

humanist, active approach, emphasising human subjectivity and involvement. For him, politics, ideology and culture are independent of the economic system, not controlled by it. A true socialist revolution not only involves proletarian control of the state and the means of production, but also ideological and moral leadership. Moreover, his own experiences of backward peasant life in Southern Italy and the industrial North convinced him that any socialist revolution would require alliances with other social groups in society, particularly the peasantry. It had to be a mass, even popular movement. A minority revolution of the working class alone on the Bolshevik model would not be enough to secure power.

### THE IDEA

Gramsci's emphasis on culture and ideology, on mass revolution, is best expressed in his concept of hegemony, a term that originated in Greek times to refer to the dominance of one state or ruler over another, Gramsci extended it to refer to the predominance of one social class over another, to the ability of those controlling society to impose their world view, their ideology, on the masses, partially by force but mainly by consent, or at least acquiescence.

Gramsci defined hegemony as 'moral and philosophical leadership, leadership which manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules' – leadership designed to create a national-popular collective will.

Gramsci argued that no ruling class could dominate by economic control, or even by political force alone. Such naked oppression would only inspire revolution. What is also needed is ideological control, the consent of the governed, and this is achieved through such important socialising agencies as the family, church, law, media, schools, and even trade unions. They all promote and legitimise the ideas of the ruling class to the point where such values are accepted uncritically and unconsciously as normal. They form the basis of everyday life, even underlie our notions of 'common sense'. Thus whilst the ruling class can ultimately enforce its rule through the state (the law, police, army, etc.), its real control lies through its intellectual dominance over civil society.

Complete ideological dominance, however, is rare and never complete. It always faces new challenges from alternative groups, new ideas, new crises. It rests on gaining the support of the mass of the population through establishing an 'historic bloc' of shifting alliances

between the dominant class and other sectors of society; alliances which are always open to dispute and collapse. This opens the way for subordinate classes like the working class to seize the moral, intellectual and political leadership, win widespread support and overthrow the ruling class. In capitalist societies the working class is in a particularly strong position to resist and expose bourgeois indoctrination. Their everyday experiences of working life under capitalism has revealed its essentially exploitative and oppressive nature. However, to turn such knowledge into revolutionary action will require sustained education of the masses by radical intellectuals to raise such proletarian understanding into revolutionary class consciousness and, ultimately, action. A true working-class revolution will, therefore, first require an intellectual struggle to expose bourgeois ideology; a cultural revolution in which the working class seizes philosophical and moral leadership before gaining political and economic control of the state and society. The role of the Communist Party is therefore, in Gramsci's view, to help promote working-class consciousness and help win the support of other groups in forming a revolutionary alliance. Such intellectual liberation and alliances, however, could equally come about through the workers themselves through such movements as syndicalism and factory councils.

### THE IDEA IN ACTION

Gramsci's concept of hegemony has had a major influence on post-war western Marxism, offering a major alternative to the rigid orthodoxy of Soviet communism. It offered new insights into the complexities of advanced capitalism, and in particular into the lack of revolutionary consciousness amongst the working class of western Europe even under the fascist regimes of the 1930s. It equally offered an alternative, non-violent socialist strategy, more in keeping with the liberal freedoms and individual rights of western society than the Bolshevik model of a political revolution based on the use of violent force to seize and sustain power.

Gramsci's use of the term hegemony differed from that of more orthodox Marxists such as Lenin and Mao Zedong, who used it to refer to political leadership or state domination. His interpretation and strategy differed in the following respects:

- Its emphasis on ideological, moral and cultural factors as opposed to simply political and economic ones, on the importance of an intellec-



tual revolution, of promoting mass class consciousness within civil society as well as seizing control of the state;

■ Its emphasis on the masses, on groups other than the working class being involved in the revolution, so allowing for the inclusion of such non-proletarian but radical groups as students, women, Blacks, etc. Such a broad analysis beyond the working class alone has greatly helped western Marxists explain the student revolution and the Women's Liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

■ Its emphasis on creating a National-Popular movement dependent on conditions in each country helped stimulate the growth of independent Communist parties and socialist groups with national strategies which did not require to wait for a world revolution or directives from Moscow.

■ Its emphasis on the unity of theory and practice encouraged radical intellectuals to get involved with the working class and promoted the idea, as Marx said, that men make their own history rather than wait for underlying, impersonal historical forces to do it for them.

Gramsci's analysis tried to show not only how ruling classes seized power, but how they sustained it, not only by force and economic control, but by ideological leadership which, if successfully broken, usually preceded its political downfall. In the *Prison Notebooks*, for example, Gramsci contrasted the success of the Jacobins in the French Revolution who, by including in their own propaganda the aspirations of the masses, were able to gain the support of the peasantry, with the failure of the Italian Risorgimento which failed to broaden its support, and so collapsed. He pointed out how the bourgeoisie, the ruling class under capitalism, has been able to retain power, despite the instability of the capitalist economy, primarily by maintaining its intellectual ascendancy even against socialist challenges; how conservative governments have achieved passive revolutions without the use of force, but by convincing the masses, even large sectors of the proletariat, that its ideas are their ideas. Mrs Thatcher's Conservative government of Britain in the 1980s not only used the state and the law to roll back the Welfare State and crush militant trade unions and local authorities, but established an ideological climate in which the values of liberal capitalism were dominant, in which market forces, privatisation and inequality were not only accepted, but promoted, under which socialism was in danger of being driven out of modern Britain as even the working classes deserted the Labour Party. Thus, to gain power, the working class must transcend its own immediate interests, combine with other sectors of society and win over the majority of the population to the

moral correctness of its cause. A modern socialist revolution, in Gramsci's view, is as much one of ideas as of political force, as much one requiring mass support as minority leadership. For him, the ideal society is one in which the laws of the state coincide with the dictates of individual conscience.

Inevitably Gramsci's more humane, open and gradualistic analysis of socialist strategy has been subjected to severe criticism by more orthodox Marxists for being too liberal, for denying the historical importance of the laws of historical materialism, and by the Communist Party for compromising the revolutionary purity of the proletariat. Structuralists like Louis Althusser (see page 1) and Nicos Poulantzas (see page 252) have been especially scathing. Nevertheless, this concept has provided western Marxists with a major means of analysing the complexities of advanced capitalism, of explaining the lack of revolutionary fervour amongst the European working class and the success in gaining and holding power of such New Right governments as Margaret Thatcher's in Britain and Ronald Reagan's and George Bush's in America. Gramsci's ideas have inspired the New Left in western Europe and the growth of Eurocommunism, providing a strategy for promoting peaceful revolution by exposing the exploitation, oppression and inequality of western capitalism, and so winning over radical groups to the socialist cause. Probably his major legacy has been the emergence, ten years after his death, of the Italian Communist Party as a major force in post-war Italian politics; a true reflection of Gramsci's desire to combine theory and practice.

## SEE ALSO

- ☐ Alienation and
- ☐ Ideology as background ideas to Gramsci's theories.
- ☐ Structural Marxism
- ☐ Critical theory and
- ☐ Legitimation crisis as three very different versions of this key Marxist idea.

## SUGGESTED READING

- Bocock R. *Hegemony*, Tavistock, 1986 – a broad analysis of the whole idea of hegemony
- Hoffman J. 'The Life and Ideas of Antonio Gramsci' in *Social Studies Review*, January 1988
- Joll J. *Antonio Gramsci*, Fontana, 1977 – short, readable study of his life and work