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ANTONIO GRAMSCI

Freestyle kayaking, hegemony,
coercion and consent

Jerry Tracey

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Introduction

This chapter will draw connections between freestyle kayaking and Antonio Gramsci, who was an Italian revolutionary and leading communist during the 1920s and 1930s. Although this connection may seem surprising, Gramsci's thought has been widely applied well beyond its original national and historical context. In particular, his development of the concept of *hegemony* has been widely drawn upon for the analysis of trans-national corporate business, and has been used to provide an explanation for the growth and dominance of global capitalism. Gramsci can also provide a useful framework for the interpretation of cultural interaction and social change. The evolution of freestyle kayaking will be used in this account as a means of illustrating this line of sociological thought.

It is likely that many readers will have experience of white-water sport and are therefore already familiar with the character of freestyle kayaking and the broader playboating subculture; for others, however, the following brief description may be helpful.

Freestyle has emerged relatively recently as an organized discipline of white-water kayaking from the 'new school' paddling culture of playboating. This form of activity has similarities to extreme sports such as windsurfing and snowboarding; like them, it is characterized by an expressive and individualistic style, within a highly sociable atmosphere in which display to other participants and spectators is a key element. At freestyle events contestants take turns to ride a large river wave or breaking hole in front of a panel of judges, who allocate scores based on the range and standard of the moves and tricks that are performed. As in surfing competitions, elimination takes place through a series of heats to create thrilling head-to-head final rounds.

Freestyle began originally with open contests known as 'white-water rodeos', but it has become progressively more structured over the years and there are now formal ranking systems that lead up to seriously contested places on national teams.

Nowadays, despite a continuing rhetoric of informality, many freestyle paddlers are visibly engaged in serious competition in officially recognized events. While early international championships were run on an *ad hoc* basis, they are now formally recognized by official governing bodies and have become integrated into the general sport-media-business complex. Meanwhile, the advent of this discipline appears to have stimulated a reverse change in the longer established forms of the sport, such as slalom, which has also become more spectacular in its displays of dramatic expression.

This chapter will use a Gramscian neo-Marxist framework to interpret these developmental changes within white-water paddlesport. The example of the evolution of sociable playboating into competitive freestyle will be used to illuminate the much broader issue of the intricate relationship between apparently resistant cultural forms and the real interests of American-led, trans-national business.

Background

You will have noticed the term 'neo-Marxist' in the above paragraph. As outlined in Chapter 2, Marx was largely responsible for two major concepts: the idea of evolutionary process in history and the interpretation of social structure as a mirror of economic relationships. In common with other major intellectual figures from the same period, such as Darwin and Freud, Marx did not create a fixed edifice but instead inaugurated a school of thought that later followers have greatly refined. Theorists who took Marx's concepts and built on them can be labelled neo-Marxists. Gramsci was one of these people.

Antonio Gramsci was born in 1891 and came from relatively humble origins on the Italian island of Sardinia. This background, and the struggles that his own family faced in reduced circumstances, gave him a deep sympathy with the Italian working class and a personal insight into the plight of the rural poor. A childhood accident left him with a hunchback deformity and permanently weakened health. However, through good educational progress and intellectual promise, the young Gramsci eventually made it to Turin University on the Italian mainland. There he became increasingly involved in left-wing politics during the turbulent period of the Great War and its aftermath. He emerged as a prominent socialist journalist, and in 1919 he became editor of the paper *L'Ordine Nuovo* (The New Order), which was a key mouthpiece for the revolutionary left.

Gramsci was personally involved in attempts to spark a Russian-style revolution in Italy, which was driven by a factory council movement (and the industrial workers it represented) in the northern cities. He was one of many at that time who believed that Italy was ripe for a proletarian uprising against a political system that had resulted in the carnage of the Great War. There was, indeed, a credible prospect of overthrowing the ruling elite, who had incompetently led the country into near disaster against Austria. Ultimately, however, these revolutionary initiatives failed. Subsequent to this setback, Gramsci spent an extended period of time in Moscow, where he met Julia Schucht, whom he married in 1922. Following his return to

Italy in 1924, he became the leader of the Italian Communist Party, at a time when the political left was coming under greatly increased threat from the rising forces of fascism.

As is well known, Mussolini seized absolute power and successfully established a fascist regime in Italy. Gramsci held technical immunity from arrest as a serving member of parliament, but he was nevertheless among those rounded up and imprisoned in 1926. Life in prison broke his already fragile health and he never regained his freedom. Near the end of his life Gramsci was transferred to a special clinic, but he died prematurely in 1937 while still under fascist custody.

