

Hegemony and all that stuff



What is clear is that what we are going through is not simply an economic crisis, though certainly the financial crisis precipitated by the neoliberal hegemony and its debt-fuelled underpinning is key, but also a crisis of democracy whose outcome remains very much in the balance

By Michael Prior

Hegemony – the way in which dominant groups in society maintain their dominance by securing the spontaneous consent of subordinate groups, including the working class, through the negotiated construction of a political, ideological and economic consensus which incorporates both dominant and subordinate groups.

Historic bloc – the degree of historical congruence between material forces, institutions and ideologies and more specifically the alliance of different class forces politically organised around a set

of hegemonic ideas and structures that give strategic direction and coherence to its constituent elements.

*The sky too is folding under you
And it's all over now, baby blue*

The concept of hegemony was developed by Antonio Gramsci, writing whilst imprisoned by Italian fascists, to solve the problem which had beset all European radicals, particularly Marxists, for decades; why the subordinate working class failed to overthrow the dominant capitalist class even after its

own oppression and exploitation had been endlessly revealed, why even then they failed to follow Shelley's impassioned words written in 1819:

*Rise, like lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number!
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you:
Ye are many – they are few.*

It needs to be acknowledged that, even as it provides a conceptual basis for resolving this conundrum, hegemony remains a somewhat mysterious process, something which has always bothered some Marxists who want to retain some form of economic determinism. Gramsci saw the capitalist state as being made up of two overlapping spheres, a 'political society' (which rules through force) and a 'civil society' (which rules through consent). He saw civil society as the public sphere where trade unions and political parties gained concessions from the bourgeois state, and the sphere in which ideas and beliefs were shaped, where bourgeois 'hegemony' was reproduced in cultural life through the media, universities and religious institutions to 'manufacture consent' and legitimacy. The political and practical implications of Gramsci's ideas were far-reaching because he warned of the limited possibilities of direct revolutionary struggle for control of the means of production; this 'war of attack' could only succeed with a prior 'war of position' in the form of struggle over ideas and beliefs, to create a new counter-hegemony.

Over eighty years have passed since Gramsci's original formulation and we are able, with the benefit of extended hindsight, to see how hegemony itself often carries seeds of its own instability in ways which sometimes are reminiscent of the way Marx believed that capitalist economic formations carried within themselves the seeds of their own destruction. The problem is that such instability is both more complex and also more unpredictable than any simple economic crisis.

Hegemonic domination is, of course, not confined to the capitalist era. It can be seen in some form, often religious, extending back to the Pharaohs. However, since capitalism shows great instability and shifts it is useful

to engage in a quick gallop through the last hundred and fifty or so years even though this risks considerable elision and gross simplification. This gallop is confined to Europe and America where the processes of such domination can be most clearly seen and does have a particular focus on Britain. The application of the idea of hegemony in post-colonial and post-Communist societies remains as work in progress given the relatively short period since domination by simple force was superseded by other forms of control.

The obvious starting point in Europe is 1848, the Year of Revolution, when there were popular uprisings in various forms across over 50 countries. Britain had its own, more decorous, form of uprising in the shape of Chartism. Virtually all of these uprisings were defeated, often with great bloodshed but it clearly marked the moment in which the dominant class accepted that the repressive techniques which had marked class control had to be modified. The use of these in Britain in the thirty years after Peterloo is wonderfully illustrated in paintings of the mass Chartist gatherings in remote hill sanctuaries held where no militia horses could pursue them.

No one seems to have any good understanding of just how or why there was such simultaneity across countries when there is no real evidence of any overt linkages. It does illustrate the spontaneous aspect of the formation of

any new hegemony. At the time, the bloody defeats in 1848 were seen as major setbacks for developing European socialist movements but they set in train the process of negotiation into what might be called the democratic hegemony, which included the concession of manhood suffrage, trade union rights and the development of parties representing the working class though always with unevenness and retreats. This long period of sixty years or so in which consensual democracy replaced physical repression is what would have informed Gramsci's views on hegemony and still represents the longest period of relative social stability in the capitalist era, surviving as it did the unification of Italy and Germany, several wars including civil war in the USA and the rise of mass social democracy and trade unions. It was destroyed by WWI without any real signs of systemic instability epitomised by the complete failure of revolutionary Marxists like Luxembourg and Liebknecht to organise any international opposition to war based upon working-class solidarity. It produced a rather rose-tinted memory of the epoch epitomised by the American novelist Scott Fitzgerald's description in *Tender is the Night* in 1934 in which an American couple visit a WWI battlefield. It remains as a perfect evocation of just how complex is the formation of hegemonic domination:

