structure. The *Notebooks* develop this, analysing the southern intellectual (doctor, priest, lawyer) as organising force, paralleling Foucault's later analysis of disciplinary religion, medicine, law and so on.

Less central to the essay, but ubiquitous in Gramsci's and his brothers' Turin experience, was northern working-class racism: the alliance, analysed in the *Notebooks* around Italian state-formation, between the northern industrial bourgeoisie and northern working-class against the "backward" south and its migrants (Cox 2016).

If Gramsci had left it there, we would have hegemony as structure alone, a familiar reading that positions those articulating as radical-because-pessimistic, reaffirming their academic status through the complexity of the analysis – a reading that suits a "traditional" intellectual position deploying "contemplative" roles.

While the *Lyons Theses* present general lines for the party's hegemonic strategy, the manuscript discusses three practical organising stories, interrelated discussions of how Sardinian communists disrupted Southern forms of dependency. We have the story of Sardinian strikers inducing a Sardinian brigade to fraternise, using shared ethnicity to

disrupt soldiers' certainty that (urban, northern) strikers were "gentry". We have communists convincing migrant workers to break with the cultural nationalism of the emigré Sardinian middle class and to join a reading group instead (!) And we have the Turin communists offering a safe seat to the anti-communist Salvemini, the voice of southern peasants prevented by corruption from being electable there, as a means of supporting the development of organic peasant leadership.

Approaching movements and hegemony through these texts grounds them in political practice, rather than elevating the theorist by emphasising how the deep ways in which resistance is hard to think. "Hard" is not "impossible" – and Gramsci's life sees him fighting the hard battle.

His analysis of power as "consent armoured by coercion" has to be read the same way. Coercion can also be resisted, as in the massive Resistance of 1943-45, and smaller-scale resistance from 1921 on.

For praxis, the point of analysing hegemony is to identify where organising can make a difference: why social movements matter. This aligns Gramsci with two often-misunderstood Marxist themes. Marx and Engels emphasise the working class, *not* because they see workers as most impoverished and oppressed (they do not, by contrast with the lumpenproletariat or the slaves whose liberation struggles fascinated Marx). It is because they see them as potentially the most effective political force: with a specific kind of interest in radical change (the proletariat as universal class), a specific potential for organising (the proletariat as potentially rational) and strategically located within globalising capitalism (with a capacity for hegemony). The key question is one of *popular collective agency*.

Similarly too with "false consciousness", read within the neoliberal academy as academics positioning themselves above ordinary people. The point of distinguishing objective interests from current class consciousness is to define where *organising* happens: who is it worth talking to, who can be convinced that they have an interest in acting differently? The general answer is that it's most worth talking to people whose political actions and beliefs contradict their social and economic interests; this is where one crucial kind of organising conversation happens, where hegemony is unmade and (perhaps) remade.

This chapter outlines a more praxis-oriented way of thinking hegemony, which sees *any* social order as a structure of alliances, where the challenge for social movements ("from below and to the left") is to disrupt those alliances and build more effective alliances of their own. The argument draws on work with Alf Nilsen (Cox and Nilsen 2014) but is fundamentally shaped by activist workshops at the Ulex Project, co-developed with Natasha Adams, Hilal Demir, Holly Hammond, Gee McKeown, and Jeroen Robbe.

Forms of power are fundamentally unstable

Societies shaped around class relationships, patriarchy, racialised hierarchies and states only represent a small proportion of our species' history. Capitalism (with its globalised

racial division of labour, its articulation with particular kinds of patriarchy and its variety of state forms) is only one form of class society. From the 1848 *Manifesto* on, one key Marxist explanation for why social orders rise and fall is class struggle (discussed below in terms of multiple forms of movement).

From pre-WWI discussions of monopoly capitalism and "imperialism: the highest stage of capitalism", Marxists in Gramsci's tradition *periodised* capitalism. His analyses of Fordism and fascism fit in here, with later analyses of e.g. national-developmentalism in the then "Third World" [2], Keynesian welfare states in the "First" and state socialism in the "Second"; and (from the 1970s) neoliberalism. Lash and Urry (1987) usefully trace the changing alliances "above and below" that enabled the latter transformation. More recently Arrighi (2010) articulated the relationship between different capitalisms and different globally hegemonic states.

