Week 10: 10 November

Antonio Gramsci: Hegemony

Tony Bennett, ‘Popular Culture and the Turn to Gramsci’, Popular Culture and Social Relations, pp. xi-xix
John Hartley, ‘Hegemony’, ‘Subculture’

N.B. This week’s lecture will focus on both the Frankfurt School and the ‘culture industry’ and Gramsci and hegemony, regardless of what is indicated by the syllabus. This because of our unanticipated review of the Hall ‘Two Paradigms’ article.

[The Culture Industry] proclaims you shall conform, without instruction as to what: conform to that which exists anyway, and to that which everyone thinks anyway as a reflex of its power and omnipresence. (Adorno)

The sign becomes the arena of class struggle. (Volosinov)

Ideas and opinions are not spontaneously ‘born’ in each individual brain: they have had a centre of formation, of irradiation, of dissemination, of persuasion. (Gramsci)

My practicality consists in this, in the knowledge that if you beat your head against the wall it is your head which breaks and not the wall—that is my strength, my only strength. (Gramsci)

Key Themes and Concepts
1) ‘Culture Industry Reconsidered’
2) Gramsci and Hegemony
3) Cultural Studies and ‘the turn to Gramsci’

1) Frankfurt School and the ‘Culture Industry Reconsidered’

Culture Industry (a.k.a. Mass media)
• mass production techniques were being used in film and radio
• culture is produced like cars—‘assembly line’ (to maximize profits)
• culture becomes a commodity
• mass production techniques impacted both how culture was being produced and consumed
• culture produced is standardized and repetitive
• cultural consumption as undemanding and passive
“Culture Industry Reconsidered”

- taken from a 1963 lecture, about 25 years after the term ‘the culture industry’ was first used in his book *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (co-authored with Max Horkheimer)
- it was translated into English in 1975

**A) Characteristics of the Culture Industry**

i) industrial production
- purposely do not use the term ‘mass culture’
- used to emphasize the industrial forms production and distribution of culture for the masses
- that is, the production of cultural commodities tailored for consumption
- not spontaneously (organically) arising from the people

Industry=standardization of culture

ii) capitalist production (profit)

The entire practice of the culture industry transfers the profit motive naked into cultural forms.

- thus the masses are regarded under the principle of their realization as value—i.e. as a profitable audience

**B) Aesthetics (cultural form)**

Adorno is in the Arnoldian/Leavisite tradition thru. a shared concern to the aesthetics of culture

- aesthetics—the internal logic and organizational form of the object of art
Both see a clear distinction b/n high and low culture but there are major differences

1) Arnold/Leavis had a conservative aesthetic
   • culture reinforced the established order

2) Adorno has a progressive aesthetic
   • art can unsettle the established order and facilitates radical social and economic transformation

Adorno is highly critical of the culture industry because of where it focused on the organizational form
   • not on culture or art, but how to make it most profitable

i) Culture Industry
   • focused on the external organization of production—distribution and mechanical reproduction
   • i.e. the profitable commodification of culture

ii) Artists (and cultural critics)
   • focused on the internal organization of the object itself
   • i.e. the inner logic and form of the work of art itself

Adorno:
   There are “laws of form demanded by aesthetic autonomy” either ignored or treated parasitically by the culture industry

Adorno’s basic question:
   What happens to the aesthetic dimension of art/culture when it becomes first, and foremost a commodity in the culture industry?

C) Frankfurt School/critical theory vs. ‘culturalism’
Adorno is also differentiated from ‘culturalism’ in his aesthetic orientation
   i) culturalism
      • took popular culture ‘seriously’ by focusing on it in the first place
      • remember it was rejected out of hand by the Arnoldian/Leavisite tradition
   ii) Adorno (and the Frankfurt School/critical theory)
      • takes popular culture ‘seriously’ by more critically examining its aesthetic quality

Recall the focus of Hoggart and Williams on working class cultural activities themselves
   • culture as actual cultural practices (i.e. bus trip to the ‘seaside’)
The culture industry thesis assumes a commodified relationship
• i.e. culture as something you consume)