"See that little stream – we could

walk to it in two minutes. It took the British a month to walk to it — a whole empire walking very slowly, dying in front and pushing forward behind. And another empire walked very slowly backward a few inches a day, leaving the dead like a million bloody rugs. No Europeans will ever do that again in this generation...

The young men think they could do it but they couldn't. They could fight the first Marne again but not this. This took religion and years of plenty and tremendous sureties and the exact relation that existed between the classes. The Russians and Italians weren't any good on this front. You had to have a whole-souled sentimental equipment going back further than you could remember. You had to remember Christmas, and postcards of the Crown Prince and his fiancée, and little cafés in Valence and beer gardens in Unter den Linden and weddings at the mairie, and going to the Derby, and your grandfather's whiskers."

"General Grant invented this kind of battle at Petersburg in sixty-five."

"No, he didn't – he just invented mass butchery. This kind of battle was invented by Lewis Carroll and Jules Verne and whoever wrote Undine, and country deacons bowling and marraines in Marseilles and girls seduced in the back lanes of Wurtemberg and Westphalia. Why, this was a love battle – there was a century of middle-class love spent here. This was the last love battle."

This war broke the long-lasting 'democratic hegemony' and ushered back the old fear announced in 1848 that:

A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre: Pope and Tsar, Metternich and Guizot, French Radicals and German police-spies.

Where is the party in opposition that has not been decried as communistic by its opponents in power? Where is the opposition that has not hurled back the branding reproach of communism, against the



Here they are in 1842 at the Basin Stone near Todmorden.

more advanced opposition parties, as well as against its reactionary adversaries? (Communist Manifesto)

Of course Marx and his allies were, at the time, quite wrong in their estimation of the power of revolution and of their own words. According to Eric Hobsbawm, *By the middle 1860s virtually nothing that Marx had written in the past was any longer in print.*¹ Only in one respect were Marx and Engels proved right; the ability of opposition parties to split based upon accusations of leftism and rightism. However, in one way, 1919 was the postscript to 1848. The Russian revolution opened up a concrete vision of a new form of society; the social democratic opposition parties in most of Europe finally split into their revolutionary and reformist factions and there were short-lived workers states set up in Hungary and southern Germany. But only in Mongolia did the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party succeed in 1921 in forming a long-lasting communist state. Instead, 1919 ushered in nearly twenty years of cultural and political upheaval, economic collapse, war and what would today be termed authoritarian populism, otherwise known as fascism. Even Britain was not immune to the upsurge of the old organs of repression with naval gunboats moored in both the Clyde and Mersey at various moments. The final devastation was WWII.

The end of WWII brought in what can be termed the 'welfare hegemony', a consensual agreement between a conjunction of forces, some of which seemed deeply hostile to capitalism including huge Communist parties in Italy, France and Finland as well as the revival of Labour in Britain based upon a left-wing programme. The 'historic bloc' developed in the agreement allowed these apparently hostile forces to be neutered and even incorporated inside the capitalist system. The essentials of this agreement need little rehearsal, basically the use of Keynesian economics to counter cyclical economic recession and the guaranteeing of certain minimum welfare levels. Of course, at the same time, capitalist Europe had been much diminished, a process that continued through to 1948 with the incorporation of Czechoslovakia into the Soviet

bloc and the continuance of forms of authoritarian fascism in Spain and Portugal. This new hegemony applied only to a core Europe of about seven countries plus the defeated countries of Germany, Italy and Austria. It was also adopted, though in a modified form, in the USA.

