

Cultural Marxism

The Theory of Hegemony

The Definition of Hegemony

- ❖ A form of control exercised by a dominant class, i.e., by a group controlling the means of production.
- ❖ The success of dominant classes in presenting their definition of reality, their view of the world, in such a way that it's accepted by other classes as 'common sense'.
- ❖ A set of ideas by means of which dominant groups strive to secure the consent of subordinate groups to their leadership.
- ❖ Domination is not imposed from above, but is won through subordinate groups' spontaneous consent to the cultural domination they believe will serve their interests best.
- ❖ Therefore, hegemony = force + consent.
- ❖ According to Gramsci:
 - Force is practiced on enemies;
 - While hegemony is practiced on friends/allies.

Attaining and Exercising Hegemony

- ❖ The supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as 'domination' and as 'intellectual and moral leadership - Gramsci.
- ❖ Gramsci describes 2 modes of social control:
 1. Coercive Control = The use of force to subordinate or dominate antagonist groups.
 - This is direct force that is used when control is low or unstable.
 - It's also used in a moment of crisis when fundamental structures are severely threatened.
 2. Consensual Control = when individuals voluntarily assimilate the worldview of the dominant group, i.e., hegemonic leadership.
 - Consent is caused by the prestige and confidence the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.
 - This involves the dominant group persuading other classes to accept its moral, political and cultural values.

Consent

- ❖ To gain dominance, the dominant group has to present itself as the group best equipped to fulfil the interests and goals of society as a whole.
- ❖ Consent has to be earned from the subordinated classes, this means:
 - There is a continuous process of negotiation to accommodate the views and interests of the subordinated groups.
 - Therefore, the dominant group has to make compromises in order to win hegemony and maintain order, i.e., it must enter into alliances with other classes.
 - Subordinated groups accept ruling class ideology, not because they are forced on brainwashed, but because it serves their interests or fulfils certain needs.

Mobilisation of Consent

- ❖ Consent is mobilised through the superstructure.
- ❖ He split the superstructure into 2 levels, i.e.:
 1. Political society = Political and legal institutions; where direct domination or coercion is exercised.
 2. Civil society, i.e., private structures that are not political, including
 - Education;
 - The church;
 - The family;
 - The media;
 - The economy.
- ❖ According to Gramsci, these two levels combine to form the integral state = political society + civil society, i.e., hegemony protected by coercion.

Mobilisation of Consent

- He believed that political and civil society overlapped, i.e., were interdependent.
- The bourgeoisie maintained their economic control by allowing certain demands from antagonist groups to be met by the political society.
- This allowed:
 - i) Antagonistic groups to be pacified;
 - ii) The dominant hegemony to change or evolve.

Civil Society

- ❖ Civil society = hegemony.
- Hegemony is mobilised through civil society or cultural institutions such as:
 - i) Education;
 - ii) The church;
 - iii) The family;
 - iv) The media.
- This is the place where consent is won, reproduced and maintained.
- These cultural institutions are a combination of coercive and consensual mechanisms that reconcile people to the part they play in capitalist society.
- That is, these institutions play the key role of mobilising consent to dominant ideology.
- In civil society, intellectuals organise the consent of the masses in support of the dominant class. Intellectuals:

Civil Society: Sites of Struggle

- i) Create the ideologies that shape society;
- ii) Are the thinkers, writers, artists, etc.
- ❖ Civil society is not a site only of dominant hegemony, but of shifting and unstable alliances of different social groups or classes.
 - The idea of a dominant ideology is replaced by the idea of a field of dominant discourses that are unstable and temporary.
 - Cultural or civil society institutions are the place where hegemony is constantly fought over, making them sites of struggle between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideas.
 - Hegemony, therefore, has to be flexible and responsive to changing conditions.
 - However, hegemony still operates within the confines of economic and political inequality.
 - That is, the bourgeoisie still have economic domination and intellectual leadership that gives them more influence.

The Role of the Media

1. Tools for spreading and reinforcing the dominant hegemony.
 - They are used to create consensus, i.e., to make the dominant ideas and beliefs seem like common sense.
 - By making them seem to be common sense rather than ideologies, the media help them become more powerful.
2. Mobilising consent, i.e., persuading people to accept the values and beliefs of the dominant group, by:
 - Portraying these values and beliefs as the norm;
 - Portraying those who don't conform as deviant outcasts.
3. Sites of struggle, i.e., a place of competition between competing social forces.
 - There is competition between the dominant groups and the dominated or subordinated groups, who want to promote their own definitions of

The Media

- Reality.
- There is, therefore, a continuous struggle for dominance between definitions of reality or ideologies.
- The media, therefore, don't act simply as instruments for reproducing dominant hegemony.
- They are also tools for establishing and reinforcing counter-hegemonic ideas.
- However, even though they don't simply reproduce dominant hegemony, they are still influenced by economic and political inequalities.
- As a result, the media tend to reproduce dominant ideas and marginalise alternative ideas, even though they are sites of struggle.

Benefits/The Contribution of the Theory of Hegemony

1. Overcame several weaknesses of classical Marxism, including:
 - Economic determinism;
 - Marx's belief that there would be a spontaneous outburst of revolutionary consciousness among workers that would lead to the downfall of the capitalist system.
 - Marx's view of ideology, which was not dynamic (as opposed to Gramsci's) and didn't allow for questioning and resistance by subordinated groups.
2. Influenced Althusser's theory of ISAs.
3. Influenced British Cultural Studies.

Weaknesses/Criticism

1. Becos Gramsci's theory uses a Marxist framework, it's seen as reductionist.
2. His ideas about intellectuals are seen as elitist.
3. Hegemony is seen as taking on a life of its own and becoming an evil power seeking to colonise people's consciousness.
4. Culture, according to some critics, should not be seen as a system of domination, but as a system of cooperation.