The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities

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TWENTY YEARS AGO THE ITALIAN COMMUNIST Antonio Gramsci was rarely discussed outside his native land; now he has become an intellectual cause célèbre and in some quarters a cult hero. Scholars continue to pore over his political journalism and his prison notebooks, reassembling the fragments in hopes of theoretical illumination. Articles and monographs continue to multiply. One historian on the Right has conjured up the vision of interdisciplinary programs in Gramsci studies, replete with unreadable journals and reverent textual exegesis. Already, on some European campuses, one poster of the Sardinian hunchback will fetch a whole wall full of Trotskies.[1]

Part of this furor involves the effort of young intellectuals on the Left to locate a moral inspiration. Gramsci's resistance to Mussolini, his stress on the role of individual action and thought in history, his desire that workers create their own cultural institutions through devices like factory councils—all this makes him an appealing figure. For many he also seems to explain why workers under advanced capitalism have not behaved the way Marx said they would and to offer a more successful revolutionary strategy. Yet his work has analytical uses as well, and those are my concern in this essay. I do not mean to turn Gramsci into "the Marxist you can take home to mother."[2] One cannot ignore his revolutionary vision. But one does not have to embrace it uncritically to recognize that Gramsci's social thought contains some remarkably suggestive insights into the question of dominance and subordination in modern capitalist societies. There are intellectual as well as moral and political reasons for the rediscovery of Gramsci.

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[1] Aileen Kraditor, *The Radical Persuasion, 1890–1917: Aspects of the Intellectual History and the Historiography of Three American Radical Organizations* (Baton Rouge, La., 1981), 332 n. 14; and Carlin Romano, "But Was He a Marxist?" review of Anne Showstack Sassoon, ed., *Approaches to Gramsci, Village Voice*, March 29, 1983, p. 41. For valuable introductions to Gramsci, in addition to those cited in the following notes, see John Cammett, *Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism* (Stanford, Calif., 1967); Thomas Nemeth, *Gramsci's Philosophy: A Critical Study* (Sussex, England, 1980); and Alastair Davidson, *Antonio Gramsci: Towards an Intellectual Biography* (London, 1970).

[2] Romano, "But Was He a Marxist?" 41.

Gramsci's most interesting ideas cluster around the concept of cultural hegemony, which he used to address the relation between culture and power under capitalism. I will explore the implications of those ideas for historians but do not pretend to give a comprehensive account of Gramsci's voluminous, chaotic, and mostly untranslated writings. Many scholars are far more qualified than I am for that task, and they are hard at work. To me, Gramsci's work suggests starting points for rethinking some fundamental issues in recent interpretations of American history.

Studies of Gramsci have nearly always characterized his work as an effort to loosen the rigidities of orthodox Marxism. The characterization is accurate, but it leaves the impression that Gramsci's work is relevant only to self-consciously Marxist scholars. Actually, Gramsci can inspire fresh thought in historians from a variety of intellectual traditions. By clarifying the political functions of cultural symbols, the concept of cultural hegemony can aid intellectual historians trying to understand how ideas reinforce or undermine existing social structures and social historians seeking to reconcile the apparent contradiction between the power wielded by dominant groups and the relative cultural autonomy of subordinate groups whom they victimize. In short, Gramsci's work, besides ventilating the Marxist tradition, provides a theoretical framework and a vocabulary for understanding historiographical problems that have asserted themselves with special force during the last fifteen years.

GRAMSCI'S TRANSLATED WRITINGS CONTAIN no precise definition of cultural hegemony. What comes closest is his often-quoted characterization of hegemony as "the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production."[3] To have Gramsci "define" the concept in this way is merely to begin unraveling its significance. The process sounds mechanical: ruling groups *impose* a direction on social life; subordinates are manipulatively persuaded to board the "dominant fundamental" express.

It would be a mistake, though, to rest with that conclusion. The concept of cultural hegemony can only be understood within a variety of historical and intellectual contexts. To rely on a single "definition" is misleading. To give Gramsci his due, we need first to recognize that the concept of hegemony has little meaning unless paired with the notion of domination. For Gramsci, consent and force nearly always coexist, though one or the other predominates. The tsarist regime, for example, ruled primarily through domination—that is, by monopolizing the instruments of coercion. Among parliamentary regimes only the weakest are forced to rely on domination; normally they rule through hegemony, even though

[3] Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York, 1971), 12.

the threat of officially sanctioned force always remains implicit. Ruling groups do not maintain their hegemony merely by giving their domination an aura of moral authority through the creation and perpetuation of legitimating symbols; they must also seek to win the consent of subordinate groups to the existing social order.[4]

The ambiguities are immediately apparent. What components of a dominant culture require the consent of subordinates? Gramsci had in mind the values, norms, perceptions, beliefs, sentiments, and prejudices that support and define the existing distribution of goods, the institutions that decide how this distribution occurs, and the permissible range of disagreement about those processes. And what was the precise nature of subordinate consent? At times Gramsci implied an active commitment to the established order, based on a deeply held belief that the rulers are indeed legitimate. This is what has persuaded some critics of Gramsci to link him with Herbert Marcuse as a prophet of "one-dimensional society." But Gramsci said other, more interesting things about consent. In key passages of the *Prison Notebooks*, he illuminated the ambiguities of consent by focusing on the conflict that sometimes arises between a person's conscious thoughts and the implicit values embedded in his actions. This conflict points to the complexity of popular consciousness under capitalism. The working class had "its own conception of the world, even if only embryonic; a conception which manifests itself in action, but occasionally and in flashes." Yet it had also "adopted a conception which is not its own but is borrowed from another group." The consequence was that "man-in-the-mass" had

> two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed. But this verbal conception is not without consequences. It holds together a specific social group, it influences moral conduct and the direction of will, with varying efficacity but often powerfully enough to produce a situation in which the contradictory state of consciousness does not permit of any action, any decision or any choice, and produces a condition of moral and political passivity.[5]

From this perspective, the maintenance of hegemony does not require active commitment by subordinates to the legitimacy of elite rule. Less powerful people may be thoroughly disaffected. At times they may openly revolt through strikes, factory takeovers, mass movements, and perhaps the creation of a counterhegemony. But normally most people find it difficult, if not impossible, to translate the outlook implicit in their experience into a conception of the world that will directly challenge the hegemonic culture. The problem is partly one of language, and here Gramsci anticipated Michel Foucault's emphasis on the role of "discursive practice" in reinforcing domination. Gramsci realized that "every language contains the elements of a conception of the world." The available

[4] *Ibid.*, 55–60, 80 n., 238–39; Walter L. Adamson, *Hegemony and Revolution: A Study of Antonio Gramsci's Political and Cultural Theory* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980), chap. 6, esp. pp. 170, 173; and Perry Anderson, "The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci," *New Left Review*, 100 (1976–77): 5–78.

[5] Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 326–27, 333.

vocabulary helps mark the boundaries of permissible discourse, discourages the clarification of social alternatives, and makes it difficult for the dispossessed to locate the source of their unease, let alone remedy it.[6]

Consent, for Gramsci, involves a complex mental state, a "contradictory consciousness" mixing approbation and apathy, resistance and resignation. The mix varies from individual to individual; some are more socialized than others. In any case, ruling groups never engineer consent with complete success; the outlook of subordinate groups is always divided and ambiguous. Gramsci's preoccupation with consent led him to recast the "base-superstructure" model of classical Marxism. He narrowed the economic base to include only the material and technical instruments of production; he broadened the superstructure to include political society, civil society, and the state. For Gramsci, "The State, which is usually thought of as political society—i.e., a dictatorship or some other coercive apparatus used to control the masses in conformity with a given type of production and economy—[is] a balance between political society and civil society, by which I mean the hegemony of one social group over the entire nation, exercised through so-called private organizations like the Church, trade unions, or schools." The state, in other words, is "hegemony protected by the armour of coercion." While his language suggests that "the masses" are still in the grip of a monolithic ruling class, Gramsci departed in important ways from classical Marxism. He not only allowed for a more complex superstructure but also reconsidered its relation to the base. For Gramsci mental life is more than a pale reflection of more basic developments in material life. The link between the two realms is not linear causality but circular interaction within an organic whole.[7]

In his effort to formulate a more flexible approach to "base" and "superstructure," Gramsci began to broaden and deepen Marxist notions of ideology. For Gramsci, ideology is not merely a system of beliefs that reflects specific class interests; its development is more complex. The starting point for understanding it is

> the "spontaneous philosophy" which is proper to everybody. This philosophy is contained in: 1. language itself, which is a totality of determined notions and concepts and not just of words grammatically devoid of content; 2. "common sense" [conventional wisdom] and "good sense" [empirical knowledge]; 3. popular religion and, therefore, also in the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting, which are collectively bundled together under the name of "folklore."