Gramsci was far from idle during his long years in prison. In spite of his prolonged struggle with failing health, he undertook a major philosophical project. This extended Marxist thinking to provide an explanation for the clear persistence of capitalism in Western Europe and the absence or failure of the expected revolutions. Within a Marxist framework, he also accounted for the rise of fascism and the conspicuous support shown for it by some sections of Italian society – especially (and surprisingly) many members of the lower middle class and the peasantry. Central to Gramsci's explanations was the concept of *hegemony*, through which a ruling formation can use popular culture to engineer dominance by consent.

Following Gramsci's death, his extensive prison notebooks were retrieved by his sister-in-law and smuggled to Moscow, where they were safely stored by his wife's family until after the Second World War. Edited versions of his copious writings were finally published in Italian during the late 1940s, and in English and French translation during the early 1970s (Hoare and Smith, 1971). In the context of the Cold War, moderate communists in Western Europe found that Gramsci's sophisticated and evolved version of neo-Marxism provided a highly valuable counter-argument to the hard-line Stalinist doctrine that was emanating from the Soviet Union. It also offered these moderate communists a philosophical basis for a peaceful road to socialism by means of a gradual cultural transformation of society.

In addition, the Gramscian framework of analysis provided a pivotal theoretical background for the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, which emerged during the 1970s and 1980s in Birmingham, England (Hebdige, 1979). Many cultural practices that were oppositional to capitalism were identified during these studies, and it was suggested that a strong tendency exists for these to become adopted by commercial interests and modified into forms that actually reinforce the existing social order. This line of interpretation of social life drew heavily on Marxism and on the concept of *hegemony* that had been developed by Gramsci. This idea is explained in the next section.

Key concepts

Hegemony

Gramsci's writing ranged over many areas and his prison notebooks are extensive and complex. The work was unfinished and includes rough notes on his thoughts

that were probably not intended for an outside audience. In addition, he was obliged to use a code in order to mislead his prison guards and the fascist censors; Marxism, for instance, is referred to as 'the philosophy of praxis' and Lenin is called 'Illich'. However, his work included the development of a key concept with wider application: the idea of hegemony. Gramsci used this to account for the failure of revolution in Western Europe and to provide a Marxist explanation for the rise of fascism. The Gramscian idea of hegemony will be applied to a very different context here, since the concept will be illustrated through discussion of the relationship between the trans-national leisure business and the freestyle form of kayaking.

The evolution from informal and sociable playboating to the structured and codified discipline of freestyle can be seen as an instance of a path of development that has often been identified in other extreme or lifestyle sports. In general terms, this pattern starts with an alternative counter-cultural activity that is initially developed by pioneering practitioners. The new form of sports practice then becomes adopted and virtually taken over by commercial interests, which use it as a marketing tool and may promote it to a broader audience as the latest 'craze'. In time, a core of serious exponents emerges, whose spectacular exploits can threaten to undermine the image and status of an associated major sport. The response to this situation is a process of absorption, through which the alternative activity becomes re-invented as a new discipline within the established structures of formal sport. Examples of this process are provided by the integration of snowboarding into the structures of skiing, of windsurfing into those of sailing and of mountain-biking into those of cycling.

One possible theoretical lens through which this pattern of transformation can be interpreted is this concept of hegemony. It refers to a process in which a ruling group makes conspicuous concessions towards the demands of a resistant faction or rising class; due to this, the challenging formation appears to have achieved many of its objectives, but the actual result is a hybrid situation that in fact strongly favours the real interests of the dominant forces (see Jarvie and Maguire, 1994, pp. 108–29). In this way, a dominant group, such as Italy's inter-war fascists, can negotiate consent, or even approval, for its power from those whom it dominates. Gramsci was clear in his exposition of hegemony that it included an element of coercion. In addition to engineering widespread consent, the ruling group retains the option of using direct force against any remaining dissidents who fail to grasp the 'common sense' that there is no alternative to enthusiastic compliance. Under our present regime of global capitalism, people are not taken out and shot (at least not in the West), but firm sanctions are still applied against any who directly threaten the system or who stray beyond the boundaries of approved opposition.

In the case of freestyle kayaking, trans-national business interests made significant concessions to local canoe and kayak clubs and national administrative structures in order to gain their support for the promotion of playboating and its associated merchandise. However, the resulting emergence of freestyle as a formally organized discipline brought playboating culture into the mainstream, and opened the rest of the sport to much greater levels of media influence and commercial exploitation.

