Understanding Hegemony and Encouraging Counter-Hegemonies Within and Beyond Anthropology

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Smith (1999: 22) argues that in examining recent social theorists and anthropologists subscribing to postmodernism, modernism, critical political economy, a combination thereof or an unmentioned distinct variation, it becomes apparent that most do not want to give up a theoretical tie to Gramsci, and specifically his analytical concept of hegemony. Given such a contested intellectual terrain and my own desire to demonstrate allegiance to Gramsci’s firm commitment political analysis inextricably linked to action and struggle, this paper seeks to explore hegemony as a historical, critical, politicized concept.

Theoretical assertions developed by recent scholars will lay the foundation of this discussion, and will be followed by an examination of the specific, historical case of the liberal nation-making project in Ecuador, as highlighted and analysed in Clark (1998). To conclude, I will put forward some politically-engaged questions about the ways we can continue to reflect on hegemonic realities, as well as present and future opportunities for academic and political action.

Gramsci (Hoare and Smith [eds.] 1971, Hoare [ed.] 1977) wrote from his jail cell in the 1920s and 30s in Italy, where he was imprisoned for socialist political activity. He wrote of hegemony as a process whereby the dominant classes in a society lead and direct materially, as well as ideologically, through the state and civil society.

In understanding hegemony and hegemonic processes thoroughly, it is necessary to see the intertwining of ideology, discourse and material circumstances, thus critical anthropology can provide an especially effective lens. Many anthropologists have coupled Gramsci’s concepts with their own ethnographic experience, and present profound, valuable, holistic ideas on hegemonic processes that are significant in different times and among different human societies. A hegemony can be identified when elites in a given society attempt to transform their ideology into taken-for-granted common sense - economically, philosophically, politically, culturally. Roseberry (1989: 45) posits hegemony as a "concept [which] refers to a complex set of ideas, meanings and associations, and a way of talking about or expressing those meanings and associations, which present an order of inequality and domination as if it were an order of equality and reciprocity, which give a product of history the appearance of a natural order."

The Comaroffs (1992: 28-29) use a similar description: "We take hegemony to refer to that order of signs and material practices, drawn from a specific cultural field, that come to be taken for granted as the natural, universal and true shape of social being... It consists of things that go without saying... Hegemony, at its most effect, is mute..." The elites’ hegemonic power strives to be simultaneously invisible, while creating catalysts and
effects that are amplified and magnified everywhere, and serve their own interests.

Williams (1977: 108-110), furthermore, argues that a hegemony must be seen as more than mere culture or ideology, but as a complex, social, interconnected and interconnecting process: "It is a whole body of practices and experiences, over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values."

It is important to reflect on the significance, depth and breadth of hegemony, but also emphasize that no hegemony is complete, total, unidentifiable or in-penetrable. Hegemony does not, as Thompson (1978: 162) puts it, "impose an all-embracing view of life; rather, it imposes blinkers, which inhibit vision in certain directions while leaving it clear in others." Within a hegemonic system, certain forms of resistance are permitted; certain questions, while being presented as subversive are, in fact, acceptable. Societies still consist of heterogeneous, diverse people, livelihoods, communities, histories, practices and experiences, despite hegemonic efforts to imposing the elites' views and practices as all-encompassing. People can continue to operate according to the hegemonic limitations on thought and action using allotted channels for resistance, or scholars and citizens, through analysis and struggle, can denaturalize hegemonic processes and fundamentally challenge the very existence of the thoughts, practices, institutions, traditions, omissions, negations and silences that constitute elite, hegemonic rule with counter-hegemonies.

A historical example which will provide theoretical and ethnographic insights into one case where elites imposed hegemonic processes and subordinate groups responded is Clark's (1998) monograph, The Redemptive Work: Railway and Nation in Ecuador, 1895-1930. She examines the early twentieth century liberal project in Ecuador and its effects on the social relations among the central state authorities, the coastal and highland elites, and the various groups of local Indians.

Clark (1998) begins with her interpretation of hegemony and applies it to Ecuador. She argues that elites used their heightened access to political and economic power to construct a specific material and ideological arena for thought and action. Roseberry is cited, and he posits that hegemony constructs "a common material framework for living through, talking about, and acting upon social orders characterised by domination... [hegemony] is in part, discursive, a common language or way of talking about social relationships that sets out the central terms around which and in terms of, which contestations and struggles can occur" (Clark 1998: 6). In other words, Clark (1998) emphasizes that hegemony channels the ways in which society is perceived and agency is conceived. Subordinate groups do not submit to an obviously or brutally imposed system of rule, but rather accept the hegemony's parameters, as the arena in which they will continue to express their own historically specific demands.

