

Higher Education in a hegemonic world (0158)

Geoffrey Hinchliffe

University of East Anglia, UK

In an article in the London Review of Books earlier this year, the scholar and author, Marina Warner,ⁱ inveighs against the directing of teaching and research by university managers and the increasing marginalisation not just of academics but of academic activity itself. Her complaints are ones that anyone working in the university sector would recognise instantly (see, e.g. Readings 1996, Rolfe 2013 and Brown 2013). The value she places on education – it “gives its participants material to think with, and ways of reading, thinking and speaking” (Warner, 2015) – is not something I wish to dispute. Yet the overall feeling on finishing Warner’s article is one of helplessness – not only hers but ours, her readers.

The Italian marxist theorist, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937)ⁱⁱ can be seen as elaborating a number of theses which help us understand the frustrations that Warner writes about but which also indicates a possible path along which those frustrations can be addressed.

1. Gramsci is well-known for elaborating a theory of hegemony which emerged through a study of Italian political history in which Gramsci noted that for a social group to emerge supreme, two factors are involved: domination – the exercise of coercive power which could include subjugation through armed force; and the exercise of ‘intellectual and moral leadership’ so that such a group “becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to ‘lead’ as well” (Gramsci, 1971 - *SPN*: 57-8; see also Anderson, 1976). Hegemony is exercised primarily through the consent given by subaltern groups to the leadership – moral, intellectual, cultural – exercised by dominant groups (Femia, 1981: 31).

2. Gramsci further suggests that a hegemonic relation is maintained and developed through a directed endeavour that is purposive in a number of respects including re-enforcing the moral authority of those in power; developing perspectives that include some ideas and exclude others; and assisting in the development of a self-identity for persons appropriate to their station in life:

“this form of relationship exists throughout society as a whole and for every individual relative to other individualsIt exists between rulers and the ruled, elites and their followers, leaders and the led.....every relationship of ‘hegemony’ is necessarily an educational relationship”. (*SPN*: 350)

3. This educational relationship is reflected in the idea of the modern intellectual who is not seen as someone who is engaged primarily in rhetoric but as a person who has an “active participation in practical life, as constructor, organiser” (*SPN*: 10). For Gramsci, each person has a philosophical-intellectual dimension that potentially enables them to play a part in constructing society both in terms of its physical, material character and at the level of meaning.

4. In Gramscian terms, Warner's reflections, no matter how cogent, are embroiled in mere rhetoric. The "active participation in practical life" is hived off to administrators, with the modern academic cast in a subaltern role as a result. But if Gramsci is right, both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic activity take the form of *both* the formulation and dissemination of ideas and in organising hegemonic (or counter-hegemonic) structures. Academics cannot escape this if they do not want to stay as subalterns.

5. If academics wish to eschew the managerial role that is assigned to them by the prevailing business-led hegemonic order they need to fashion a counter-hegemony that encompasses a distinctive organising principle. Gramsci's writings provide us with a way forward.

6. He puts forward the idea that what he terms an 'educational principle' comprises the idea of *work* which "is the specific mode by which man actively participates in natural life in order to transform and socialise it more and more deeply" (SPN: 34). He goes on to say that work involves "theoretical and practical activity" through which a human world is created that is free of magic and superstition and which is populated by people who "appreciate the sum of effort and sacrifice which the present has cost the past and which the future is costing the present and which conceives the contemporary world as a synthesis of the past.....which projects itself into the future." (ibid)

7. Gramsci also believes that one of the chief purposes of education is to challenge what he terms 'common sense'. This is "the philosophy of non-philosophers" of which:

"its most fundamental characteristic is that it is a conception which, even in the brain of one individual is..... in conformity with the social and cultural position of the masses whose philosophy it is." (SPN: 419)

Common sense reflects and helps to maintain a particular hegemonic order and so the educator must start by accepting and acknowledging the beliefs associated with common sense in order to develop more critical and coherent perspectives on the part of her students.

8. Gramsci's challenge to us is to think of education in terms of work activity that challenges common sense. The idea would be for academics to think of themselves as organisers as well as academics who are embarked on a quest to show how their students can become comfortable *both* with ideas and practical activity, fused into a single endeavour.

9. By seeing education in terms of the work of learning/creating/constructing Gramsci is not afraid to emphasise the instructional component of teaching, observing that if the "nexus between instruction and education is dissolved, while the problem of teaching is conjured away by cardboard schemata exalting educativity, the teacher's work will as a result become yet more inadequate" (SPN: 36). Learning activities which avoid work and instruction may be enjoyable for the student whilst merely confirming her subaltern status all the while.

10. Gramsci's ideas furnish us with the idea of the intellectual as leader who uses both teaching and research to construct a counter-hegemonic order through educational relationships. This seems to me the best kind of response to Marina Warner's lament.

Bibliography

Anderson, P. (1976) 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci'. *New Left Review*. 100 (Nov 1976-Jan 1977).

Entwistle, H. (1979) *Antonio Gramsci: Conservative Schooling for Radical Politics*. London: Routledge.

Brown, R with Carasso, H (2013), *Everything for Sale? The marketization of UK Universities* (London: Routledge)

Femia, J. (1981), *Gramsci's Political Thought*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Gove, M (2013), *The Progressive Betrayal*, Speech given to the Social Market Foundation, 5 Feb 2013: <http://www.smf.co.uk/media/news/michael-gove-speaks-smf/>

Giroux, H., Holly, D. and Hoare, Q. (1980) Review Symposium: 'Antonio Gramsci: Conservative Schooling for Radical Politics'. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. 1 (3), pp. 307-325.

Giroux, H. (1999) 'Rethinking Cultural Politics and Radical Pedagogy in the work of Antonio Gramsci'. *Educational Theory*. 49 (1), pp. 1-19.

Gramsci, A. (1971), *Selections from Prison Notebooks*. Translated by Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith. London: Lawrence and Wishart. Referred to as *SPN*.

Hirsch, E. D. (1996) *The Schools We Need*. New York: Anchor Books.

Readings, Bill (1996), *The University in Ruins* (Harvard University Press)

Rolfe, G (2013), *The University in Dissent* (London: Routledge)

Warner, M (March 19th 2015), London Review of Books. See: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/ueaezproxy.uea.ac.uk:2048/v37/n06/marina-warner/learning-my-lesson>

Warner, M (2006), *Phantasmagoria: spirit visions, metaphors, and media*(Oxford University Press)

Warner, M (2014), *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale* (Oxford University Press)

i See, e.g. Warner, 2006 & 2014.

ii Gramsci's ideas on education have been appropriated by both the political left and right in recent years. See Entwistle, 1979, Giroux, 1980 and 1999, Hirsch, 1996 and Gove, 2013 for a sample.