

Conquests of the rational essay sample



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It costs a little over a dollar to ensure that a child does not lose his or her eyesight as a result of malnutrition. It costs a little under ten dollars to inoculate a child against six potentially fatal diseases. Thousands of children die each day from poverty and disease. Meanwhile, America's defence budget stands at over \$379 billion for the coming 12 months. While it would be facetious to argue that the government of a sovereign state has not the right to allocate its budget as it sees fit and in its own best interests, it is equally irresponsible to ignore the gross injustice that is being perpetrated for the benefit of corporate America and specifically those corporations that bankroll the Bush administration – Boeing, General Electric and Exxon Mobil to name but a few. Without wishing to regurgitate statistics needlessly, it should be pointed out that of all the industrialised nations, the United States contributes the smallest proportion of its GDP to the development of third world countries, and even then, the 0.2% of GDP that goes to foreign aid is offered with plenty of political and economic strings attached to ensure the continuing influence and domination of the hegemonic power.

So children starve. Elderly people die of exposure to the elements. Three generations of people live in squalid tents without electricity, without running water and without even the most basic medical necessities. What kind of past, present and future hopes can the disenfranchised have? If a man has something to live for, he will not kill himself. But if he has nothing, what is the point of living? Meanwhile, Uncle Sam's disciples sit in front of 24 minutes of commercials in every hour, engulfed by the possibilities for material consumption laid before them, eating packaged food while the SUV idles in the driveway and the A. C. ensure complete climate control.

Such is the American ' Way of Life', and there is nothing more important than its preservation, as the present U. S. Government implied when unilaterally scuppering the Kyoto Protocol on the basis that it was not in America's national interest. If the American way of life were purely a domestic phenomenon there might be less international displeasure at U. S. policy. The politicisation of the phenomenon has simply led to its increased hegemony, and highlighting the injustice has proven fruitless as a means of promoting change. Yet the point must surely stand: if a man has a reason to live he will not kill himself. It does not seem too farfetched to suggest that if American domestic and foreign policy were less aggressive the reactions of the disenfranchised might be less radical and aggressive in response.

But the American people are not intrinsically unintelligent. Nor are they unethical or immoral in many aspects of life. Indeed it is to the ' Puritan Ethic'¹ that America owes much of its financial and economic strength. So what is it that prevents the people of the most wealthy nation in history from perceiving their own foreign and domestic policy failings? Or do they perceive them and simply choose to ignore?

On a simplistic level there is a strong argument for the role of subjectivity or perspective in the claim that America and her people do not conform to the ethical standards demanded of the world's only superpower. The blame culture works both ways and ends up being circular.

Obviously America is neither the first nor, one imagines, the last dominant power to believe in the unquestionable benefits of her own brand of ideological hegemony. The Soviet Union, while by no means a textbook

interpretation of the Marxist theory it sought to promote, was nevertheless intent on promoting its ideology across the world. The British Empire was founded on the belief that it was Britain's duty to 'civilise the barbaric masses to the east', while religion has often been used to similar effect by the other regional superpowers from Ancient Rome to Persia and China. The difference, if there is one to be found, is that while all hegemonies are supported and often advanced militarily, the American Empire is first economic and then political, in line with the ideological belief that the political structure should be a tool for the economic superstructure.

What is it, then, that blinds the people of dominant powers to the unsavoury aspects of their hegemony, and more importantly, prevents ideological change? In other words, how does a hegemonic ideology perpetuate itself. The arguments for moral and ethical ineptitude, selfishness or subjectivity or straightforward ignorance are not satisfactory explanations – they serve to justify the current state of affairs, certainly, but do not necessarily explain the uniformity of the phenomenon or the fact that it perpetuates irrespective of the ideology.

