

## **Hegemony and feminism**

A. Best (unpublished essay) c. 1984

Since the resurgence of the Women's Movement in the early 1960s, many feminist writers have analysed women's position in contemporary societies in attempting to explain the basis for female oppression. The concept of patriarchy - the system of male domination and female subordination (K. Millett 1969) has long since been identified as a facet of female subordination Virginia Woolf, The Fabian Women's Group, Vera Brittain (V Beechey 1979) although the concept has more recently, been applied in a number of different ways. J Mitchell (1974) defines patriarchy as ideology; H Hartman (1979) uses patriarchy to refer to male power over women and analyses the inter-relationship between it and the capitalist labour process; and E Eisenstein (1979) defines patriarchy as sexual hierarchy manifested in women's role as mother, domestic labourer and consumer within the family. These are only four writers who use the concept but there are of course many many, more. Marxist feminists (V Beechey 1979) and socialist feminists (C Delphy 1977) have been concerned to maintain that women's oppression has a material basis and much effort has been devoted to debating whether patriarchal oppression is subordinate to or merely a result of class exploitation. Other feminists (S Robotham 1979: S Alexander & B Taylor 1980) have attempted to emphasise patriarchy's long and varied history and debated whether it is now a useful concept in relation to a capitalist mode of production. Overall, feminists have recognised that women's oppression is not only economically grounded but that patriarchal relations also benefit men as individual which is evidenced in the fact that patriarchal relations existed prior to capitalism (S Lewenhak 1977: J West:1982).

However, having defined and located a feature of women's oppression and analysed the various institutions such as: the family (M Barrett 1980), the labour market (A Pollert 1981), the judiciary (C Smart 1977), education (D Spender 1980) the media (C M Heck 1980), language (D Spender 1980) in which patriarchy can be seen to operate, or having located it as an ideology which inheres in all male/female relations, the women's movement has not produced an adequate analysis of the ways in which patriarchal relations, despite the long history of the women's movement in it's many guises, continues to exist.

Despite the growing numbers of women entering the labour market, the predictions of a marxist analysis, that women will become equal to men when they enter the sphere of waged labour through which their economic dependence on men will be abolished, have not been realised, This has highlighted a problem with the application of Marxism to gender inequality - the relationship between the base and the superstructure. Although women's oppression is materially grounded as waged labourers and domestic labourers, their oppression is also clearly visible in the institutions which make-up the superstructure and to reduce all oppression to an effect of the base is to misinterpret Marxism as economism. Gramsci's concept of 'cultural hegemony' refutes any form of reductionism, especially economism and is refinement of the base/superstructure analysis which enables an explanation of the means by which dominant group succeeds in maintaining their domination over another group or groups:

"It is the problem of the relations between structure and superstructure which must be accurately posed and resolved if the forces which are active in the history of a particular period are to be correctly analysed and the relation between them determined." (Gramsci S.P.N. :177)

Gramsci's concept of 'cultural hegemony' can be employed to explain how the cultural group of men have been able to develop and maintain cultural hegemony/patriarchy which oppresses women.<sup>2</sup>  
2 Gramsci identifies two levels within the superstructure:

"civil society; that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called 'private' and that of 'political society' or 'the state'." (Gramsci S.P.N. :12)

Within the sphere of political society reside all the state apparatus which gain consent through legally coercive power such as the army, the police and the judiciary. Civil Society is made up of all other agencies and organisations who are unable to use coercion and is the sphere in which hegemony is exercised. Within civil society:

" 'spontaneous' consent (is) given by the great masses of the population [women] to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant group... "[men]. (Gramsci S.P.N. :12)

One of the prime sites of female oppression has been identified as the family (Dobash & Dobash 1979) in which gender roles are learnt and into which women 'freely' enter via monogamous marriage. Thus women can be seen to 'spontaneously' consent to their oppression although obviously marriage and its resultant family life are not presented to women as oppressive but as part of their 'natural' role in life. The images of femininity reproduced by the media and the arts, serve to reproduce and reinforce a stereo-type image of the 'normal' woman which is based on a patriarchal definition of femininity (C & B Smart: 1978) to which a majority of women do not overtly object. Thus it can be argued that women 'spontaneously' consent to the position which has been prescribed for them. However, although male hegemony is maintained through the consent of women, in the final instance, i.e. if women do not consent, it is maintained by force or by the threat of violence as with wife beating and rape. Thus as Gramsci states:

