

Mapping Ideology and Hegemony in Marxist, Althusserian, and Gramscian Thought

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Abstract

This paper delves into the concept of hegemony by contextualizing it within Marxist, Althusserian, and Gramscian ideological frameworks. It begins with an analysis of Marx's notion of dominant ideology, highlighting its role in shaping consciousness, distorting reality, and sustaining class structures. The discussion then shifts to Althusser's reinterpretation, which challenges economic determinism by proposing that ideology functions through Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) and interpellation, thereby embedding individuals within the ideological system. The limitations of this model, particularly its neglect of counter-ideologies, are then examined. The paper subsequently engages with Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which redefines ideology as an ongoing contest between dominance and resistance. Gramsci's emphasis on cultural leadership, the dialectic between coercion and consent, and the fluidity of hegemonic power offer a more dynamic understanding of ideological struggles. Ultimately, this study argues that hegemony is not a static imposition of power but a continuous process of negotiation, making it a crucial analytical tool for understanding socio-political formations in capitalist societies.

Keywords: Hegemony, Ideology, Interpellation, Ideological State Apparatus, Power, Consent, Coercion, Socio-Political Formations.

This paper deals with an in-depth exploration of Gramsci's concept of hegemony by situating it within the tradition of Marxist and Althusserian models of ideology. Before proceeding further, it is important to highlight that ideology has a complex background, as "from classical Marxism, it is a system of false beliefs founded on contradictions and inconsistencies that misrepresent

social relations” (Makaryk 22). Interestingly, the Marxist notion of ideology has three major aspects, which include a) a conception of a dominant ideology; b) ideology as a site of distorted reality; and c) the intricate bond between phenomenal forms and reality. Marx’s argument is that “...consciousness, the way in which we believe things, is deluded because it is determined by factors outside its control: social, historical, and economic factors that shape what we are supposed to believe are our own authentic ideas, creating what Marx calls ideology” (Fry 21).

Taking up the first aspect, Marx thinks that ideas of the ruling class rule the world of reality. Rather, the class that holds the material resources of a particular society is also the controller of its intellectual power and thus exerts its domination on all mental productions. In this sense, he conceives ideology within the ambit of the dominant because the ruling class enjoys firm control over the ideological representations of reality, which, in turn, stabilizes and sustains the subservience of others. In this sense, ideology refers to the ways “...in which society as a whole adopts the ideas and interests of the ruling class” (Stoddart 195). Hence, the Marxist ideology infers material conditions to be solely determined by the mode of production.

The second aspect of the Marxist conception treats ideology as a site of distorted reality. Marx thinks that consciousness means the consciousness of our existence. This suggests that the patterns of living, the framework of life, embed our consciousness. However, our consciousness is obscured and obstructed by way of ideological distortions whereby the representations of reality undergo an inversion/blurring of real relationship(s) between the ruling and the ruled classes. Such distortion of reality emits false consciousness and dehistoricizes the apparent reality and thus preserves the delicate yet imbalanced social order intact.

Moving to the third aspect, it weighs the relationship between phenomenal forms and reality. The phenomenal forms refer to the constitutional and representative categories of ideology emanating from the projected real relations. However, such categories also act to misrepresent/conceal the real relations of people. Seen thus, phenomenal forms connote a slanted view of reality that runs in consonance with the interests of the ruling class. Not only this, the phenomenal forms are manifested in the materiality of the social practices and thus camouflage the real relations amongst the classes.

In light of the above discussion, it is worth accentuating that the Marxist conception of ideology is [conflictually] twofold in the sense that a) ideology is considered to be a distortion of reality [yet]; b) ideology is considered to facilitate a partial representation of reality vis-à-vis the domain of economic relations. However, this conception hosts the problematics of such a contradiction,

i.e., how (distorted) reality can influence the domain of economic relations. This is where a post-Marxist thinker, Althusser, comes into the picture with his altered conception of ideology.