How does Adorno ‘take popular culture seriously’?
• by focusing on questions otherwise ‘repressed’ by the culture industry
• questions of quality
• questions of truth/untruth
• aesthetic levels

In short, critical analysis does not even begin until it gets past the surface level of popularity and uncritical reception

This critical analysis leads him to the next level of analysis—the negative effects on the culture industry on mass consciousness

D) ‘Consciousness’ produced by the culture industry
The objectively binding order [of the culture industry is] the status quo.

i) uncritical consensus
• a general uncritical consensus under the rubric of advertising/consumption

ii) disregard for ‘the masses’
• the culture industry assumes a mass mentality
• furthermore, they treat the ‘mentality of the masses’ as if it were “given and unchanging”

iii) conformity not consciousness
• Adorno confers extraordinary power to the ‘ideology’ of the culture industry
• that is, he asserts that conformity has replaced consciousness
• the order that emerges is completely unreflexive

For example, Adorno writes that narratives of the culture industry are “exhortations to toe the line, behind which stand the most powerful interests.”

Like Gramsci, then, he assumes a correlation between the content of popular culture and dominant material interests
• they differ radically on how it is correlated

Adorno’s bottom line: the content of the culture industry “strengthens blind, opaque authority.”
E) Stupefaction and ‘substitute gratification’
Adorno concludes that the overall effect of the culture industry is “the anti-enlightenment” and anti-democratic

[The Culture Industry] impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves.

He considers this to be a basic precondition for democratic society

Instead, the culture industry turns people into masses, then despises them while obstructing their potential for emancipation

Summary of Adorno and Frankfurt School

1) Critical theory is important for rethinking the relationship between culture and politics
   • previous Marxist analysis tended to limit the political to the state and economy
   • the Frankfurt School saw culture—in its everyday practices and concerns—as a site where ideology (the political) always operated

2) But they were also criticized for their pessimistic perspective
   • does the culture industry really function in such a totalizing and unidirectional fashion?
   • does it play such a direct role of ‘thought control’ (unthinking conformity)?

3) Do they have an adequate model of power?
   • does domination function so effectively?
   • what about the possibilities and practices of resistance?

2) Gramsci and Hegemony

[...] the dominant group is co-ordinated concretely with the general interests of the subordinate groups, and the life of the state is conceived of as a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria [...] between the interests of the fundamental group and those of the subordinate groups - equilibria in which the interests of the dominant group prevail, but only up to a certain point, i.e. stopping short of narrowly corporate economic interest. (Gramsci)
We know from the Hall article (‘Two Paradigms’) that hegemony became perhaps the most important single concept for Cultural Studies thru. the late 70s and early 80s

It is favoured because it takes a more nuanced and sophisticated approach to the material and symbolic components of culture

Specifically, it does not posit a simple or mechanical determination of cultural and ideological expression (the symbolic) by the mode of production (the material)

Instead, while dominant meaning exists, it develops in complex and variegated struggles, and it always in process

Who is Antonio Gramsci?

• an Italian political and cultural theorist
• he was a peasant from Sardinia who went to university in Torino (home of FIAT) when workers were in a state of insurrection
• asked questions similar to Marx regarding the persistence of unequal social and economic relations
• theorized the rise of industrialization and Fascism
• jailed by Mussolini
• died there in 1937—but managed to write prodigiously (The Prison Notebooks)

Gramsci emphasized agency (the struggle inherent in hegemony) and rejected economic determinism (hence his focus on culture and ‘the struggle over meaning’).
What is Hegemony?
• from the Greek ‘egemon’ meaning ruler or leader (usually in regards to the state)
• in the 19th c. it was used in reference to one state’s dominance over another
• Gramsci changed usage of the word hegemony changed in the 20th c.
• it refers to the ability of dominant classes to exercise social and cultural leadership

Capitalist society is reproduced not only thru. economic means (i.e. the mode of production) but also thru. cultural means

