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## **Antonio Gramsci's Theory of Cultural Hegemony in Edward Said's *Orientalism***

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### **Abstract:**

There is little doubt that Edward Said's seminal text *Orientalism* is still believed to be one of the most important books of its time. Indeed, although a great amount of academic ink has been spilt on the discussion of Said's masterpiece, because of its academic value, there is still a need for more in-depth thinking and research on the book. In this respect, among the aspects of the book which the present paper proposes to explore is the profound influence which the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci has on Said's thought and research. Gramsci, as probably goes without saying, is best known for his concept of cultural hegemony as the predominant mode of rule. For Gramsci, the dominant classes maintain their rule through the use of cultural institutions to establish the consent of the subaltern classes. That is, instead of using force and coercion, the ruling class develops a hegemonic culture through the use of ideology to manipulate other classes into accepting their status as subaltern. Gramsci's elaboration on the concept of cultural hegemony appeals a lot to the author of *Orientalism* because it allows him to uncover the ideological side of the West's construction of the Orient. That is, following Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, Said argues that it is through culture and ideology that the Western powers promote certain ways of thinking which legitimate their invasion of the Orient. The purpose of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it aims at exploring the main features characterizing Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony. Secondly, it attempts to show how Edward Said reinvests the concept to expose the colonialist ideologies underpinning the Western texts on the Orient.

**Keywords: Orientalism, cultural hegemony, consent, ideology, force and coercion, the ruling class, the subordinate classes, rule.**

## **Introduction:**

Antonio Gramsci can be considered as one of the most remarkable Marxist theorists in the previous century. The man's role in developing Western Marxism is undeniable. Specifically, Gramsci's main contribution to Marxism remains his concept of cultural hegemony. The latter explains how the ruling class manages to dominate and rule over other classes. In this respect, unlike his Marxist predecessors, Gramsci insists on the role of ideology by which the dominant class maintains its rule and domination in society. For Gramsci, instead of imposing its rule by means of force and coercion, the ruling class seeks to establish the consent of other classes to their rule. Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony is of great significance in shaping Edward Said's assault on Orientalism. Therefore, as Said himself makes the point, hegemony is "an indispensable concept for any understanding of cultural life in the industrial West." (7) In brief, this concept is what enables Said to show how Western cultural discourses portray the Orient in such way as to establish Orientals' consent to colonialism. The paper is divided into two major parts: whereas the first part discusses the concept of hegemony in the Gramscian sense, the second part explains how Edward Said uses the concept in his analysis of Orientalism.

## **Gramsci's Concept of Hegemony Explained**

It is generally agreed upon that Antonio Gramsci shares with Marx and the Marxists as a whole their belief that the struggle between the ruling class and the subordinate working class is what enables society to move forward. However, when it comes to the way the ruling class dominates and rules, Gramsci distances himself a lot from Marxism. In other words, whereas the Marxists focus on the coercive practices of the ruling class and its tendency to exploit the proletariat by means of force, Gramsci emphasizes the role of ideology. In his opinion, before the ruling class resorts to direct force and coercion, it seeks to make its rule acceptable by all classes. This is what Gramsci calls "hegemony".

To foster a better understanding of the Gramscian concept of hegemony, it is useful to highlight its link to earlier Marxist thought. Relatedly, Marx is of the opinion that the world can not get its real meaning through our views and perceptions as idealist philosophers claim. For him, our ideas and views necessarily appear within certain historical and social contexts. In his own words, "life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life." (Quoted in Jones 28)

It is to be noted that Marx divides society into two major components: a base and a superstructure. The first is represented by the economic structure and the second by socializing mechanisms such as language, religion, education, law, ideology, mass media and the army. It needs to be emphasized here that Marx believes that the economic base of society is what determines its social, political and cultural environment. He argues that "the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general." He adds that the society's economic relations "constitute the economic structure of



society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.” (Quoted in Williams 75)

According to Marx, since the ruling class owns and controls the means of production, it must equally control the means of intellectual and cultural production. Consequently, the ideas of the ruling class must be the most prevailing ideas in society. Put in Marx’s words, “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas [. . .] the class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production.” (Quoted in Jones 28) By implication, therefore, what follows is that since the economic base is the determining element in society, the success of the working class revolution requires a fundamental change in the economic base. To argue this point, Steve Jones says:

To truly change society, the base would have to be fundamentally changed and this for Marx, writing in the context of industrial society, entailed workers seizing control of the ‘means of production’ (above all, the factories). It follows from this argument that superstructural changes – penal reform, say, or abolishing private education – could not in themselves be truly revolutionary. This is not to say that they would be unwelcome, but they would not change the essential characteristics of capitalist exploitation. (29)

It can, therefore, be argued that Marx and his followers are so obsessed with the economic factor that they ignore the role culture and ideology can play in the production of social relations. For them, it is always the economic base that determines the status people occupy in society. This is to imply that if the working class wants to become the dominant class in society, it must have total control of the base. That is, revolution would be possible only if there is a fundamental change in the economic base.