Despite initial appearances, the long-term profit goals of the global leisure industry were thus ultimately furthered by the pattern of development that occurred. There is, though, something of a paradox here; as in the case of other extreme forms of sport, many of the early pioneers of playboating were engaged in a direct protest against the social order in general, and the structures of sport in particular. Notwithstanding the later widespread commercialization of the activity and the advent of formal freestyle competition, echoes of this resistance remain visible in the culture of playboating today.

In a similar way to Gramsci's development of Marxism, his own work has itself been taken further and adapted to new circumstances. Two of these extensions to the Gramscian concept of hegemony are worthy of discussion here: Williams' (1977, 1982, 1983) analysis of the relationship between different forms of culture and Harvey's (2000, 2005a, 2005b) work on the power dynamics of trans-national business and global capitalism.

Dominant, residual and emergent cultures

Williams (1977, 1982, 1983) employed Gramsci's conceptual framework to investigate the interaction between high and popular forms of culture. In particular, he disputed the common Marxist view that leisure and culture are secondary to the world of productive work, as he saw popular culture as a key mechanism for the establishment and maintenance of ruling-class dominance by consent. Williams' version of hegemony has been characterized as 'hegemony lite', since he strongly emphasized the consent to domination that can be engineered through popular culture rather than through the underlying dimension of coercion. In the outdoor adventure context, examples of such a manufacture of consent can be seen in the diversion of the anti-establishment protest ethos of new activities, such as kite-surfing. This has recently undergone a familiar process that was seen before in snowboarding and mountain-biking, in which commercialization and the involvement of major business sponsors led to the introduction of formal rules and absorption into official structures of organization. Kite-surfing has now followed its predecessors down this route to gain the ultimate marker of mainstream social acceptance: the status of an Olympic sport. It will be interesting to observe those activities that still currently have a strong pioneering and alternative character, such as slack-lining, to see if a similar pattern of development occurs.

Williams (1977) produced a typology of cultural forms, which classed them as dominant, residual or emergent (pp. 121–7). The cultural practices of those in power are classed as *dominant forms*, together with activities that are directly promoted to the wider population through education, for instance. *Residual forms* are the persisting social interests of previously powerful or significant groups. Sometimes practices of this type can undergo spectacular revivals and re-emerge with a transformed nature. Finally, *emergent cultural forms* are those embraced by rising social groups. Such practices tend to be marginal at first but can herald styles of social interaction that are destined to become important in the future.

Emergent cultural practices can threaten to disrupt the established social order by providing a focus for opposition and challenge; the dominant formation, however, usually engages with any such new social behaviour and organizes 'diversionary channels' for it, such as structured programmes of approved events. This continuous process is seen as crucial to the maintenance of hegemony by the capitalist ruling class. Williams (1977), along with other neo-Marxists, regarded this ongoing upkeep of 'domination through consent' as a significant reason for the conspicuous absence of a social and economic revolution under contemporary corporate capitalism (p. 114). Like Gramsci himself, Williams (1982) believed that efforts should be made to counteract this ruling class hegemony through building alternative forms of culture among workers and their families (p. 40).

Within Williams' framework, our example of freestyle kayaking could be viewed as an instance of an emergent culture. Playboating expressed a clearly oppositional stance back in its early days. This was even the case within the sport; in the 1970s and 1980s informal playboaters were often seen as maverick intruders at regulated events, such as wildwater races. As is often the case with emergent forms, dominant business interests from the wider capitalist society adopted playboating as a new pursuit and began to actively promote a modified version of it as a marketing tool for leisure products. Commercial sponsors encouraged playboaters to embrace integration with the wider sport, of kayaking and support its codification into the new structured discipline of freestyle. The new style of paddling rapidly transformed into simply one more branch of the dominant white-water sports culture, with the full support of the ruling establishment, which included the governing sports authorities. Following Williams (1982), this process could be interpreted as the taming of an emergent oppositional activity by dominant forces (pp. 40-2), as these businesses employed the adapted and controlled version of playboating to maintain and widen their ruling hegemony in the world of white-water kayaking.