Before embarking on a discussion of the reasons for the perpetuation of ideology, there are a few propositions worth noting. Firstly, ideology should, according to Gramsci, be studied as a superstructure. In the Gramscian approach to the structure/superstructure complex, whose basis is formed by the concepts of hegemony, civil society, the State, the party and the intellectuals, ideology occupies its extremely important position only if it is subordinated to the political conceptions around which Gramsci's thinking is oriented. 2

In other words, the value of ideology is superstructural, but is based on the collective (not necessarily active) acceptance of the ideology. Politics is the key movement in the relations of structure and superstructure. It ' marks the passage from the structure to the sphere of the complex superstructures'. Ideology is not to be judged according to the criterion of truth and falsehood, but rather according to its function and efficacy in binding together classes and class fractions in position of dominance and subordination: ' ideology serves to cement and unify the social bloc'. It is also important to make two distinctions concerning ideology: the first is between systematic ways of thinking (philosophies) and ' aggregated and internally contradictory forms of thought' (common sense and folklore). 3

The concept of hegemony is produced by Gramsci to analyse economic, political, ideological and cultural relations within classes and between classes, however it is not merely a political tool. In fact Gramsci's regular references to ' ethico-political hegemony' implies that its true breadth causes it to affect every aspect of social life and thought.

The absence of a ' consciousness of historicity' and hence of self knowledge is, according to Gramsci, the principle feature that condemns the common sense thinker to the role of subordination and dependence. Popular notions such as ' human nature' effectively discount the possibility of change and naturalise the social order.

The creation of social norms by the hegemonic entity within the structure is a key concept in Marxist theory of the Bourgeois Political-Economy. The hegemonic entity can intervene ' positively' in popular thinking in order to

recompose its elements and add new ones, or ‘negatively’ by setting boundaries on its development whilst leaving it the restricted freedom of internal elaboration. In other words, while it tends to be acceptable for the subordinated classes to make changes within the system in which they live, the hegemon prevents any changes to the superstructural ideology.

This (exaggerated) impression of the plasticity of dominant ideologies is further enforced by the ability of the ruling bloc to change the political playing field, to change the rules which govern it in its own favour and ultimately to enforce its rules by means of the police and the army. The revolutionary party must be constantly changing its face and redefining its activities, and the consequence is that no sustained attack on the hegemony takes place. An obvious illustration of this point is the hysterical resort to Neil McCarthyism in the face of a perceived Communist threat to national security, or more recent anti-terrorism laws that clearly and distinctly infringe on the very human rights that America champions overseas.

From this one begins to understand how revolutionary change to the system is prevented. The superficial impression that the subordinated class can make changes to the system is, in fact, in the final analysis proven to be false: the ruling bloc, by forgoing largely irrelevant and inconsequential influences can give the impression of promoting evolutionary change within a society and thus placate the majority, or at least enough of the subordinated class to overcome the threat that might be posed to it by new, more appealing orders.

To recap briefly, the ability of the dominant group to determine norms within a society lies largely in its control of the tools of ideology. For example the Church enforces its religious authority over those subordinated to it through the 'updating' of the moral system it has created.

All this is not to say that the society that we live in is necessarily and implicitly flawed. Indeed it should be noted that many of the social norms enforced upon the individual are not simply in existence at the whim of a ruling body. Many social norms, most notably religious morality, are enforced for the benefit of the majority, or for the 'common good' as the would-be altruists might put it. To take an extreme example, it seems evident that the notion that we should not kill is beneficial to society as a whole, and it is by enforcing morality through the legal system that the hegemonic ideal remains intact. However it is interesting that the only compelling argument for this is based on rational conceptions of the sanctity of an individual's life.

And what is rationality if not a tool of a hegemonic ideology? After all, rationality is no different from the political playing field. It is an abstract notion whose barriers can be moved at the whim of any given individual. It only takes for that individual to be able to exercise some form of control over the rest of society for his or her conception of rationality to influence another's conception.

When Marinetti or Breton suggest a break with rationality, the general public stand aghast at the suggestion. What kind of social conditioning could possibly be responsible for causing such strong reliance on this faculty of reasoning?

