

To appear in: James R. Bailey and Stewart Clegg, eds (2007), *International Encyclopedia of Organization Studies*, London: Sage.

HEGEMONY

Definition

Hegemony is the form of political leadership based on the skilful mix of force and consent. The consent of those being led is secured through a variety of material, discursive, and institutional apparatuses through which the worldview of the ruling class is rendered universal and common sense. Hegemony refers both to the political and economic practice used to obtain dominance, as well as to the outcome of such a process, or, to the particular historic condition of class supremacy achieved through a balance of coercion and consent.

Conceptual Overview

The term hegemony (from the Greek *hegeisthai*: to lead) has been used since antiquity for describing the dominance of one nation over another. Its modern use, however, derives from the analysis provided in the 1930s by the Italian Marxist political leader and scholar Antonio Gramsci.

Deviating from the prevailing Marxist view of the time, which viewed ideology as a set of values and beliefs mechanically imposed for defending a specific economic order, Gramsci claimed that the organization of consent arises as a contingent accomplishment of strategic interventions and is based on the deployment of specific figures and apparatuses. A critical role is played in particular by the organic intellectuals, who perform the task of extending the range of consent by imposing the hegemonic views through prestige and intellectual seduction. An equally important part is played by the education system, the bureaucracy, the popular writers and film-makers, and the media in general.

Because in any given historical moment more than one class or group aspires to impose its dominance, hegemony is necessarily a continuous exercise and an unfinished task: maintaining a dominant position requires activity both in the economic, political, and cultural spheres.

Gramsci's notion of hegemony had the historical merit of introducing a cultural and strategic dimension into the rigid deterministic Marxist model of the time. In doing this, he provided a much more sophisticated account of domination, one in which hegemonic ideology mediates between social being and social consciousness. At the same time, he broadened the meaning of politics beyond the immediate struggle for control of the means of coercion, to include the activities which organize (or disorganize) consent within the economy, state, and civil society.

Gramsci's idea that leadership relies on the cultural activity of social groups as much as on their political and economic influence attracted great interest during the cultural and linguistic turn in European social theory in the 1970s and 1980s. The idea of hegemony appealed especially to authors who were trying to rescue Marxism from its orthodox slumbers, but resonated also with post-structuralists and post-modern scholars. The notion of hegemony, in fact, supported the idea of the historicity of cultural and discursive formations and their capacity to constitute at the same time the instrument, the arena, and the outcome of power struggles. Often deprived of its original immediate practical flavour (for Gramsci, who was one of the founders of the Italian Communist Party, hegemony constituted above all a political strategy), the idea was thus extended beyond the realm of concrete politics and became a general principle for explaining the relationship between identity, cultural formations, and domination. Authors such as Laclau and Mouffe, for example, argued that hegemony is a generalised political strategy that operates at the level of the formation of personal identity.

Hegemony is, in fact, the attempt to impose a dominant horizon of social orientation and action through discourse. A hegemonic discourse, such as e.g. capitalism or managerialism, aims thus at fixing meaning and identity in a context marked by antagonistic forces; it does so by imposing an ideology which is a totalizing horizon with its basis hidden from view and hence subtracted from scrutiny and

dissent. All discourses, however, are unable to fulfil their will to totality and constitute by definition unfinished attempts to stabilise and condense social meaning around privileged signifiers. Hegemony is therefore a form of politics based on the continuous effort by both the dominant and the antagonist groups to occupy the spaces left undomesticated by the prevailing discourses. Hegemony, in this sense, signifies both the organization of consent around any dominant group and the possibility of constructing counter-hegemonic formations by dis-articulating the existing signifying relationships and constituting new ones.

Hegemony in Organization Studies

In organization studies, the concept of hegemony has been central to the work of critical management theorists, who have used it in exploring the multifaceted nature of the organisational manufacturing of consent. Advanced capitalist conditions of work, they argue, can be conceived as a hegemonic production regime. Starting from the 1930s, state interventions, such as social insurance and labour legislation, allowed in fact the establishment of a consent-based form of capitalist dominance based on the converging interests in a stable accumulation regime and economic security. This process has been supported by a variety of practices which weakened collective resistance and mobilised consent toward increased productivity. Workers have thus become actively involved in perpetuating their own subordination. In exchange for marginal local gains and constrained forms of autonomy, such as in Quality Circles, they effectively waive the possibility of pursuing their wider class interests thus participating in the perpetuation of the hegemonic regime.

The concept of hegemony has also been used for critically reappraising the use of cultural perspectives in the 1980s and knowledge management discourses in the late 1990s. From a hegemony-informed perspective, cultural engineering and knowledge management can be conceived as attempts at homogenising norms, values, and discursive practices and at constituting work identities which prevent the emergence of antagonist perspectives and forces.

Critical commentary and future directions

The notion of hegemony is central to the project of Critical Management Studies and is likely to become increasingly relevant as this approach gains legitimacy and academic acceptance. Critical Management Studies stem in fact from a hegemonic reading of the project of corporate capitalism, bringing to the fore the supportive role played by management studies and business schools. It argues that business academics have often played the role of organic intellectuals both by manufacturing consensus-building tools and by naturalising what is in fact a specific historically situated economic and organizational order. This hegemonic reading of their position in society in turn supports the effort of Critical Management scholars to find an alternative and less collusive position, which requires taking a critical and reflexive stance and denouncing the assumed objectivism and neutrality of mainstream management science as a masquerade which is already part of a well formed project of domination.

While Critical Management Studies have interpreted hegemony mainly as a kind of academic antagonist political practice, one which is aimed at contesting “from within” the consolidated views of modern capitalism and corporate society, the future of the notion of hegemony in management studies lies mainly in its still unexploited capacity to illuminate critical aspects of organizational life from a political angle. Once freed of some of the baggage deriving from its Marxist origin, the notion of hegemony becomes a powerful analytical tool for investigating the political dimension implicit in the performance of all aspects of organizational life. The concept of hegemony is both a tool for understanding the accomplishment of any form or organization as the outcome of a struggle between diverging interests, but also a useful antidote to static and polar views of organizational life. For example, the notion of hegemony emphasises that consent and coercion should not be conceived of as a polarity. Consent and coercion co-exist in a complex and shifting dynamic based on complex tactics of attempted domination and clever local resistance, conflict and alliance, imposition of meaning through

discourse and antagonism. The notion of hegemony becomes thus a powerful conceptual tool for exploring in detail the practices of domination and resistance, opening a still largely unexplored territory for future research.

Cross-references

See also: Activism, Critical Management Studies, Domination, Identity, Ideology, Managerial Capitalism, Organizational Discourse, Politics of Organizational Culture, Power, Radical Feminist Theory, Social Theory, Subordination.

References and further readings

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Laclau, E. & Mouffe, C. (2001). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (2nd ed.) London: Verso.

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