

The H-Word

The Peripeteia of Hegemony



Perry Anderson

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FOREWORD

Few terms of art are so conspicuous in contemporary political literature, technical or polemical, as hegemony. But its diffusion is quite recent, as a glance at the holdings of any good library immediately reveals. In the English language, the first entry in the UCLA catalogue goes back no further than 1961. Thereafter, tracking its title-use decade by decade, it appears in no more than five books in the sixties, sixteen books in the seventies, thirty-four books in the eighties, then—the big jump—ninety-eight books in the nineties. In the first decade and a half of this century, 161 such titles have been published: that is, one every month. The word has ceased to be either marginal or arcane.

What lies behind this alteration? The idea of hegemony—like modernity, or democracy, or legitimacy, or so many other political concepts—has a complicated history which belies its current wide adoption, and which needs to be understood if we are to grasp its relevance to the contemporary landscape around us. That history is one that extends across eight or nine distinct national cultures, and it will be necessary to say something about each of them. In considering the fortunes of

the concept, the approach adopted here will in the first instance be an exercise in comparative historical philology. But the curvatures in its usage—differing applications, contrasted connotations—have never just been semantic shifts. They form a political barometer of changing powers and times across the centuries.

The study that follows appears together with another, *The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci*, that looks in much greater detail at just one body of work centred on ideas of hegemony, if the most famous one, and the context in which it emerged. Readers approaching both must forgive a brief repetition here, in very compressed fashion, of what can be found in extended form there, an overlap intellectually unavoidable. The aims and methods of the two studies are not the same, even if they can be regarded as complementary. Their accents, the product of times that have little in common, differ more radically. But the one, written forty years ago, was a stimulus to the other, a connexion close enough for their publication as an asynchronous pair.

I owe the conception of this book to the Institut d'Études Avancées of Nantes, where in working on a related project, a study of American foreign policy, its design first occurred to me. In composing it, I owe special thanks for guidance in the literature of two languages I cannot read, Chinese and Japanese, to the kindness of scholars who can: Andrew Barshay, Mary Elizabeth Berry, Joshua Fogel, Annick Horiuchi, Eric Hutton, Kato Tsuyoshi, Peter Kornicki, Jeroen Lamers, Mark Edward Lewis, Kate Wildman Nakai, Timon Screech, Wang Chaohua and Zhang Yongle. The ninth chapter of this book could not have been written without their help, but

none of them bears any responsibility for the errors it must certainly contain, let alone for views on many other matters expressed elsewhere in the book. The eighth chapter originally appeared, in slightly longer form, in *New Left Review* 100, July–August 2016.

October 2016

CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i>	vii
1. Origins	1
2. Revolutions	13
3. Inter-War	25
4. Post-War	39
5. Cold War	51
6. Americana	65
7. Fade-Out	75
8. Sequels	85
9. Inversion	117
10. Cross-cutting	145
11. Enduring or Ebbing	153
12. Aspiring	169
13. Conclusions	177
<i>Index</i>	185

ORIGINS

Historically, of course, the origins of the term hegemony are Greek, from a verb meaning to 'guide' or to 'lead', going back to Homer. As an abstract noun, *hēgemonia* first appears in Herodotus, to designate leadership of an alliance of city-states for a common military end, a position of honour accorded Sparta in resistance to the Persian invasion of Greece. It was tied to the idea of a league, whose members were in principle equal, raising one of their number to direct them all for a given purpose. From the outset it coexisted with another term indicating rule in a more general sense—*arkhē*. What were the relations between the two? In a famous passage of his *History of Greece*, discussing the evolution of the Delian League headed by fifth-century Athens, the eminent liberal historian Grote—an associate of John Stuart Mill—argued that *hēgemonia* was leadership freely based on 'attachment or consent', whereas *arkhē* implied the 'superior authority and coercive dignity' of empire, extracting by contrast mere 'acquiescence'. Thucydides had carefully distinguished between the two, and criticised the passage of Athens from the first to the second as the fatal cause of the Peloponnesian War.¹

¹ George Grote, *A History of Greece; from the Earliest Period to the Close of the Generation Contemporary with Alexander the Great*, London 1850, Vol.

The latest scholar to consider the classical evidence concurs. Conceptions of hegemony and empire were ‘in deadly conflict’. Force is ‘what makes the difference.’²

So stark an opposition was, however, foreign to contemporaries. In Herodotus and Xenophon, *hēgemonia* and *arkhē* are used all but interchangeably. Was Thucydides more punctilious? The paragraph on which Grote relied opens with the first term and ends with the second, tracing a development without counterposing them.³ Elsewhere in his narrative, actors make no distinction between the two. In the course of the Sicilian expedition, an Athenian envoy straightforwardly equates them: ‘After the Persian Wars we acquired a fleet and rid ourselves of Spartan rule and hegemony’—*arkhēs kai hēgemonias*.⁴ Most pointedly, it was Pericles himself who made clear to his fellow citizens that it was *arkhē*—not *hēgemonia*—of which they should be proud, and not let slip from their grasp. ‘You should all take pride in the prestige the city enjoys from empire and be prepared to fight in defence of it,’ he told them, ‘You cannot shirk the burden without

V, pp. 395–7, basing himself on Thucydides, I, 97. Later in his narrative, while deploring the reduction of the city’s allies to subjects, Grote was unstinting in praise of the empire Athens constructed, ‘a sight marvelous to contemplate’, whose operations were ‘highly beneficial to the Grecian world’, and ‘extinction a great loss, to her own subjects’: London 1850, Vol. VIII, pp. 394–5.

