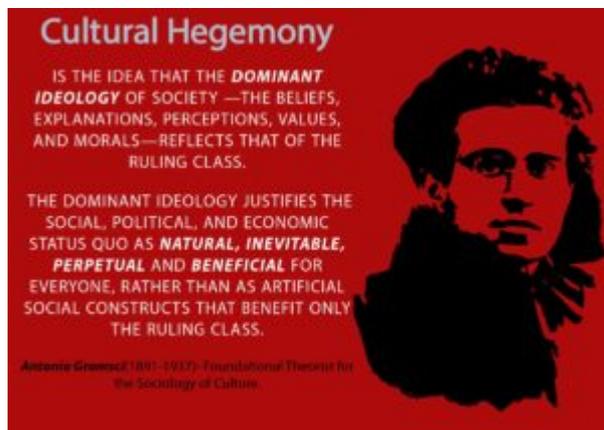


Gramsci in Lebanon: Analyzing the Powerful('s) Ideology



We have all heard of the famous question of nature versus nurture being brought up in mainstream discourse. We know that one's environment and surroundings are bound to influence one's thoughts, even if unconsciously. Many of us, especially youth in Eastern Arab

societies, eventually become aware enough to reject outdated and discriminatory values or "traditions" espoused by our society, like patriarchy, racism, sexism, etc. However, there are more implicit beliefs that control our pattern of thinking and, in turn, our actions through exposure to media, for example.

In our societies today, we are faced with a dangerous phenomenon: the dominance of ruling-class ideology. Not only has capitalism created long-lasting social and economic implications for people, but it has also become "culturally hegemonic." Let's turn to Antonio Gramsci. This Italian Marxist philosopher introduced the concept of "cultural hegemony," which, simply put, is the idea that a certain class exercises power and dominance over another intellectually through ideology and not just through straightforward political coercion.

In Lebanon – as in many other countries – those in power are bourgeois oligarchs who are feeding off the country's working-class and what is left of their almost non-existent wages. This capitalist system that we are facing has proven to us once and again that it is destroying the working-class and further widening the gap between the rich and the poor so that

the poor are getting poorer and the rich, richer. It is clear that most Lebanese people are suffocating from poverty and exploitation, while those already in the upper classes are the only ones benefiting from capitalism. For this reason, it would be expected that working people would condemn this system and see right through its empty promises of "equal opportunity for all." Unfortunately, the working classes are still not anti-capitalist enough to want to overthrow it; in fact, you hear them talking about a society divided into classes as something "natural" to human nature, and that human nature is instinctively "greedy." But as Ernest Mandel has shown, with anthropological evidence, in his book [From Class Society to Communism](#), prehistorical tribes organised their social life in a classless existence, so it is not impossible to have a society not divided into socioeconomic classes:

Several anthropologists have mentioned a custom which is found among many primitive peoples, which consists of organising plentiful feasts after the harvests. The anthropologist Margaret Mead has described these feasts among the Papuan tribe of Arapech (New Guinea). Those who have gathered in an above average harvest invite all their family and neighbours, and the festivities continue until most of the surplus has been consumed. Margaret Mead adds: 'These feasts represent an adequate way of preventing any individual accumulation of riches.' The anthropologist Asch studied the customs and special system of the Hopi tribe, which lives in the southern USA. In contrast to our society, the principle of individual competition is considered morally reprehensible by this society. Hopi children never keep score, or know who has 'won' in their games and sports.

The Hopi tribe example makes us aware of our own indoctrination that has ingrained in us the idea that everything is a competition, and due to the exclusivity of opportunities like prestigious scholarships and job positions there isn't room for everyone, so life must be "the survival

of the fittest." We must always be "the best"; we must have an excellent CV; we must work to enter this university because it is known to be "elite" so when we apply for a job we can beat the other applicants who are less fortunate and come from less prestigious socioeconomic background and education. In Lebanon, students are trained to make their educational and professional choices on the basis of what field is the most profitable, which is why many students find themselves in a major they don't love so they quit and decide to start over and pursue their true passions, costing them years of their lives. Mandel, again:

While agriculture, which occupies a set terrain, is the principal economic activity of primitive communities which are not yet divided into classes, there is often no longer any collective exploitation of the earth. Each family receives fields for work for a certain period. These fields are frequently redistributed to avoid favouring this or that member of the community more than the others. Pastures and woods are exploited in common. This village community system, which is based on the absence of private ownership of the land, is found at the origin of agriculture among nearly all the peoples of the world. It shows that at that time, society was not yet divided into classes at the village level.

In those communities, members organised their economic livelihood around public benefit of crops, so there was no personal competition which motivated the accumulation of capital for just a few people. Even if there were, we should not forget that humans are adaptable beings, so they will condition themselves to adhere to the status quo and act accordingly, so there is no state more natural than another. Nevertheless, competition can easily become unhealthy like what is happening in our capitalist societies now, which is why it feels so burdensome to stay ahead on the scoreboard; at the end of the day, humans became insatiable and are always looking for more. Again, capitalism feeds off people's misery

by offering them a plethora of products – most are useless – that they could buy to “fill the gap” caused by capitalism itself in the first place.