Spontaneous philosophy embodies all sorts of sentiments and prejudices that have private, subjective meanings apart from the public realm of power relations, yet it can never be divorced entirely from that realm. Some values (such as kinship ties) are more likely to remain relatively autonomous; others (such as attitudes toward

[6] Gramsci, as quoted in Joseph V. Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought* (Oxford, 1981), 44. I am deeply indebted to Femia's thoughtful analysis of the ambiguities in Gramsci's notion of consent; *ibid.*, 35–50. For the clearest introduction to the relevance of Foucault's work for historians, see Mark Poster, "Foucault and History," *Social Research*, 49 (1982): 116–42.

[7] Gramsci, *Letters from Prison*, ed. and trans. L. Lawner (New York, 1973), 204, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 262–63; and Adamson, *Hegemony and Revolution*, 179, 215.

work or patriotic duty) are more likely to be mobilized in the service of a particular social group. In Gramsci's scheme a given group or class, as it develops in the economic sphere, finds some values more congenial than others, more resonant with its own everyday experience. Selectively refashioning the available spontaneous philosophy, a group may develop its own particular world view—an ideology that cements it into what Gramsci called a "historical bloc" possessing both cultural and economic solidarity. The idea of historical bloc departs significantly from notions of class embedded in the Marxist tradition: it promotes analysis of social formations that cut across categories of ownership and nonownership and that are bound by religious or other ideological ties as well as those of economic interest. A historical bloc may or may not become hegemonic, depending on how successfully it forms alliances with other groups or classes. The keys to success are ideological and economic: to achieve cultural hegemony, the leaders of a historical bloc must develop a world view that appeals to a wide range of other groups within the society, and they must be able to claim with at least some plausibility that their particular interests are those of society at large. This claim may require selective accommodation to the desires of subordinate groups. The emerging hegemonic culture is not merely an ideological mystification but serves the interests of ruling groups at the expense of subordinate ones.[8]

The overall picture that Gramsci provides is not a static, closed system of ruling-class domination. Rather, it is a society in constant process, where the creation of counterhegemonies remains a live option. As one of Gramsci's most thoughtful critics observed, hegemony is "a process of continuous creation which, given its massive scale, is bound to be uneven in the degree of legitimacy it commands and to leave some room for antagonistic cultural expressions to develop."[9] Gramsci's vision of society involves not a mechanical model of base and superstructure but a complex interaction of relatively autonomous spheres (public and private; political, cultural, and economic) within a totality of attitudes and practices. And yet he remained faithful to the Marxist tradition in granting causal priority to the economic sphere under most conditions. The base does not determine specific forms of consciousness, but it does determine what forms of consciousness are possible. The process of interaction between spheres is characterized by the formation and reformation of historical blocs, which, depending on their success in forming alliances and disseminating a coherent ideology, may or may not come to exert a hegemonic influence.

This vision is manifestly more complex than most anti-Marxist critics have realized: it rejects the economic determinism of the Second International; it broadens the notion of ideology, rooting it in spontaneous philosophy (what Raymond Williams might call "structure of feeling"); it redirects the obsession with objective determinants of class by introducing the idea of historical bloc; it acknowledges the role of the state as a complex political entity, not merely a tool

[8] Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 323; Adamson, *Hegemony and Revolution*, 170–79; and Roger Simon, *Gramsci's Political Thought: An Introduction* (London, 1982), 58–79.

[9] Adamson, *Hegemony and Revolution*, 174. For a similar view, see Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxian Cultural Theory," *New Left Review*, 82 (1973): 3–16.

of the bourgeoisie; it points us toward cultural definitions of race, ethnicity, and gender and toward an exploration of the ways those definitions justify or challenge existing power relations. To resort to the concept of cultural hegemony is to take a banal question—"who has power?"—and deepen it at both ends. The "who" includes parents, preachers, teachers, journalists, literati, "experts" of all sorts, as well as advertising executives, entertainment promoters, popular musicians, sports figures, and "celebrities"—all of whom are involved (albeit often unwittingly) in shaping the values and attitudes of a society. The "power" includes cultural as well as economic and political power—the power to help define the boundaries of common-sense "reality" either by ignoring views outside those boundaries or by labeling deviant opinions "tasteless" or "irresponsible." Unlike Marx's epigones, Gramsci realized that a class interpretation of history does not entail a fixation on the struggle between oppressors and oppressed; rather, as Eugene Genovese has observed, "it may reveal a process by which a given ruling class successfully avoided such confrontations."[10] And the source of that success may well be in the realm of culture.

The concept of cultural hegemony offers intellectual and cultural historians an opportunity to connect ideas with the "social matrix" that they are constantly being urged to locate, without reducing the ideas to mere epiphenomena. Not that one should ransack Gramsci's writings for a foolproof schema. Anyone, for example, who looks closely at Gramsci's celebrated distinction between traditional and organic intellectuals will find it incoherent.[11] Still, his work offers a point of departure for trying to understand how ideas actually function in society. His concept of hegemonic consensus acknowledges differences in wealth and power even in "democracies" and seeks to show how those inequalities have been maintained or challenged in the sphere of culture. It provides a convenient vocabulary for beginning to identify those elements in the dominant culture that serve existing power relations and those that subvert them. Unlike liberal notions of consensus, Gramsci's vision acknowledges the social and economic constraints on the less powerful, then aims to see the ways that culture collaborates with those constraints.

The concept of hegemony is also superior to the more sophisticated versions of consensus embodied in functionalism, symbolic interactionism, and cultural anthropology.[12] Unlike functionalist theory, a Gramscian approach does not try to match all cultural manifestations with the demands of "the social system." It allows one to analyze the systemic features of a society characterized by inequalities of power without reducing that society to a system. Nor does Gramsci reify society into a being that has needs and interests apart from human agency; rather, he

[10] Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London, 1961), 48–71; and Genovese, "A Question of Morals," in his *In Red and Black* (New York, 1970), 369.

[11] For an incisive critique, see Jerome Karabel, "Revolutionary Contradictions: Antonio Gramsci and the Problem of Intellectuals," *Politics and Society*, 6 (1976): esp. 146–56.

[12] For some excellent critiques of functionalism, see Maurice Stein and Arthur Vidich, eds., *Sociology on Trial* (New York, 1963). For the best statement of the symbolic interactionist position, see Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York, 1966). For an early critique, see Richard Lichtmann, "Symbolic Interaction and Social Reality: Some Marxist Queries," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 15 (1970): 75–94.

stresses the human creators of culture, with their particular, socially shaped needs and interests. Further, a Gramscian approach allows one to integrate the insights of symbolic interactionism and cultural anthropology with an awareness of power relations. Many historians have used Clifford Geertz's work, for example, to illuminate the integrative significance of cultural symbols within particular communities, but they have often failed to link those symbols with larger economic or political structures, allowing inequalities of power to be subsumed by an implicitly functionalist "cultural system."[13] From a Gramscian perspective, that pitfall is avoidable. People indeed create their own symbolic universes (Gramsci's spontaneous philosophy) to make life understandable and tolerable, and those symbolic universes do come to have an apparently "objective" validity, particularly over generations as they spread from scattered individuals to broad social groups. But a given symbolic universe, if it becomes hegemonic, can serve the interests of some groups better than others. Subordinate groups may participate in maintaining a symbolic universe, even if it serves to legitimate their domination. In other words, they can share a kind of half-conscious complicity in their own victimization.

