

# Unmasking the State

## Commentary Session 7

The question is how the state in particular and capitalism in general gain the consent of its citizens to rule? How does a system that essentially prioritises the interests of the 1 per cent govern with the support of the majority? Perhaps support is the wrong word here. But at the least there is a general acceptance that the state has the authority, the right to rule. If that wasn't the case, the UK would find itself in some kind of revolutionary conflict, in my opinion.

Ralph Miliband, who was a leading academic, socialist, Marxist and father of somewhat less radical sons Ed and David, made a similar point in his book, *Socialism for a sceptical age* written in 1994. Hegemony, which is another word for control or domination, must, he argued, 'also be taken to mean the capacity of the ruling classes to persuade subordinate ones that, whatever they may think of the social order, and however much they may be alienated from it, there is no alternative to it. Hegemony depends not so much on consent as on resignation.'

Of course, there are many and varied forms of domination in capitalist society. Having to labour for others while employers walk away with the profits is one. We still live in a largely male-dominated society.

Some forms of domination are openly coercive, which would include the use of force in the shape of the police or even the armed forces. Take a look at state violence against the miners' strike of 1984-5 or more recently the mass arrests of XR activists.

However, the state doesn't as a rule sustain its power through open displays of force, through outright coercion on a day-to-day basis. We are not forced to go to work, college, school or university at the point of a gun or under the threat of a fine. That is not to say that capitalism can't or won't resort to outright authoritarian rule or dictatorship when it's felt necessary. Fascist regimes in pre-war Europe and in Japan testify to that. Dictatorships and coups are common to all continents.

But in a liberal, or more accurately neoliberal representative democracy like the UK, other means of domination are more common and perhaps more effective. This form is ideological in the broadest sense of the term.

I'll begin with a general theoretical proposition put forward by Marx and Engels in 1846 but which was only published in English in 1933. Their thesis was that the dominant

class in society was also its ruling intellectual force. Material social relationships - the fact that the working class was subordinate to the capitalist class - also found its expression in ideas. In other words, there is a social origin to ideas and to consciousness. The net result of these ideas tended to favour the ruling classes and the status quo. If this class view of ideas is in general correct - and I believe it is - this creates a challenge, a barrier which we have to overcome. I'll return to this later in the session.

Which brings us to the term hegemony or what I have dubbed 'authorised thinking'. It is about how ideas and views about the world around us are shaped by others and feed into our consciousness. So that they become authorised, legitimised or 'acceptable'. . The most common usage of hegemony as a concept is to do with the power one country wields over another. For example, the British empire had a hegemonic relationship to its colonial possessions. The former Soviet Union had a similar hold on East European states like Poland, Hungary and so on. The United States maintained an economic and political grip on what was going in Latin America, which it liked to think of as its 'backyard'.

Antonio Gramsci saw hegemony differently, looking at it from the standpoint of barriers to revolutionary change. Shortly after Gramsci returned to his native Italy from an international conference in Moscow, Benito Mussolini took power and created a fascist state which was to last for over 20 years. Gramsci, a communist, was arrested, jailed and died in prison in 1937 aged just 46. Heroically, Gramsci devoted his life to studying how the ruling class maintained the upper hand. He developed the concept of hegemony beyond its narrow meaning of domination of one country by another power.

Gramsci defined the state as 'the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance but manages to win the active consent over whom it rules'. The last phrase is key. Active consent, not just passivity. We have to consent to be ruled in a certain way. If not, the system could not function. This is, however, not a stable or absolute consent, as we shall see later. Nor is hegemony reducible, we should say, exactly to the ideas of the ruling classes or crude propaganda. They are refracted, popularised, turned into aspects of art and culture and into an approach to education, for example. They become mainstream.

Contemporary thinkers have tried to develop Gramsci's concept. For Bob Jessop the result is a 'worldview' or an outlook on the world, with rules of conduct. Hegemony manifests itself in individual and collective behaviour. For Eugenio-Enrique Cortes-

Ramirez, hegemony embraces the "moral, cultural and intellectual direction of society through education".

So who is involved in relaying these 'dominant' ideas into our brains? There are some obvious candidates! Political parties play a crucial role, in and out of government. And not just those of the right. In the UK, the Tories incessantly bang on about 'freedom', 'individual liberty', 'country', 'national identity', 'patriotism', 'entrepreneurs', 'home ownership', 'competition', 'sovereignty'.

Much of it may sound hollow but it is the world we inhabit when we first come into social awareness. In other words, we're born into this spectrum of hegemony and political noise. In so far as little of this is challenged by the current Labour Party leaders, it also contributes to the pumping out of 'dominant ideas'.

The rest of the categories are pretty self-explanatory. An astonishing statistic is that there are over 400 right-wing think tanks in a global alliance. Many have direct access to state officials and ministers. The domination of the ideas of neoliberalism in state, government and even popular thinking owes a great deal to the work of key international policy groups. They have helped forge a hegemonic view of the world that presents a challenge to all those seeking democratic change. Three most notable bodies are the World Economic Forum which meets at Davos, the Mont Pelerin Society and the International Chamber of Commerce.

In their study of these policy groups, William Carroll and Jean Philippe Sapinski says that these transnational policy-planning bodies have, "since their inception... played a crucial role in promoting a neoliberal globalising outlook". They add: "Each has mobilized the agency of transnational capitalists, ultimately leading to the consolidation of transnational neoliberalism from the 1970s onward. Funded by corporations and private foundations, these groups elaborate the general neoliberal worldview shared by transnational capitalists and diffuse it to constituencies."

