

Hegemony as a Moving Target: Why Manufacturing Consent is an Endless Battle

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In contemporary political analysis, power is too often measured strictly by visible force like laws, policy shifts, and institutional crackdowns. However, a deeper look at how authority sustains itself reveals that the most durable structures of power rely on a quieter, more insidious mechanism: the manufacturing of consent.

Antonio Gramsci famously bisected the state into two interacting spheres: political society (the apparatus of direct coercion, such as the courts, police, and prisons) and civil society (the realm of consent, populated by schools, religious institutions, and media). Within civil society, power structures quietly shape everyday values, beliefs, and cultural norms into what we unthinkingly accept as "common sense." Under this Gramscian framework, systemic domination ceases to feel like an external imposition; it becomes viewed as natural, inevitable, and baseline reality. Coercion does not vanish; it simply recedes into the background, waiting to act as a safety net the moment consent begins to fracture.

Yet, treating this system as a monolith misjudges the vulnerability of modern power structures. As cultural theorist Raymond Williams observed, hegemony is never a permanently completed project. It is an unstable, dynamic equilibrium that must be continuously defended, reproduced, and adjusted through daily socio-cultural friction. Williams helpfully maps this struggle across three fluid cultural forces:

The Dominant: The current normative values that actively reinforce existing power structures.

The Residual: Past traditions and old norms carried into the present, which can either bolster or unexpectedly complicate current rule.

The Emergent: Brand new meanings, practices, and relationships bubbling up from below that hold the genuine potential to disrupt the status quo.

By integrating Williams' fluidity with Gramsci's structural foundation, we see that political stability is an illusion maintained by constant effort. Consent is never entirely secured; it is perpetually under pressure from alternative ways of thinking. For political strategists and organizers alike, the lesson is clear: because hegemony must be negotiated every single day, the cracks within dominant narratives are not failures of the system as they are permanent openings for resistance and structural change.