Longer-established disciplines of kayaking, such as slalom, can be seen as residual forms of hegemony, since they date from an earlier period, when the values of amateur sport were dominant. A number of these older disciplines have undergone conspicuous revival in recent years, although their present regenerated forms have become highly dependent on the demands of commercial interests and the requirements of the media. In the case of slalom, especially, this visible change has been largely due to the influence of the emergent culture of freestyle, which has thus served to augment the hegemony of free-market capitalism. The needs of spectators have always been a central consideration in the organization of freestyle events, but slalom has tended to be much more geared around the enjoyment of actual participants. In recent years, however, there has been a strong trend towards much shorter and more intense slalom courses, which allow spectators to see most of the action from a single vantage point. In addition, championship level slalom has now mirrored freestyle by adopting a system of elimination through heats and semi-finals, in order to create dramatic final rounds that have greater appeal to the media and spectators.

Neo-liberalism and global capitalism

Gramsci wrote in the specific context of inter-war Europe. Unsurprisingly, his theoretical analysis was originally intended to address the particular situation of the failure of socialist revolution in Italy, and the appearance instead of a rising tide of fascist power. More recently, his explanation of the mechanisms by which capitalism can entrench its hold on society has been applied on a broader scale to the current situation of global interaction. Notable here is the work of Harvey (2000, 2005a, 2005b), who has used hegemony theory to outline a global trend towards dominance by vast trans-national corporations. Harvey suggests that the interests of these companies are increasingly backed by the advent of neo-liberal political systems, which are characterized by their support for an unrestrained free market, together with the widespread privatization of infrastructure and services. He points to the roles of Americanized forms of popular culture and mass media entertainment in maintaining this hegemony of American-led big business.

Freestyle kayaking could be viewed as contributing to this hegemonic process. Along with the other extreme forms of sport with a 'Californian cachet', it forms part of the ubiquitous and standardized American-style popular culture that is rapidly spreading across the globe in a process that Horne (2006) refers to as 'the production of consumption'. This refers to business interests influencing culture by creating artificial demands for consumer goods, from which they can subsequently profit from fulfilling. In the case of freestyle kayaking, sponsored 'pro-paddlers' regularly create elaborate new moves and tricks and exhibit them at high-profile events with extensive media coverage; it is almost invariably the case that these stunts can only be replicated by those who have purchased the very latest branded equipment!

Limitations and critiques

Gramsci made a major contribution to left-wing philosophy and these days he is normally associated with the idea of a gradual transition to socialism rather than turbulent upheaval. In view of this, it is perhaps rather disappointing to find that he was not, in fact, an advocate of peaceful protest and passive resistance in the Gandhian mould; it is clear that he was a strong supporter of armed insurrection in the 'right' circumstances, such as those faced by Lenin in Russia. We should remember, however, that Gramsci lived through very violent times and that his principal opponents, Mussolini's fascists, regularly had people tortured and shot.

Gramsci placed great emphasis on the importance of popular culture as a mechanism for the maintenance of ruling class dominance. He also stressed that those who hoped to achieve social change in developed societies needed to first develop and promote alternative and oppositional forms of culture. He had learnt from bitter personal experience that a direct assault on the power structures of the state could not work in Western Europe, despite its success in Russia. Nevertheless, Gramsci remained committed throughout to the fundamental Marxist concept that economic relationships are the base that determines the social structure of society. This general

line of thinking has been widely challenged by those who attribute a much greater influence to individual free choice and who therefore ascribe a prime function to human agency. It can also be argued that ideas and original thought may have a much greater effect on human behaviour and on social development than Marxists, Gramscian or otherwise, are prepared to recognize.

Gramscian hegemony theory, along with structuralism and other forms of neo-Marxism, has been regarded by some of its post-modernist critics as a 'modernist grand narrative', which claims to offer an all-embracing interpretation of the dynamics of society (see Tosh, 2000, pp. 123–31). Wide-ranging theories of this type offer generalized explanatory frameworks that can help to generate understanding of broad social and economic trends. They are not always very helpful, however, for the detailed study of the actual minutiae of everyday life. The realities of the social world are inevitably significantly more complex than a purely uncritical reading of any such broad macro perspectives or grand narratives would suggest. Therefore, social theories purporting to offer a total world-view, such as neo-Marxism and Gramscian hegemony, are probably best regarded as polemical starting points for thought and discussion rather than as definitive solutions.

Like other Marxists, Gramsci considered the primary division in society to be based on class. This was defined in terms of the relationship to the means of production, with workers being those who had to rely on the sale of their labour to the capitalist owners of machinery and materials. Later Gramscian analysts have pointed to the current dominance of a global business and finance class over a large general population of consumers (for example, Harvey, 2005a). While it provides a useful point of reference, this viewpoint is open to major criticism for seriously undervaluing other highly significant lines of social cleavage, especially those based on gender, ethnicity or religion.