This was the nature of hegemony in early twentieth century Ecuador - subordinate groups submitted to hegemonic restrictions on their forms of expression, organisation and mobilisation, while they simultaneously continued to resist oppression through the very system set up for the benefit of the elites (Clark 1998).

In examining the hegemonic processes in Ecuador, therefore, it is necessary to understand the political, economic, social, discursive and
ideological levels of the liberal hegemonic project and the ways in which an area of seeming shared meaning and experience were created. It is also important to demonstrate that the area's Indian peasants' demands were not suppressed or eliminated, but were instead articulated and organised along acceptable lines.

The early twentieth century saw the rapid ascendancy of an international, integrated liberal capitalist system, concomitantly with a well-developed ideology of political liberalism. Transnational laissez-faire economics, the separation of church and state, the promotion of equality before the law, notions of individualism, movement, progress, modernisation and connection were all interwoven into the elite Ecuadorians' liberalism (Clark 1998). An integral part of actualising this liberal project was the transformation of Ecuador into a modern, unified nation, connected by a transnational railway and with a strong, centralised state and. Political rhetoric spoke of Ecuador needing to "greet the future" with "the indissoluble link, the steel embrace between all zones" (Clark 1998: 45). Clark (1998) argues that individual effort and achievement were also stressed and the state reformed many institutions, including the education and prison systems, in order to develop specific liberal morals and physical strength among the people to support Ecuadorian advancement.

Two main political and economic groups are presented as central to the promotion of the liberal agenda. The highland elites were usually hacendado owners produced for the domestic market, while the coastal plantation owners oriented their exports to the international market (Clark 1998). These two dominant groups had their own specific interests in the railway construction and tensions existed between them. The coastal elites wanted to transform the highlands, curbing church power and freeing up indigenous labour, in order to hasten the modernisation of what was seen as a stagnant, isolated region. The highland elites were interested in moving their products to the coast. In addition, the government wanted to promote national unity, economic progress overall and state centralisation.

The hegemonic project in Ecuador, must, then, be seen as an interconnected bundle. Ideas, words and tangible results constituted the hegemonic entirety. The railway, labour relations and political rhetoric intertwined to construct, express and reinforce the liberal hegemony. It was articulated through language of movement, progress and connection "in which both highland and coastal elites could identify their own interests" (Clark 1998: 66). Legislation and state institutions were established to order, regulate and centralise authority, as an implementation and regimentation or ritualisation of hegemonic power. In addition, elites were to "push through the establishment of the secular state, which was essential to their economic and political power" (Clark 1998: 57). Essentially, liberal hegemony in Ecuador was multi-faceted. It involved the construction of a railway, the promotion of modernity, the legislation of liberal values and, on the whole, the creation of a nation in which economic and political power was linked and controlled by these very changes. The hegemony was simultaneously material and ideological. Liberal elites successfully imposed their values side by side with the necessary institutions to maintain and promote their wealth and power.

In addition to examining the whole of the hegemonic project from the
elites' perspective, it is important to consider the specifics of some of the new, liberal institutions, as well as the reactions of local populations. A hegemony does, by definition, involve subordinate people, and by considering their responses, it is possible to demonstrate that the liberal hegemony in Ecuador not only provided elites with benefits, but was more or less accepted by Indians.

The liberal hegemony promoted law and equality as central components of the modern nation of Ecuador. Specific populations recognised these ideas and "not only did local Indians use the idiom of citizenship and the freedom of movement in their petitions to higher authorities, but in the 1920s they actually invited state officials into their communities to mediate in their labour disputes" (Clark 1998: 177). Labour disputes did not disappear within liberal Ecuador, and occasionally, disputes resulted from new, liberal legislation about labour migration and labour rights. However, the same legislation and the liberal state's hegemony as a whole "provided some of the tools for dealing with the conflicts that arose" (Clark 1998: 212). The hegemony had been successful in its attempt to construct the state and liberalism as protectors of Indians and promoters of fair and equal treatment under the law. Elites, while irritated by the intervention of state officials in employee-employer disputes, were nonetheless provided with a dispute resolution mechanism which did not require them to deal with Indian revolutionaries wishing to usurp their wealth and power.