This analysis can be read at different levels – the transition from non-class to class societies (still contested in some parts of the world); between different kinds of class societies; from one form of capitalism to another – and need not be global: we can acknowledge the mid-C20th competition between fascisms, state socialisms, liberal and welfare capitalisms and national-developmentalisms, for example. This is what we should expect if power structures are formed by alliances. There are constraints on what alliances are possible, but the same thing doesn't have to happen everywhere at the same time, and the future is not predetermined.

Particularly important for movements is *just how short* the lifespan of many different forms of capitalism: you could live through twenty years of Italian fascism, the postwar "thirty glorious years", British empire in central Burma (1885-1948), the Soviet bloc or national developmentalisms.

In 2014, when Alf and I subtitled our book *Marxism and Social Movements in the Twilight of Neoliberalism*, many people disagreed that neoliberalism was in crisis. That now seems far easier to accept, and has been said in many other ways since; however a glance at the history sketched above makes it clear that *no* form of capitalism is likely to survive indefinitely, and how short their shelf-lives are. The question is rather what comes next: another capitalism, a fascist barbarism, ecological collapse, or a better form of society?

This is where hegemony and social movements come in. Any social order can be read politically as a form of hegemony, a structure of alliances; social movements can seek to disrupt this by undermining those alliances. That disruption will arrive sooner or later; it is less predictable what new structure of alliances (social form) will result. This is partly because movements "from below and to the left" are not the only players; "movements from above" (with privileged access to state structures, economic power and cultural status) also count. What movements *do* here matters hugely.

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[2] The French (*tiers état*) makes the reference to the Third Estate clear: "it is nothing but wants to become everything", in other words holds potential for transformative agency.
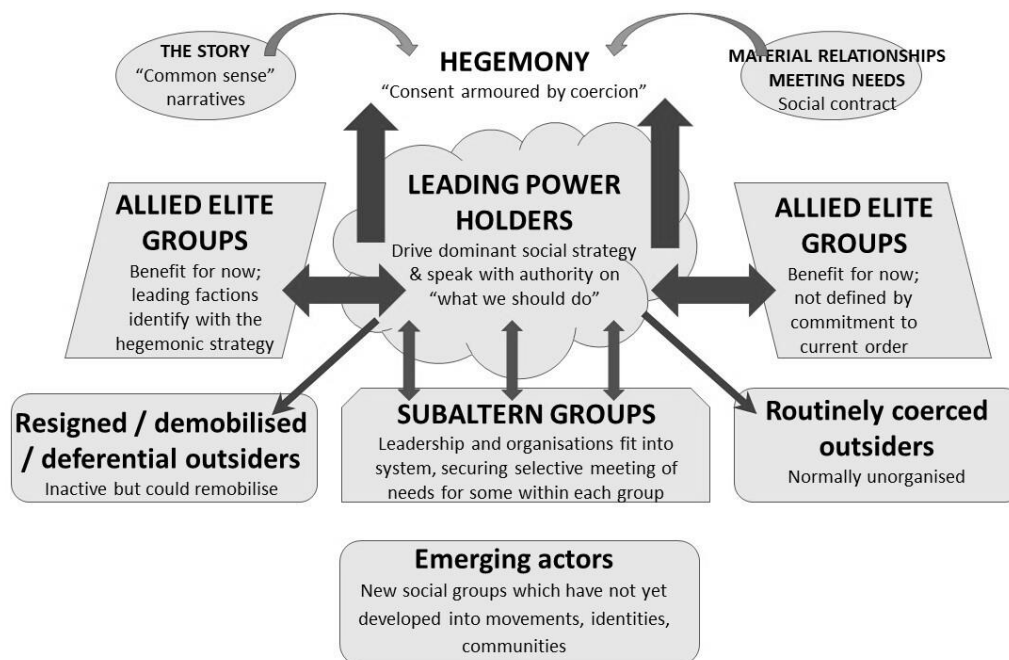
Hegemony in detail: elite groups

Image © Natasha Adams

This diagram is a workshop flipchart visualizing "a structure of alliances" in practical terms, presented as an ideal type of near-total hegemony. For simplicity this is presented within a single state, but there is no reason to think of hegemony only at this level.

