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You need a gun

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The H-Word: The Peripeteia of Hegemony by [Perry Anderson](#)

Verso, 190 pp, £16.99, April, ISBN 978 1 78663 368 2

The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci by [Perry Anderson](#)

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What is the relationship between coercion and consent? Under what circumstances does power turn into authority, brute force into legitimate leadership? Can coercion work without consent? Can consent be secured without coercion? Does political power depend on voluntary agreement and values shared in common, or does it grow out of the barrel of a gun? When ideas rule, how is that rule maintained? Can associations of equals – built on common interests, ideas and identities – endure, or must they degenerate into empires kept together by force? Such questions go to the foundations of political theory and practice. There is no better way to explore them than by tracing the complex career of the concept of hegemony, from the Greeks to today's 'international relations'. That is the task undertaken by Perry Anderson in *The H-Word* and *The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci*.

The two books are closely connected. *The H-Word* reconstructs the long history of the concept of hegemony in 12 chapters, moving from Thucydides via Lenin and Gramsci to various German and other imperialists, and from there to British, American and French postwar international relations theory. It takes in American political science and US strategic doctrine; the political economy of the Thatcher years; the work of Ernesto Laclau and Giovanni Arrighi; and, after a particularly exciting treatment of Asia and China from the time before the Warring Kingdoms to Mao and Deng Xiaoping, ends with today's European Union. *Antinomies* deals with Gramsci alone; essentially it is a reprint of a long essay published in 1977 in *New Left Review*. Both books are remarkable examples of the deep, historically situated reading of complex texts. *Antinomies* contains a preface reflecting on the interval since the first publication of the essay forty years ago, and in an appendix a fascinating report from 1933 on Gramsci in prison, written for the leadership of the Partito Comunista Italiano by a fellow prisoner, published in English here for the first time.

The concept of hegemony has been and is still applied to relations between and within societies, to international politics as well as to national class struggle. Wherever they crop up, hegemony and their ideologues will do what they can to identify hegemony with legitimate authority: a social contract among equals in which leaders govern by consent and their followers give that consent in grateful return for services rendered. Yet when push comes to

shove, as it very often does, the indispensable element of coercion in hegemony comes to the fore. Hegemony has never been sustained without coercion, but has more often than not been secured without consent. Hegemons don't always carry guns, but you can't be an effective hegemon without a decent supply of them. The purpose of hegemonic ideology is to make people believe that the hegemon is benevolent: having been granted power, the hegemon will act on behalf of those who cannot help themselves, whatever the cost to the hegemon. In compensation, the hegemon expects to be loved. But if it is to be secure when the moment of truth arrives, the hegemon must be able to instil fear. *Pace* Weber, a political regime is not stabilised by legitimacy, but by the capacity to substitute for it with coercion.

So far, so Machiavellian ('Is it better to be loved than feared or better to be feared than loved? One would of course like to be both; but it is difficult ... and when a choice has to be made it is safer to be feared'). Anderson dispenses, one after another, with preachers of the 'white man's burden' school of belief in benevolent empire, among them Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, with their self-serving fairy tales about a post-Vietnam US internationalism organised around 'complexity', 'interdependence', 'regime theory' and 'liberal institutionalism'. But his main focus is Gramsci, who as general secretary of the PCI was interned by Mussolini in 1926, and died in prison 11 years later. Gramsci had spent time in Moscow in the years after the Russian Revolution, and had been privy to the deadly serious strategic debates of the Third International. None of what he heard would, in his view, be helpful in leading the Italian party to victory. Italy was a deeply traditionalist European country, in which the dominance of capital was based on more than just brute force. It was deeply ingrained in 'civil society' and everyday life: the Church, the peasantry, small business, the urban bourgeoisie and parts of the intellectual and cultural elites were all more or less in the bourgeois-capitalist camp.

The concept of hegemony, as developed by Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*, had to be useful not only as an analytic tool, but also strategically: it must help not only to theorise the rule of capital, but to end it. Revolutionary action, in Gramsci's view, could succeed only once the social consent that gave capitalism its hegemony had been sufficiently undermined. The overthrow of capitalism must be preceded by cultural struggle, the changing of social life from the bottom up by replacing its bourgeois government and ideology with forms of collective solidarity and democratic self-organisation. The problem of hegemony posed itself also within the anti-capitalist camp. The party of the working class would need to build alliances with other classes, which must be won over – through education, co-operation and organisation – if they were to accept Communist Party leadership when the time came to dismantle the capitalist order.

Anderson's reading of Gramsci focuses on the practical problems he faced as he developed his perspective on the proletarian revolution. It wasn't just that Moscow might disapprove of his thinking but, perhaps more important, that his conceptualisation of hegemony might suggest to PCI members that capitalism could be defeated by cultural struggle alone, making revolutionary violence unnecessary. Too much theoretical attention to civil society risked overlooking the state, and excessive concern with the element of consent in hegemony might underplay the role of coercion, which would be brought to bear by the state in the moment of

truth, but also by the revolutionary party in defeating the state and, for a transitional period after victory, to keep its allies and former enemies in line.

