

An Indian Context of Antonio Gramsci's Views on Hegemony & Civil Society

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Abstract

Antonio Gramsci was an Italian journalist and activist who is known and celebrated for highlighting and developing the roles of culture and education within Marx's theories of economy, politics, and class. Gramsci is considered a foundational theorist for the sociology of culture, and for articulating the important connections between culture, the state, the economy, and power relations. Gramsci's key intellectual contribution to Marxist theory is his elaboration of the social function of culture and its relationship to politics and the economic system.

Antonio Gramsci, imprisoned for much of his life by Mussolini, took these ideas further in his Prison Notebooks with his widely influential notions of 'hegemony'. 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). What Gramsci said about the division of the society into two categories, is a different view on civil society from the 'associational' view common today, which defines civil society as a 'sector' of voluntary organisations and NGOs. Gramsci 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 idea of power as 'hegemony' has also influenced debates about civil society. Critics of the way civil society is narrowly conceived in liberal democratic thought – reduced to an 'associational' domain in contrast to the state and market – have used Gramsci's definition to remind us that civil society can also be a public sphere of political struggle and contestation over ideas and norms.

The paper provides relevant information about Antonio Gramsci's views on Hegemony and civil society as well as an analogical perspective in the context of the Indian social system at present.

Keywords: Hegemony, Civil Society, Social System, Indian Context, Analogy, Similarity, Pressure, Cultural Majority.

Introduction

Gramsci was one of the most important Marxist thinkers of the 20th century, and a particularly key thinker in the development of Western Marxism. He wrote more than 30 notebooks and 3000 pages of history and analysis during his imprisonment. These writings, known as the Prison Notebooks, contain Gramsci's tracing of Italian history and nationalism, as well as some ideas in Marxist theory, critical theory and educational theory associated with his name.

Gramsci on Cultural Hegemony

Cultural hegemony refers to domination or rule achieved through ideological and cultural means. The term refers to the ability of a group of people to hold power over social institutions, and thus, to strongly influence the values, norms, ideas, expectations, worldview, and behavior of the rest of society. Cultural hegemony functions by achieving the consent of the masses to abide social norms and the rules of law by framing the worldview of the ruling class, and the social and economic structures that go with it, as just, legitimate, and designed for the benefit of all, even though they may really only benefit the ruling class.

Antonio Gramsci was not the first person to speak about hegemony. But, he was the one who broadened the idea of hegemony. In Gramsci's view, a class cannot dominate in modern conditions by merely advancing its own narrow economic interests; neither can it dominate purely through force and coercion. Rather, it must exert intellectual and moral leadership, and make alliances and compromises with a variety of

forces. In Marxist philosophy, cultural hegemony is the domination of a culturally diverse society by the ruling class who manipulate the culture of that society the beliefs, explanations, perceptions, values and mores—so that their imposed, ruling-class worldview becomes the accepted cultural norm; the universally valid dominant ideology, which justifies the social, political, and economic status quo as natural and inevitable, perpetual and beneficial for everyone, rather than as artificial social constructs that benefit only the ruling class.

In a society, cultural hegemony is neither monolithic intellectual praxis, nor a unified system of values, but a complex of stratified social structures, wherein each social and economic class has a social purpose and an internal class-logic that allows its members to behave in a way that is particular and different from the behaviours of the members of other social classes, whilst co-existing with them as constituents of the society.

The effects of cultural hegemony are perceptible at the personal level; although each person in a society lives a meaningful life in his and her social class, to him and to her, the discrete social classes might appear to have little in common with the private life of the individual man and woman. Yet, when perceived as a whole society, the life of each person does contribute to the greater social hegemony. Although social diversity, economic variety, and political freedom appear to exist—because most people see different life-circumstances—they are incapable of perceiving the greater hegemonic pattern created when the lives they witness coalesce as a society. The cultural hegemony is manifested in and maintained by an existence of minor, different circumstances that are not always fully perceived by the men and the women living the culture.

Interpretation of Gramsci's Views on Hegemony in the Context of India

Gramsci's views on Hegemony can be rightly be applied to the contemporary socio-political scenario in India wherein we find the class in majority forcing through certain agents the classes in minority to practice and imbibe its culture, and thus, to be subordinate to the class in majority in terms of the culture. The contemporary India reveals the same picture of India. In India, the society is divisible into the upper class, the middle class and the lower class. Obviously, with the view to being dominant, the upper class keeps forcing the members of the of the lower classes to adopt and practice its culture and in this way, to submit itself to it through the adoption of the cultural modes of living being practiced by the class in majority.