The twenty-five or so years of this welfare hegemony have often been thought of as the golden years of capitalism when both recession and unemployment as well as the threat of communist revolution seemed to have been banished in favour of steady economic growth benefitting all sections of society. The inherent problem of this pact was the

“The key hegemonic point of neoliberalism was the alleged return of power to the individual consumer, to allow individual choice as against state-dictated spending and the removal of power from institutions such as the trade-unions and local authorities which were portrayed as impinging on the power of the individual.”

increasing penetration of the state into the functioning of capitalism and the increasingly powerful position of organised labour within this state intrusion. This included not just nationalisation of much basic industry but also the use of various forms of planning and economic direction to steer the economy. These included such as the French economic plans which ushered in the so-called Trente Glorieuses, only briefly faltering with the événements in 1968, the Italian Istituto per la Ricostruzione Industriale, a Fascist institution taken over in postwar Italy and much admired by British social democratic economists,

as well as the various forms of state intervention in Britain, mostly involving nationalisation but also the National Economic Development Council set up in 1962 by a Conservative government followed by the ill-fated national plan of 1965 under Labour.

The inevitable economic problems created by this penetration were summarised in 1975:

The most general contradiction of capitalism remains that between the growing social character of production and the private appropriation of the product through the market.

In the period following the 2nd World War, this contradiction has developed in a number of different spheres, each marked by the increasing encroachment of conscious public control over the decreasingly effective market mechanism.

*In the area of human life, this process of increasing public control has been able to achieve definite social and economic progress, but in each such area, the problem of the increasing incompatibility of the market mechanism with the social and economic needs created by the continuing development of the productive forces, has caused new and intractable crises to develop. These crises are insoluble because each new encroachment on the sphere of the market leaves less and less room for manoeuvre in what is left of the market economy.*²

In Britain, these crises were particularly marked by very high inflation rates created by intensive union action to raise wages. However, this characterisation did to an extent draw upon the need for Marxist economists to find economic underpinning for social upheaval. What was occurring throughout Europe was more complex than any simple economic explanation. These, after all, were the anni di piombo in Italy, the Red Army Faction in Germany and the wave of various kinds of student agitation throughout Europe.

An analysis later in the 1970s looked at the almost simultaneous events in this decade:

The exact cause of the great

international explosion of 1968 is not clear, though it was a social and political phenomenon without parallel, transcending even the Year of Revolution, 1848, in its international scope. There was certainly an element of international emulation heightened by the use, almost for the first time, of virtually instantaneous satellite TV transmissions. The images of that year still stand to mind: the NLF flags on Hue Citadel; clenched fists of black athletes in Mexico City; the CRS visors and shields appearing out of teargas clouds in Paris; bewildered Russian tank crews harassed by Prague crowds; the ruins of Detroit ghettos. Yet each of these events and the accompanying discord of a hundred cities – even London, where a Vietnam march in November 1968 was seriously seen in the leader column of *The Times* as being the precursor to armed uprising – was its own end point, the result of apparently dissimilar movements within quite different societies.

We do not propose to analyse this international shock wave except to note one factor. All the popular movements we have mentioned were failures, at least in the dimension of physical repression. Even the Tet Offensive was accounted a material defeat at the time. But each, with one exception, set in motion powerful forces for change, which, in some cases, are still progressing. The Tet Offensive broke the power of the US government to convince its own people that the price was worth the gain and initiated a deep questioning of the effectiveness of political democracy in controlling the actions of governments. In Italy and France, the Communist Parties began their climb out of the political wilderness. In the USA, the struggle against racism was given a political dimension that it had never achieved before. What they all represented – save the Tet, which lies outside this circle except in its indirect effects on the American people – was a break with certain aspects of bourgeois hegemony rather than a challenge to state power. And what they demonstrated more effectively than a thousand theories was that

such challenges could emerge out of popular movements; that they need not be mediated by any strata of intellectuals or party groups; that bourgeois hegemony within the political and ideological structures of society is not absolute.³

Applying a more Gramscian analysis, we suggested a more subtle explanation than the one quoted above for the dominance of the 'welfare hegemony' and the seeds of its downfall:

This notion of an ongoing conflict between structurally antagonistic modes of production co-existing within the same social formation is crucial to the subsequent argument. It is also necessary to be clear that the dominant mode of production is not identical with the progressive mode of production. The dominant mode may lack the capacity to resolve the major social and economic issues of the day from within its own resources. In order to sustain itself and to integrate both individual and social needs at various levels of society into a stable synthesis it may have to rely on partial and contradictory borrowings from outside itself.