The central question for Anderson is whether Gramsci, by assigning such a prominent place to the notion of hegemony in his reflections on revolutionary strategy, crossed the line into liberal reformism, or at least paved the way for it. Anderson thinks he did neither, emphatically defending Gramsci the revolutionary against those who, in the 1970s, exploited the *Prison Notebooks* to justify Eurocommunism's opportunistic switch from a revolutionary to a parliamentary path to socialism, or what they understood that to be. Anderson believes that the reformist tint of some passages in the *Notebooks* is owed to Gramsci's need to fool the fascist censors, who apparently collected his manuscripts each day for inspection. (It should also be borne in mind that the *Notebooks* were, after all, no more than notes for future elaboration.) Be that as it may, it is in the context of the turbulent 1970s – 'a time when there had recently been the largest mass strike in history in France, the overthrow of a government by workers in Britain, continuous outbreaks of revolt in Italy, the defeat of the United States in Vietnam, and a revolution in Portugal' – that Anderson's account of Gramsci must be read. At that time the Leninist tradition of discussing revolutionary strategy under advanced capitalism still made sense to some.

Anderson realises that the time has passed for debating the amount of violence required for revolution, or the precise character of the proletarian dictatorship. But Gramsci remains relevant in helping us to understand how the apparently unforced consent to the regime of contemporary, intensified capitalism comes about, and where coercion may be at work in the operation of today's liberal democracies. In his preface to *Antinomies*, Anderson gives a deeply melancholic account of the new historical epoch that began when the revolutionary, or pseudo-revolutionary, surge of the 1970s ended with the terrorist spectacles staged by the likes of Baader-Meinhof and the Red Brigades – a new epoch that could dispense with ideology since capitalist hegemony now 'lay in a set of lifestyles, conducts, needs, demands, whose origin and end was in the world of commodities'. Now, he writes, there was 'no ethos, no directive idea, no concern with the inner life of the individual, which was delivered over to the market and the unconscious', and no need either for intellectuals and their passionate devotion to ideas. The new era's 'basic value' was 'tolerance, that is, indifference'. Still living in a 'relatively backward capitalist society' – one could describe it, alternatively, as a European society with strong pre-capitalist social bonds – Gramsci, according to Anderson, was unable to imagine that there could be a hegemony without hegemonic ideas, and indeed a hegemony 'that would rival in strength that of any in history' because it was 'anthropological, not ideological'.

What about coercion? Where is it at work in an individualistic consumer capitalist democracy in which dollars and votes aggregate freely to determine the optimal allocation of economic resources and political power? Marx's passage on 'primitive accumulation' in *Capital* comes to mind:

the advance of the capitalist mode of production develops a working class, which by education, tradition, habit, looks upon the conditions of that mode of

production as self-evident laws of Nature. The organisation of the capitalist mode of production, once fully developed, breaks down all resistance ... The dull compulsion of economic relations completes the subjection of the labourer to the capitalist. Direct force, outside economic conditions, is of course still used, but only exceptionally.

Replace 'labourer' with 'consumer' and note that, like the manufacture of consent, the production of compliance through coercion can proceed invisibly if it is embedded in the taken for granted structures of everyday life. That isn't to say that there is not, in this new society, a huge machinery of coercion, easily the largest and most expensive in history, maintained in readiness for the state of emergency that may one day have to be called: indelible records of each and every individual's plane journeys, bank card transactions, email, Facebook posts and so on, produced through a round the clock surveillance operation conducted by opaque bureaucracies, national and international, bigger than ever and still growing, not least under the cover of the 'war on terror', waged to enable the masses to continue living their pressured lives of competitive production and consumption.

Another testing ground for the continuing usefulness of the concept of hegemony is 'Europe', the political organisation of a continent whose borders have only ever been vaguely defined. Is Germany the emerging hegemon of the European Union, this complex league of formally independent states: a Germany traditionally unwilling to play that role but now increasingly warming to it, even developing a sense of entitlement to it? What must be understood is that the business of post-heroic German society is business, not physical violence. It is true that Germany has recently become less pacifist: marginal participation in the illegal bombing of Serbia in 1999; a small detachment of troops in Afghanistan at the request of the US; air reconnaissance in Syria, to please Obama; minor military interventions in French Africa, in tribute to Franco-German friendship; an unknown number of special ops forces doing active duty in unknown places, together with colleagues from Denmark, Norway, Sweden and elsewhere, but always under US direction. Add the (generous) provision of airbases for the use of the US military and espionage facilities for the American 'intelligence community', as well as the half-price sale of submarines to Israel, and that's basically it – and there is unlikely to be much more for the foreseeable future. Casualties, not just on the German side, are unacceptable to the German public, so German commanders and their units wherever possible leave the killing (and the being killed) to the locals and the Americans.