Starting with social "leadership": a given group succeeds not only in controlling coercion, but also in directive leadership across society as a whole, securing broad consent for what it defines as the most important social strategy(ies) – for growth, development, modernity etc., and successfully asserting authority to speak on this. That strategy is also expressed through organizing material relationships that to a greater or lesser extent meet needs (whatever "social contract" exists), and in "common sense" ideology(ies).

For a practice-oriented discussion of hegemony, we can note the multiplicities, ambiguities and contradictions in forming any such group and strategy as well as the complex relationships to material production and the archaeological layers of "common sense". These may be interesting as fracture lines, but we are not trying to develop a stand-alone social theory or model of political order.

For social movements from below and to the left, our main area of interest is everywhere else in the diagram: the relationships that this leading group constructs with other social actors and which constitute its leadership.

Firstly, it is not the only elite actor. Other elite actors have to be reckoned with; hegemony involves constructing a "historical bloc" of such actors. In some cases (perhaps political parties, multinational corporations, leading media institutions, hegemonic intellectuals) it needs leadership strata identifying with the hegemonic strategy. This does not mean uncontested leadership: watching the complexities of Brexit or Trump, for example, this is obvious. But successfully asserting longer-term leadership *does* depend on controlling political parties, subduing or marginalizing fractions of international capital with competing aims, etc.

Matters are different for elite groups who are broadly committed to the maintenance of state power (or capitalism, or patriarchy, or the racial hierarchies) without being particularly invested in *which* form it takes. Thus the leaders of coercive state forces (police, military, judiciary, border and prison forces) may consistently support the current leading group out of loyalty to power in general. In the recent uprising, the police forces of largely Democratic cities were particularly contested by Black activists: whoever holds power, they will continue to kill young Black men, as indeed before neoliberalism. Of course in other times and places such forces take sides more actively.

The ruling group needs both kinds of support – committed support for its particular policies, and general support because it holds power. One strand of academic work on revolutions and movements discusses "political opportunity structures", the proposition that when elites are divided popular agency has most chances of success. This analysis agrees, but without accepting that *everything* depends on elites, and that change must suit at least some elite forces. The great social revolutions all went far beyond this.

Hegemony in detail: popular groups

The vast majority of society, by definition, does not consist of elites. However, people have different kinds of relationships to power; and this may vary in different parts of their lives, as Gramsci's race-and-class analysis suggests. At the bottom of the diagram are groups which do not (yet) exist as collective actors: newly emergent social positionalities who have not yet constructed everyday communities, developed shared identities, or learned to act collectively as movements. From the point of view of hegemony, they are therefore irrelevant (in this ideal situation of near-total hegemony.) This includes, for example, first-generation university students training for welfare-state jobs before the uprisings of 1968.

To the right are social groups whose consent is simply not required in a particular context. This varies: in most capitalisms it includes prisoners, the homeless, addicts, sex workers or indigenous populations. Fascisms expand this category to include many intellectuals, much organised civil society, ethnic and sexual minorities and trade unionists. Those in this category in a particular kind of capitalism find themselves – largely without recourse – subject to arbitrary violence and normally unable to exercise significant power, except occasionally (riots, short-lived self-organisations of the homeless, prisoners and addicts, etc).

To the left are groups with *latent* collective agency, for example previously active groups which have not yet recovered from defeat. Social groups which are actively deferential and dependent on more powerful groups are another. Fundamentally resigned populations are a third. As with those subject to violence, they are the recipients or targets of action from above, but not independent actors.