Similarly, Indians were able to refer directly to equality and legality, and local leaders often travelled to larger urban centres such as Riobamba and Quito to present petitions or complaints. The liberal hegemony's prioritisation of law demonstrates its success in the "setting of terms under which subsequent struggles [were] conducted" (Clark 1998: 177). Because of access to political authorities, organisation and collaboration among different indigenous groups became muted. Clark (1998) demonstrates that when Indians complained (through the appropriate outlets provided) additional laws were then set up to improve local social relations, contributing to the sense that the state was responsive. The hegemonic project, in this way, successfully maintained law and order in liberal Ecuador by providing enough opportunities for the expression of indigenous opposition and criticism, and by delivering them results compatible with the hegemony and the liberal agenda.

Clark (1998), at the outset, argues that no hegemony is complete because of differential power relations and varying life experiences, and posits that subordinate groups will often manipulate the allotted opportunities or simply use the outlets, straightforwardly, in order to better their immediate circumstances. Subordinate groups in Ecuador often subscribed to the hegemonic processes as opportunities to express their legitimate concerns; however, they also refused to participate in the liberal project in some instances. When the railway was being constructed, many Indians refused to work in areas deemed snake-infested or disease-ridden and pieces of the track itself often went missing, the precise reason or perpetrators not known for certain, but angry Indians were prime suspects (Clark 1998). As a result, the government was forced to explore various options including cash and product payment advances and Jamaican labour recruitment. Ultimately, however, "many workers took advantage of the availability of well-paid labour in the area, once the.
construction had moved out of the tropical zones and when it did not interfere with their agricultural tasks" (Clark 1998: 187). Indians resisted elements of what was being asked of them, but, in the end, upon obtaining more pleasing conditions, accepted their role as labourers.

Clark (1998) argues that participants occupied different social locations on local and national levels, both within their own immediate social groups and in relation to larger ones; were integrated unevenly into political and economic processes; and were privy to differential historic and contemporary conditions. Thus, individual relations to hegemonic processes varied. People experienced the world in many different ways which often contradict the hegemony. As well, the dominant groups constructing hegemonic processes were not without internal cleavages nor differential power relations and interests. Therefore, people from all social positions may produce new forms of discourse or alternative meanings and selectively use elements of hegemonic discourse for their own circumstances and in relation to their own experiences, stretching the intended limits of the hegemony and demonstrating its permeability (Clark 1998).

In the early stages of the liberal project, control over subordinate groups, and even the channelling of their resistance was far from effective and complete. However, it is possible to argue that the Indians' eventual submission actually reinforces the strength of the hegemony, and they did not subvert or challenge the liberal hegemony to any significant, threatening, transformative degree. It is impossible to know what type and to what degree resistance would have continued or in what direction Indians might have gone had they not submitted to the government and accepted their positions as labourers. Were their immediate situations considered to be too desperate, or did they feel as though submission and small rewards were the only option?

It becomes imperative, therefore, in analysing hegemonies, in Ecuador and elsewhere, historically and in the present, to ask about what parts of people's lived experience and history take priority in their decisions to resist, react and express political concerns? How are people choosing the issues over which they will struggle? Which individuals and groups, when, why, how and under what conditions will people choose not just to ask for reform, but to conceptualize, demand and create social and cultural transformation? Roseberry (1989: 54) suggests that "[w]e need to allow for the creative and sometimes surprising activity of human subjects, living conditioned lives and acting in conditioned ways with results that have a determined and understandable shape, and sometimes, under conditions not of their choosing and with results that cannot be foreseen."

In other words, there is a need to focus on opportunities, not limitations. As anthropologists and citizens, we need to seek out examples, ask questions and listen. We need to recognize that hegemonic processes are evident among those we study, and among ourselves. Smith (1999) argues for an anthropology that is committed to fundamental critiques of hegemony, as well as part of the anti-hegemonic processes developing alternatives. The neoliberal, capitalist hegemony, has various claws and teeth, but the same rapacious core which seeks to stretch all over the earth. It is evident in the tuition bills of anthropology students in Ontario, in the transnational free trade agreements being negotiated secretly in various boardrooms across the Americas, in the slums of Dar Es
Salaam, in the bank accounts of those who promote it, and in the silences of those who do nothing. Gill (2000) recounts the specific impacts of the International Monetary Fund's program of privatization and deregulation, and the resulting slashing of public spending and social services, on the Aymara indigenous people in Bolivia; and the multiple ways in which they are responding. She asks about how "these changing social relationships [are] transforming people's sense of what they can do by themselves and with others and what is improbable, unimaginable, or simply absurd?" (Gill 2000: 4). Are there questions and social relations that anthropologists have deemed improbable or absurd? I argue that inextricable to improbability, absurdity and unimaginability are opportunities, and that critical, politically-engaged anthropology can help us uncover, highlight and create diverse examples of counter-hegemonic denaturalization, imagination and hope.

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