The previous example of post-war Britain illustrates how British capitalism was enabled to survive and even, by the standards of its own historical past, to flourish, by incorporating some of the dynamics of socialism. It is this phenomenon, the pre-emptive borrowing of elements of the class enemy's programme in order to forestall revolution, for which Gramsci coined the phrase "passive revolution". The borrowed elements do not, however, become totally submerged. They do not completely lose their progressive character by virtue of being harnessed to the dominant mode. Because they derive ultimately from an antagonistic mode of production they always retain a threatening potential and remain a continuing focus of political and ideological conflict. It is hard to see how the experience of the UK since the onset of acute economic crisis in 1973-4 can be understood in any other terms. On every front of economic and social policy, from

the control of the National Health Service to the control of the money supply, the most fundamental principles of social organisation and action have been locked in combat. That this combat has been fought out in the idiom of reform rather than revolution should not obscure its importance.⁴

The outcome of this breakdown of 'welfare' hegemony did, however, demonstrate that the victory of what subsequently became known as neoliberalism was not inevitable and that it was not total. In 1983 in Britain, the victory of what later became known as Thatcherism could probably have been resisted, at least for a time, had the Labour Party not conveniently committed suicide in 1981 just as it had done fifty years before in 1931. The key hegemonic point of neoliberalism was the alleged return of power to the individual consumer, to allow individual choice as against state-dictated spending and the removal of power from institutions such as the trade-unions and local authorities which were portrayed as impinging on the power of the individual. The final part of the agreement was the progressive privatisation of parts of the economy, including social housing, once seen as necessarily state-owned, with generous discounts offered to purchasers of shares or freeholds. One key statistic summarises the basis of this hegemonic agreement: in 1979, UK household debt was at the record low of 29.20 percent of GDP whilst in 2016 it was a little above 87% down from its record high of 97% in 2010 but increasing. Accompanying this was a prolonged attack on government expenditure from a postwar high of over 48% of GDP at the end of the 1970s down to a low of 36% in 1998.⁵

The rise in household debt was common throughout the capitalist world. In 1995, household debt as a proportion of household disposable income was about 38% in Italy and 105% in Australia. The corresponding figures in 2014 were 89% and 201%. Only in Germany has household debt been kept relatively stable resulting in Germany's current position as the economic arbiter of Europe with Angela Merkel as the good-housekeeper.⁽⁶⁾

In the USA, it will be recalled that it was the sub-prime mortgage scandal which precipitated the financial crisis of 2008, essentially the provision of the mortgages necessary to buy houses well beyond the ability of households to pay.

In one important way, the neoliberal hegemony differed from the previous two in that it was based upon a lie whereas both the democratic and welfare hegemonies were based upon at least partial truths. Real advances were provided in democratic rights after 1848 and there were real gains in welfare provisions after 1945. What neoliberalism provided was access to personal debt finance to promote consumption whilst allowing monstrous growth in real inequality to those with power either corporate or political. (A recent article in *The Thinker* has shown how much corporate power has increased in this period.⁷) A recent startling revelation about this is that just 8 people have as much wealth as the bottom 50% of the world's population⁸. Real wages have effectively stagnated for most working people whilst top-earners have soared away. This is shown in the figures for the USA of the share of national income taken by the top 1%. This bottomed out in 1973 at 8.9% and has since under neoliberalism risen to 21.2% in 2013. Similar numbers can be found for most countries.

The neoliberal hegemony was also concerned to reduce the fear and uncertainty which had been created in the turbulent 1970s essentially by reducing the power of trade-unions and other organs of social dissent.