All these different categories are *currently*, in a situation of near-total hegemony, unable to exercise political agency; but it is crucial to realize that they are *capable* of doing so in the right conditions, and to support them in doing so. Like the Turin communists supporting the emergence of autonomous peasant self-organisation, solidarity can be extended to self-articulation and organization of new groups; to organizing attempts among groups which are routinely subject to coercion; and to support steps out of apathy, deference and despair. "Solidarity" here means specifically *supporting the collective agency of others on their own terms* – while recognizing that this is usually a process, attempting to realise potential.

The most complex situation, however, is that of subaltern groups, those whose leadership or organisations (in this near-perfect hegemony) are thoroughly reliant on their relationships with the existing ruling group and its social strategy. Conservative trade unions, boardroom feminism, the pink pound, minorities benefitting from tokenistic "representation" are all obvious examples. Typically such arrangements *do* benefit *some* members of the wider group materially (e.g. boardroom feminism can also benefit some middle-class women) while necessarily excluding wider demands (e.g. conservative trade unions accepting precarisation, subcontracting, zero hours work etc., particularly when they affect women or ethnic minorities).

Here there is *real* collective agency, but it is effectively co-opted – while more or less successfully presenting itself as the only way for the subaltern group to represent itself (trading on working-class backgrounds, moralistic pointing at outrageous situations which will supposedly be resolved by a more diverse state, the politics of celebrity etc).[3]

This model is a large-scale kind of "power structure analysis" – identifying not just who is powerful, but which alliances are key, who those alliances are made with and on what terms.
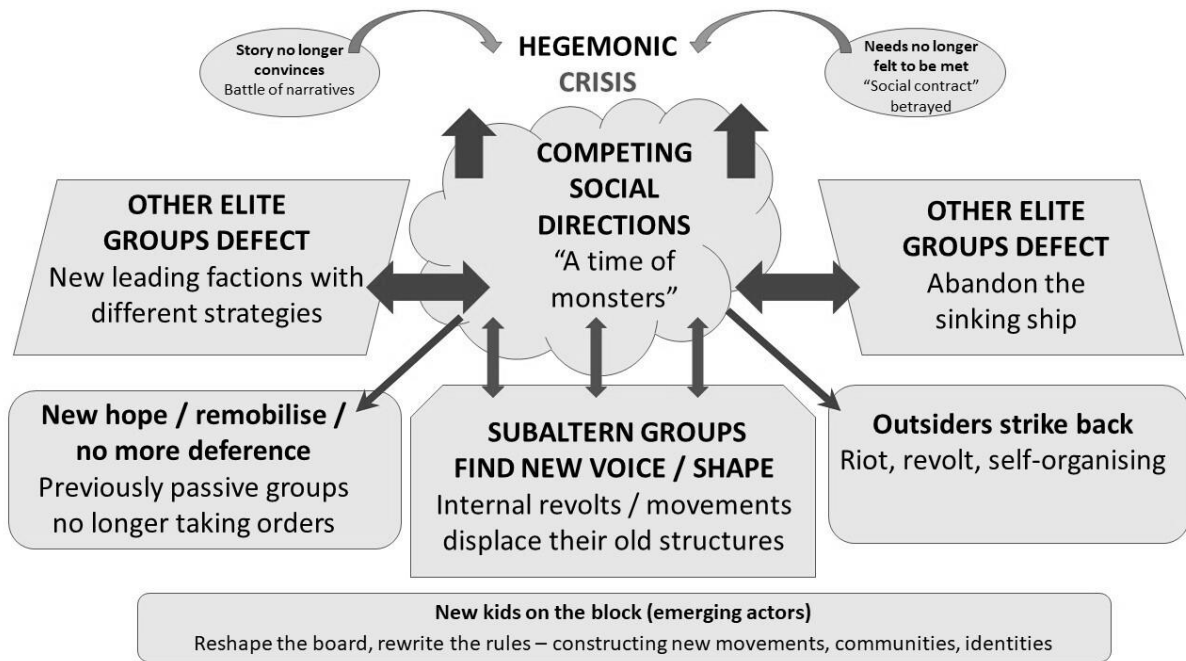
Hegemonic crisis

For simplicity, we can discuss crises of hegemony as the *breakdown* of such alliances. But from the point of view of practice, part of the role of social movements – in moving from particularism to social transformation or revolution – is to actively *disrupt* such alliances, while constructing their own on other terms (Smucker 2017); these alliances are often with different fractions of subaltern groups, and with other organisations within particular social groups.

