Hegemony: Archaeology of an Unarticulated Dialogue

Jeremy Lester’s extended reflection on the concept of hegemony and the debates surrounding its evolution is organised around three major concerns. Picking up the thread of the Gramscian distinction between East, where ‘the state was everything [and] civil society was primordial and gelatinous’, and West, where a ‘proper relationship’ revealed a complex and ‘sturdy structure of civil society’ behind the coercive force of the state, it traces the contours of hegemony, firstly, along the lines of a dialogue between the Left, East (Russia) and West. This is presented as a kind of dialogue of those who will not hear, a ‘dialogue of negation and reciprocal exclusivity’, whose negation (or transcendence) is necessary to prepare ‘the shared hegemonic task . . . a qualitatively rejuvenated critical project of socialist modernity’ (p. 181). Secondly, the book offers a rejoinder to those, such as Laclau and Mouffe, who would instrumentalise Gramsci’s account of hegemony as the pivot of their own post-Marxist trajectory and, in particular, to those who would have us read Gramsci himself as a post-Marxist. Thus, it tries to mount a Marxist defence of Gramsci’s interpretation and usage of hegemony and of their continuing relevance today. Finally, locating the possibility for success of a hegemonic socialist project within the parameters of modernity, the logic of Lester’s argument commits him to a defence of modernity, understood as the beginning of a reflexive process of dialogue and critique, expressed in an experience of disorientation and contradiction, grasped through a self-consciously ironic dialectic of unity and disunity, and emergent in ‘a very distinctive kind of new, enlarged public space in which political contestation and the search for new forms of legitimacy can now take place’ (p. 25). Where both the ‘pre-modern nationalism’ prevalent in the Russian Left and the ‘postmodern apoliticism’ current in the Western Left convey a subaltern avoidance of reasoned engagement, an ‘anti-hegemonic . . . escapism’, the reciprocity of modernity constitutes the very possibility of the dialogic

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1 Gramsci 1971, p. 238, cited at p. 76.
‘transcendence of contradictory tensions’ and thus an ‘unavoidable existential condition of socialist hegemony’ (pp. 181, 182).

The project is a timely one. When his writings first gained currency in the English-speaking world in the 1960s and 1970s, it was in large measure because Gramsci’s conception of hegemony seemed to afford a measure of intellectual discipline in the study of the processes whereby the oppressed and exploited are constituted ideologically and politically as subaltern, a terrain then befogged by broad-brush deployments of ‘false consciousness’ when it was not simply spirited away through the magic of social-scientific positivism. Although this terrain has been staked out in a number of works of historical-materialist scholarship (of which Lester offers a useful, albeit inevitably partial, survey), a couple of decades of cynically subjective postmodern playfulness have done much to throw this work of exploration, and with it the concept of hegemony itself, into clichéd obscurity. So it is well-nigh time that the Marxist credentials, and the revolutionary-communist thrust, of Gramsci’s concept were forcefully reasserted. And, in order that this can be effectively accomplished, the Marxist debates over hegemony in the Russian Revolution, the archaeological layer upon which Gramsci articulated his conception, must be disinterred.

Lester’s study is thus well conceived, but its execution is more problematic. The mere fact that he devotes a chapter to the Russian origins of hegemony represents progress, but the chapter does not reflect an independent research effort and Lester is not well served by the available English-language literature on the subject. Although a cursory check of the reference index to Lenin’s works turns up no less than half a page of incidences of the term, the editors of Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* express perplexity at Gramsci’s attribution to Lenin of responsibility for the theorisation of hegemony since, they write, ‘the word hegemony as such does not /bullet5 gure prominently in Lenin’s work’.

2 Although the concept of hegemony is indeed traced in the *Prison Notebooks* to Lenin, and although the Bolshevik understanding of hegemony is there sharply contrasted to Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, Laclau and Mouffe see fit in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* to trace the logic of its evolution in Russian Marxism with primary reference, not to Lenin, but to Plekhanov and Trotsky, that is, the two foremost critics of the hegemonic conception of Bolshevism. And, although the notion of hegemony shaped Lenin’s understanding of socialist consciousness since at least the writing of *What Is to Be Done?*, Perry Anderson, by treating it as nothing more than a strategy for bourgeois-democratic revolution, would relegate it to an outmoded phase of Lenin’s intellectual development.

3 Laclau and Mouffe 1985, pp. 48–54.


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2 Gramsci 1971, p. 381n.
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