Gramsci rejects the Marxist claim that the power of the ruling class is limited to the economic base. For him, a social class becomes hegemonic not only by controlling the means of production and coercing other classes but rather by establishing their consent. In fact, consent is so important to Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. The point being made is that before the ruling class resorts to force and coercion, it seeks to indoctrinate the proletariat with those ideas that make them consent to their subordinate position. Gramsci holds the view that hegemony is always established on

The “spontaneous” consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is “historically” caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. (12)

In the main, Gramsci's concept of hegemony can perhaps be traced back to Marx's prediction that the working class revolution which took place in Russia would spread to all advanced capitalist societies. Gramsci notices that this was not the case. On the contrary, although the suffering of the working class was very obvious, the ruling classes of all capitalist societies managed to maintain their rule, in some cases without even using physical force and coercion. According to Gramsci, the subaltern people were so manipulated that it did not even occur to them to question the dominant system of rule which came to be seen as the "norm". The dominant groups managed to stabilize their rule by seeking to win the approval of other groups. To argue this point, Dominic Strinati maintains:

dominant groups in society, including fundamentally but not exclusively the ruling class, maintain their dominance by securing the 'spontaneous consent' of subordinate groups, including the working class, through the negotiated construction of a political and ideological consensus which incorporates both dominant and dominated groups. (165)

The main point to get hold of here is that the consent of the people is what makes the rule of the dominant class secure. This is why the latter relies more on manipulative and ideological means than direct force and oppressive power. Put differently, when the subaltern people believe that it is in their interests to accept the leadership of the ruling class, they do so willingly. In the words of Joseph Femia,

those who are consenting must somehow be truly convinced that the interests of the dominant group are those of society at large, that the hegemonic group stands for a proper social order in which all men are justly looked after. (42)

With this idea in mind it comes as no surprise that the ruling class does not impose its system of rule by means of force, but rather through what Carl Boggs calls "the permeation throughout society of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs and morality that has the effect of supporting the status quo in power relations." (39) This is how the dominated groups are brainwashed and manipulated into accepting the economic, political and social leadership of the dominant class. Hegemony in this sense can be characterized as

the 'organising principle' that is diffused by process of socialisation into every area of daily life. To the extent that this prevailing consciousness is internalised by the population it becomes part of what is generally called 'common sense' so that the philosophy, culture and morality of the ruling elite comes to appear as the natural order of things. (Boggs 39)



It becomes clear that unlike the Marxists' obsession with the economic base, Gramsci pays more attention to ideology and ideas. For him, as long as the ideas of the subaltern people are dominated, the dominant class will not need to use force and oppression to maintain its rule.

Gramsci takes Marx's division of the state into a base and a superstructure a step further when he divides the superstructure into what he calls political society and civil society. Whereas political society stands for such coercive institutions as the government, armed forces, police, the legal system and the like, civil society refers to those institutions that are not coercive, including all institutions used in the construction of public opinion. To put it in Gramsci's words, "everything which influences or is able to influence public opinion, directly or indirectly, belongs to it: libraries, schools, associations and clubs of various kinds, even architecture and the layout and names of streets." (389)

In Gramsci's opinion, "the supremacy of a social group or class manifested itself in two different ways: 'domination' or coercion, and 'intellectual and moral leadership'," (Femia 24) or hegemony. Whereas the first type of supremacy (i.e. domination) is exercised through force by political society, the second (i.e. hegemony) is exercised through consent by civil society. This is to mean that domination is achieved by the coercive machinery of the state while "Hegemony is attained through the myriad ways in which the institutions of civil society operate to shape, directly or indirectly, the cognitive and affective structures whereby men perceive and evaluate problematic social reality." (Ibid)

It is to be noted that although those in power can achieve social control in two different ways: domination and hegemony. The former is used only when the latter fails. In other words, when the ruling class establishes the consent of the ruled people successfully, oppression and force are no longer needed. Howard Zinn makes the point in *Declaration of Independence*, suggesting:

If those in charge of our society – politicians, corporate executives and owners of press and television – can dominate our ideas, they will be secure in their power. They will not need soldiers patrolling the streets. We will control ourselves. (Quoted in Western 231)

For Gramsci, physical force is used only against those who refuse to consent, or as he says:

