

Antonio Gramsci and
the Struggle for
Hegemony



Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937)

- Marxist organizer and journalist in Italy
- Widely influential political theorist and revolutionary strategist
- 1920: leader in general strikes and factory occupations, involving up to 500,000 workers, which shut down Turin and other industrial cities in northern Italy
- 1921: One of the founders of the Italian Communist Party (PCI)




Gramsci's Prison Notebooks

- 1922: Mussolini seizes power following the “March on Rome.”
- 1926: Gramsci and other Communist leaders arrested by Mussolini’s forces
- 1928: Gramsci tried and sentenced to 20 years, 8 months. The prosecuting attorney exclaims: “For 20 years we must stop this brain from working!”
- 1929-37: In prison, and despite ill health, Gramsci wrote some 3,000 pages in 30 notebooks on a wide range of topics pertaining to politics, culture, and education.

The Struggle for Hegemony

Hegemony: initially defined by Lenin and other Russian Marxists, Gramsci expanded its use to describe the “intellectual and moral leadership” over society



Power entails a mixture of coercion and consent, and hegemony is essential for the latter.



Politics involves building and maintaining coalitions between different fractions of a class society—Gramsci called them “historical blocs”



Hegemony means the ability to define “common sense” and represent the “general interest” of everyone in society



Revolutionaries must not only struggle *against* capitalist hegemony, but also *for* an alternative type of socialist hegemony

The War of Maneuver and the War of Position


The Bolsheviks seized power with “war of maneuver” in 1917



However, in the more advanced capitalist societies of the West, Gramsci thought a different strategy was needed—a “war of position”



The “trenches” of this war are in civil society, especially popular culture and education



The war of position means that we build a socialist future at the same time we resist the capitalist present

Traditional vs. Organic Intellectuals

Because culture, education, and “common sense” are crucial in the struggle for hegemony, intellectuals have a decisive role to play.

However, Gramsci challenges the conventional definition of “intellectual”—all human beings have this capacity.

“Traditional intellectuals” claim to be above the fray, but are in fact “experts in legitimation”

Organic Intellectuals

For Gramsci, organic intellectuals are the link between “the popular element [which] ‘feels’ but does not always know or understand” and “the intellectual element [which] ‘knows’ but always understand and in particular does not always feel.”



Gramsci in 2019

“I’m a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will” (Letter from Prison, 1929)

“The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear” (Selections from *The Prison Notebooks*)