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[3] On a different scale, see Nielsen et al. 2022 on social movements and hegemonic conjunctures in India.

This is literally "revolutionary practice" because – if successful – it involves upending a particular form of hegemony, an organic crisis opening the way for a different kind of society, and an alternative alliance which *may* be strong enough to shape that future. As autonomists say, "we are the crisis of capital" – or rather, we can become it.

The previous flipchart showed a near-total hegemony; this one shows a hegemonic crisis:

Story no longer convinces
Battle of narratives

HEGEMONIC CRISIS

Needs no longer felt to be met
"Social contract" betrayed

COMPETING SOCIAL DIRECTIONS
"A time of monsters"

OTHER ELITE GROUPS DEFECT
New leading factions with different strategies

OTHER ELITE GROUPS DEFECT
Abandon the sinking ship

New hope / remobilise / no more deference
Previously passive groups no longer taking orders

SUBALTERN GROUPS FIND NEW VOICE / SHAPE
Internal revolts / movements displace their old structures

Outsiders strike back
Riot, revolt, self-organising

New kids on the block (emerging actors)
Reshape the board, rewrite the rules – constructing new movements, communities, identities

Credit: © Natasha Adams

This probably needs less commentary than the previous diagram. There is no longer one agreed social direction and a largely uncontested leading group; "a time of monsters" ensues with many different experiments, with greater or lesser success. Popular material needs are no longer felt to be met and the "social contract" is seen as having been betrayed. There is no longer a single, broadly accepted narrative of society's direction.

Factions of elite groups that previously supported the current hegemony are displaced or contested by new ones attempting to articulate group survival strategies; meanwhile, the instrumental support from other elite groups stops as they flee the sinking ship.

Much of a previously passive society now becomes active: resigned, defeated, deferential groups acquire new hope, refuse to comply and take action on their own behalf. Those normally coerced strike back in many different ways, and new social actors appear from below.

Within subaltern populations, internal revolts displace old leaderships: rank-and-file organizing disrupts conservative labour forms, young radicals contest respectable

ethnic minority leaderships, new waves of feminism and queer activism emerge, etc. These revolts are characterized (in this ideal form) by much wider participation, the articulation of needs from a much broader proportion of the social group, and more substantively democratic ways of organizing.

This typically appears as "social movements" because the poor, the powerless and the culturally stigmatized now find new ways to self-organise outside "the proper channels" and officially approved tactics. Many people cease experiencing themselves simply as inhabiting a positionality or identity and come to understand themselves in terms of collective struggle.

We can tell the story of the "long 1968" (for example) like this (Mohandesi et al. 2018). In many countries – West, East and South - previously coerced, passive or emergent groups articulate themselves as communities in struggle, while upheavals displace the conservative leaderships of subaltern popular organizations. We also see – usually less successful – attempts at building alliances to pose alternatives to welfare-state, state socialist or national-developmentalist political strategies. While these movements did constitute a "crisis of capital", they did not succeed in co-creating a new form of society (cf de Smet 2016), unlike the earlier subaltern struggles which fed into many different national-developmental strategies, some state socialisms and some welfare states.

Hegemony, social movements and revolutionary practice

In this context, the practical uses of hegemony are:

1. Mapping the structure of alliances that constitute the existing set of hegemonic relationships, including their weak points.
2. Attempt to disrupt these weak points, notably by creating other relationships "from below".
3. Developing different alliances "from below and to the left".
4. Supporting the articulation of popular collective agency in the different popular spaces identified above (emergent, coerced, resigned, subaltern).

In practice, of course, these are rarely entirely separate. Gramsci's interconnected discussions of organic and traditional intellectuals, good sense and common sense, and wars of manoeuvre and wars of position (Reed, this volume; Egan, this volume) frame the question somewhat differently.

