

# Counterhegemony

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Counterhegemony—a growing and diverse alliance of forces not just in resistance to the existing, oppressive alliance ranged against them, but exploding beyond it in a great scattering of sparks. New visions, new ways of being, burning through the limits of what can be thought. New and better worlds collectively imagined and created through sedimentations of small victories or with the rubble remaining after a victorious revolution. Whether the old world must first be taken over, smashed, or simply shed like a skin may be a point of contention. But the old world has had its day.

In this, counterhegemony somewhat belies its name. To be in true resistance it must think, imagine and dream beyond hegemony, breaking through its false limits. Yet it is a word belonging to our long war of position. For those like Pablo González Casanova (1984), writing optimistically in the midst of Central American revolutions of the 1980s, there is little value in the idea of “counterhegemony”. In the wars of manoeuvre in Nicaragua and El Salvador, freedom fighters equipped with AK-47s and machetes required a theorising of the ways in which the left could build a shattered hegemony anew. Roque Dalton sang of love, denounced dictators and first dreamed then fought for revolution and the creation of a new world (as did Agostinho Neto and so many other poets in the face of colonial, neo-colonial and imperial forces). The “counter” existed in El Salvador both in open armed resistance in the turmoil of an old hegemony failing, and in the guerrilla schools teaching literacy and *conscientización* beneath the mountain trees, developing better tools than guns for the new world to be created. Even in battle, the counter could not be defined simply by what it stood against, but its violence made stark the sides and the stakes. The limitations of our language set utopian struggle for a better world in definition against “hegemony” as it stands in the present. Yet although counterhegemony is founded in resistance to an oppressive present, it cannot remain limited to it.

The richness of hegemony as a term in theorising revolution comes initially from Antonio Gramsci, although Perry Anderson (1976) shows its previous use by intellectuals of the Russian Revolution and the Third International. A trade-union organiser, journalist and party activist, Gramsci lived through a time when it seemed the revolutionary moment opened up by the Bolsheviks might spread through the militant industrial councils of 1920s Turin. Unlike González Casanova, he only found time and space for theorising hegemony in a moment of that movement’s most profound defeat. He wrote his notebooks in a fascist prison, struggling to understand not just the reknitting of a new, increasingly violent

hegemony under Mussolini and Hitler, but also the politics of the rural, poverty-stricken Mezzogiorno, where he grew up, in relation to the wealthy, industrialising North of Italy.

In reaching to understand these events through a Marxist framework already 80 years old, Gramsci opened up a new way to think theoretically about how power was built and maintained. The revolutionary struggle is not as simple as one class exerting force against another, an exploited majority of workers and producers in constant opposition to a wealthy minority owning the means of production. Instead the forces of domination are a forged conglomeration, an alliance of groups and forces that come together in their own interest to support those in power. Where power is maintained purely through force it is fragile. Hegemony only exists where there is a balance of force and consent enforcing rule over the majority, expressed and buttressed through media, associations, and popular culture. This balance between domination and acceptance brings about a construction of common sense that works to limit imagination itself to “a particular way of seeing the world and human nature and relationships”. Raymond Williams (1983:145) explains what this means for how we understand revolution, which requires “the overthrow of a specific hegemony ... an integral form of class rule which exists not only in political and economic institutions and relationships, but also in active forms of experience and consciousness”. A new, counter-, alternative hegemony must be created to replace the old, both internally and externally—the war of position must be carried out on economic, political and cultural fronts.

This expansion of revolutionary activity and agency along axes of culture, race, gender, nationality etc.—characteristics that cannot be reduced to class—allows the many complexities of oppression and strategies of control to be understood as they articulate with economic and political structures. It removes a reductionist blockage and spatialises revolution. Counterhegemony has a location—the subaltern. The most well known development of this aspect of Gramsci’s theories undoubtedly emerged from the Subaltern Studies Group in South Asia, founded in 1982. As Veena Das (1989:312) writes, part of their importance lay in establishing the “centrality of the historical moment of rebellion in understanding the subalterns as subjects of their own histories”. They are the historical agents of change.