The apparatus of state coercive power [...] 'legally' enforces discipline on those groups who do not 'consent' either actively or passively. This apparatus is, however, constituted for the whole of society in anticipation of moments of crisis of command and direction when spontaneous consent has failed. (12)

### **Gramsci's Theory of Hegemony in Said's *Orientalism***

As probably goes without saying, the role the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci has played in shaping Edward Said's analysis of Orientalism is vital. In fact, his theory of cultural hegemony is what enables Said to uncover the ideological and cultural side of European colonialism. Therefore, it is not a big surprise that Said introduces the concept from the very outset of his analysis as an important one. Relatedly, drawing on Gramsci's hegemony, Said affirms that it is through culture that European powers disseminate certain ways of thinking and seeing that make their conquest of Oriental lands appear legitimate and beneficial for the natives. This is how hegemony is established over Orientals who are manipulated into viewing colonialism as "a natural phenomenon".

In fact, Said finds in the discourse of Orientalism a perfect example of how hegemony works. In the words of Walia Shelly, "He sees the literary texts and the historical accounts of the West as valuable representations of the ways in which hegemony works." (34) The point to get hold of here is that these texts as cultural forms play a fundamental role in the construction of imperial views and perceptions which have an effect on how Oriental people look at themselves. That is, these texts become a mirror in which non-Europeans see their identity and culture. They are, to borrow from Said, "the method colonized people use to assert their identity and the existence of their own history." (xiii)

Culture, therefore, can be said to be a much more efficient tool of control than the use of physical force and coercion. For Said, without manipulating the Orientals' culture, hegemony can not be achieved over the Orient. The colonizer may control the Orient politically and economically, yet this control will not be complete unless the Oriental culture itself is controlled. The Kenyan novelist Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is of the same opinion. For him, "economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others." (16) In this respect, Said tends to view Orientalism as a cultural project whose aim is to achieve mental control over Orientals. For him, "to speak of Orientalism therefore is to speak mainly although not exclusively, of a British and a French cultural enterprise," (4) which aims mainly to establish hegemony over Orientals by making the Colonialist worldview the dominant ideology in Oriental lands.

It is to be noted that the relevance of Gramsci's theory of hegemony to Said's study of Orientalism can be attributed to the former's reflections on the concept of consent. Relatedly, Said asserts that European colonialism relies much more on the consent of Orientals than on the use of direct force to subdue them. This is to mean that instead of imposing their political and economic policy by force, European powers induce in the minds of the colonized a set of ideological ideas and beliefs which function to manufacture their consent and approval.

Besides, in a similar manner to Gramsci, who asserts that the ruling class manages to achieve social control in two different ways: domination and hegemony, Edward Said affirms that the subjection of the Orient itself comes from both of them. In other words, European



colonization of the Orient depends on both the use of physical force and coercion and the consent of the subjected people through Orientalism. Put in Said's words, "cultural domination is maintained, as much as by Oriental consent as by direct and crude economic pressure." (124)

In Said's perspective, one way to achieve Oriental consent is through Orientalism, which he qualifies as "an influential academic tradition" (203) whose aim is to construct an appropriate public opinion in the colonized lands. In other words, the stories and the views the Orientalists tell about the Orient and its people aim, among other things, to make Orientals believe that it is in their interests to be colonized by the civilized West. Colonialism therefore is always talked about in Orientalist texts in such a manner as to manufacture the natives' consent. Thus, it can be argued that Orientalism not only constrains how the Orientalist tends to view and talk about the Orient, but it also has a direct effect on the mind and psyche of the colonized. To argue this point, Said says:

like any set of durable ideas, Orientalist notions influenced the people who were called Orientals as well as those called Occidental, European, or Western; in short, Orientalism is better grasped as a set of constraints upon and limitations of thought than it is simply as a positive doctrine. (42)

The epithet "durable" is used here by Said to refer to the long-lasting effect Orientalist ideas have on Orientals. It can therefore be argued that nothing is more dangerous than this "set of durable ideas" when internalized by the natives. This is why the colonizer keeps inculcating such Orientalist ideas as "the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures" (7) in the minds of the colonized people until they believe and adopt them. In *the Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon makes the point clearly when he says: "In the colonial context, the colonizer does not stop his work of breaking in [d'èreintement] the colonized until the latter admits loudly and clearly the supremacy of white values." (43)

According to Said, Orientalism is a cultural tool used by the West to control and manipulate the Orient by means of ideas and ideology. That is, Orientalism keeps hammering into the minds of Orientals that they are savage, uncivilized and in dire need of help until they start to see Western colonialism as a necessity for their salvation. The colonizer therefore does not need to resort to the use of force to maintain his authority because the colonized already accepts colonialism as a bless. Because of this Orientalist indoctrination, the colonized can be said to take part in his own subjection and control. It is may be in this light that Said affirms that "the modern Orient [...] participates in its own Orientalizing." (325)