"This apparatus (state coercive power) is, however constituted for the whole of society in anticipation of moments of crisis of command and direction when spontaneous consent has failed." (Gramsci S.P.N. :12)

Although violence against women is not openly condoned by such state apparatuses as the judiciary and the police, their compliance is manifested in laws which state that a man is legally entitled to rape his wife and in the practices of the police who are reluctant to intervene in domestic violence (E Pizzey 1974), therefore as Gramsci states, "...in other words hegemony (is) protected by the amount of coercion..." However, coercion is the final resort in maintaining hegemony and the more pervasive form used is that of consent.

Gramsci argues that as a social group becomes dominant it creates its own "organic intellectuals" who effectively organise hegemony in all social spheres and represent the interests of the dominant group. Intellectuals are not characterized by the intrinsic activity of thinking but by the function they perform. Given that men have colonized all institutions, organisations and social relations, even those biologically exclusive to women such as reproduction of the species in determining when, where and how women give birth, it could be argued that all men are intellectuals. If this is the case then it can be assumed that hegemony is assured indefinitely but as Gramsci notes:

"A social group becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to 'lead'." (Gramsci SPN 57-58)

Who therefore are the intellectuals who lead? Prior to the capitalist mode of production, patriarchal relations existed, albeit in a different form and they were adequately maintained by religion and superstition via the clerics whom Gramsci identifies as the "traditional intellectuals". Some of the means which were used can be seen in the persecution of witches, who were predominantly female, thus alleging that there was something innately different between men and women. Women's autonomy was also restricted by the lack of safe and reliable means of controlling their own fertility. The liberating effects of scientific advances in contraception necessitated new ways of maintaining female subordination and ironically, science has provided the means to re-establish hegemony. The intellectuals who organise patriarchal hegemony today are those people who, under the auspices of 'objective' sciences, attempt to reveal innate differences between men and women. Under this umbrella can be identified such figures as John Bowlby who argues that women have an innate propensity to 'nurture' and Talcott Parsons who stresses women's 'natural' role in providing an emotional and physical retreat from the traumas of 'public' world for her husband and children; or psychiatrists who maintain that women are more mentally unstable than men or that female criminals need 'treatment' rather than punishment as evidenced in the re-designation of Holloway Prison into a psychiatric prison. The massive propaganda campaigns carried out by the state after the 2nd world war is also evidence of attempts to re-establish women's primary role as mother/housewife which enabled men to maintain and re-claim their role as 'breadwinner' and re-establish women economic dependence. All of these can be seen to be attempts to stress innate differences between men and women and as attempts to return women to their 'proper' position - a position in which women are subordinate to men. Organic intellectuals are therefore those who organise hegemony and include, in the sphere of production; all those who have the power to allocate work and wages (including trade unionists) in maintaining the sexual division of labour: in civil society; politicians, prominent writers, academics, media personalities, journalists etc., who portray stereo-type images of the 'normal' and 'abnormal' woman: and within the state apparatus; civil servants, judges, magistrates, police etc., who enforce women's position.

Gramsci identifies a third strata of intellectuals who facilitate the continuance of hegemony whom he calls "urban and rural intellectuals". This group mediate between women and local and state administration and consist of priests, lawyers, teachers, doctors etc., who have a professional status and so can command authority and respect. If we take doctors as an example, a woman who visits her doctor with symptoms often a result of her socio-economic circumstances, which are diagnosed as depression, she is likely to be either told that she is neurotic (something which it appears only affects women) or she may be given tranquilisers and patronisingly told 'everything will be better now'. This serves to reconfirm views that women are unstable and/or child like and in need of placation. Teachers obviously serve a secondary socialising function, in preparing girls for their primary role as mothers and housewives and guiding them towards 'appropriate' female subjects such as art, low level commerce, and caring professions. Given that all women at some point in their lives have some contact with rural and urban intellectuals, their role in maintaining cultural hegemony is of the utmost importance.