The apparently total victory of neoliberalism was marked by the failure of opposition forces to adequately develop any counter-hegemony; particularly any way to bring together the various social movements of the 1970s and established political agents which effectively controlled access to channels of electoral democracy. This failure was most marked in Italy which had both mass social upheaval and powerful left political parties.

A paper by the controversial Italian sociologist, Antonio Negri,⁹ (later described by a conservative Italian President as 'a psychopath' who 'poisoned the minds of an entire generation of Italy's youth' — so he can't be all bad) analyses this period and, in particular, the failure of the Italian Communist Party's 'historic compromise' which was, in effect the one effort to produce a counter-hegemony, however flawed.

In various ways, the collapse of the welfare hegemony and the rise of a neoliberal hegemony was mirrored throughout Europe though in different ways and in varying degrees. The notorious tournant de la rigueur by the Mitterand government in 1983, accompanied by the expulsion of the Communist Party from government, is the most obvious example, a turn essentially derived from the same problem which had confounded British Labour governments in the 1970s, persistent and rising inflation. The historic bloc created in all cases was essentially based upon fear, that the perceived chaos created by strong

trade-unions would destroy hard-won savings and prevent individual success.

We are now in the midst of the fourth hegemonic crisis in the capitalist era if one counts the turbulent 1840s. It may or may not be encouraging for progressive politics that they seem to have come at steadily decreasing intervals; very roughly 60, 30 and 20 years. It is certainly not encouraging that war has often, in the past, been part of the breakdown. What is clear is that what we are going through is not simply an economic crisis, though certainly the financial crisis precipitated by the neoliberal hegemony and its debt-fuelled underpinning is key, but also a crisis of democracy whose outcome remains very much in the balance. The election of the maverick Donald Trump in America and the Brexit vote in the UK were a massive markers along this path.

All over Europe from the Pirate Party in Iceland to Podemos in Spain, new and rather odd political formations have arisen whilst in others the old spectre of fascism has arisen in a new garb. There have also been an array of social movements which often overlap with the new parties to the extent that it is difficult to see much difference. One problem with describing these is that the old labels no longer fit very well. In France, Marine Le Pen is often described as 'far-right' but in fact it is her likely opponent in the French Presidential elections, Fillon, who best fits this label. He would demolish the existing labour code, cut public expenditure, abolish the wealth tax, in short the full neoliberal agenda. On economic policy, Le Pen's Front National's 2012 manifesto contained commitments to raise the minimum wage and lower the retirement age to 60, reduce energy prices and taxes, introduce trade barriers along with measures designed to help small rather than big business, and give priority to French nationals in employment. Essentially, left-wing protectionism plus hostility to immigrants. In many ways, Trump offers the same kind of mix. Of course, pessimists would suggest that another name for this kind of combination is national socialism.

One more quote from 1979 to suggest that this political disarray is not unique:



Figure 1

Source: Striking it Richer: The Evolution of Top Incomes in the United States, E. Saez, June 2015

We are paradoxically in a situation where the richness and diversity of the left has outrun the political concepts that we possess to handle their coordination, mutual support and unification around common political objectives.¹⁰

Just why have we reached this parlous state? In a previous article, we quoted Zygmunt Bauman¹¹:

We could describe what is going on at the moment as a crisis of democracy, the collapse of trust: the belief that our leaders are not just corrupt or stupid, but inept. Action requires power, to be able to do things, and we need politics, which is the ability to decide what needs to be done. But that marriage between power and politics in the hands of the nation state has ended. Power has been globalized, but politics is as local as before. Politics has had its hands cut off. People no longer believe in the democratic system because it doesn't keep its promises. We see this, for example, with the migration crisis: it's a global phenomenon, but we still act parochially. Our democratic institutions were not designed for dealing with situations of interdependence. The current crisis of democracy is a crisis of democratic institutions.¹²

Thus Europeans and Americans hear their national leaders say that they will resolve the refugee crisis, stop terrorism, provide more jobs, control the banks, increase economic growth... And then they don't. As a consequence they turn to parties or social movements disguised as parties which at least hold out the promise of action even though, as with Syriza in Greece, they prove unable to do this. In America, Trump based his campaign on exactly this self-proclaimed ability to get things done.