Althusser's position on ideology is revisionist to the extent that it loosens a counterargument to Marx's economic reductionism. His position signifying that the social order isn't reducible to a singular/monolithic element. He also contends that the economic dimension doesn't hold a deterministic center with respect to the domain of social formation. It implies that the superstructures enjoy a relative autonomy on their own. Significantly, such a notion also infers that ideology—being a constitutional element of superstructure—may also be conceived as being relatively independent of the economic base. Seen from this perspective, ideology cannot be reduced to being a mere reflection of the material relations. Further, his conceptualization places ideology beyond the borders of consciousness as well.

He contends that ideology includes certain structures that impose their being on the majority of people by inducing a subtle distinction between real relations and imaginary relations. He contends that the relationships that people have with their reality are predominantly imaginary, i.e., there exists no direct bond between the real social relations and how they are lived/performed by people. For example, the exploitative relationship between the ruling class and the ruled class is never lived with this typical realization, confirming thereby that there is no direct link between the real social relations and how they are lived/performed by people. However, such relations are experienced through an opaque/imaginary working of the phenomenal forms. Hence, people never experience their exploitation; rather, they experience the imaginary world of forms, i.e., ideology. In other words, people live or perform their ideologies by treating the same as their world-in-itself. In this sense, ideology shapes our lived experience materially and thus inscribes our social practices.

Further, ideology operates in such inscribed social practices, which Althusser labels as 'ideological state apparatuses' (ISAs). The ISAs—which include the educational system, the family, the religion, etc.—reproductively inform and influence the social structures. The ISAs assume the form of social rituals that silhouette the lived experience of people. Seen thus, ideology gains autonomy and materiality of its own and hence ensures material repercussions also. Resultantly, ideology cannot be understood as a false consciousness. If it is a false phenomenon, it should not form material effects. Hence, ideology creates subjects within the realm of its being. In other words, individuals embrace their subjecthood by experiencing the realm of ideology, and thus subject positions are created in the ideological framework. Althusser calls such a notion 'interpellation,' meaning thereby that all individuals are interpellated in the

web of ideology. In the Althusserian sense, "...to say that someone is fully interpellated is to say that he or she has been successfully brought into accepting a certain [being], or that he or she has accepted values willingly" (Notes on Interpellation: longwood.edu). However, it is pertinent to point out that the Althusserian position on ideology again favours the notion of a dominant ideology that interpellates individuals. The dominant ideology occupies the center and thus acts to reproduce the structures of social imbalance by integrating masses so that absolute refusal becomes impossible. However, Althusser does not take into account the production of alternate ideologies that concurrently collide with the dominant ideology. In this sense, the Althusserian model fails to address such an important dimension of social relations amongst the classes vis-à-vis the conception of ideology and thus remains predominantly fixed, totalizing, and unitary in nature.

Now, it is apt to move to Gramsci's conception of hegemony so as to multidimensionalize and further enrich the notion of ideology and to measure its alternatives. Notably, Gramsci broadens the scope of ideology and hence adds a quality dimension to understand the finer nuances of this concept. By this concept, he means "... the nexus of material and ideological instruments through which the ruling class maintains its power" (Hawkes 117). Further, he is primarily concerned with an analysis of the factors responsible for the production of consensus in society, which is typically characterized by power/dominance. From Gramsci's point of view, "...culture doesn't function as mere reflection of the economic base" (Grodén, Miaechal, and Martin Kreisworth 361). This is where he formulates his conception of hegemony to answer how consensus is produced in power and dominance characterized social praxis. The Gramscian position stands against the notion of a static dominant ideology in society. If "...ideology connotes closure and a unidirectional flow of power, hegemony emphasizes the inherent conflict involved in constructing networks of power through knowledge" (Stoddart 193). Gramsci differs from his predecessors and hence shifts the focus from the view of ideological domination to the conception of cultural leadership. The conception of cultural leadership refers to an ability of the dominant to ensure a balance whereby the ideological elements supersede the counter-ideological struggle of the subordinate. Such equilibrium (signifying balance/façade) carves a collective will among the dominant and subordinate participants and thus suggests 'general interest.'

