

Contesting Hegemony

Have you ever seen a friend, or group of colleagues, behave in a way which you knew was killing them slowly, and decided in the interests of friendship to point this out to them? And have you ever found that your analysis of their behavior was met with scorn or disbelief and an increased desire by your friends to celebrate, and become even more committed to, these same behaviors? Then what you may be witnessing may be something other than willfully irrational, self-destruction. Instead, it could be hegemony in action. Hegemony is the process by which we learn to embrace enthusiastically a system of beliefs and practices that end up harming us and working to support the interests of others who have power over us. West (1982) describes a hegemonic culture as “a culture successful in persuading people to ‘consent’ to their oppression and exploitation” (p. 119). Hegemony describes the way we learn to love our servitude.

The theorist most associated with the term is Italian political economist Antonio Gramsci, described by Cornel West (1982) as “the most penetrating Marxist theorist of culture in this century” (p. 118). Gramsci was a founder member of the Italian Communist Party, a journalist for socialist newspapers, and a strategist for the factory council movement in 1920’s Turin, which advocated direct workers control of industries such as the Fiat motor company. In 1926, while a Communist deputy in the Italian parliament, he was arrested by the fascist government (Mussolini had come to power in 1922) and placed under police supervision. In May 1928 he was tried as a political prisoner, with the prosecutor reportedly declaring that “for twenty years we must stop this brain from working”. He spent the rest of his life in prison, interspersed with brief spells in hospital, until dying in 1937 in a sanitarium days after his full release finally became legal. There could hardly be a more dramatic illustration of Zinn’s (1990) observation (quoted in chapter 1) that “how we think is ... a matter of life and death” (p. 2).

Gramsci did not coin the term hegemony, indeed it is often associated chiefly with Lenin. Borg, Buttigieg and Mayo (2002) observe that there is no “specific passage or section in Gramsci’s massive opus wherein he succinctly and systematically expounds his concept of hegemony” (p. 1). This means that subsequent scholars such as Williams (1983) or Laclau and Mouffe (1985) have added their own shading to the concept. Generally speaking, discussions of hegemony locate the idea as a subtler, more encompassing, concept than ideology. As outlined by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* (1970), the ideas of the ruling class become universalized as the ideas of all. Hegemony widens this understanding of ideology so that instead of conceiving it as a system of dominant ideas that reinforced the power of the ruling class, it can be viewed as embedded in a system of practices – behaviors and actions that people learn to live out on a daily basis within personal relationships, institutions, work and community. Ideology becomes hegemony when the dominant ideas are learned and lived in everyday decisions and judgments, and when these ideas (reinforced by mass media images and messages) pervade the whole of existence. In many ways hegemony is the conceptual bridge between the Marxist notion of dominant ideology and Habermas’ idea of the colonization of the lifeworld by capitalism and technical rationality. It emphasizes how the logic of capitalism, especially the logic of commodification discussed in chapter (1), seeps and

soaks itself into all aspects of everyday life – culture, health care, recreation, even intimate relationships.

The important thing to remember about hegemony is that it works by consent. People are not forced against their will to assimilate dominant ideology. They learn to do this, quite willingly, and in the process they believe that this ideology represents their best interests. Hegemony works when people actively welcome and support beliefs and practices that are actually hurting them. This means that the state or ruling class does not need to resort to force or coercion to keep order, which would be expensive and unpredictable. It is important to state, though, that Gramsci believed some form of hegemony was inevitable in every society. The crucial task was to make sure this hegemony was exercised on behalf of the many, rather than the few. His goal was to replace ruling class hegemony with working class, or proletarian, hegemony.

As we read Gramsci's elaboration of hegemony, there are several things we need to keep in mind. First, as with much critical theory appearing in English but written in other languages (Italian in this case) there is the problem of translation and the misunderstandings that can result from this. Second, most of his writing was done under harsh prison conditions, involving censorship by prison authorities, so it was necessary for him to use a kind of coded shorthand in his work (Marxism becoming 'the philosophy of praxis' is the most quoted example). Third, as his letters (Gramsci, 1994) to his sister in law, wife and friends indicate, Gramsci suffered constantly from increasingly serious illnesses, often untreated. Consequently much of his work appeared only in note form only, as outlines and sketches of future projects rather than as fully realized theoretical analysis. To this extent, the prosecutor quoted earlier could claim some success. Fourth, Gramsci was as much activist as theorist, concerned both before and after imprisonment to further the communist cause in Italy by offering strategic and tactical advice on specific initiatives. As well as the factory council movement, these included the Institute of Proletarian Culture, magazines such as *The People's Cry* (Il Grido del Popolo) and *The New Order* (L'Ordine Nuovo), and the parliamentary work of the Italian Socialist and Communist Parties. As a result Gramsci's theoretical analysis is often embedded in the discussion of educational policies, theatrical events (he wrote a great deal of theatre criticism), and intellectual debates pertaining to Italian life in the 1920's and 30's. The link between these local analyses and an analysis of generic tendencies in the twenty-first century is often hard to make. And, finally, as a Marxist activist writing for other Marxist activists, Gramsci's writing often assumes a level of knowledge of Marxist philosophy, and of debates within Marxist scholarship, denied to most general readers and most adult educators.