Hegemony as the key to understanding the cultural side

Gramsci’s innovation was to focus not on the force of dominant power (i.e. coercion) but on consent

Consent attained by the ongoing construction of a symbolic ‘force field’ that establishes the ‘common sense’ of an age
• denotes the exercise of power via social, cultural, and intellectual leadership or direction
• primarily power as persuasion, inducement, and incitement
• thus culture (and media) are key to gaining hegemony

For hegemony to function, the particular is presented as being universal

Thus, everyday culture functions in a way that renders particular class interests (organized into a dominant ‘hegemonic’ bloc) into an apparently natural, inevitable, eternal, and hence unarguable general interest.

Hegemony functions on a general cultural level but is also inscribed into institutions
• school, work, the law and the state all produce knowledge and meaning (establishing a logic of sense or the world around us, rendering it as natural)
• such institutions are typically captured by hegemonic blocs

The metaphor for hegemony is the velvet glove for the iron fist

Summary of the key characteristics of hegemony
• i) dominant classes exercise social and cultural leadership
• ii) done in part thru. gaining consent form subordinate classes
• iii) dominant classes need to form temporary coalitions to attain such consent
• iv) key strategy therein is making particular interests (i.e. of
capitalists) seem universal  
• v) functions on both the cultural and institutional level  
• vi) functions best when it seems most natural  
• vii) never fully set once and for all  
• viii) complex arrangement of alliances or blocs, constantly formed and reformed

Remember that any oppositional practice can be counter hegemonic

3) Cultural Studies and ‘the turn to Gramsci’

Tony Bennett’s article outlines the increasing importance in the late 1970s of Gramsci—and especially the concept of hegemony—for the discipline of cultural studies

The basic idea is that hegemony makes it easier to examine the politically- and economically-charged ‘struggle over meaning’ that plays out in popular culture

Remember that both paradigms—structuralism and culturalism—saw popular culture as being governed by dominant ideologies  
• though there was strong disagreement as to how dominant ideologies functioned in popular culture  
• but both culturalism and structuralism tended to divide popular culture neatly along class lines—bourgeois and working class

Bennett notes that Gramsci’s hegemony was seen as a way forward from the this paradigmatic impasse

Gramsci was an innovative and radical thinker among Marxist orthodoxy

He thought culture was more complicated and not to easily split along class lines

More specifically, he did see bourgeois ideology as dominant, but only as a result of a form of negotiation w/ the working class in a struggle for hegemony

So the ‘cultural leadership’ attained by the bourgeois only comes thru. some genuine negotiations  
• not by the obliteration of the opposition but by the articulation of some of their interests into the hegemonic group

In cultural terms, we can still see this at play in contemporary politics  
• Bush and NASCAR  
• Harper and hockey
These changes in the hegemonic group are meant to convince those in the opposition to accept their political leadership.

In turn, this breaks down any easy or natural opposition b/n the bourgeois and working class.

In this way, hegemonic formations are always in process and provisional in a never-ending process of accommodation and reformation.

• also, subordinate classes never fully accept their domination and always engage in new struggles to greater and lesser success.

Hegemony, then, is a more flexible and subtle concept.

Popular culture, thru. the lens of hegemony:

• both dominated and oppositional

To the degree that it is implicated in the struggle for hegemony...the field of popular culture is structured by the attempt of the ruling class to win hegemony and by the forms of opposition to this endeavour. As such, it consists not simply of an imposed mass culture that is coincident with the dominant ideology, nor simply of spontaneously oppositional cultures, but is rather an area of negotiation between the two within which—in different particular types of popular culture—dominant, subordinate and oppositional cultural and ideological values and elements are mixed in different permutations. (Bennett)

In this way, popular culture is in a never-ending process of struggle.

Advantages of hegemony:

• rejects class essentialism in cultural expression
• rejects simplistic perspective of being ‘for’ or ‘against’ popular culture
• sees culture as not fixed but as dynamic, always in process
• opens culture up to wider examination (i.e. race, gender, ethnicity, etc.)