This complicity is a crucial implication of the concept of cultural hegemony, and it accounts for much of the hostility toward Gramsci's work among American historians of all political stripes. The idea that less powerful folk may be unwitting accomplices in the maintenance of existing inequalities runs counter to much of the social and cultural historiography of the last fifteen years, which has stressed the autonomy and vitality of subordinate cultures.[14] Discovering nearly inexhaustible resources for resistance to domination, many social historians have been reluctant to acknowledge the possibility that their subjects may have been muddled by assimilation to the dominant culture—perhaps even to the point of believing and behaving against their own best interests. There is a certain irony here. Historians have long been willing to evaluate the behavior of elite leaders as mistaken, inappropriate, perhaps even perverse or irrational. (Think of the pummeling Woodrow Wilson takes every few years.) But to apply similar standards to "the people" is somehow "elitist." In part, this double standard is a reaction against C. Wright Mills and Herbert Marcuse, who inveighed against a narcotized population of "cheerful robots" and "one-dimensional men."[15] These slogans were variations on the familiar theme that nonradical workers were laboring in the dim light of "false consciousness." The flexibility of Gramsci's concept of hegemony makes it superior to such formulations and compatible with the recent emphasis on distinct and vigorous working-class cultures.

To clarify that flexibility, one might imagine hegemonic cultures placed anywhere on a continuum from "closed" to "open." In the closed version,

[13] Geertz's most influential work is collected in his *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973). For a thoughtful evaluation, see Ronald G. Walters, "Signs of the Times: Clifford Geertz and Historians," *Social Research*, 47 (1980): 537–56.

[14] For three outstanding examples (among innumerable possibilities), see Herbert R. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York, 1976); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1 (1975): 1–29; and David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America* (New York, 1979), esp. chaps. 1, 4.

[15] Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (New York, 1951); and Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston, 1964).

subordinate groups lack the language necessary even to conceive concerted resistance; in the open version, the capability for resistance flourishes and may lead to the creation of counterhegemonic alternatives. The place of a culture on the continuum depends on specific circumstances at a particular historical moment. For much of American history, certainly for those patches of it uncovered by recent studies of working-class culture, a more open version of hegemony seems more accurate.

Whether one imagines hegemony to be relatively open or relatively closed, the essence of the concept is not manipulation but legitimation. The ideas, values, and experiences of dominant groups are validated in public discourse; those of subordinate groups are not, though they may continue to thrive beyond the boundaries of received opinion. Where Gramsci differs from many "new" social historians is in his recognition that the line between dominant and subordinate cultures is a permeable membrane, not an impenetrable barrier. By developing the notion of "contradictory consciousness," Gramsci opened possibilities for more complex approaches to popular culture, though he never fully transcended his Leninist heritage. But before I turn to the limitations of his approach I want to explore its utility by surveying some recent studies of working-class culture.

How does a ruling class rule? The historian who has most persistently posed that question from a Gramscian perspective is Eugene Genovese. Among his many works, the monumental *Roll, Jordan, Roll* most directly examines a subordinate group consciousness. In analyzing slave culture, Genovese rejected any notion of false consciousness. He emphasized the richness and variety of slave culture, the resources it provided for dignity, solidarity, and resistance. Yet he also recognized that elements of the master's paternalistic world view penetrated the slave's consciousness as well. Slaves could appropriate paternalism to create a limited set of rights for themselves—for example, the right not to be worked too hard and not to be worked at all on Sundays. But paternalism may have also promoted the slaves' sense of attachment to a particular plantation; it limited and shaped slave protest into "pre-political" forms, directed against a particular master's practice rather than against slavery as a system of domination. Prepolitical protest (such as breaking a plough blade or running off to the woods after a beating) provided slaves with a valuable breathing space and even a sense of dignity. But it also reinforced the master's paternalistic belief that he was dealing with irresponsible children. To oversimplify a complex argument: powerlessness combined with paternalism to influence the slave's consciousness in ways that reinforced the master's hegemony. Slaves were by no means reduced to Sambos; their conduct reveals a complex combination of accommodation and resistance.[16]

One can find a similar relationship within white popular culture during the nineteenth century. In the works of Eric Foner, Bruce Laurie, Alan Dawley, Steven Hahn, Sean Wilentz, and others, evidence can be found of the halting, uneven

[16] Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), esp. 585–665.

emergence of a historical bloc of artisans, skilled workers, small farmers, and petty producers of all kinds. Despite regional, ethnic, and occupational differences, they shared enough social experience and perceptions of common interest to develop a coherent world view. This "producer ideology" was energized by egalitarian and communal currents that challenged developing inequalities of wealth and power. A labor theory of value promoted disdain for bankers, brokers, and other "parasites," as well as protests against the transformation of labor into a commodity controlled by an abstract market rather than by customary relationships. The producers' republican suspicion of luxury encouraged criticism of conspicuous accumulation, and their customs of moral economy and mutual obligation led to distrust of any effort to pursue individual gain at the expense of communal welfare. And all these sentiments were given political force by the egalitarian rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence. By the late nineteenth century, the producer ideology animated mass movements from the Knights of Labor to the People's party.[17]

Yet the producers never became hegemonic. There were obvious reasons: the other side had more guns, the Populists made a mistaken alliance with the Democrats, and so on. But this is not the whole story. The producer ideology contained contradictory elements that promoted internal divisions and pointed toward accommodation as well as resistance. As early as the Revolutionary War era, Foner observed, the debate over price control legislation revealed that many Philadelphia artisans were abandoning the communal traditions of moral economy for the entrepreneurial vision of Adam Smith. The drive to prosper through individual effort, the horror of any form of dependence, sparked challenges to domination but also eased assimilation to the dominant individualist ethos. Evangelical revivalists, interpreting economic depressions as moral judgments, responded to and reinforced that ethos. Individualism blurred class distinctions and propelled workers into the arms of middle-class radicals who focused on financiers rather than employers and worked through existing political institutions. That strategy was understandable. Dawley observed that the earliest generations of workers won political democracy before they experienced the worst effects of industrial capitalism; it is not surprising that they viewed voting as a panacea and the government as "the executive committee of the people." The problem was that working-class leaders grew "unable to look beyond victory at the polls toward programs that would infringe upon the rights of property and effectively redistribute wealth to bring about the equality [they] so passionately desired."[18]

[17] Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York, 1976), esp. chap. 5, and "Abolitionism and the Labor Movement" in his *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York, 1980), esp. 74–76; Laurie, *The Working People of Philadelphia, 1800–1850* (Philadelphia, 1980); Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976); Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890* (New York, 1983); and Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York, 1984). Also see, among many other studies, Paul Faler, *Mechanics and Manufacturers in the Early Industrial Revolution: Lynn, Massachusetts, 1780–1860* (Albany, N.Y., 1981); and Milton Cantor, ed., *American Working-Class Culture* (Westport, Conn., 1979).

[18] Dawley, *Class and Community*, 72, 207; Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 41, 157; and Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia*, 119, 172, 197–203.

Entrepreneurial ambitions, evangelical religion, a preoccupation with electoral politics—none of these was a mistaken path for an individual to follow. But they constituted powerful countertendencies within the producer ideology, which often subverted its egalitarian and communal aims. It is possible to see the producer ideology as evidence for Gramsci's "contradictory consciousness." This is not to deny that workers felt class hatred, or to imply that they were only dimly aware of what their employers were up to. Nor is it to suggest that the dominant entrepreneurial ethos was foreign to workers' everyday experience, as Gramsci apparently would have claimed. It does suggest that subordinate groups could identify with the dominant culture—often for sound reasons—even as they sought to challenge it. And the challenge could be undermined by that identification.