So why should those of us interested in adult learning read Gramsci? To me there seem three reasons. First, his understanding of hegemony as an educational relationship has justifiably captured the attention of adult educators. Hegemony – the process by which people learn to live, and love, the dominant system of beliefs and practices – is not imposed on them so much as it is learned by them. Hence, his most often quoted observation that "every relationship of hegemony is necessarily an educational relationship" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 350). For Gramsci a central feature of adulthood is

learning hegemony. Second, in his writing on how to identify and oppose hegemony he develops a theory of learning, particularly a theory of the formation and development of critical consciousness, that has relevance for contemporary work in transformative learning. Third, in sketching out the ways education can be used to contest hegemony he develops the concept of the organic intellectual – an activist and persuader who emerges from an oppressed group to work with, and on behalf of, that group. This idea has been picked up by adult educators who see in it one way to think about their practice as catalysts of oppositional learning.

How Hegemony Works

In analyzing how the dominant class organizes, maintains, and defends its control, Gramsci emphasizes the all pervasive nature of the process. Although he paid special attention to the influence of the mass media, he viewed the process of hegemony – of persuading people to accept the way things are – as infiltrating all aspects of life; “Everything which influences or is able to influence public opinion, directly or indirectly, belongs to it: libraries, schools, associations and clubs of various kinds, even architecture and the layout and names of streets” (1985, p. 385). As Williams (1977) points out, “hegemony goes beyond ideology” by conceiving “the whole lived social process as practically organized by specific and dominant meanings and values” (p. 109). Hegemony is not just a system of ideas, but “a saturation of the whole process of living . . . a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living” (111). It “constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society . . . beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives” (110). Knowing of hegemony makes it easier to understand how racism and sexism flourish unchallenged and unacknowledged. It is not so much that people go around loudly declaring bigotry, patriarchy, or homophobia, though this certainly happens. Rather, hegemony is lived out a thousand times a day in our intimate behaviors, glances, body postures, in the fleeting calculations we make on how to look at, and speak to, each other, and in the continuous micro-decisions that coalesce into a life.

In Gramsci’s analysis, hegemony is evident in two domains. On a political level the state exercises direct domination through “the apparatus of state coercive power which legally enforces discipline on those groups who do not consent either actively or passively” (1971, p. 12). This is what Althusser (1971) subsequently referred to as the repressive state apparatus. State coercive power is a last resort, a failsafe device in the event of hegemony failing to secure people’s consent to their oppression. In civil society – “the ensemble of organisms commonly called private” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 12) – we see the workings of hegemony as ideological manipulation. Here hegemony is evident in the “spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general directions imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group” (ibid. p. 12). If the workings of hegemony in civil society are successful, then the coercive apparatus of the state need never be called upon. The media, the schools, the churches, the networks of community associations through which we move, all serve to convince people that the way they live is a natural, pre-ordained state that works in their best interests.

The idea that certain institutions in civil society convince the masses that the world is organized on their behalf (thereby concealing the gross inequity that really exists) finds expression much later in Althusser's concept of ideological state apparatuses. To re-emphasize the basic point – hegemony saturates all aspects of life and is constantly learned, and re-learned, throughout life. If anything can be described as lifelong learning it is this. The hegemonic relationship exists “throughout society as a whole and for every individual relative to other individuals. It exists between intellectual and non-intellectual sections of the population, between the rulers and ruled, elites and their followers, leaders and led, the vanguard and the body of the army” (ibid. p. 350).

As is probably evident by now, hegemony is a difficult concept to grasp. Of all the ideas I've discussed with groups of adult educators over the years, this is the one people have the hardest time understanding. Subtle and elusive, it seems to slide from our consciousness even as we think we have it. Think of trying to nail down jello (in America) or blancmange (in England) and you have something of the struggle to get this concept clear. When the film “The Matrix” came out in 1999, Linda Kvamme, a participant in a graduate course I was teaching on adult learning theory, found the film helpful in illustrating how she understood the idea. This is entirely in keeping with the spirit of Gramsci's work, since he was fascinated with how narratives in popular culture both reinforced, and sometimes challenged, hegemony.