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How can such a country, voluntarily incapacitated and weaned, to the satisfaction of its allies, off the sovereign use of military violence, be considered hegemonic? Perhaps only if we allow that economic coercion can take the place of physical coercion. Germany's most potent weapon in the European arena isn't a nuclear missile, but a hard currency. The prospect of the Bundeswehr invading Italy or France is unimaginable, but the Bundesbank may be seen as having done so in the past, and today the European Central Bank, acting together with the Eurogroup on German orders, may be in the process of creating an international regime.

It's as well to recall that the European Monetary Union (EMU) was forced on Germany by its partners, France in particular; Germany resisted because, as its monetary 'realists' rightly predicted, assuming the role of hegemon would incur demands for redistributive benevolence. The story is complicated, but less so in the light of two often under-examined aspects of hegemony (they aren't overlooked by Anderson). First, the desire on the part of hegemonies that their allies-turned-dependants organise themselves internally on the model of the hegemon – something that began with ancient Greece and didn't end with the American empire of the 20th century. Second, that national and international struggles for hegemony should be considered together as interacting arenas in a multi-level power game. So, why did France (and Italy) force the role of European hegemon on an unwilling Germany? Because, in short, the French and Italian modernising elites, in pursuit of domestic hegemony, were eager to force the hard German currency onto their own soft societies in order to make them fit for modern capitalism. Germans liked the idea in so far as it eliminated devaluation in other countries as a weapon of last resort against German competitiveness (devaluation being, in the German mindset, tantamount to cheating honest, hard-working, hard-saving German workers and employers). But there were also fears that Germany's new comrades-in-hard-money might not be up to the task of reforming their obstinate citizens, and that they would come looking for help in the form of a 'transfer union'.

Looking back, we can see now that the EMU and the divisions it causes in Europe are the result of historical miscalculations in the 1990s by Germany under Helmut Kohl and France under François Mitterrand. Kohl wanted political union to precede monetary union, which would effectively have eliminated Germany as a nation-state together with all other European nation-states. Kohl's imagined union would have been economically semi-sovereign on the model of the old Federal Republic, its central bank a replica of the Bundesbank. Mitterrand, by contrast, never once entertained the thought of letting France be subsumed into some multinational European state; he was too much of a Gaullist, or simply too French. What he had in mind wasn't political union but the economic reinvigoration of his own country through the introduction of a German-style European currency, by means of which France would itself rise to become the European hegemon – over Germany in particular – with enhanced, nuclear-powered national sovereignty and, one may assume, a (European) central bank more supportive of public deficits than the German version. Both projects failed dismally. Now Germany is working hard, with the help of co-operative national governments, to have its domestic political economy extended to Europe as a whole, the aim being to keep the euro while retaining, for free, the advantages conferred on Germany by its superior competitiveness. So far its efforts have been in vain. The French and Italian elites find themselves unable to force the blessings of neoliberalism on their countries, which now depend on German beneficence for their survival. The result is, *pace* Anderson, not hegemony but a profound political deadlock that nobody knows how to resolve.

It is true, though, that underneath the European stalemate a strange kind of hegemonic consciousness without hegemony is developing in Germany. Armed with 'values' in place of guns, a broad German mainstream feels entitled to tell other Europeans, in the name of European unity, what they must aim to become – which is to say, more like the German mainstream. Consent is demanded on moral grounds, and refusal is met with sad

disappointment. Central to this is an appeal to a version of universalism that denies nations the right to exist in their own way, indeed to exist as nations at all. There is some resemblance here to US liberal interventionism, although in the German case the means are restricted to moral admonition and, increasingly, the threat to halt European Union subsidies if countries do not live up to universal – that is, German – standards: Hungary and Poland, for example, with respect to immigration.

The German idea, if there is one, is European hegemony as leadership, based not on coercion but on moral superiority – a utopia which, as Anderson makes clear, cannot work, either within nations or between them. Indeed, as seen from Berlin, Europe is far from being a well-ordered league of states ready to follow a German example. Keeping the likes of Macron in power by means of quiet economic support wasn't made any easier by the results of the recent German election: there are now parties in the Bundestag that won't be shy to ask impolite questions. Brexit will make things even more difficult. While Merkel's instinct is to want a reversal of the UK referendum result, France is happy to be rid of the British, and sooner rather than later. The French will use the opportunity to pursue once again 'ever closer union among the peoples of Europe', hoping to consolidate a Mediterranean coalition that will keep Germany in its place. As a counterweight to the Southern member states, Germany needs the Eastern ones, which means maintaining a moderate level of tension with Russia. This, in turn, requires American backing, in case the going gets tough. Yet Germany also needs Russian energy, to a degree that the nuclear-powered French do not, and it needs the Eastern Europeans to accept their share of migrants – for which they will need to be paid off with German taxpayers' money. Meanwhile, at home, any German government will have to pay tribute, symbolic and material, to the eurozealots in the media, and among the Greens and Social Democrats, who continue to clamour for 'European integration': for a union without hegemony and its discontents, based solely on 'European values' and on publicly expressed disgust with Trump, Putin and Erdoğan. Not easy, to say the least.

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