- 2 John Wickersham, *Hegemony and Greek Historians*, London 1994, pp. 74, 31.
- 3 On a plausible alternative reading, his phrasing would refer to the character, rather than emergence, of Athenian *arkhē*, since elsewhere—for example I, 99—Thucydides appears to date this back as far as the formation of the Delian League. For criticism of Grote’s use of the passage, and the commonplace evidence it became, see the careful documentation and trenchant conclusion of Richard Winton, ‘Thucydides I, 97, 2: The “archē of the Athenians” and the “Athenian Empire”’, *Museum Helveticum*, 1981, 38, pp. 147–52.
- 4 Consequence: ‘we now have an empire because we have earned it’. Thucydides VI, 83–4.

abandoning also pursuit of glory. Do not think that the only issue at stake is slavery or freedom: there is also loss of empire, and the danger from the hatred incurred under your rule.' The statesman to whom Thucydides gave unstinting praise for his moderation concluded: 'Posterity will remember that we held the widest sway of Greeks over Greeks, in the greatest wars held out against foes united or single, and inhabited a city that was in all things the richest and the greatest.'⁵ Underlining the positive valence of *arkhē*, Thucydides proceeded to confer it as the highest compliment on Pericles himself. 'So Athens, in name a democracy, became in fact a government ruled by its foremost citizen'—*tou prōton andros arkhē*.⁶

That there was a conceptual continuity, rather than any clear-cut contrast, between the ideas of hegemony and empire in classical Greece was rooted in the meanings of both. Written at the end of the Weimar Republic, the first scholarly study of the former, by Hans Schaefer, showed that hegemony was indeed leadership freely conceded by members of a league, but it was a specific commission, not a general authority. Granted was command on the battlefield.⁷ War, not peace, was its domain of application. But since military command is the most imperative of all types of leadership, hegemony was the exercise of an unconditional power from the start. That power was temporary and delimited. But what could be more natural or predictable than for a hegemon, once elected, to expand it in duration and scope?⁸ If *hēgemonia* was inherently inflatable at one end of the

⁵ Thucydides, II, 63, 64.

⁶ Thucydides, II, 65.

⁷ *Staatsform und Politik. Untersuchungen zur griechischen Geschichte des 6. und 5. Jahrhunderts*, Leipzig 1932, pp. 196–251.

⁸ As Victor Ehrenberg would write: "There was a tendency for the supreme power in the League to pass entirely into the hands of the Hegemon, and for the autonomy of the allies to be reduced and eventually annulled. That means a tendency to change from the alliance under a Hegemon into an

spectrum of power, *arkhē* was constitutively ambiguous at the other, translatable according to context (or leaning of the translator) as neutral rule or dominative empire. In the rhetoric of the fifth century, associations of the first with consent and the second with coercion were tactically available, but the sliding surface between them precluded any stable demarcation.

In the fourth century, this changed. After defeat in the Peloponnesian War, Athenian oratory, no longer able to extol empire as before, revalued the virtues of hegemony, now suitably moralised as an ideal of the weakened. Isocrates, calling on Greeks to unite once more against Persia under the leadership of Athens, claimed hegemony for his city by exalting its cultural merits—the benefits it had historically conferred on others, above all its blessings in philosophy, eloquence and education. His panegyric is the most systematic vindication of hegemony as a freely acknowledged preeminence to be found in the literature. But even it could not dispense with the telltale counterpoint of its other: Greeks should also be deeply grateful for ‘the very great empire’ that Athens had enjoyed.⁹ Twenty-five years of further setbacks and humiliations later, pleading for peace with allies who had risen against domination by Athens, Isocrates lamented that ‘we covet an empire that is neither just nor tenable nor advantageous to us’, whose pursuit in the Peloponnesian War had brought ‘more and greater disasters’ on the city than

arkhē, a united empire based on domination. This tendency found vent in various forms and degrees; but it was everywhere present. To quit the League now meant not merely the breaking of an oath, but a political revolt’: *The Greek State*, London 1969, p. 113.

- 9 *Panegyricus*, 107. After remarking that Athenians had traditionally ‘treated Greeks with consideration and not with insolence’, and so ‘in fairness should be entitled to hegemony’, he explained that if the inhabitants of Melos had been massacred, they had only met their deserts. It was ‘no sign of our misrule if some of those who warred with us had to be severely disciplined’: 80, 100–1.