Gramsci on Civil Society

The term Civil Society came into political sphere in the 16th and 17th century Europe. Gurpreet Mahajan is of the view that "At this time theorists of democracy invoked this concept to define a democratic form of government rooted in the rights of citizens." The theorists of the 17th century brought the idea of civil society in the center of the debate because for them rights of the individual were more

important than everything else. The idea's of Hobbes, Locke, Hegel, Marx, Tocqueville and Gramsci played an important role in regard to the concept of civil society. Writings of Antonio Gramsci played an important role in the revival of the concept of civil society. He came out of the jinx of the traditional idea of Marx and showed a new path to the Marxist thinking which was very much appropriate during his time and to some extent till today.

Gramsci's theory of hegemony is tied to his conception of the capitalist state. Gramsci does not understand the 'state' in the narrow sense of the government. Instead, he divides it between 'political society' (the police, the army, legal system, etc.) – the arena of political institutions and legal constitutional control – and 'civil society' (the family, the education system, trade unions, etc.) – commonly seen as the 'private' or 'non-state' sphere, mediating between the state and the economy. However, he stresses that the division is purely conceptual and that the two often overlap in reality. Gramsci claims the capitalist state rules through force plus consent: political society is the realm of force and civil society is the realm of consent.

Interpretation of Gramsci's Views on Civil Society in the Context of India

Gramsci's views on civil society are applicable to the Indian society where one can find the division of the whole society into the political society and the civil society. Here too, the political society is constituted by the governmental agencies like police, army, law, administration etc. On the contrary, the civil society is constituted by the non-governmental agencies like family etc.

Objectives of the Study

1. Applying Antonio Gramsci's views on cultural hegemony and civil society to the Indian social system which has a close resemblance to Gramsci's views.
2. Exploring similarities and dissimilarities between what Gramsci says and what there is about the Indian social system.

Overview of Literature

Michael Burawoy (2001) in the work Antonio Gramsci and his Legacy, writes that Gramsci is the "Sociological Marxist" par excellence, although, as we will see, others have often turned his writings into a form of Marxist sociology.

Guha, Ramachandra (2007). *India after Gandhi: The history of the world's largest democracy*.

A massive but well-crafted account of India since its independence, ending with the advent of the postliberalization order. Considers the tumultuous events that comprised India's founding and challenged its continuity, as well as the factors that continued to hold the nation together in vivid historical detail. Suitable for undergraduate or graduate students.

Leela Fernandes (2007) argues that the acquisition of particular forms of social and cultural capital as well as credentials, cultural knowledge, skills and lifestyles allow middle class individuals to negotiate the new-economy segments of the labour market.

Vijender Singh (2012) in the paper An Analysis of Concept and Role of Civil Society in Contemporary India, writes that the concept of civil society moved from 'civilized society' to a socially located debating and acting groups emerged now outside the political arena. However, its identity fixes next door to politics. Advancement of democracies pushed the civil society movement on world scene, in both the developing and developed societies equally. India land maintains a great lead in this movement with impinging on administrative and political setup the right to information, human rights, social advocacy, environmental preservation including elimination of corruption from public institutions. Anna Hazare's fast based strategy movement acquired a very pervasive support from all quarters i.e. for Janlokpal (People's Ombudsman) under the banner India against Corruption.

Andrea Mubi Brighenti (25 November, 2016) in Antonio Gramsci's Theory of the Civil Society, argues that Civil society is a direct expression of hegemony, which Gramsci famously theorised as a pattern of established power relations among social groups in a given historical political situation. In Gramsci's view, hegemony is not simply a matter of domination because it also requires "direction", that is, headship or consensual leadership. With Gramsci, hegemony stretches beyond the pure "economic-corporative" level, being supplemented by a veritable "ethical-political" layer. In this context, the civil society features simultaneously an object of conquest, a battlefield among different social and political groups, and the outcome of a given configuration of forces in a specific historic context. Civil society is also intimately linked to the production, circulation and consumption of discourses and myths; its constitution, in other words, is ideological. Gramsci took ideology seriously arguing that, to become operative, critical ideas must make their way into in people's everyday existence. As a consequence, common sense – the domain of ideas and discourses as they exist in the everyday – emerges as the real battlefield for any political project.

Souvik Lal Chakraborty (2016) in his paper Gramsci's Idea of Civil Society argues that the idea of hegemony was the central theme of Antonio Gramsci's thought. Antonio Gramsci mentions about state and civil society in parts of the "Prison Notebooks". Practically his idea on state, civil society is scattered everywhere in his theoretical work. Civil society as a concept has always been important but it has gained tremendous momentum and importance in the last decades. It has been viewed differently by different thinkers. Like other concepts, Gramsci's concept of civil society is also very important and unique. He brought few dimensions in the idea of civil society which was never discussed before. He is best known for his concept and theory of cultural hegemony, which describes how states use cultural institutions to maintain power in capitalist societies. This article will try to analyze Gramsci's idea of civil society and the major important elements which constitutes this idea.