To make this sort of argument is to resurrect the much-maligned ghost of "consensus history." One does not have to embrace the fantastic vision of a conflict-free American past to acknowledge the power of the currents in the American mainstream. The most penetrating historiography of the 1950s—the work of Richard Hofstadter, for example—was less a celebration than an unsparing critique of the consensus and its absorptive capacities. To escape the dualisms of progressive historiography, Hofstadter wanted to show how often champions of "the people" collaborated in the entrepreneurial culture they claimed to transcend. For Hofstadter, who admired authentic dissent on the rare occasions he found it, the American consensus was not pluralistic but hegemonic.[19]

Not that Hofstadter was a Gramscian *malgré lui.* Deft as he was at exploring the assimilative powers of the entrepreneurial ethos, he never grasped the seriousness of the efforts to create alternatives. Nowhere is this clearer than in his dismissive treatment of Populism in *The Age of Reform,* where the only alternative to the "commercial realities" of rural experience is a treacly "agrarian myth" concocted by Eastern literati and imbibed by fuddled farmers. In recent years Lawrence Goodwyn has revealed the depth and vigor of Populism as a mass-based democratic challenge to a hierarchical political culture. His argument is powerful and convincing, but it might have been rendered more theoretically coherent in a Gramscian idiom. Goodwyn knew that class analysis does little to illuminate Populist insurgency, he knew it was an extraordinary social formation with cultural as well as economic roots, and he knew that the failure of the movement involved more than an uneven power struggle. To be sure, one must give an account of stolen elections, race-baiting demagogues, and intransigent bankers—the sort of account C. Vann Woodward offered with elegance and authority in *Origins of the New South.* But Goodwyn also stressed the critical importance of hegemonic and counterhegemonic cultural patterns. Wherever the plain people could "'see themselves' experimenting in democratic forms" (as in Texas), the Populist movement flourished. Wherever it was largely an affair of local political elites (as in Nebraska), the movement was far more easily assimilated to the "received culture" of entrepreneurial aspiration, "sound money," sectional animosity, and inherited party loyalty. By 1896 the received culture (with help from force, fraud,

[19] This is especially apparent in Hofstadter's *The American Political Tradition* (New York, 1948).

and Populist tactical blunders) had blunted the Populist thrust toward democratic cultural options. The central Populist tenet—the idea of a democratically managed currency—had been rendered "culturally inadmissible" to public discourse. The constriction of debate was not the result of systematic repression. "Martial law was not declared, no dissenting editors were exiled, and no newspapers censored," Goodwyn wrote. Yet among many dissenters after 1896 there was "a kind of acquiescence that matured into settled resignation," a tendency to accept a hierarchical political culture as somehow "inevitable." Goodwyn has provided a subtle account of the role played by "divided consciousness" in the rise and fall of a mass democratic movement.[20]

In the twentieth century, working-class attitudes seem to approximate even more closely Gramsci's notion of divided consciousness. Most sociological studies of working-class Americans in the post–World War II era suggest that their participation in a national consensus has been limited and ambiguous. Summarizing survey data in 1970, Michael Mann concluded, "It is not value-consensus which keeps the working class compliant, but rather a *lack* of consensus in the crucial area where concrete experiences and vague populism might be translated into radical politics." Schools and mass media, implicitly denying class or group conflict, have presented a picture of competitive strivers within a benevolent nation-state. Rather than engage in indoctrination, "the liberal democratic state" has perpetuated "values that do not aid the working class to interpret the reality it actually experiences." In other words, values rooted in the workers' everyday experience lack legitimacy.[21] As Gramsci understood, the hegemonic culture depends not on the brainwashing of "the masses" but on the tendency of public discourse to make some forms of experience readily available to consciousness while ignoring or suppressing others.

One result of this process, recently documented by Paul Kleppner, is that during the twentieth century working-class Americans have become progressively disengaged from national elections. This is not to say that they have developed immunity to dominant values. According to Mann, working-class people tend to embrace dominant values as abstract propositions but often grow skeptical as the values are applied to their everyday lives. They endorse the idea that everyone has an equal chance of success in America but deny it when asked to compare themselves with the lawyer or businessman across town.[22]

Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb explored the psychic significance of this ambivalence in *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. Their respondents knew quite well that there were class inequalities in America, that rewards were distributed unfairly. And they had their own resources for dignity and solidarity. Yet they could not

[20] Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York, 1955), 23–59; Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment* (New York, 1978), xxix, 266, 270; and Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877–1913* (Baton Rouge, La., 1951). For a more detailed account, see Goodwyn's *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York, 1976). Valeria Gennaro Lerda interpreted Populism in an explicitly Gramscian framework as a developing "historical bloc." See Lerda, *Il populismo americano* (Genoa, 1981).

[21] Mann, "The Social Cohesion of Liberal Democracy," *American Sociological Review*, 35 (1970): 423–39. Also see James D. Wright, *The Dissent of the Governed* (New York, 1976).

[22] Kleppner, *Who Voted? The Dynamics of Electoral Turnout, 1870–1980* (New York, 1982); and Mann, "Social Cohesion of Liberal Democracy," 435–39.

escape the effect of dominant values: they deemed their class inferiority a sign of personal failure, even as many realized they had been constrained by class origins that they could not control. In one breath, a garbage collector told the interviewer: "Never learning to read good . . . it was out of my hands . . . I mean I wanted to, but I got bad breaks." In the next breath, the same man said: "Look, I know it's nobody's fault but mine that I got stuck here where I am, I mean . . . if I wasn't such a dumb shit . . . no, it ain't that neither . . . if I'd applied myself, I know I got it in me to be different, can't say anyone did it to me." Even if this man was simply saying what he thought a college professor wanted to hear, that desire to please would itself be evidence for divided consciousness. *Hidden Injuries* implies that workers have internalized a class struggle in their own minds, punishing themselves for their failure to acquire the culture's badges of ability even as they recognize that those badges are often a sham. Gramsci's conception of subordinate group consciousness seems to be borne out by much available evidence.[23]

But it would be a mistake to dismiss Gramsci's critics too quickly. Gramsci was, after all, a revolutionary strategist. Despite the complexity of his view of working-class consciousness, he did not entirely exorcise the demon of false consciousness. He distinguished invidiously between the existing cultural commitments of workers and those they would form in an imagined revolutionary future. He believed that the working class would somehow generate its own "organic intellectuals" who would acknowledge their class ties and cooperate with workers in transforming inchoate discontent into revolutionary proletarian consciousness. This "rational" outlook would be based on the "authentic" interests of workers, which he thought would dictate a struggle for economic and political power. Despite his assault on "economism," Gramsci still assumed that the need for power in the public sphere was more fundamental than needs fulfilled in the "so-called private" sphere and that the social bonds of class were ultimately more genuine than those of family, community, and religion. His notion of "contradictory consciousness" was hobbled by a rationalist psychology and a revolutionary teleology. He could not approach workers' discontent as historical evidence open to a variety of interpretations; he saw it as a sign of "embryonic" class consciousness (just as Genovese viewed slave protest as "pre-political"). His revolutionary commitment both energized and narrowed his vision.[24]

These difficulties have led some historians to charge that Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony is not a "falsifiable hypothesis." If one assumes that workers ought to be class-conscious revolutionaries, then all evidence of their nonradicalism can be fitted into the same mould as a demonstration of the success of ruling-class hegemony. From this view the concept of cultural hegemony is an airtight scheme not subject to disproof by contrary evidence. Between the poles

[23] Sennett and Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York, 1972), 77–96, 151–53. For similar evidence, see Eli Chinoy, *Auto Workers and the American Dream* (New York, 1955).

[24] Adamson cogently addressed some of these issues; *Hegemony and Revolution*, 235–45. Gramsci's rationalism also helps explain some aspects of his thought that the contemporary Left might find disagreeable, such as his enthusiasm for Taylorized "scientific management" or his statist vision of a "regulated society" emerging "after the revolution."

of revolution and false consciousness, Marxist teleology closes off a wide range of counterevidence. This argument deserves some attention.[25]

THE PHRASE "FALSIFIABLE HYPOTHESIS" jars immediately because it calls to mind the silly analogies historians have long been tempted to make between their craft and the physical sciences. Strict falsifiability is virtually impossible in the writing of history, especially with respect to questions of consciousness. But I will grant that the historian should be open to the possibility of "bad news"; evidence contrary to his interpretation should at least be conceivable. If Marxist teleology prevents the falsification of hegemony, then we can drop the teleology and ask what kind of empirical bad news would discredit the concept of hegemony? The first possibility is rule through force rather than consent. There is evidence for this view scattered throughout American history. At particular times and places, one can argue that the dominant historical bloc had not established a hegemonic culture and therefore turned to violence to protect its interests. The period from 1877 to 1919, for example, offers abundant evidence that subordinate groups did not consent to the hegemony of industrial capitalism. But this is consistent with Gramsci's larger scheme: ruling groups resort to force when their hegemony breaks down or when it has not yet been established. To discredit hegemony from this "conflict" perspective, one would have to assert that even during times of social peace subordinate groups were entirely estranged from dominant values and kept from rebellion only by the superior power of their oppressors. This argument may apply to closed caste systems or to police states (even there it slights the role of acquiescent consciousness), but, when applied to developed capitalist societies, it is absurd.