In order to tackle this question it is worth noting a number of premises. Firstly, that reason is a function of some form of conscious activity. Secondly, that as Wittgenstein suggested in refuting Descartes' theory of mind in the last century, 'even when we think our most private and spiritual thoughts we are employing the medium of language which cannot be severed from its public and bodily expression.'⁴ In other words all thoughts, be they intentional (in the metaphysical sense) or of a reasoning nature, are bound by the rules of language since it is through language that we conceptualise and thus grasp otherwise alien and meaningless phenomena. Thirdly that concepts are taught. Fourth, that the uniformity of rationality is a result of a consensus of reason. As Nietzsche stated with regard to morality (which can be seen as a form of common reasoning), 'morality is the herd instinct of the masses'. In other words, rationality is a product of common cognitive function which is taught through language.

Thus there is a clear causal link between the learning of language and the determination of rationality. Given that our private and spiritual thoughts are products of language which is itself based on the logic of syntax, it seems that it would be impossible to employ language to effect a change in hegemonic conceptions of rationality, since to do so, would be to demand that the individual forgoes the natural and logical process that spawns rationality that may have a physiological and thus evolutionary basis. The notion of using language as the chosen medium for communicating anti-rationalist ideas is intrinsically and by definition flawed since to do so would be to restrict oneself to the laws that one is trying to see beyond.

Thus we can arrive at the following conclusions which might, to return to the original subject, help us understand why it is that true superstructural breaks with the past are so difficult to effectuate: The fact that language, as a function of a rational learning procedure, and at the same time as the controller of all forms of conscious thought, determines that our thoughts must be logical and thus rational, at the basest level in terms of structuring our thoughts into basic syntactic patterns over which even the super-ego has no control (try thinking an irrational thought in an unconsidered, un-syntactical way) and on a more complex level in terms of connotations and implications in connotative and denotative language.

Even so, revolutions take place. Old orders are replaced by new ones. Most often this is a result of the loss of the support of the army and police, the basic tools of state repression. But what then, is the role of intellectuals? As suggested, as a general rule, since the boundaries of rationality are unclear and can be changed, it seems that rational intellectuals are bound to the system that their thoughts are the product of. This leads to the superstructural perpetuity of the truly hegemonic ideologies since these ideologies are able to absorb new ideas internally and evolve from within the framework of rationality. Are anti-rationalist intellectuals such as Marinetti and Breton implicitly flawed by their reliance on a rational tool to communicate their ideas? Can there ever be an Irrationalist Revolution? The answer, sadly, must be no.

Obviously there exist innumerable social norms that are outside the political structure, but the same traditional conceptions seem to determine their existence and their change, and they still have the function of creating social

norms to which the individual is subject. Manners and behavioural norms are an interesting case in point: while there is clearly a need, as suggested earlier, to prevent people from committing certain acts and making certain choices for 'the common good', there seems to be no particularly compelling reason for politeness, yet one is bound by its rules. While the norms of behaviour do indeed evolve alongside the ideals and philosophies that are their cause (for example the elevated status of women in society creating an environment where the norm is to accord them greater, or at least different forms of respect) there is never any suggestion that they should be done away with completely in favour of a completely new set of modernised rules. Furthermore, one is deemed to be anti-social if one does not follow the norms of the society that one is in, and one is compelled to believe that one's own cultural norms with regard to manners is something that one as a member of one's society, and thus makes one proud of being part of that society, perpetuating the societies norms through association.

So to conclude, the perpetuity of hegemonic ideologies is a virtue of the perpetuity of the language in which it is encased and propagated. Since the dominant ideology is also that which sets the boundaries of rationality within that society, rationality becomes a tool of the dominant faction of society for preventing change and ensuring its continued dominance. The fact that the American people act as they do to solve world issues is not, then, a function of their moral and ethical ineptitude. Nor is it a result of ignorance. It is simply their (naive) belief in an apparently objective rationality that is, in fact, a powerful self-imposed tool for promoting and normalising the choices they make.