Certainly, social commentators adopting a post-modern analysis often believe that we have moved far beyond the era of mass labour in heavy industry and into a post-industrial period of fluid relationships, transient identities, instant information flow and a multi-choice cultural menu. An alternative to hegemony theory, with this perspective, is provided by the work of Castells (2004). He analyses the role of freely chosen cultural practices as a means of asserting one's social identity within this contemporary 'network society'. It is becoming increasingly common in the Western world for the social character and status of people to be defined by their leisure and lifestyle choices, rather than purely by their paid occupation and their position in formal hierarchies. Castells (2004) argues that the availability of such flexible social options has become widened by the significant development of information and communication technology and its application to everyday life.

In addition, Gramscian hegemony theory has inevitably come under strong criticism from neo-conservatives, who favour Thatcherism and Reaganomics. They point to the success of capitalism in promoting efficient production and in spreading material prosperity in areas where it has been enthusiastically adopted, such as the 'tiger economies' of the Pacific Rim. Those who take this stance often suggest that overall human happiness and material well-being have greatly increased since the

fall of the Soviet Union and the spread across the world of free-market economics combined with liberal-democratic politics (Fukuyama, 1992). These claims have, of course, been tempered by those who highlight catastrophic environmental damage and widespread exploitation of vulnerable people as consequences of this prosperity – especially in less-developed parts of the world (Klein, 2005).

Returning to our example of changes in white-water kayaking practice, there have indeed been some positive aspects to the commercial penetration of the sport, the emergence of which was greatly assisted by the advent of freestyle. For example, there have been conspicuous developments in the design and construction of boats and paddles that would have been unlikely without the driving motivation of business. Safety equipment and protective clothing have also been improved. The increase in numbers generated by media promotion has put some venues under strain, but has also led to the development of new purpose-built facilities.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed one strand of the extensive development of Marxist thought beyond the influential (but flawed) basic version that was promoted by Soviet propaganda. In particular, Gramsci's concept of hegemony has been introduced and explained as the process by which dominance can be established through using popular culture to engineer consent. I hope that the issues raised will stimulate discussion and the sharing of opinions. This will in itself help us to more deeply question the widespread 'common-sense' view that there are no possible alternatives to the established capitalist system within which most of us live.

In common with other forms of Marxist theory, the Gramscian approach to social analysis can appear to be very negative. When seen from this perspective, society can seem riddled with conflict – with further class confrontation not only necessary, but inevitable. However, the fact that we have developed an awareness of our submission to the global capitalist system does not necessarily preclude us from enjoying its products.

Like other forms of Americanized popular culture, extreme sports are highly seductive. In the case of our example, freestyle kayaking is undeniably dramatic for spectators and thrilling for participants. Those of us who are addicted to surfing waves and playing rapids in commercially produced, plastic playboats can still find the activity liberating and uplifting on the personal level – even after becoming aware of our own exploitation. On the other hand, is this in itself an instance of the construction of hegemony, in which we are manipulated into giving consent to our own domination?

Further reading

Gramsci's own writing can be quite hard to follow, owing to its non-sequential thematic nature and his efforts to mislead the prison censors. However, the Hoare and Smith translation (referenced below) includes a full introduction and useful

commentary notes throughout. A more concise anthology is available, which also includes extracts from Gramsci's journalism and early work:

Forgacs, D. (ed.) (1988) *A Gramsci reader: Selected writings 1916–1935*, London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Those interested in finding out more about the story of Gramsci's life and the context of his work should find this definitive historical study by Clark to be interesting and accessible:

Clark, M. (1977) *Antonio Gramsci and the revolution that failed*, London: Yale University Press.

An extensive secondary literature exists on Gramsci's political thought and philosophy. An example that is enjoyable to read is the analysis by Femia, which also includes a discussion of the later application of Gramsci's ideas:

Femia, J.V. (1981) *Gramsci's political thought: Hegemony, consciousness and the revolutionary process*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

An example of the application of Gramscian thinking to the study of sport and leisure is provided by the work of Bairner. A good introduction is the following book chapter:

Bairner, A. (2009) 'Re-appropriating Gramsci: Marxism, hegemony and sport', in B. Carrington and I. McDonald (eds), *Marxism, cultural studies and sport* (pp. 195–212), London: Routledge.

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