A more formidable alternative is the possibility of genuine consensus, characterized by open debate on fundamental issues. From this particular perspective, all interests are articulated in public discourse until consensus emerges; individuals choose freely to support the consensus in pursuit of their own self-interest, registering their decision in elections. Recently Carl Degler applied this view to the antebellum South. His argument highlights the ambiguities of terms like "consensus" and "interest." Degler attacked Genovese's notion that the southern planter class, having achieved cultural hegemony, was able to identify its own interests with those of society at large. "What we have not been told by proponents of hegemony is how we know it was the planting class's hegemony that accounted for the identification of interest rather than the *actual self-interest* of the nonslaveholders," Degler complained. "To someone who does not accept hegemony as an explanation, it seems quite plausible that the interests of

[25] Kraditor made this argument most pointedly; *Radical Persuasion*, 65. Also see Carl Degler, *Place Over Time: The Continuity of Southern Distinctiveness* (Baton Rouge, La., 1977), 73. Robert Westbrook's thoughtful review of Kraditor has influenced my thinking on a number of points. See Westbrook, "Good-bye to All That: Aileen Kraditor and Radical History," *Radical History Review*, 28–30 (1984): 69–89. Strictly speaking, the critics are correct: every organized society is directed by a hegemonic group, though some forms of hegemony can be more democratic than others. But clearly the critics' target is a narrower meaning of hegemony: the hypothesis that the elite exercise cultural as well as economic and political power over an entire society.

nonslaveholders and planters, as each defines them for himself, are at least parallel, not antagonistic." One has to prove the existence of class antagonism, not assume it, and, to show the existence of hegemony, one has to produce empirical evidence that alternative courses of action would have more genuinely served the interests of nonslaveholders.[26]

There are several problems with this argument. Assuming the economic rationality and free choice of nonslaveholders, Degler sidestepped the thorny question of how culture and psychology shape definitions of self-interest, as well as the inner and outer constraints on human action. How free were nonslaveholders to oppose slavery when the subject was beyond discussion in nearly every southern state? Their outlook was shaped not only by economic rationality but also by the spontaneous philosophy of their time and place—racial pride and fear, deference and democracy, "southern honor." Even granting a measure of rationality, what looks like the pursuit of self-interest may only make a virtue of necessity.

In any case, one does not have to deny that slavery served nonslaveholder self-interest. Gramsci's notion of a hegemonic historical bloc implies that its leaders forged alliances based on economic as well as cultural ties. Many yeomen, particularly in the Black Belt, had an interest in preserving dependent relations with the planters.[27] The problem turns on the ambiguity of "interest"—is it short or long term, individual or collective, economic or something more complex? Degler did not address that question.

On the matter of counterevidence, there is a great deal (particularly in WPA narratives) to suggest widespread class hostility between yeomen and planters as well as to induce a belief among historians that opposition to slavery might have better served the nonslaveholders' interest—however one defines that slippery term. As Hahn observed, "Political democratization was possible only because slavery did not present itself as an issue." To explain why slavery became a nonissue, historians have usually gestured toward the planters' power in the state legislatures. The concept of hegemony highlights their power in the cultural realm. If antislavery was placed beyond discussion, the narrowness of political discourse would serve to protect the property base of the ruling groups—slavery. That, as Genovese observed, is "all a hegemonic politics is supposed to do." But how was the task accomplished? Alongside systematic suppression of dissent, subtler processes may have been at work—ambivalent self-censorship among planters, grudging acquiescence among small landowners of the Piedmont. And these may have contributed to the closing of counterhegemonic alternatives.[28]

[26] Degler, *Place Over Time*, 80–81. To demonstrate the existence of free debate, Degler mentioned the Kentucky emancipation referendum of 1849, which does show that slavery was not beyond discussion in that state, but it may be the exception that proves the rule. In any case, using elections as examples of consensus does not confront the other problems mentioned in the following paragraph.

[27] Hahn, *Roots of Southern Populism*, 50, 52, 84–85, 90–91.

[28] *Ibid.*, 110; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese, "Yeomen Farmers in a Slaveholders' Democracy," in their *Fruits of Merchant Capital* (New York, 1983), 262; and George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, 19 vols. (Westport, Conn., 1972), 7: 354, 18: 215, 15: 273–74, 319, 17: 13, 328.

The larger point is this: historians do not have to assume false consciousness to suggest the possibility of false (or hegemonic) consensus. Degler's argument for genuine consensus rests on the unproven assumption that action reveals free choice and individual preference.[29] True consciousness replaces false consciousness but remains one-dimensional. Neither view recognizes the problematic nature of human interests.

When we turn from yeoman and planter to labor and capital, it is less difficult to establish a clear conflict of economic interests. As Dawley said: "In any marketplace transaction, buyers and sellers have opposing interests. As buyers of labor, manufacturers had a common interest among themselves which was opposed to the common interest of workers, as sellers. If the wage bargain between manufacturers and workers had been mutually beneficial, then the conflict of interest would have been historically insignificant. But the bargain was unequal."[30] The question then arises: were there other, more compelling interests outside the economic sphere?

Aileen Kraditor thought so and argued the point in *The Radical Persuasion*. Much of her animus is directed against the concept of cultural hegemony. In her view the concept denies the segmented, discontinuous character of American society, substituting a monolithic system whose parts are subsumed in a hegemonic whole directed by a ruling class.[31] The charge may apply to some of the sectarians she skewered in her footnotes, but not to Gramsci. Even though he devalued the private realm and stressed its penetration by dominant values, the major tendency of his prison notebooks is to reject system and emphasize the relative autonomy of cultural, economic, and political spheres.

But Kraditor had other arrows in her quiver. Announcing that hegemony is not a falsifiable hypothesis, she then attempted to falsify it in two ways. First, she argued that 1890–1917 was a "shake-up period" when massive industrial combinations rose to power but by no means exercised cultural hegemony. The arrogance and brutality embodied in corporate capital provoked a wide variety of Americans into organizing to limit the new forms of power.[32] This argument is accurate but not inconsistent with a Gramscian view of the late nineteenth century as a period when corporate leaders constituted a historical bloc in the process of overcoming potential counterhegemonies (Populists, Socialists, Knights of Labor) and of negotiating cross-class alliances in order to create a new hegemonic culture.

Kraditor's other criticism of hegemony involves a variation on the theme of consensus. She argued that workers chose to accept dehumanization in the workplace in exchange for autonomy in the private sphere. Having decided that their emotional and spiritual interests outweighed their economic interests, workers remained deaf to socialist appeals. Viewing their work instrumentally, they willingly embraced the dominant social order because it allowed them to

[29] On the weaknesses of the theory of "revealed preference," see Craig Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle* (Chicago, 1982), 211.

[30] Dawley, *Class and Community*, 174.

[31] Kraditor, *Radical Persuasion*, 66–71, 88, 90.

[32] *Ibid.*, 63–64, 71–85, 95–96.

preserve their most cherished values in the "mediating institutions" of family, community, and religion.[33]

The argument raises important points. Kraditor rightly stressed that there are subjective needs that may be more "real" than class interests and that not all cultural forms can be pigeonholed as accommodation or resistance to capitalism. Even the remnants of the idea of false consciousness in Gramsci can make it difficult to examine "the intrinsic truth or appeal of the idea in question"—that is, the subjective needs culture actually serves.[34] Kraditor rejected the quest for embryonic class consciousness and tried to take the private sphere on its own terms.