Nicki Lisa Cole (Updated April 12, 2017) in Biography of Antonio Gramsci, writes that Gramsci viewed the state as an instrument of domination that represents the interests of capital and of the ruling class. He developed the concept of cultural hegemony to explain how the state accomplishes this, arguing that domination is achieved in large part by a dominant ideology expressed through social institutions that socialize people to consent to the rule of the dominant group. He reasoned that hegemonic beliefs--dominant beliefs--dampen critical thought, and are thus barriers to revolution.

Hypothesis Formed for the Study

The traces and glimpses of Gramsci's theories of cultural hegemony and civil society are more or less there in the Indian social system. However, some differences still exist there.

Research Methodology

Grounded in Gramsci's theories and limited to the application of his theories of cultural hegemony and civil society, the paper serves as a thorough theoretical study designed with the specific purpose to explore similarities and dissimilarities between what Gramsci's theories of cultural hegemony and civil society say about the social systems and what the Indian social is at present. The secondary data available in books, journals and internet sites helped the researcher undertake the work and prepare a paper on the theme. Overview of literature supplied a feedback on the theme; the hypothetical assumptions provided directions for the study; secondary data enabled the scholar to be familiar with Antonio Gramsci and his theories. All this prepared the scholar to brood over the existing socio-political conditions in the Indian social system. For the sake of the scientific spirit of the study, the steps of social research were observed. The conclusions were drawn keeping in view the theoretical concepts propounded by the Italian sociologist Antonio Gramsci.

Sociological Analysis of Gramsci's Views in the Context of the Indian Social System

Gramsci's theories of hegemony and civil society can be applied to the Indian social system as it exists at present. In the Indian society too, the seeds, traces and glimpses of cultural hegemony are apparent. The people in cultural majority are dominant, and they keep influencing the people belonging to the other cultures through several means to imbibe their culture. Similarly, the Indian society is divisible into the political society constituted by the governmental agencies like police, army, administration etc., while the civil society is constituted by the non-governmental agencies.

Conclusion

Gramsci drew on Marx's theoretical foundation to elaborate the important role of political strategy in challenging the dominant relations of society, and the role of the state in regulating social life and maintaining the conditions necessary for capitalism. He thus focused on understanding how culture and politics might inhibit or spur revolutionary change, which is to say, he focused on the political and cultural elements of power and domination. Gramsci viewed the educational institution as one of

the fundamental elements of cultural hegemony in modern Western society and elaborated on this in essays titled "The Intellectuals" and "On Education." Though influenced by Marxist thought, Gramsci's body of work advocated for a multi-faceted and more long-term revolution than that envisioned by Marx. He advocated for the cultivation of "organic intellectuals" from all classes and walks of life, who would understand and reflect the world views of a diversity of people. In a nutshell, both the theories of Antonio Gramsci, namely, the theory of Hegemony and the theory of Civil Society can prettily be interpreted and analysed in the context of the contemporary India. To conclude with the citation of Chatterjee by Mihir Shah's comments in the work *Civil Society and Indian Democracy: Possibilities of Social Transformation*.

The most important contemporary contribution to developing a conceptual framework for understanding civil society in India has been that of Partha Chatterjee. He speaks of civil society in contra-distinction to what he terms political society. Chatterjee distinguishes between a domain of properly constituted civil society and a more ill-defined and contingently activated domain of political society. Civil society in India today, peopled largely by the urban middle classes, is the sphere that seeks to be congruent with the normative models of bourgeois civil society and represents the domain of capitalist hegemony. But there is the other domain of political society which includes large sections of the rural population and the urban poor. These people do, of course, have the formal status of citizens and can exercise their franchise as an instrument of political bargaining. But they do not relate to the organs of the state in the same way that the middle classes do, nor do governmental agencies treat them as proper citizens belonging to civil society. Those in political society make their claims on government, and in turn are governed, not within the framework of stable constitutionally defined rights and laws, but rather through temporary, contextual and unstable arrangements arrived at through direct political negotiations...the bulk of the population in India lives outside the orderly zones of proper civil society.

Chatterjee believes that those belonging to what he calls political society, lacking an agency of their own, typically mobilise through powerful patrons and brokers. While some instances of this can be

found, in the main, Chatterjee's distinction does not appear to be of much value in understanding the dynamics of Indian society today. Chatterjee completely fails to see the massive mobilisation of marginalised sections, dalits, adivasis, women and the poor, which has happened very much "within the framework of stable constitutionally defined rights and laws".

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