The World Economic Forum's network of Global Future Councils is quite the thing. The network brings together more than 1,000 what are called "thought leaders" from academia, government, international organisations, business and civil society, according to the WEF website. Part of their mission is to provide decision-makers from business and government with a "multidisciplinary understanding" of strategic implications. Its main aim is to convince the world that a sustainable and ethical capitalism. WEF founder

Klaus Schwab argues for a "better kind of capitalism", what he calls "stakeholder capitalism."

Another key contributor to hegemony is advertising. Before the pandemic, advertising spend worldwide was about \$600 billion a year. Top spenders were Samsung – the South Korean mobile phone corporation – and L’Oreal, which describes itself as a 'world leader in beauty'. In case you might think badly about the corporation, its website proclaims: "Human First" and "People are our Greatest Assets". Seductive or what? The relentless pounding of the virtues of the market, competition and low prices has taken its toll on social consciousness.

As Bryn Jones and Mike O’Donnell in their Alternatives to Neoliberalism write, neoliberalism has the effect of structuring the way "subjects think about the practices, techniques and rationalities used to govern themselves. Neoliberal governments represent the population’s wellbeing as ultimately tied to individuals’ ability to make market principles the guiding values of their lives, to see themselves as products to create, sell and optimise". They describe neoliberalism as a "systemic discourse embodied in the dominance of market-like practices over social life and governance ... a pervasive commodification of most aspects of personal, public and cultural life, and well-being".

A final point. The slide doesn’t include a more elusive transmission belt – the way we are taught to think, the way we approach the world around us.

You could argue that the superficial approach to thinking that we pick up at school, university contributes to 'authorised thinking'. That area is covered extensively in another unit, called Philosophy for Revolution which I hope you look into if you haven’t already done so.

It's important to remember is that hegemony is not a once-and-for-all project. Ideological domination requires constant reinforcing. Thoughtful right-wing thinkers understand the importance of this process. Take Michael Gove, who is a senior Tory cabinet minister. In a wide-ranging speech last year, he began by citing a famous passage from Gramsci's Prison Notebooks, which Gove said defined our times:

Quote "The crisis consists precisely of the fact that the inherited is dying - and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear". Quote Gove warned that "morbid symptoms" present today threatened capitalism and state institutions and that they had to change their outlook and message to survive.

So enough people in the ruling political classes are aware that the relationship between the people and the state, for example, needs rebuilding because, as Gove puts it, "the model that the current generation of political leaders inherited has been crumbling". Hegemony is about 'manufacturing consent', creating an agreement, an acceptance of the status quo. We come to 'agree' that there is no alternative, or that it's not worth the risk trying to create one.

This is achieved by what could be described as the 'production of consciousness' or subjectivities on a continuous basis by various agencies. It is 'common sense' that the present political and economic system is the only viable one. In the neoliberal period, this production line has increased a thousand fold: We are repeatedly told: We are sovereign individuals, free to make choices about work, life style and consumption.

The free market, together with risk-taking entrepreneurs and hardworking taxpayers, delivers our basic needs

The main role of the state is promoting free trade, deregulation and creating new partnerships with the corporate sector.

Things may not be perfect but it is the best of all possible systems.

Be what you want to be. You are worth it.

As William Davies, the political theorist, in the Sage Handbook of Neoliberalism, acknowledges: "Commitment to a strong state, capable of rebuffing political and ideological challenges to capitalist competition, is a defining feature of neoliberalism, both as a system of thought and of applied political strategy."

Authorised thinking is also about presenting history in a distorted, one-sided way. So democratic rights are simply British values and not the achievements of struggle by generations over several centuries. There were some positive aspects to the British empire, we are told. As you know, revisiting history to probe the role of slave owners and slavery, for example, in British society is strongly rejected by the right-wing media and politicians.

There is a good reason for this. Opponents fear that process could open a can of worms about British history and how it was made. Instead of the authorised version of great, male inventors coming up with the idea of steam engines to harness power and drive the new cotton mills we might discover another story. That would include using the proceeds of slavery to finance the first factories, the employment of disposable child

labour, many taken from orphanages and work houses and extreme exploitation of the workforce. Better not to go down that road. So the national curriculum is carefully devised to avoid deep probing of history and the right-wing press conduct their spurious anti-woke campaigns.

Is it possible to build a counter-hegemony? Not only is it possible but absolute necessary. And the time is right. Covid-19 and the pandemic has shaken up people's thinking. For many, being freed from the daily commute has allowed more time to reflect and to change their lifestyles. For others, the role of the state in keeping the economy alive has led to thinking about the vulnerabilities of the capitalist way of running the economy.

The hold over people's thinking is fragile. Increasing numbers reject the status quo and don't want to return to how they lived pre-pandemic. The new generation especially is looking to another form of society. The rejection of the authorised view of colonialism, with its worship of statues of white pioneers and so-called explorers point to this.

In a series of interviews carried out by the Guardian recently with young people across Europe, one person commented: "So many revolutions to lead". A young worker in the UK hospitality sector said:

"The biggest challenge my generation faces is climate change. It would feel crushing if we just fell back into pre-pandemic 'normal'. What's the point of learning all these lessons about ourselves if we don't put change into action?"

So counter-hegemony is vital, not just to challenge authorised thinking but to develop ALTERNATIVE coherent, comprehensive ideas, plans and perspectives. Campaigning for a critical way of thinking, a deeper approach that points to solutions should be part of counter-hegemony.

Actions that that move us beyond protest, that mount a serious challenge to the existing political and economic system, with a view to making a transition to a true democracy is counter-hegemony in practice.