Sonata No. 6: On the concept of HEGEMONY, and why it matters.

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Introduction

There is a kind of power that does not announce itself. It wears the face of the ordinary; it speaks in the voice of common sense; it presents itself as simply the way things are. To question it feels not merely wrong but nonsensical — as absurd as questioning why water is wet or sky is blue. I am speaking of hegemony, and I have come to believe that without some grasp of it, it is genuinely impossible to understand how our world actually works.

I am not a natural activist. I came to politics late, through the sideways door of adult education, where I spent decades helping people read and write and think more clearly. What I observed, year after year, was not a world of rational agents freely choosing their opinions, but something far more interesting and far more troubling: people earnestly convinced of their own freedom who were nevertheless thinking inside walls they could not see. The walls were not made of brick or law. They were made of assumption, of the unexamined given, of what Gramsci called the world view that presents itself as simply the world.

That is hegemony. And once you begin to see it, you cannot stop seeing it. It is there in the most casual remarks — the offhand certainties about who belongs in which role, about what a proper family looks like, about which kinds of love are natural and which are merely tolerated. It is there in the way we automatically assume that our own cultural horizon is the natural one, the way we treat the local as the universal, the present as the permanent. Hegemony is the invisible architecture of the taken-for-granted, and it shapes everything from the grandest political ideologies to the smallest intimate gesture.

This is a personal political testimony. I want to share with you what hegemony is, where the concept comes from, how it operates in practice, and why understanding it matters for anyone who cares about justice, about change, about the possibility of thinking and living otherwise.

Development

The word itself comes from the Greek * hegemonia*, meaning **leadership or rule**. In ancient Greece it described the dominance of one city-state over others in a coalition. Athens over the Delian League, Sparta over the Peloponnesian alliance. But the modern concept of hegemony in political and social thought owes far more to the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, writing in the 1920s and early 1930s from a prison cell under Mussolini's fascist regime.

Gramsci was trying to understand something that had tormented the European left for generations: why had the predicted proletarian revolution not happened in the industrialised West? The Marxist orthodoxy of his time expected that the contradictions of capitalism would produce revolutionary crisis.

But the working classes of Western Europe had not risen. They had, instead, consented to their own subordination. Gramsci's answer was that capitalism in the West had achieved something it had not achieved in Russia: not merely economic dominance but *cultural* dominance. A whole way of seeing the world so thoroughly naturalised that even those whom it disadvantaged accepted it as simply reality.

This is the heart of the concept. Hegemony is not simply the exercise of raw power. It is something more subtle and more durable: the construction of a consensus so pervasive that it appears not to be constructed at all. The dominant group does not merely rule; it presents its own particular interests, its own values and assumptions, as the universal interest, as common sense, as simply the way reasonable people see the world. Because it presents itself in this way (as nature rather than politics, as given rather than made) it does not need to enforce itself through constant coercion. It is reproduced in schools and churches, in newspapers and television programmes, in the casual assumptions of everyday conversation. It is breathed in, absorbed, internalised, so that people come to defend their own subordination as though it were a principle.

Hegemony 'hails' 21st century people into existence, as Althusser would have it, breathing the spirit of common sense into the blank slates of its subjects.

The American Marxist philosopher and social theorist Herbert Marcuse, writing in the 1960s, developed this insight further. In *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Marcuse argued that advanced industrial societies had become extraordinarily skilled at absorbing opposition, at incorporating dissent, and at making even criticism serve the existing order. The system, as he put it, was able to demonstrate that "*resistance is impossible.*" Not because resistance was physically prevented (though at times it was), but because the very categories of thought through which people understood their situation had been so thoroughly shaped by the system itself that they could not imagine an alternative. **The horizon of the possible had been narrowed to what the system could tolerate.**

This is what Marcuse meant when he spoke of the "*closure of the universe of discourse*" — a phrase that has stayed with me since I first encountered it. Hegemonic concepts do not typically forbid thought. They do not post guards at the gates of the mind. What they do, far more effectively, is determine where thought may legitimately go. They provide the grammar of acceptable discourse. **They set the boundaries of what can be said without social cost.** They determine what is believable, what is imaginable, what is too absurd or too dangerous to take seriously. Because these boundaries feel like **simple** reality rather than the historical product of power relations, challenging them is experienced not as politics but as confusion, as **pathology**, and as a failure to understand how the world works.

Consider, if you will, how many debates we have about gender that are conducted on terms no one chose. The very framework of the debate (the assumption that human beings divide naturally into two sexes, that gender is anchored in biology, that families are properly organised around a male breadwinner and female carer) is itself a product of a specific historical hegemony. These assumptions did not drop from the sky. They were built over centuries, defended by churches and states and medical establishments, and reproduced in every institution from the law courts to the nursery. They became, through relentless repetition and institutional reinforcement, the texture of common sense itself. **To question them is not merely controversial; it feels, to many people, like questioning arithmetic.**

Or consider the history of chattel slavery. For centuries, the idea that human beings could legitimately be owned as property was not merely legal but philosophically defended, theologically justified, and widely experienced as part of the natural order. The "*common sense*" of the antebellum American South held that abolition was not merely impractical but morally absurd. A denial of the **obvious** truth that some peoples were suited by nature for servitude. That consensus collapsed, eventually, through enormous struggle and suffering. But notice what replaced it: not the absence of hierarchy but its

transformation. The chattel slave became the Jim Crow sharecropper, the convict labourer, the precarious worker in global supply chains. The *form* of the given changed; the *function* of providing a subservient underclass did not.