Following Gramsci, Said affirms that it is Orientalism rather than military or economic power that promotes Western hegemony over the Orient. It is through Orientalism that a kind of pacification with the colonized is established. The point being made here is that Orientalism functions to convince Orientals that it is for their own good to be colonized by the



West. Therefore, it enables the colonizer to avoid Orientals' resistance. In Said's own words, "The scientist, the scholar, the missionary, the trader, or the soldier was in, or thought about, the Orient because he could be there, or could think about it, with very little resistance on the Orient's part." (7)

Just to be clear, the European colonizer, as Said believes, does not conquer the Orient the way, for example, the Spaniards did with the New World. Unlike the Spaniards, who were interested only in stealing the New World's natural resources by means of force, Europeans invade the Orient in the name of civilizing the backward Orientals. In Said's words:

What distinguishes earlier empires, like the Roman or the Spanish or the Arabs, from the Modern [colonial] empires, of which the British and French were the great ones in the nineteenth century, is the fact that latter ones are systematic enterprises, constantly reinvested. They are not simply arriving in a country, looting it and then leaving when the loot is exhausted. And modern empire requires, as Conrad said, an idea of service, an idea of sacrifice, an idea of redemption. Out of this you get these great, massively reinforced notions of, for example, in the case of France, the "mission civilisatrice." That we're not there to benefit ourselves, we are there for the sake of the natives. (66)

Differently put, Europeans often claim that they are in the Orient for a noble cause, to spread civilization and progress among the natives. This seemingly philanthropic mission, which is often called the "White Man's Burden", is just a beautiful façade behind which the hideous face of European colonialism hides. In Said's opinion, "the White Man's difficult civilizing mission" (254) is just an excuse to invade the Orient. In his own words, "To have said, as Curzon once did, that "the East is a University in which the scholar never takes his degree" was another way of saying that the East required one's presence there more or less forever." (215)

In fact, the progress which Europeans promise to bring to the Orient is no more than a big lie. It is just a romantic discourse which has nothing to do with the sour reality of the "civilizing mission." Said makes it clear that what the Occident is concerned with in the Orient is just the latter's fortunes. Europeans' economic interests are the driving force behind their presence in the Orient, or as Said puts it, "what mattered was not Asia so much as Asia's use to modern Europe." (115) Therefore, it can be said that what happens in the "civilizing mission" is contradictory with what was promised. As Said stresses, the "liberality [promised] was no more than a form of oppression and mentalistic prejudice." (254)

To explain how Western hegemony is established on the Orient, Said draws on Gramsci's distinction between civil society and political society. "The former [which] is made up of voluntary (or at least rational and non coercive) affiliations like schools, families, and unions," (6-7) is the site where Orientalist culture – the main tool for inducing Oriental



consent – is located. In Said’s own words, “Culture [...] is to be found operating within civil society, where the influence of ideas, of institutions, and of other persons works not through domination but by what Gramsci calls consent.” This is to mean that since hegemony is a culturally-motivated phenomenon, Western political society which consists of “state institutions (the army, the police, the central bureaucracy) whose role in the polity is direct domination” (Said 7) is not significant. In other words, Edward Said, in his theorization of Western hegemony over the Orient, argues that the West replaces the use of its coercive institutions with the use of certain ideological and persuasive means (“the civilizing mission” and “the White Man’s Burden”) for the sake of winning the consent of Orientals.

If European colonialism, as Said believes, involves indoctrinating the natives with those ways of seeing that help establish their consent, then liberation from it does not simply mean giving land back to its dispossessed owners. A real independence requires a change in the dominant ways of viewing the world. To argue this point, John McLeod asserts that “freedom from colonialism comes not just from the signing of declarations of independence and the lowering and raising of flags. There must also be a change in the minds, a challenge to the dominant ways of seeing.” (22)

### **Conclusion:**

To conclude, as the above analysis demonstrates, Said finds in the West’s construction of the Orient the best application of Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony. In this respect, following Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, Said insists to portray Orientalism as a hegemonic discourse by means of which the Western powers manipulate the natives. Orientalism, in this sense, can be seen as an ideological apparatus which the colonizers produce so as to persuade the colonized people to see the injustice and exploitation which they go through as natural and acceptable. Therefore, although the colonial system is based on exploiting the natives and dispossessing them of their lands and properties, it is immune to change. In other words, despite the pain and the suffering which the colonizers inflict on the natives, it does not occur to them to question colonialism because they are brainwashed and indoctrinated with those ways of thinking that establish their consent.

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