One space where Marxist uses of Gramsci and "post-Marxist" approaches (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) diverge is in the social grounding of movement practice (cf. Carroll and Ratner 1994). For Gramsci, the tension between good sense (the active development of understanding from subaltern groups' practice and hence their social relationships) and common sense (the passive sedimentation of ideologies derived from many historical layers but dominated by the powerful) is key. The workers' movement, or an independent peasant movement, would have to articulate "a vision of the world and an ethics consistent with that" starting from their own "good sense". His analysis does not

restrict these terms to class; they can equally be used for thinking feminist struggles against patriarchy, for example.

The good sense / common sense distinction parallels that between subaltern groups' organic and traditional intellectuals. While everyone is an intellectual, Gramsci is interested particularly in those who have this full-time role – often unpaid in the case of activists. Their intellectual activity is both "theoretical and directive", in other words includes organizing, whether politically or in Foucauldian ways, "an ethics consistent with that". The organic intellectuals of subaltern groups are organic because their activity articulates the group's good sense. This is clearer for movements defined by their agents – the workers', peasants', women's, LGBTQIA+, Black, Indigenous, migrant and so on movements – and less so for movements defined by issues (Barker 2013; Cox 2013).

This is one aspect of the war of manoeuvre: the process of organizing and arguing that centres subaltern good sense in many social groups, institutions and fields. We can express this as the development of separate social movements (or class consciousness etc.), but often it is "intersectional", as in Gramsci's race-and-class examples. My own analysis, around the articulation of "local rationalities", develops from this (see also de Smet 2015)[4].

This overview makes it clear that the role of revolutionary social movement activists (there were also social democrat and corporatist kinds – or, today, liberal and NGO strategies, tokenizing and celebrity-oriented ones etc.) is to carry out the counter-hegemonic tasks above in reverse order: articulating good sense, developing alliances from below and disrupting those from above, while mapping the overall structure of power. This is their contribution to creating an organic crisis (which can start from many different directions); our organizing and their crisis are the same.

This is what Nilsen and I (2014) call the "ABC of activism" practiced by experienced organizers: within emergent struggles, resist clientelist or charity forms of dependence; broaden out discussions about the issues while linking to related campaigns and other places; seeking alliances with other movement actors; developing a wider sense of identity; learning about the international dimension; and so on. Practical actions like these underpin our developmental analysis of movements, from local rationalities (good sense) via militant particularisms conflicting with the strategies of the wealthy, powerful and culturally privileged; as militant particularisms allying across space and developing into ("single-issue") campaigns; and multiple such campaigns coming together into a social movement project, carried by a counter-hegemonic historical bloc.

While it is easier to think hegemony nationally, world-systemic or continental etc. forms of hegemony and crisis are crucial (as I have argued elsewhere, such crises underlie "waves" of revolution and movement), and regional and local hegemony also matters. We can also usefully think like this within particular fields: for example, analysing the coalition of coercion that enables power holders to successfully deploy a particular level

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[4] The war of manoeuvre / war of position discussion *also* briefly mentions "the Irish bands" - presumably the guerrilla War of Independence; *PN* quaderno I/XVI; para 134. He then veers off course to discuss it literally, rather than pursuing the political metaphor.

of violence. Some such analysis is central to movement work attempting to disrupt this coalition and thus reduce the levels of violence they can use against us (Cox 2014a, 2015; Cox and Ní Dhorchaigh 2011).

The past hundred years

Like Lenin, Luxemburg or Connolly, Gramsci's political activity was cut violently short, so that (unlike Lukács or Trotsky) their sense of what movements could achieve ended with the (extraordinary) global movement wave that produced not only the October Revolution and the Irish Revolution, but also Ghadar, the Egyptian and Mexican Revolutions, and the wave of mutinies, strikes, revolutions and soviets that swept Europe from 1917 – 1923. From the March on Rome, Gramsci and the movements he was involved in were largely on the defensive (with the unfortunate exception of Germany) and from the mid-1920s underwent the internal violence of Stalinisation.