Some observers believe that the current turmoil presages the final collapse of capitalism. For example, Paul Mason¹³ predicts that the spread of information technology, in particular the internet, will create an entirely new form of society whilst Wolfgang Streeck¹⁴ suggests that democracy will inevitably master a weak and failing capitalist system. However,

both views seem to rely heavily on a version of the old Marxist tradition of capitalism failing because of internal contradictions rather than the actions of any agency, a new kind of economic determinism. It is difficult to see the new hegemony which might arise from the collapse of neoliberalism; certainly a return to what we have called welfare hegemony seems unlikely, particularly as pillars of international order such as the International Monetary Fund and the Economic Union seem wedded to neoliberalism. On the other hand, formation of what may be called in Gramscian terms a counter-hegemony

“Real advances were provided in democratic rights after 1848 and there were real gains in welfare provisions after 1945. What neoliberalism provided was access to personal debt finance to promote consumption whilst allowing monstrous growth in real inequality to those with power either corporate or political.”

is also difficult to envisage. The historic bloc required to achieve such requires a complex set of alliances which go beyond the simple proletariat/peasantry duality of Gramsci's time. In particular it must include alliances with refugees displaced by war and famine as well as with the mostly young protesters in such as the Occupy movement which erupted after the 2008 financial crisis. It also has to take into account the growing international importance of countries such as China and Russia which were effectively excluded in any hegemonic settlement in previous eras because of

the simple capitalist/communist duality which prevailed. It is difficult to foresee other than turmoil as the EU enters a period of crisis and Donald Trump does, well, whatever Donald Trump is going to do.

Unfortunately in this troubled time, your correspondent's local choir has little to offer save a song based upon a quote from Martin Luther King "We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now." Perhaps the best commentary comes from a prophet of a past era, our current Nobel Literature laureate:

*Come writers and critics
Who prophesize with your pen
And keep your eyes wide
The chance won't come again
And don't speak too soon
For the wheel's still in spin
And there's no tellin' who that it's namin'
For the loser now will be later to win
For the times they are a-changin'
Come mothers and fathers
Throughout the land
And don't criticize
What you can't understand
Your sons and your daughters
Are beyond your command
Your old road is rapidly agin'
Please get out of the new one if you
can't lend your hand
For the times they are a-changin'*¹⁵ ■

References:

- Eric Hobsbawm. "On the Communist Manifesto". How To Change The World, 2011
- B. Warren and M. Prior, *Advanced Capitalism and Backward Socialism*, p. 25, Spokesman Press, 1975, <http://mikeprior.net/pdf/advanced-capitalism.pdf>
- M. Prior and D. Purdy *Out of the Ghetto*, p.89, Spokesman Press, Nottingham, 1979, ISBN 0 85124 245 6, <http://mikeprior.net/pdf/OutOftheGhetto.pdf> ibid p.27
- These total percentages include both direct expenditure and transfer payments, such as pensions, which are essentially income transferral mechanisms.
- It is not often mentioned that a good part of Germany's apparent good economic housekeeping arose from the fact that in 1990, it absorbed a well-educated, low-income group of workers with very low household debt and limited propensity for more. Reunification did however produce other social tensions which have yet to be resolved.
- P. Lawrence, "Corporate Power, the State, and the Post-Capitalist Future", *The Thinker*, v.71, 2017 <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/economy-99>
- A. Negri <http://marxsite.com/Negri.pdf>
- Out of the Ghetto, op cit p. 14
- Zygmunt Bauman died in January, 2017.
- http://elpais.com/elpais/2016/01/19/inenglish/1453208692_424660.html?id_externo_rsoc=FB_CC
- Paul Mason, *Post-Capitalism, a Guide to Our Future*, Penguin, London, 2016 ISBN 0141975296
- Wolfgang Streeck, *How Will Capitalism End?: Essays on a Failing System*, Verso, London, 2016, ISBN 0178478401
- Bob Dylan, 1964 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7qQ6_RV4VQ