But she could have given the argument a further turn by acknowledging the possibility that the private sphere can do more than provide a haven in a heartless world. It can also nurture radical challenges to capitalism. The sociologist Craig Calhoun has argued that, as capitalist-style modernization encroached on everyday life in England, customary social bonds and nonrational impulses proved more effective in promoting resistance than the rational perception of class interest. The shift from communal to class consciousness attenuated social bonds and encouraged reformism rather than radicalism. His conclusion has global reach: the most radical anticapitalist protests have been rooted not in Marxist universalism but in local traditions undermined by industrialization.[35] This finding has been implicit in much of the social history of the last fifteen years. It suggests that Gramsci's persistent rationalism may have led him to misperceive the roots of radicalism, overlooking the messiness of existent working-class culture in his zeal for the clean, bold lines of the proletarian future.

Although Kraditor jettisoned her Gramscian baggage, she, too, remained a rationalist. Insisting that workers had a conscious choice, she overlooked the possibility that their refusal to embrace a vague and threatening revolutionary future may not have implied embrace of the established order; they may simply have been making the best of a bad lot. Attacking Gramsci for denying "John Q. Worker's full consciousness of what he was doing," she replaced false consciousness with true consciousness. Her naive voluntarism neglected to note that people may be confused or ambivalent and still retain "rationality and purposefulness." John Q. Worker was not fully conscious of what he was doing; no one is.[36]

There is a further problem. Reacting against "System-thinking," Kraditor (along with some of the social historians on whose work she relied) displayed an extraordinary faith in people's capacity to compartmentalize existence. Although she referred to the "partial autonomy" of the private sphere, it is apparent she regarded that terrain as a sanctuary undefiled by the dominant culture. One does not need to regard workers as passive victims to reject this view. If Calhoun is right, the incursions of capitalist institutions into the private sphere have provoked the most vigorous forms of resistance. A glance at Jane Addams on generational

[33] *Ibid.*, 66, 279, 294, 301–17.

[34] *Ibid.*, 66, 369–70 n. 28.

[35] Calhoun, *Question of Class Struggle*, esp. chap. 8. For a thoughtful effort to formulate class consciousness in historical rather than "essentialist" terms, see Sean Wilentz, "Against Exceptionalism: Class-Consciousness and the American Labor Movement, 1790–1820," *International Labor and Working Class History*, 26 (1984): 1–24.

[36] Kraditor, *Radical Persuasion*, 66, 152.

conflict between immigrants or Robert and Helen Lynd on "the long arm of the job" in Middletown further reveals how difficult, if not impossible, it has been for working-class people to preserve an autonomous cultural domain.[37]

Kraditor's work, like Degler's, shows that neither consensus nor hegemony is an easily falsified hypothesis. In that sense the empiricist critique has a point, but it applies to almost any historical interpretation that tries to illuminate a wide range of human experience. And yet the concept of hegemony may at least be falsifiable in principle. John Gaventa argued that case in *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*.

Gaventa began by observing that a lack of expressed grievances may not mean genuine consensus; the most effective use of power may be to prevent grievances from arising in the first place. "A consistently expressed consensus is not required for the maintenance of dominant interests, only a consistency that certain potentially key issues remain latent issues and that certain interests remain unrecognized—at certain times more than at others." But how can one observe nondecisions, analyze nonissues, and study what does not happen?[38]

Gaventa wanted to answer that question yet keep his empiricist credentials intact. Focusing on the domination of the Yellow Creek Valley in West Virginia by the American Association (a British and later multinational coal company), he began with a testable hypothesis: the quiescence of Appalachian miners, far from reflecting consensus, resulted from the exercise of cultural hegemony by coal companies and local elites. He needed to show that policies of development were promoted by a powerful minority rather than the powerless majority, that the miners were not free to accept or reject the new economic conditions those policies produced, and that they would have thought and acted differently but for the power arrayed against them.[39]

The first two claims are easily demonstrated; the third is more problematic. Gaventa elaborated it by investigating what the Yellow Creek miners did when company power weakened or third parties intervened and what miners in other Appalachian localities did when faced with similar conditions. In each case he found resistance. During the 1890s, when the company was forced into bankruptcy and internal reorganization, the prodevelopment consensus broke down. During the 1930s, when the Communist party and the ACLU intervened in behalf of unemployed miners, widespread anticompany protests surfaced. The same was true of the 1960s, when government agencies tried to ensure "maximum feasible participation" by local communities in the distribution of federal antipoverty funds. Throughout the century, resistance flared intermittently in other valleys outside Yellow Creek. Yet at nearly every point the miners' protests were ineffectual and short-lived. They failed, Gaventa claimed, not only because the other side resorted to force but also because the experience of powerlessness had

[37] Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (New York, 1910), 231–50, 252–53; and Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown* (New York, 1929), chap. 7.

[38] Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Urbana, Ill., 1980), chap. 1, esp. p. 19.

[39] *Ibid.*, 25–29.

inculcated a spirit of acquiescence within the mining communities. Like the workers interviewed by Sennett and Cobb, the miners internalized the dominant culture even as they saw through its pretensions. "Although the mountaineers suggest that [their forefathers'] land was stolen by the [coal company] agents, they consider these matters to be examples not of exploitation but of their forefathers' 'ignorance' or 'poor doings.'"[40]

In exploring this version of a Gramscian "contradictory consciousness," Gaventa recognized the difficulty of defining the miners' interests. If free to do so, subordinate groups would choose their real interests, which, he declared, do not have to be identified in order to study the cultural dimensions of power. The historian can postulate a variety of plausible interests for a given subordinate group, then show that the group was prevented from acting on or even conceiving those interests. That, in Gaventa's view, is sufficient to show that an apparent consensus does not express the actual interests of subordinates, even though it may serve their immediate need for maintaining good relations with existing elites.[41]

Unavoidably, it seems, we are returned to the idiom of "interests" and "needs." And here even Gaventa's approach, for all its strengths, is thinner and flatter than it might be. Like most social scientists, he is more interested in groups than in individuals, more concerned with self-interest rationally conceived than with the unpredictable depths of the human psyche. So it is not surprising that he overlooked the questions posed by Dostoevskii's half-mad but preternaturally prescient narrator in *Notes from the Underground* over a century ago.

> When in all these thousands of years has there been a time when man has acted only from his own interest? What is to be done with the millions of facts that men, *consciously*, that is fully understanding their real interests, have left them in the background and have rushed headlong on another path, to meet peril and danger, compelled to this course by nobody and by nothing, but, as it were, simply disliking the beaten track, and have obstinately, willfully, struck out another difficult, absurd way, seeking it almost in the darkness. So, I suppose, this obstinacy and perversity were pleasanter to them than any advantage. . . . Advantage! What is advantage?[42]

Like the rationalists of Dostoevskii's time, contemporary social scientists have been inclined to take their "whole register of human advantages from the averages of statistical figures and politico-economic formulas." Their lists have always included "prosperity, wealth, freedom, peace" but rarely the perversity that might undermine a person's willingness to secure those goals even as he consciously salutes them.

It is a bit much, though, to require every historian to cultivate the imagination of a Dostoevskii. Within the limits of its genre, Gaventa's conception of the miners' interest does overcome the shortcomings of most Marxist or liberal formulations.

[40] *Ibid.*, 55.

[41] *Ibid.*, 29.

[42] Fedor Dostoevskii, *Notes from the Underground*, in Constance Garnett, trans., *Three Short Novels of Dostoevsky* (New York, 1960), 196–97. The whole question of "needs" and "interests" requires some imaginative rethinking. For a comprehensive review of the literature from Plato to the present, see Patricia Springborg, *The Problem of Human Needs and the Critique of Civilization* (London, 1981).