Also wrestling with these issues was the subaltern studies group in Latin America, translating texts and undertaking their own reclamation of voice and history through the work of, among others, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and Rossanna Barragan. In 1997 they published translations of key texts of the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group, but their work had long drawn on the same concepts, theorising subaltern subjects in historical moments of counterhegemonic rebellion (see also Mignolo 2012). Stuart Hall in the UK and Laura Pulido in the US worked to understand the subaltern positionality internal to what Paul Gilroy (1999) calls the “overdeveloped” nations, as well as external to it within the global South. These insights brought together with those emerging from Black and Indigenous feminisms—Angela Davis, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Andrea Smith, for example—signal a possible definition of subaltern as a category in which any one

individual's place (or positionality) must be understood as a relational constellation rather than a fixed identity, shaped by the intersectionalities of class, race, gender, sexuality, ability, and immigration status, language and all the multitude of differences used as bases for oppression. In the balance of force and consent, these are the positionalities upon which the full force of domination is often expended. Cast outside of the community of consent, the demonisation of the poor, the working class, the immigrant, the young people of colour serves to bind the alliance of privileged groups ever tighter, especially for those whose relative privilege is precarious. For this very reason, it is not simply from precarity but from subaltern locations that the clearest view of hegemony can be found.

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) describe the possibilities of counter-hegemonic alliance working across difference, multiple identities coming together in chains of equivalence to recreate the world. Theorised through Derrida, difference becomes rooted wholly in discourse. Nothing is fixed, any alliance is possible. For those drawing on the work of subaltern studies, however, Gramsci's own method demands a deep rooting in the concrete histories of place and specific hierarchies of oppression. In allowing for the cultural constructions of race and gender, there is still no denying their terrible, death-dealing materiality (Gilmore 2002). Theorising counterhegemony must escape abstraction, stretch to understand the world as it is (and long has been)—global, dominated first by Europe and now by the United States. Counterhegemony has a location—in the camps and segregated communities of colour in the North, and across the Global South. The overdeveloped nations still appropriate a majority of global resources, still dominate along political, economic and cultural fronts through a combination of force and consent.

Charles Mills (1997:18) writes that the global system of white supremacy contains "an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional)". Such ignorance produces the "ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made" (Mills 1997:18). Racial and patriarchal logics articulating with the logics of capitalism have worked to place the subaltern outside of concepts of community, citizenship, and at times of humanity itself. This process has taken place as a project of (neo)colonial and imperial domination through the work of the World Bank, IMF, WTO alongside black ops, pre-emptive strikes and illegal processes of extradition for imprisonment and torture. But it has also worked within national boundaries. The continuing murderous assault on black bodies in the United States displays graphically the deadly force applied with impunity against those considered outside the (white) communities of consent. Likewise, environmental racism has long inflicted prosperity's costs of pollution and waste upon subaltern communities least able to bear them. As all of us hurtle towards global environmental catastrophe, these longer-term costs of global transformation are now falling due. Again, it is the subaltern who is already paying without ever having enjoyed prosperity.

It is not from the racialised and gendered positions of privilege that such hegemonic formations can be best understood, but from the subaltern positionality with its daily experience of hegemonic violence and oppression. To be of the

community of consent is to be subject to a kind of blindness that must be actively undone. This is not to argue that blindness belongs to the community of consent alone, but only that it is maintained through a weight of both conscious and unconscious privilege that must be painfully acknowledged and picked apart. This is a process which can be undertaken in choosing a new positionality in relation to the interlocking systems of oppression, but it must be undertaken in all humility as a collective project, with a willingness to commit to, and to learn side by side with, others in struggle. Paulo Freire (1993) describes just such a process in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, by which the subaltern working collectively and in dialogue names reality in order to transform it. This requires of them also a conscious choice, but to them belongs the ability to see the world most truly.

We cannot also forget that in many colonial spaces where domination has ruled above consent, strong connections to culture, as well as political and economic structures never fully incorporated within the hegemonic, colonial project of European modernity, continue to develop and grow. Out of these reservoirs are emerging movements of vibrancy and hope distinct from Europe's old left (Mbembe 2015; Rivera Cusicanqui 2010; Santos 2016). We must welcome the new organic intellectuals, the ferment of theory and praxis emerging from subaltern communities and countries in a multitude of languages and idioms. This is where counterhegemony will be built and the new world ushered in.

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