Here, it is necessary to consider Gramsci's distinction between coercion and consent. By coercion, he refers to the dominant's capacity for violence against those who fail to comply with the agenda of the dominant. On the other hand, the hegemonic power works in a far more

complex manner, but it effectively persuades the subordinated classes/subaltern to extend their support towards the agenda of the dominant. The dynamics of hegemonic power privilege the tendency to participate voluntarily and thus relegate punishment to the secondary position. The focus remains on building up a common sense that facilitates the mundane understanding of the world. Such a common sense accelerates willful and uncritical absorption amongst the subaltern, and this, in turn, formulates the socio-cultural-political passivity in a society. Gramsci contends that such a subtle consent-forming mechanism occupies a central place for understanding the complexity that governs the delicate relationship between the dominant and the subaltern in all capitalist societies. In this context, the dominant relies on the method of coercion in exceptional circumstances only.

As a consequence, the counter-ideological struggle of the subordinate becomes blunt and hence produces consensus in society. Now the subordinate consents to his/her own subordination and starts identifying with the interests of the dominant. This proves to be the success mantra of the dominant because this is how s/he rips apart the resistive agency of the subordinate. This forms the hegemonic ideology and also inscribes power in ideology. It is important to foreground that this kind of cultural leadership understands dominance as an ongoing contest between the participants. In this sense, the dominant is constantly involved in the dynamics of modifying collective will for sustaining his/her hegemonic position. Accordingly, the whole process is quite dynamic and fluid.

It is also worth foregrounding that Gramsci places far more importance on the role of the cultural superstructure of capitalist societies, which implies that the superstructure is not a simple reflection of the economic base of a society (the Marxist position). He contends that these two spheres hold a substantial degree of autonomy. The prevalent ideas/values of society do not necessarily signify the ideas of the ruling class. Rather, the social order experiences a dialogic contest between the ruling class and the subaltern. Such contestation constitutes the hegemonic power. However, this contestation also resists a monolithic/totalizing domination. Seen thus, there exists a relentless strain between hegemony and counter-hegemony. Gramsci also affirms that hegemony enjoys a material dimension that does not glide from the economic structures only. This has a process-governed clandestine orientation and is the life force of the unarticulated. In addition, he thinks that "...popular beliefs and similar ideas are themselves material forces [hence] any revolutionary theory must deal with class conflict on the level of ideas at least as much as in the economic arena" (Hawkes 118).

So, hegemony maneuvers, manipulates, and governs common sense in the cultural realm of a society. However, it always remains an incomplete, incoherent, contingent, and unfinished process. It is "...a process without an end. In order to maintain its power, a leading group must be constantly alert to the volatile demands of its subalterns and to the shifting context within which it exerts its authority" (Jones 48). In this context, counter-hegemonic representations of the subaltern act like a catalyst for facilitating social change(s). He is of the opinion that coercion/forcible seizure isn't a feasible tactic to gain and sustain control in the capitalist societies. Not only this, he believes that "...revolutions, while they may be facilitated by shifts in the economic structure, are also fought out, and their outcomes are decided, on the level of ideologies" (Hawkes 116). Therefore, a sustained dialogic contest is more apt to corroborate, maintain, and reconstruct the hegemonic spaces for exerting power and alleviating the dominant-subaltern binary in a society. On a condensing note, Gramsci's conceptualization of hegemony offers a broader scope and thus admits recognition of multiple ideologies in society, which are illustrative of differing representations of reality. In this sense, hegemony:

...treats the aspirations and views of subaltern people as an active element within the political and cultural programme of the hegemonizing bloc. This understanding of hegemony as an ongoing form of negotiation represents an advance on conceptions of power that see it as the static possession of a particular social group. (Jones 55)

Thus, hegemonic ideology demonstrates a dynamic and fluid structure of contradictory and contesting ideologies operating within the sphere of the dominant's perspective on reality. Here, power becomes a site of struggle over freezing the play of meaning for signifying reality in a peculiar way, and this struggle manufactures 'the politics of signification' in a society.

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