The narrowness of those approaches becomes apparent in Gaventa's account of outsider intervention in the 1930s. The Communists assumed that the militant response of the miners to economic conditions implied an equally vehement rejection of their fundamentalist Protestant culture. But for miners, religion was not an opiate; it was the only form of collective organization they had been allowed for decades. Communists were fixated on economic issues, liberals on civil liberties. Both groups held the miners' culture in contempt. Local elites realized that the miners' interests involved more than free speech and economic redistribution; in combatting the outsiders, they could address local pride, fears of communism, longings for a righteous community. The hegemony of Appalachian elites involved an appeal to resonant cultural symbols.[43]

Despite the care Gaventa devoted to developing a testable concept of cultural hegemony, his argument remains somehow unsatisfying. The whole debate over falsifiability often seems to rest on the empiricist fallacy that what cannot be precisely observed and measured does not exist. The empiricist tradition can check dogmatic assertion but also impoverish historical imagination. To assess the significance of a given event, the historian may need to rethink the larger process in which it occurred. (Thoughts, sentiments, prejudices are all "events" from my perspective.) By imagining what might have occurred in the absence or variation of the event, the historian can more fully appreciate its place in the configuration that actually formed. A fuller understanding of the past "as it really happened" may sometimes require inquiry into unrealized or resisted possibilities. In the case of cultural hegemony, one does not need to imagine the only unrealized alternative to be Jürgen Habermas's "ideal speech situation"—where communication is open, transparent, undistorted by hierarchies. That notion can hardly be considered a possibility in any sense. Staying closer to the empiricist tradition, the historian can explore unrealized past possibilities by thinking through a text or body of thought to its "unthought" implications. This is part of the agenda behind Barbara Taylor's examination of the feminist strain in Owenite socialism that was ignored or repressed in later forms of socialism. My own desire to think the unthought possibilities of antimodern dissent animated my exploration of an often-inchoate antimodernism among middle- and upper-class Americans at the turn of the century. This approach can degenerate into a search for a usable past. But it can also illuminate a hegemonic culture by recovering alternatives that were no less real because they were submerged or silent.[44]

[43] Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*, 115–16.

[44] On the use of hypothetical nonoccurrences, see Max Weber, "Critical Studies in the Logic of the Cultural Sciences," in Edward Shils and Henry Finch, eds., *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (Glencoe, Ill., 1949), esp. 164–88. On "thinking the unthought," see Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, ed. and trans. Joan Stambaugh (Harper Torchbook edn., New York, 1974), esp. 48. I am indebted to Dominick LaCapra's lucid comments on these problems. See LaCapra, "Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts," in his *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1983), 31–32. The examples I mention are in Barbara Taylor's *Eve and the New Jerusalem* (New York, 1983) and my *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (New York, 1981). For Habermas's most succinct summary of his ideal speech situation, see his "What Is Universal Pragmatics?" in his *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, 1979), esp. 63. For a valuable review of the issues, see Martin Jay, "Should Intellectual History Take a Linguistic Turn? Reflections on the Habermas-Gadamer

If the social history of the last fifteen years has taught us anything, it is the ambiguity of that silence. What official or public discourse left unmentioned was often eloquently discussed around kitchen tables, in saloons, in slave quarters. Yet too frequently those discussions have been treated in isolation. What is needed, Thomas Bender observed, is "a simultaneous embrace of the public and private—and the way meanings move back and forth between them. . . . We must examine with greater focus than we have the interplay of private talk and public talk, private talk and public silence, public talk and private silence."[45] Bender's observation suggests a recasting of the problem of falsifiability. Social historians have shown that a wide range of cultural meanings—derived from the *gemeinschaftliche* worlds of family, community, and faith—was often denied entry into public discourse. What needs to be explored with greater precision is how this hegemonic process occurred at crucial moments, such as the final debate over American entry into World War I, when the vast majority of congressmen chose to disregard their constituents' opposition to the war and voted with the president.[46] In this and other policy matters, one way to falsify the hypothesis of hegemony is to demonstrate the existence of genuinely pluralistic debate; one way to substantiate it is to discover what was left out of public debate and to account historically for those silences.

Yet even if the concept of cultural hegemony can be rendered falsifiable and disentangled from crude notions of false consciousness, other problems remain. Some stem from the schematic cast of mind that sometimes surfaced in Gramsci: the bipolar model of hegemony and domination, the rationalist psychology that stressed intentionality and slighted unintended consequences. Other difficulties involve the ambiguities surrounding certain key implications: the relative autonomy of spheres, the variety of ways that hegemonic values can affect different cultural texts. By considering these problems, I hope to suggest possibilities for a more flexible concept of cultural hegemony.

GRAMSCI NEGLECTED THE VARIETY OF CONSTRAINTS (such as the fear of unemployment) that could exist between the poles of force and consent and sometimes formulated his case so starkly that he provided a warrant for oversimplified models of class domination. Even Genovese, for all his sensitivity in developing the concept of hegemony, has been criticized for presenting a static, monolithic image of planter-class rule in the Old South. Gramsci's own emphasis on the constant formation and reformation of alliances within historical blocs points toward more dynamic approaches. Rhys Isaac, though inspired by Geertz rather than Gramsci,

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Debate," in Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, eds., *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), 86–110.

[45] Bender, "Comment," on T. J. Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," paper presented at the Seventy-Seventh Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians, held in Los Angeles, Calif., April 4–7, 1984.

[46] To my knowledge, no congressional supporter of American entry into World War I ever claimed that a majority of the population supported it, and even historians sympathetic to Wilson, such as Arthur Link, have acknowledged that a popular referendum might well have gone against the president. See Link, *Wilson: Campaigns for Progressivism and Peace, 1916–1917* (Princeton, 1965), esp. 429 n. 103. Also see David P. Thelen, *Robert M. LaFollette and the Insurgent Spirit* (New York, 1976), 131–32.

transcended the implicit functionalism of Geertz in a brilliant example of how a historian may analyze a hegemonic culture in transition. In *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790*, Isaac showed how a traditional culture sanctioning deference and display gave ground before a popular evangelical ethos promoting contractual social relations, ascetic self-denial, and domestic privacy. The process was gradual, halting, and never complete. Vestiges of the old culture survived in the new. Yet a new historical bloc emerged, successfully challenged traditional sources of authority, and promoted more democratic and bourgeois forms of cultural hegemony.[47]

The compatibility of the Isaac and Gramsci viewpoints should dispel the idea that hegemony is a model of social control from the top down. On the contrary, new forms of cultural hegemony can bubble up from below, as historical blocs fashion a world view with wide appeal. The Virginia evangelicals translated their spiritual outlook into a regenerative creed, which took its most dramatic political form in the speeches of Patrick Henry. In *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Keith Thomas described a similar process in seventeenth-century England, as an antimagical ideology of self-help emerged among the middling sort and gradually became the cornerstone of a developing hegemonic culture. The decline of magic was the work not only of a scientific elite but also of the shopkeepers and small farmers, like the man who declared "his mare will make as good holy water as any priest can." Other, more oblique influences can also be traced from below. Dominant groups can revitalize a hegemonic culture by incorporating what they imagine to be the instinctual vitality of the lower orders—as, for example, during the late nineteenth century when neurasthenic Americans were urged to adopt a more relaxed pace of life by emulating "Oriental people, the inhabitants of the tropics, and the colored peoples generally." No top-down model of domination can explain the complex growth, dissolution, or transformation of hegemonic cultures.[48]

Yet the tendency to confuse hegemony with social control persists. It is possible for Stuart Ewen to invoke Gramsci's name in support of his conspiratorial interpretation of American advertising, wherein ad executives become master manipulators of mass culture.[49] The problem with this view is not that it is completely false but that it provides an easy target for those who want to deny hegemony altogether. To avoid getting shot down, proponents of hegemony should beware of attributing a single mentality to large institutions. In universities, newspapers, even advertising agencies, there may be conflicts between commercial and cultural objectives and internecine power struggles that have little to do with ideology. Closer attention to these internal processes would reveal more about how

[47] Anderson, "Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci," 25–26; interview with Herbert Gutman in Henry Abelove, Betsy Blackmar, Peter Dimock, and Jonathan Schneer, eds., *Visions of History* (New York, 1983), 209–10; and Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1982). Isaac referred to the "cultural hegemony" of the gentry on page 137.

[48] Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 266; Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York, 1971), 147; and Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 52.

[49] Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York, 1975), 133.

hegemonic values are produced in the complex organizations that have shaped modern culture.

