

M. A. Sociology Semester IV, Paper I

Unit I – Antonio Gramsci

Topic – Concept of Cultural Hegemony

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Question- Elaborate Antonio Gramsci 's theory of Hegemony

1-The concept of cultural Hegemony was given by Italian political theorist, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) in his famous – ‘Prison Notebooks’ which was edited and translated in English by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. Prison Notebooks was published in the year 1971.

2-The term Hegemony derives from Greek word – ‘ Hegemon’; which means leader; prominent power or dominant state or person. The term is widely used to denote political dominance. Gramsci gave a specific concept of Hegemony known as Cultural Hegemony.

3-Gramsci sees Hegemony as cultural leadership which is exercised by the ruling class.

4-Hegemony is a process of domination where by one set of ideas subverts the other. Its seen as a process whereby one group in society exerts leadership over others. Gramsci sees culture as one of the major sites where the struggle for Hegemony takes place.

5-Where as the economic Marxists tended to emphasize the economy and the coercive aspects of state domination, Gramsci emphasized “Hegemony and cultural leadership”. (Ritzer Sociological Theory).

6-Gramsci parted with conventional Marxists in arguing against- economic determinism. He was of the view that there is reciprocity between structure and super structure. It is not always that economic infrastructure determines the occurrences in the super structure of society. Although the

economic infrastructure affects the superstructure, the reverse is also possible.

7-Gramsci divided the superstructure of society into two parts.(levels)

(1) Political Society : It consisted of what is normally called ,the state.

The state uses direct force by the use of Police; Army ; legal system ; to create consent on those groups who do not “consent” i.e. it uses direct coercive power to create consent in the society.

(2) Civil Society : It consisted of those institutions which are normally thought of as private particularly the Church (in western societies), mass media ; political parties... For Gramsci , “ the intellectuals are the dominant groups, “the deputies” exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government”.(Prison Notebooks, page 12)

8- Both the Political society and Civil society function to create hegemony. Political society uses direct force or coercion to create hegemony. The civil society creates or indirectly induces “ Spontaneous” consent through various institutions. The masses readily move their social lives in the direction the dominant fundamental group wants. Civil society reproduces its hegemony by ensuring that the mass of the population “spontaneously” consents to the general direction imposed upon social life by ruling group.

9- Gramsci uses the term “ hegemony” to denote the predominance of dominant social class over the masses. This represent not only- the economic or political control, but also the ability of the dominant classes to project its own way of seeing the world; so that the masses (subordinate group) accept it as ‘ Common sense’ and ‘ natural’.

(Common sense suggests Geoffrey Nowell Smith – is the way a subordinate class lives its subordination)

10- Gramsci saw civil society as a public sphere in which ideas and beliefs were shaped “ manufacture of consent”; where bourgeoisie ‘ hegemony’ was reproduced in cultural life-through media, schools/universities,

religious institutions etc. To “ manufacture consent” and “its legitimacy”. Power is constituted in the realm of ideas and knowledge and is expressed through “ Consent” rather than “ force”.

11-Gramsci contrasts between ‘ Ideology’ and ‘Commonsense’ (social experience of the subordinates). According to him there is a constant contradiction between Ideology and common sense and this interface turns into an inevitable struggle for ideological Hegemony.

12- The concept of hegemony not only helps us to understand domination within capitalism but it also serves to orient Gramsci’s thoughts on revolution. “ The masses needed to develop a revolutionary ideology” but they could not do so on their own, they needed the help of social elites. However, once the masses become aware and are influenced by these ideas, they would take the actions that lead to social revolution.

Thus we see that-

- (1) Gramsci’s concept of Hegemony helps us to understand domination within Capitalism.
- (2) Gramsci notion of hegemony makes an important contribution to the theory of Ideology.
- (3) It broadens materialistic Marxist theory into the realm of Ideology.
- (4) It also serves to orient Gramsci’s thoughts on revolution.

References

- 1- Selections from the Prison Notebooks by Antonio Gramsci.
- 2- Dictionary of Critical Theory by David Macey
- 3- Sociology Themes and Perspectives 8th Edition by Haralambos & Holborn