As we have seen, hegemony describes the process by which one group convinces another that being subordinate is a desirable state of affairs. The subordinate group enthusiastically embraces beliefs and practices that are slowly killing them. This is the premise of “The Matrix”. In the film machines created from artificial intelligence maintain control of humans by saturating their consciousness with a manufactured reality, while keeping them imprisoned in pods. The humans live wholly in the realm of illusion which is experienced as convincingly real. The dominant group (the artificially intelligent machines) does not have to struggle to impose a way of life that the subordinated group (humans) would oppose if only they could understand their situation. Instead, the state of subordination is actively sought out and regarded as desirable.

For example, at one point in the film one of the few rebel humans (played by Joe Pantialano) who has become aware of the hegemonic Matrix decides to betray his small band of counter-hegemonic comrades (led by Lawrence Fishburne). As reward for his treachery Pantialano asks the machines to return him to his previous state of blissful oppression where all aspects of his consciousness are controlled by the Matrix. Begging for our own oppression is what happens when hegemony works smoothly. Those who are exploited enter ideological prisons built by the exercise of their own free will. They choose their own cells, lock their cell doors behind them and then throw the keys out of the cell window as far beyond retrieval as they can, all the while luxuriating in a gleeful sense of self-satisfaction at having completed a job well done. In a situation like this there is no need for elites or state agencies to exercise coercive control. Not only will those being exploited work diligently to ensure their continued subservience, they will take great pride in so doing.

We can bring the concept of hegemony even closer to home by using as an example the metaphor of vocation. Think of how many of your colleagues, perhaps you yourself, speak of adult educational work in terms of fulfilling a vocation. The concept of adult education as vocation – of answering a calling and being in service to learners – appears irreproachable. Who could argue with the notion that good adult educators are selfless servants in the cause of adult learning? This seems praiseworthy indeed. It marks us out as special compared to those moneygrubbers who serve corporate interests and global capitalism. I well remember leaving college in my early twenties and being told by a friend going into industry the riches he expected to earn by the time he was 30, and the kind of car he was going to buy as soon as he started work. My envious resentment of his good fortune was eased only by my self-congratulation concerning my choice of vocation. Unlike my mammon-worshipping friend, I would be helping students realize their full potential thereby increasing the amount of compassion and criticality in the world. ‘He may be saving money’ I thought to myself ‘but I’m saving imaginations, saving souls’.

Viewed from another perspective, however, things are not quite so sunny. There is a dark side to this idea, notwithstanding its morally admirable aspects. Quite simply, this sense of vocation, of fulfilling a calling to the selfless service of others, opens educators to the possibility of exploitation and manipulation. Vocation becomes hegemonic when it is used to justify workers taking on responsibilities and duties that far exceed their energy or capacities, and that destroy their health and personal relationships. In effect their self-destruction serves to keep a system going that is being increasingly starved of resources. If educators will kill themselves taking on more and more work in response to budgets being cut, and if they learn to take pride in this apparently selfless devotion to students, then the system is strengthened. Money can be channeled into corporate tax breaks and military expenditure as educators gladly give more and more for less and less.

Vocation becomes especially hegemonic when filtered through patriarchy, as is evident in predominantly female professions such as teaching. Again and again in my time as a university teacher I have seen female faculty internalizing the ethic of vocation, and being held to a higher standard regarding its realization, than is the case with their male counterparts. Women professors in departments often become cast as the nurturers, known by students for their excellent teaching and advisement. Translated into academic reality this means that women professors are willing to spend time working with students rather than locking themselves away in their offices writing articles and books in an effort to gain tenure. Since dominant ideology presumes men to be less relational, less prone to an ethic of care and compassion (in short, less moved by a sense of vocational calling) they receive less opprobrium for being unavailable to students.

Vocation becomes hegemonic when it is embedded in institutional culture and interpreted to mean that one should be willing to sacrifice one’s mental and physical well being to the cause of student learning (which translates into meaning for the overall institutional good). Imagine the scene: you’re an overworked teacher who has too many students, too many administrative responsibilities, and too little time. A dean or department head comes to you and asks you to take on a section of students taught by a colleague going on

sabbatical. Your supervisor explains it will only be for one semester till your colleague returns and that the students will really benefit from being able to work with you since you're such a good teacher. Then comes the kicker. Your supervisor informs you that the only other faculty member available to work with these students is Professor X. Now it just so happens that Professor X is a well-known idiot – a bigot with no sense of responsibility or compassion. You know you can't live with consigning these unfortunate students to the clutches of an incompetent. So you agree to take the students on, but just for the one semester until your colleague returns from sabbatical. Then, at the end of the semester, you learn that your colleague has resigned the profession, or taken another position, and a budget freeze means that no new instructors will be hired. In the meantime you have formed relationships with the students temporarily assigned to you and you just can't face abandoning them (which would be a betrayal of your sense of vocation). So now a temporary commitment has become permanent.

