



REVIEW

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The Lost Leviathan

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Perry Anderson's critique of liberal hegemony was written before Donald Trump's unexpected victory in November of last year. And in a way, Trump's election might serve as a vindication of Anderson's attack.

Perry Anderson, the noted New Left Marxist historian, has written a new book on the history of an uncomfortable idea: hegemony. The *peripeteia* in the subtitle refers to a sudden shift in narrative—a reversal of fortune in a literary arc. And it says something about Anderson's standing that a publisher would consent to an obscure literary term on the cover of a book meant for a general audience. But whether it's the right term is not exactly clear—was hegemony ever on the outs? As Anderson shows, while occasionally the term becomes publicly vulgar, there are always professional euphemists ready to proclaim its virtues or cloak it in the friendly veil of “global leadership”.

The H-Word: The Peripeteia of Hegemony

Perry Anderson

New York: Verso (2017)

The book is not a comprehensive, heavily-footnoted study of hegemony—but then again, it’s not meant to be. Instead, it presents a series of vignettes tracing the evolution of thought about hegemony—mostly modern, mostly Western, with some fascinating detours into Asia. The intellectual history is worthwhile on its own terms. But by the time Anderson is tangling with today’s conceptions of hegemony, the debate becomes genuinely compelling—especially in the shadow of the Trump Presidency.

As a modern political term, hegemony has only existed for a century and a half, but the arguments around it extend back millennia. The deep ambiguity of hegemony repeatedly surfaces in the book as a battle between two competing notions: benevolent (and perhaps necessary) leadership versus brutal, self-interested domination. In its original sense of *hēgemonia*—leadership based on consent—Thucydides used the concept to describe the role played by Athens in spearheading Greek resistance against the Persian Empire. But in his narrative, *hēgemonia* is never far from its evil twin, *arkhē*—coercion that extracts assent by force. Thucydides argues, in part, that Athens’ transition from the first to the second eventually leads to the Peloponnesian War. Yet even in his own book the moral distinction is unclear; Pericles, for example, argues that Athenians should be proud of *arkhē*. As Anderson admits, there is no clear defining line between the two. Hegemony is “unthinkable without assent, impracticable without force.”

This tension between the two faces of hegemony is repeatedly explored in a variety of cultural and historical contexts. It reappears as *wangdao* (“The Kingly Way”) versus *badao* (culture of force) in imperial China. It surfaces again in interwar Germany as *Herrschaft* (domination) versus *Einfluss* (influence). The Marxist conception of hegemony, seeing everything through the lens of class conflict, turned away from the international and developed a domestic view of hegemony as a relationship between social groups. This tradition, beginning with Pavel Axelrod and George Plekhanov, paralleled the ancient Greek conception of a hegemon as the leader of an alliance. But instead of an alliance of states against Persia, it was to be an alliance of social classes against the tsar, with the working class playing the role of Athens. For Lenin, the hegemony of the revolutionary class meant possessing ultimate strength, but also leading by example. This conception soon curdled into the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The influential Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci picks up on this thread, conceiving of hegemony as something originating in social relations. But for him, it came to denote the sometimes-invisible but pervasive dominance of the bourgeoisie. This was a different kind of consent, “not the adhesion of allies in a common cause, but the submission of adversaries to an order inimical to them.”

How was this hegemony achieved? One path was through intellectuals (the pundits and the thought leaders, as we would call them today), who became “enablers of hegemony”. Another was through civil society—newspapers, clubs, and churches who hawked “in one way or another the outlook of capital”. Far from being a liberating force, for Gramsci civil society upheld hegemonic ideologies that kept elites in power.

As the narrative heads into modern day, Anderson gets more antagonistic with his interlocutors. He is contemptuous of the German-American scholar Hans Morgenthau, a key founder of the “realist” school of international politics. Anderson describes his first book, *Scientific Man and Power Politics* (1946), as “a cannonade against the predominance of legalism, moralism and sentimentalism,” which were “products of a decadent middle-class liberalism, patron of the forces of nationalism which would destroy it.” But despite Morgenthau’s links with Carl Schmitt, and his suspicion of majoritarian democracy (a common sentiment after 1933), he never advanced an illiberal critique of modern political life. Anderson presents Morgenthau as a figure who was morally and intellectually compromised, not even by his own will to power, but by his will to *proximity* to power. He claims Morgenthau continuously watered down his critique of American hegemony, to the point of embracing it in later years as a means of personal advancement. This line of argument is petty and poorly substantiated. Morgenthau was above all an anti-foundationalist, who refused to embrace any ideology fully in the way that (say) Anderson has sometimes done. He remained a harsh critic of U.S. foreign policy throughout the Cold War, including during the Vietnam War, but also refused a position of moral equivalence between the U.S. and USSR.

Anderson’s greatest disdain is reserved for liberal justifications of hegemony—the economic reinvention of the hegemon as the provider of public goods and the protector of global commons. This line of thought becomes especially powerful after World War II, through the works of Charles Kindleberger, Robert Keohane, Joseph Nye, and more recently in John Ikenberry’s vision of the “Liberal Leviathan”. For Anderson, this view gives rise to the stubborn liberal inability to see American hegemony as anything but benign; in their hands, the so-called liberal order becomes a euphemism for American domination. Anderson has no patience for such woolly-headed softening of the concept. Hegemony is force, he seems to say. Stop dressing it up! (Given their vastly different views on the nature of the state, it may seem surprising to have a Marxist siding with the realists on this question. Yet realism and Marxism always shared an appreciation of the centrality of hegemony, and a deep cynicism about the exercise of power as an altruistic endeavor.)

In his contempt for hegemony, Anderson sometimes turns the story into a polemical genealogy, albeit a truncated and selective one. In his view, there can be no demand for hegemony. It is something to be imposed from the outside. For those who experience it, hegemony cannot bring relief, only resistance or weary acquiescence. This is consistent with Anderson's broader ideological views, but also happens to be a selective reading of modern history. After 1945, both superpowers were hegemonic in their aspirations and universalist in their goals. The dark side of this utopian universalism was a shared imperial mentality, tinged with a self-righteous paternalism. This is the face of hegemony that Anderson attacks. And indeed, many of today's laments about the waning global order tend to forget that outside of Western Europe, the "liberal order" was not always liberal and rarely very orderly. In Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere, its exercise and maintenance have at times become a flimsy mask for American dominance.

But the parallels between American and Soviet hegemony do not require a position of moral (or even definitional) equivalence between them. Europeans felt a range of sentiments about American postwar dominance, which the French disdained and the Austrians cheerfully accepted. Still, by and large, America's presence in Western Europe comprised what Geir Lundestad called "an empire by invitation." The local fear was not too much American involvement, but too little.

On the continent's eastern half, Soviet presence was also initially welcomed, but the feeling quickly dissipated once people realized what this presence actually entailed. In post-1945 Europe, the fastest way for a young believer to reject communism was to experience it. The periodic Soviet incursions into Eastern Europe testified to the fragility and artifice of local communist support. American hegemony in Europe brought unease, cultural anxiety, or feelings of inferiority. Soviet hegemony brought tanks into the street—an unease of a qualitatively different sort.

Anderson's critique of liberal hegemony was written before Donald Trump's unexpected victory in November of last year. And in a way, Trump's election might serve as a vindication of Anderson's attack—the liberal leviathan, for all the triumphant proclamations that followed the Soviet collapse, may be fading in front of our eyes. All the more reason to seriously consider the ways in which ideas about hegemony have been abused by its practitioners, either to fit their own ideological needs or to reflect the pressing concerns of the time. Anderson's book, however flawed, manages to accomplish that task in an impressive fashion.

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