As Gramsci argues all social groups who oppose the hegemony of another group create their own organic intellectuals who organise and lead that group. Within the women's movement feminists who are, whether through theoretical or practical means, attempting to instigate intellectual and moral reform through a critique of patriarchal ideology which is manifested in 'common sense' beliefs about women's 'natural' role can be seen to be, or have the potential to be, the organic intellectuals.<sup>3 33 3</sup> For Gramsci, ideologies have a material existence in the sense that they are embodied in individuals and in the institutions and organizations within which these social practices take place. Ideologies are not merely reduced to social practice, but they also exist in and through ideas, and serve to bind different social

factions. Therefore a patriarchal ideology unifies men of different socio-economic backgrounds and is translated by individuals into 'common sense' and, as Gramsci points out:

"Thus a person can be said to have two theoretical consciousnesses, one which is implicit in his activities and which in reality unites him with all his fellow workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed." (Gramsci S.P.N. :333)

The important part of the last quote is underlined and applies equally to a majority of women, in that it is through common sense that women have organised their experience, i.e., women over the course of history of living within a patriarchal ideology, come to see their experiences as common sense and natural. The 'two theoretical consciousnesses' can also be seen specifically in the practices of trade unionists who, whilst espousing equality in the workplace, still operate within a patriarchal ideology which is based on inequality, but is legitimated and expressed as 'common sense' such as women can't or don't want to do heavy and dirty jobs in the labour market whilst within the home women carry out dirty and heavy jobs. The contradiction between 'common sense' views and reality are not however recognised. Therefore whilst common sense is the site on which patriarchal ideology is constructed, it is also the site for resistance and challenge to it.

The women's movement has raised the issue of 'inherited and uncritically absorbed' through consciousness raising groups and through campaigning on issues such as sex discrimination in the labour market, abortion, rape, prostitution, domestic violence, media portrayal of women etc. yet their effectiveness has been limited. In comparison to the existence of patriarchal hegemony, it could be argued that the Women's Movement is relatively young, however this is not strictly true. Female resistance has a long history albeit in different guises, e.g., women's fight for voting rights, to child care facilities during the war and women only trade unions. However if Gramsci's concepts of "passive revolution" and "war of position" are applied, then the reason for the lack of progress becomes clear

In order for a group to become hegemonic it cannot restrict itself to its own interests, it must take into account the interests of other groups and be prepared to make compromises over its own interests. The growing numbers of women in waged work could be seen to be as against the interests of men, however given that women are predominantly in low paid, low status jobs, the threat which women might pose to 'men's jobs' is minimised and the possibility of women challenging male domination is reduced. A dominant group therefore builds up a broad bloc of varied social forces in order to retain hegemony, what Gramsci refers to as a "war of position." When hegemony is seriously threatened and extensive re-organisation is needed to re-establish it, modifications are made through the agencies of the State and without relying on the active participation of the people. Social reforms which have been demanded by the opposing forces may be carried out but in such a manner that it disorganises these forces and reduces the opportunities for further struggles. This Gramsci refers to as a "passive revolution", a "revolution from above and is a tactic used by the dominant group. This can be clearly seen in recent legislation on sex discrimination, on equal pay, and on abortion, over which women (as the opposing forces) were also engaging in a "war of position" by mobilizing support from women themselves and from other sectional groups such as the trade union movement.

However, since those particular legislative changes, the Women's Movement has diversified (as would be expected after a passive revolution) and the movement has become fragmented into many small groups who are attempting to change the situation of women on specific issues such as work, rape, prostitution, peace movement, lesbians and child custody, and even by ethnic backgrounds. If however,

women are to become a serious challenge to male hegemony, they need to unite their own movement and join forces with other radical groups who are fighting for different issues but can be united under the common interest of equality.

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