Space does not allow analysing the subsequent century of popular struggle around the world, but a few points of reference can make it easier to bridge the gap in language between Gramsci's commentary and contemporary usage. One is the term "social movement". Marx like other 19th century authors often used the phrase to refer to "the whole movement of society" (Barker 2013, Cox 2013). Popular agency developed in many ways and directions, all understood as parts of a general process which there was good reason to be broadly optimistic about; the social development of situated rationality, "good sense".

We are now – since the 1920s, not just the 1980s – inclined to think of multiple "movements", and to use the term for very specific issues even where the broader struggle is clear, and for individual organisations. From a Gramscian perspective (and in line with his philological training), we don't need to fix a "correct" meaning of "social movement" as a concrete noun. However, the abstract singular noun – "social movement" as process – is immediately relevant to the development of hegemony, in the articulation of popular agency (on the basis of good sense, by organic intellectuals etc.)

Williams' work, not least his 1977 distinction between residual, dominant and emergent social forms, can help here. It fits directly with the *historical* understanding of many different hegemonic situations replacing one another in conflictual and contested ways; there is not simply one hegemony, but rather the new struggles to be born, and the ghosts of older pasts attempt to return to life. The process of struggle can also be very limited or very far-reaching, as alliances are made, broken or not attempted; and (as in 1922-37 for Gramsci) it can be driven in the opposite direction by defeat, demobilization and repression.

Wainwright's (1994) work analyses the rise of neoliberalism in movement terms. Her perspective parallels Gramsci's thought on on good sense vs common sense, giving the example of feminist consciousness-raising as in effect an articulation of good sense through movement activity; it is perhaps the single most important contemporary reading of Gramsci in social movement analysis, thanks also to its grounding in practice.

While as far as I know Gramsci never uses the term "counter-hegemony", it is clear that the logic of opposing hegemony and disrupting hegemonic alliances is largely the *point* of his analysis (see Carroll 2010). Williams' observation "To be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing", reworking Gramsci's Romain Rolland quote about optimism and pessimism, is often ignored by Gramscians disconnected from popular movements.

However, "counter-hegemony" as disruption may not be identical with "counter-hegemony" in the sense of an emergent or proto-hegemony; there is also an anarchist reading of counter-hegemony as opposition to hegemony of any kind, what Carroll (2006), responding to Day (2005) and others calls anti-hegemony. As a Marxist, Gramsci would not have seen anti-hegemony as a realistic *strategy*: it is only in a world without inequalities where "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" (in other words, communism) that an end to *any* kind of collective social ordering can be imagined.

We can, though, imagine a situation where collective consent is achieved without coercion, through alliance-formation and shared language (cf Hardnack 2019). Much community organising, particularly in the majority world and indigenous communities, has this form – movements do not coerce their own participants, but nonetheless manage to achieve broad agreements over strategy.

This brings us back to the formation of historical blocs in a positive (movement) sense (Carroll and Ratner 2010; Sotiris, this volume). While for Gramsci a "modern Prince" (Chrysis, this volume) in the form of a political party was a privileged tool for this, the subsequent history of his own party and the others whose *bolscevizazzione* he saw during the Third International is less happy. This also goes for other kinds of party proceeding from related visions in Europe, Asia, Latin America or Africa: it is not that political parties can contribute nothing, but today the real questions *start* at the point which naive readings, unfamiliar with the actual history of left and movement parties, imagine as an answer (cf Antentas 2022).

One other area where Gramsci's work has been widely drawn on around social movements is popular and adult education, often together with Paulo Freire (Hall et al. 2015, Choudry 2015, Mayo, this volume). This is closely tied to practical attempts to develop organic intellectual activity: movements can be seen as spaces where this takes place, or alternatively popular education can be imagined as a route towards movement development.

In the 2020s, an important question is how far contemporary movements control what Marx calls "the means of mental production". Paralleling Sears' (2014) arguments about the infrastructure of dissent, I have argued (Cox 2023) that organic intellectual activity or the articulation of good sense needs some control of these. But if movement-internal (-owned, -controlled) spaces of communication, discussion, education, theorising, research etc. are crucial (Cox 2014b), what do we do if (as across the global North) they are weaker than they have been in decades?