Cue the next semester. A representative of the faculty senate approaches you to chair a new college-wide committee on critical thinking across the curriculum. You have been chosen because of your knowledge of critical thinking, your ability to work with faculty from different disciplines, and the intellectual credibility you possess in the eyes of your colleagues. The argument is made that this new committee, properly chaired, could be of enormous benefit to the students. It would help generate a common understanding of, and commitment to, the practice of critical thinking across the university. Students would not be exposed to contradictory definitions of critical thinking, and critical abilities developed in earlier courses would be honed and refined, rather than just repeated, as students moved through the curriculum.

Now comes the killer argument. You are told that another person has lobbied vigorously for the chair - Professor Y. Professor Y is supported by a faction known to be hostile to critical thought, and to regard its demonstration by students as an inappropriate challenge to teacher authority. This faction is hoping that by having Professor Y chair the committee the critical thinking across the curriculum initiative will effectively be killed. Professor Y is also known to be expert at divide and rule tactics, and has a history of creating strife among previously harmonious committees. At this point (and very predictably) your sense of vocational calling kicks in and you find yourself agreeing. After all, the last thing you want to have happen is for the students to suffer because of the ill thought out and retrograde changes you know the committee will instigate. So now you have more students than you can possibly handle, and more committee responsibilities than is reasonable, but you remind yourself that this is what fulfilling a vocation is all about. Astoundingly, you feel proud of this situation! After all, your acceptance of these additional responsibilities proves that you are dedicated to your students' well being, truly worthy of the title 'educator'. You wear your enslavement with pride.

When vocation becomes hegemonic in this way it ensures that you start to think of any day on which you don't come home exhausted as a day when you have not been "all that you can be". If you have any energy left for your family, friends, or recreational pursuits, then you have failed to give your all to your students. If, however, all you can manage at

the end of the day is to microwave a T.V. dinner and watch a re-run of “The Nanny”, then you know you’ve done a good day’s work. A state of burn out becomes a sign of your commitment to your vocation. Anything less than total exhaustion indicates a falling short of the mark of complete professionalism.

So what seems on the surface to be a politically neutral idea on which all reasonable persons could agree – that adult education is a vocation of service to learners calling for dedication and hard work – becomes manipulated to mean we should squeeze the work of two or three jobs into the space where one can fit comfortably. Lived out this way adult education as vocation becomes a hegemonic concept; an idea that seems a morally desirable example of commonsense wisdom, but that ends up working against educators’ own best interests. The interests it serves within educational institutions are those of people who wish to run departments and divisions efficiently and profitably while spending the least amount of money, and employing the smallest amount of staff, they can get away with. On a broader scale, education as vocation becomes a metaphor that supports the commodification of learning, the turning of schools and colleges into centers of production concerned to minimize expenditure and maximize output. What is felt as a private moral commitment is actually a mechanism of control and a prop to the maintenance of the exchange economy. As long as teachers view taking on heavier and heavier workloads as examples of their vocational diligence, and as long as they take pride in the level of commitment this shows, then smaller and smaller resources can be devoted to education. These resources can then be diverted to fund tax breaks for the wealthy, or to assist corporations who wish to skirt, or reverse, environmental controls.

The subtle power of hegemony, and the chief reason for its successful operation, is its all pervasive, blanket nature. There seems no chance for opposition, no way to develop alternative possibilities. Defining the enemy, to use Newman’s (1994) phrase, becomes impossible when the enemy is embedded in the thoughts one thinks, the actions one takes, and the relations one lives out, on a daily basis. And even when hegemony is threatened it is very adept at regrouping its forces to define and accommodate oppositional elements. Were it static and immovable then the target would be clear. But hegemony is flexible, malleable, able to adjust and reconfigure its shape to try and block whatever revolutionary impulse emerges to challenge it. However, all is not doom and gloom from the tomb. The hegemonic blanket is never broad or deep enough to cover all parts of the body politic at all moments. Hegemony is always being contested, to a greater or lesser extent, by elements of those it seeks to dominate. So the hegemonic process is really a constant process of realignment as challenges arise to the dominant group’s control, and as this group works to dampen these.

The contested nature of hegemony is emphasized by Williams (1977) who writes that “it is never either total or exclusive. At any time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in the society” (p. 113). Of course, hegemony is ever watchful for these elements, “especially alert and responsive to the alternatives and opposition which question or threaten its dominance” (ibid.). This means that “it has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified” at the same time as “it is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not

at all its own” (p. 112). Consequently, Williams argues, “we have then to add to the concept of hegemony the concepts of counter-hegemony and alternative hegemony, which are real and persistent elements of practice” (pp. 112-113). Adults learn hegemony, to be sure, but they also have the capacity to become critically aware of hegemony as they develop a revolutionary political consciousness.