Sadly, people often believe that capitalism is good because this idea has been fed to them through their media outlets, the news, and the false promise of a better future, even though their life is withering away while they continue to be more and more exploited by the ruling class. With the rise of globalization, children are being exposed to “influencers” with lavish lifestyles and witnessing 21-year-olds accumulate millions of dollars by releasing three-minute repetitive pop songs in which they brag about belonging to “Gucci gangs” and owning Lamborghinis. In addition to this, different brands of phones, tablets, and gaming consoles are released regularly, all of which strengthen the consumerist tendency of these children and give them the illusion that they have an equal opportunity to hoard wealth like the capitalist class. In this way, the working class consents to the ruling class’s ideology without being aware of what it’s consented to, a simple demonstration of Gramsci’s cultural hegemony in action.

As a reader and student in Beirut, I like to sit in a nice café and do my studying and reading, and I do that on a regular basis. But the simple act of me doing that makes me a working-class person adopting an aspect of middle-class lifestyle because in order to do that, I have to go to areas like Hamra, Ashrafieh, Mar Mikhael where the study cafes are, spending 6000-8000 LBP on one cup of coffee. Now, imagine doing this on a daily basis. As a desperate student, you will have to do your research and settle for the place that would rip you off the least for the simple endeavor of sitting in a quiet nice atmosphere to do work, which becomes a privilege in itself. After doing the routine calculations of what you can afford to buy today, you eventually settle for a cup of tea or coffee; at the table next to yours, however, you see students having several dishes and desserts in addition to the coffee

you are still having. This is just a small example of the economic discrepancy in Lebanon.

The ruling-class further assert their dominance through monopolizing the right to think and reflect. This facilitates the ruling-class's mission to keep the masses silent and obedient by depriving them the means to adopt an ideology and fight according to it which would oppose theirs. The ruling-class ensures this through several aspects of life like education. In Lebanon, the working-class has one public university – the Lebanese University – whose education quality has been ruined by the government's corruption and bureaucracy. Whereas the ruling class has a wide selection of prestigious private universities and a variety of programs to choose from such as AUB, LAU, USJ, and so on. By ensuring that the public university remains neglected, you ensure a low-quality education for the lower classes. It is important to keep in mind that awareness in itself is a privilege brought about by reflection and reading, in addition to experience. Then, the long-hour job that workers are obliged to do exhausts them mentally and physically. Everyone is busy with providing means of survival that it becomes hard to find time for "communes" that are of political and ideological nature. As long as working-class people are divided by sectarianism and policed by state authorities, failing to unite and leading their lives based on an opposing ideology, the ruling class remains in power. The main drive is no longer ideology, it is the "ethic" of whatever is good for one's personal gain, what might get us rich, what supposedly ensures our personal, individual happiness. Basically, we submit to the marketing of a fake idea of "freedom."

This hegemony also becomes manifested in what is considered "common sense"; those who suffer from capitalism will still believe it is the natural order of things, which also leads them to scoff just as naturally at the idea of socialism as a better alternative. Cultural hegemony kicks in, immediately

disregarding a socialist society as nonsensical or a complete failure, whipping out the typical answer "it failed everywhere it was tried" with no further analysis. Of course, this puts the ruling class at ease because when the working-class normalizes and internalizes capitalist ideologies, this implies that they will not rebel against them, especially when the former is just as ready to dismiss alternative systems. As [Lebanon's October revolution](#) continues, it has to face the challenge of all the doubts thrown at it and conspiracy theories it is accused of. In Lebanon, we are left with an ideological gap which is reinforced by the youth's aversion to the mere concept of "political party" since it has become a negative sign, associated with corrupt leaders, sectarianism, and brainwashing. Naturally, in their attempts to run away from this, pro-neoliberal thought is strengthened because it feeds on the government's failure and the corruption of existing political parties.

For decades, the concept of a political party in Lebanon has been transformed by sectarian leaders to mean groups divided on the basis of sect rather than ideology. It also has to do with power relations, as the power equation has already been established and reinforced over years: secular parties will always be crushed by sectarian ones. The members of these sectarian parties abuse their power through nepotism in securing jobs, getting university tuition discounts, bribing for votes, and so on. In Lebanese universities, especially the Lebanese University, student councils are dominated by political parties who impose their own rules and make decisions. These include forbidding students from using certain spaces of the campus, in addition they hold political events, and even hang posters of their leaders around the campus. They also use their power to prevent secular university clubs from being active, often through violence.

All of this reinforces the negative impressions that youth, who are often leftist and want a secular and system, have

about political parties in general, so they resort to finding alternative platforms like non-profit organisations for human rights or other initiatives that aspire and work for political change. However, these organizations do not act according to a leftist ideology; rather, they already have their own agenda – to provide humanitarian aid to alleviate suffering rather than change the system that causes the suffering in the first place. This ideological gap is harmful in the times of revolution because this enables organizations disrupt the revolution and propagate illusions of reformist change that can seem convincing. This separates the protesters as this agenda not in line with the needs of the working class which extends beyond temporary “solutions.” The working class in Lebanon and everywhere must be one united force embracing revolutionary politics because we cannot keep merely treating symptoms, we must not embrace the illusion of change brought about by NGOs, we must eliminate the disease of capitalism and establish socialist society.