The contrast with the cornucopia of movement media, internal debate and strategizing, and writing "from and for movements" in the long 1968 (Mohandesi et al 2018), never mind earlier, highlights the problem. Again especially in the global North (see Novelli et al 2023 for startling majority world contrasts), radicals are often reduced to piggybacking on other institutions in order to be heard, let alone communicate with each other: commercial and state media (including for-profit radical media), subject to the logics of advertising and largely passive audiences; social media algorithms that prioritise celebrity and outrage; and academia, with its own peculiar logics. All this allows limited space for agitation (or rather for bringing people to outrage, not necessarily to action); it offers possibilities for education (understanding the persistence of problems despite "awareness"); but it gives very little space for real organising beyond clicks and petitions[5].

Conclusion

The *für ewig* Gramsci can be rethought in terms of the *longue durée* of popular struggles, the centuries-long struggles of subaltern groups to articulate their own good sense despite everything and to become the makers of their own history. In this context, social movements of many kinds appear both as key drivers of democracy, welfare, human rights, formal equality, redistribution, cultural transformation and so on – and as ambiguous, often falling short of their own goals and expectations, or (as in the vast majority of the world's states, which emerged from anti-colonial struggles within living memory) needing completion by new movements using a different language.

For audiences in the global North – especially for those English and US audiences who occupy an unhelpfully strategic location in today's processes of cultural selection and redistribution – Gramsci is sometimes attractive because of his personal credibility (a retrospective celebrity), the cultural capital represented by his hermetic language, and the possibility of reading him so as to seem intelligent because pessimistic. If we want to recover Gramsci as a social movement intellectual, we have to find points of reference closer to those of the two red years, the Russian or Irish revolutions, the struggles of peasant life or other parts of the wave of mutinies and strikes that brought WWI to an end (Falossi and Loreto 2007).

If we want a better contemporary reference point, we could think of the broad "movement of movements" against neoliberalism, which in many countries successfully undermined its legitimacy in the years before the 2007-8 crash, which reappeared around 2011 in a second wave of revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa, indignad@s movements in southern Europe and smaller Occupy events in the Anglophone world, and which today is contributing to a hundred-year peak of popular mobilisation[6] (Silver 2021, Ortiz 2022). If anything gives us a sense of the broad meaning of the struggle over hegemony, it is this relationship between movements and

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[5] Chalcraft 2021 offers some powerful thoughts along these lines.
[6] At least up to 2019, after which data is skewed by Covid lockdowns.

the *process* of social movement, rather than the more typical media commentary on an individual organisations and events.

In Ireland, I think of our three genuinely mass movements of the last decade, a peculiar late version of the "2011 wave" – the defeat of water charges (Cox 2017), the referendum on marriage equality and the successful struggle for abortion rights (Caherty et al. 2022) – experiences of large-scale, radical and transformative action which are simply outside the experience of many contemporary commentators on Gramsci.

I think too of the 40-year struggle of the EZLN in Chiapas and globally, which helped spark the "movement of movements" through the 1995 and 1996 *encuentros* with radical movements around the world (Leyva Solano 2021). I also think of the extraordinary experience of revolution in Rojava (Knapp et al. 2016), following the Tunisian coup the only survivor of the MENA revolutions, and via the Kurdish women's movement key to the initiation of the 2022-23 Iranian uprising.

And I note the near-total lack of interest on the part of supposedly radical intellectuals for these events, which are neither commercially saleable, viable sources for social media celebrity, or reliable routes for academic prestige – contrasting with deep movement solidarity with Rojava in the face of ongoing Turkish and jihadi warfare, and the extensive engagement with the 2021 Zapatista tour of European social movements. The "traditional intellectual" recuperation of Gramsci will always fall short for these reasons – but if we want to think Gramsci in his own terms, as a communist intellectual facing the onset of fascism who "went down with his ship" like Luxemburg or Connolly, we need to try and read him to ask what practical engagement with radical mass movements means today.

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