This is crucial. **Hegemonic concepts can and do change over time, sometimes dramatically.** The given is not immutable. But what persists is the *role* of the given — its function as the taken-for-granted foundation of social organisation. **Each era has its own common sense**, its own set of assumptions that present themselves as simple reality. And each era defends its given just as fiercely as the last, because the given is always the foundation of someone's position, someone's status, someone's claim to a particular place in the hierarchy. To challenge the given is always, at some level, a threat to those who benefit from it — and that is why the struggle to preserve hegemonic concepts is **always** so fierce.

The struggle over sex and gender that we are living through is a perfect contemporary illustration. What is at stake is not merely a set of legal rights or medical practices, though those matter greatly. What is at stake is **the hegemony of a particular account of what human beings are.** An account that many people experience not as a political position but as the plain truth. To question it is experienced as an attack on reality itself. And because it is experienced in that register, as something approaching an ontological threat, the defence of it can be fierce to the point of cruelty. People will lie, distort, and destroy reputations in defence of what they understand as simply how things are. They cannot help it. That is what hegemony does.

Conclusion

So what, if anything, can be done? Gramsci and Marcuse both pointed toward the same uncomfortable answer, though they framed it differently.

For Gramsci, the bearers of genuine social change were likely to be found at the margins. Those groups who, by virtue of their exclusion from the benefits of the given, retained some critical distance from it. The industrial working class, he had come to believe, was too thoroughly incorporated into the existing order to be the agent of its transformation. The true revolutionaries were those whom the system had failed to fully absorb: the marginalised, the outsiders, those whose experience of subordination gave them a perspective the insiders could not easily obtain.

Marcuse, similarly, looked to the "happy few" — the outsiders, the inhabitants of the shadows, those who had not yet been inured by the one-dimensional world. He was wary of the mainstream, suspicious of mass movements that could too easily be incorporated, and drawn to the figure of the radical who could maintain a critical perspective that the larger society could not. Both thinkers were, in their different ways, pointing to the same phenomenon: **that those who fully inhabit a hegemony are often the last to see it, and that critical insight tends to come from the cracks and margins of the existing order.**

But both also emphasised something else that I find deeply reassuring, despite its slowness. Change does happen. The given **does** shift. The assumptions that seem most solid, most natural, most beyond question can and do crumble, sometimes with startling speed once the conditions are right. Water on stone, as I have written elsewhere — the patient, persistent pressure of contradiction, of the obviously absurd, of the quietly gathering evidence that the emperor has no clothes.

The stresses on any hegemony accumulate over time, in the form of contradictions that become too glaring to ignore, idiocies that become too costly to sustain, experiences of exclusion that become too painful to accept. Eventually, a fracture occurs (what the philosopher Ronald Heisler has called a *caesura*, a sudden break in continuity, a moment when the given simply collapses and something new takes its place).

Then, of course, the new given establishes itself in turn. The revolutionary generation that broke with the old order becomes, within a generation or two, the new establishment, defending its own given against the next wave of dissent. Society wakes up from its dream — and falls under the spell of another.

This is not a counsel of despair. It is, I think, a counsel of rationality, caution, and modest but genuine hope. **The given is not the same as the good.** What feels like nature is always history wearing a mask. What presents itself as permanent is always, in principle, open to challenge. The work is slow (far slower than any of us would wish) and it requires a combination of steadfastness, intellectual clarity, and what I can only describe as a certain quality of bloody-minded anger. But it does produce results, drop by drop, stone by stone. The world we live in is different from the world of fifty years ago, and not only in the ways the defenders of order intended.

We who care about justice are engaged in a long game whose outcome is never guaranteed. But we are not fools for playing it. We are not wasting our time.

The given can shift. It has shifted before. The only question that matters is whether we are willing to do the slow, patient, often thankless work of shifting it — and to persist in that work even when we cannot see the results we hope for.

The answer, for me, has to be yes. It always has.

Coda

One final thought, offered not as argument but as reflection.

To understand the function of hegemonic concepts (truly to understand it, in your bones rather than merely in your head) is to undergo a peculiar kind of disenchantment. The world looks different afterwards. The casual certainties of everyday life acquire, as it were, a faint shimmer, an almost imperceptible flicker of contingency. You begin to see the seams in what seemed solid. You notice the way power wears the costume of the obvious.

This can be uncomfortable. It can make you feel, at times, like a stranger in your own culture. But I have come to think it is also, in its own way, a liberation. If the given is made rather than found, then it can be unmade and remade. If the constant illusion of common sense is a historical product, then it is not immutable. The world is not a fixed text to be interpreted but a contested terrain to be navigated and, when necessary, transformed.

That is why the idea of hegemony matters. Not because it dooms us to perpetual subordination, but because it reveals the mechanism through which subordination is reproduced — and therefore reveals, too, the possibility of its undoing. The given is always someone's given. And the someone, in a democracy, can always be challenged.

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