Another way to escape from the dead end of social control is to abandon any assumption that there is a straight line linking intentions, actions, and effects. An emphasis on the unintended consequences of purposive social action was popularized by Robert Merton half a century ago; it also pervades the ironist tradition of American historiography from Henry Adams to Perry Miller. But David Brion Davis was the first to adapt it to Gramscian purposes. In *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, Davis showed how antislavery agitators unwittingly promoted new forms of cultural hegemony. By ignoring the emergent "wage slavery" in factories and defining labor exploitation solely in terms of the master-slave relationship, abolitionists helped legitimize the capitalist organization of labor and reinforce the spread of bourgeois cultural hegemony. This was not their conscious goal, Davis insisted, but an unintended by-product of actions aimed at other ends.[50]

One can give a further turn to the idea of unintended consequences by stressing the importance of half-conscious psychic needs that seem far removed from the public realm of class relations but may serve to revitalize or transform a hegemonic culture. Racial and sexual fears offer some pervasive examples of this functional "irrationality"; so do the fictive and fantastic elements in the consumer culture promoted by advertising and mass media. And *fin-de-siècle* antimodernism, which was often rooted in idiosyncratic longings for authentic experience, nevertheless helped accelerate the spread of a therapeutic world view well suited to the secular, corporate society emerging around the turn of the century. Private needs had public consequences: they helped accelerate the rise of a new hegemonic culture.[51]

If private needs have public consequences, how autonomous are the spheres of social life? Their boundaries seem discernible only in specific historical circumstances. Personal frustration or fulfillment can resonate in a variety of ways, promoting change within a dominant culture or challenges from outside it. The desire to preserve customary bonds with neighbors and kin, the yearning for salvation, the longing to please parental authority or rebel against it—these private concerns can have radical or reactionary results in public. Yet many cultural forms can also have a vigorous and complex life apart from accommodation or resistance to the dominant social order.

[50] Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1974), esp. 349–50. For the classic formulation, see R. K. Merton, "The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action," *American Sociological Review*, 1 (1936): 894–904. Also see his *Social Theory and Social Structure* (London, 1957), 51, 61–62, 66, 128, 563, 597.

[51] Lears, *No Place of Grace*, esp. chaps. 3, 4, 6. For a similar argument, see my "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880–1930," in Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, eds., *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880–1980* (New York, 1983), 30–38. Ronald T. Takaki stressed the hegemonic role of racism. See Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1979). On advertising, see my "Some Versions of Fantasy: Toward a Cultural History of American Advertising," in Jack Salzman, ed., *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies* (New York, 1984), 349–405. Steven Watts has provided many suggestive insights into the unintended hegemonic consequences of half-conscious psychic needs; Watts, *The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790–1820* (Baltimore, forthcoming).

To chart the largely unexplored territory where public and private meet, historians may need to devote more detailed attention to the acculturation process. One model study is Steven Stowe's account of planter-class families in the antebellum South. Informed but not imprisoned by the psychoanalytic tradition, it provides valuable insights into how elite boys and girls became men and women under particular historical circumstances. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, in his work on public education and popular taste, has opened less intimate areas of cultural reproduction to critical scrutiny. Closer to home, David Tyack and Elizabeth Hansot have effectively focused on the intersection between American public education and business culture, tracing the emergence of "scientific management" in educational administration and observing that "what was not on the agenda" of professional educators "was often as important as what was." And William R. Taylor, focusing on the transformation of public space in New York City during the Progressive era, has shown how the built environment can be designed to serve acculturating purposes, for example, the assimilation of immigrants through exposure to gargantuan icons in cavernous railway stations.[52] The success of such acculturation projects, as always, remains an open question. We still need to know more about how students actually experienced the "scientifically managed" classroom or how immigrants interpreted the public culture embodied in Grand Central.

In trying to catch the complexity of the acculturation process, historians may need to take a linguistic turn. That would be entirely appropriate for proponents of hegemony, since Gramsci's linguistic studies played a decisive role in the formation of the concept. Even his earliest writings stressed the centrality of language in cementing a given group's prestige and cultural leadership. The key task would be to examine the ways cultural meaning emerges in various historical "texts": sermons, advertisements, folklore, popular ritual. The investigation of cultural meanings might involve the historical ethnography pioneered by Isaac in his accounts of dancing and cock fighting in old Virginia. For intellectual historians it might suggest the close attention to rhetorical strategies that Sacvan Bercovitch brought to the Puritan jeremiad. By reaffirming a sense of mission, even as the speaker seemed to despair of its fulfillment, and reinterpreting social problems as the product of individual moral failings, the jeremiad, Bercovitch suggested, revitalized the hegemony of Puritan elites. Both Bercovitch and Isaac deciphered meanings within a framework of power relations.[53]

[52] Tyack and Hansot, *Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America, 1820–1980* (New York, 1982), 110; Taylor, "Public Space, Public Opinion, and the Origins of Mass Culture," lecture delivered to a joint meeting of the American Council of Learned Societies and the Hungarian Academy of Science, Budapest, Hungary, August 24, 1982; Stowe, *The Relations of Life: Family, Ritual, and Culture in the Antebellum Planter Class* (Baltimore, forthcoming); Bourdieu and J. C. Passeron, *Reproduction: In Education, Society, and Culture* (Beverly Hills, Calif., 1977); and Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass., 1984). Also see Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974).

[53] Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 104, 119, 323–57; and Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (New York, 1974). For a suggestive review essay linking Gramsci with Kenneth Burke and other rhetorical critics, see Phillip K. Tompkins, "On Hegemony—'He Gave It No Name'—and Critical Structuralism in the Work of Kenneth Burke," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 71 (1985): 119–31. J. G. A. Pocock's *Politics, Language, and Time* is also helpful but a bit too intellectualist to be directly relevant; see *Politics, Language, and Time* (New York,

The rhetoric of a dominant culture may contain more than clues to its hegemony. A number of historians and literary critics have begun to insist that language, the ground of meaning, is a contested terrain. Fredric Jameson complained that Marxists are too preoccupied with unmasking mystifications and too little concerned with the utopian promise often implicit in ideology. How can one explain fascism, he asked, without some reference to the longings it claimed to fulfill? This stress on the coexistence of ideology and utopia can be brought to a variety of cultural forms. Advertising offers one example, law another. Genovese and E. P. Thompson have emphasized that the rule of law constituted not simply a powerful hegemonic instrument but also a fund of beliefs and values from which the less powerful could draw sustenance. The meaning of the law could be contested by conflicting social groups. Law promised a reign of universal norms with utopian implications.[54]

Emphasis on the dialectic of ideology and utopia helps us get beyond one-dimensional conceptions of cultural hegemony, but we remain in the world of binary oppositions: truth and falsehood, resistance and accommodation. Semiotic theory suggests one way out of the binary realm by drawing attention away from static categories and toward the process by which meaning is constructed in particular texts. From this view, ideology is less a product than a process in which different kinds of meanings are produced and reproduced through the establishment of a mental attitude toward the world. That outlook privileges certain sign systems as necessary, natural, or inevitable ways of recognizing meaning and suppresses or ignores other sign systems. According to Hayden White, this is how semiotic codes are constructed—whether they are scientific, legal, fictional, or political. So instead of describing ideological elements and evaluating their truth according to a preestablished canon of interpretation, we might more profitably ask how those codes establish the plausibility of their discourse. Semiotics leads away from truth and toward "truth-effects"—the elements in a code that resonate "truthfully" with the subjective experience of a particular audience.[55]

The problem of audience leads another step beyond the binary realm, toward communication theories that stress the reciprocal quality of meaning construction. The work of Stuart Hall and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies offers one example. Hall and his comrades have fastened on Claude Levi-Strauss's notion of *bricolage* as a pattern for the construction of meaning in modern mass culture. The *bricoleur* is for Hall and his colleagues a kind of cultural hero, decoding fragments of consumer culture—a style here, a "look" there—and reassembling them to create his own personal code. The quintessential *bricoleur* was

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1971), esp. 3–41. On the importance of Gramsci's linguistic studies, see Franco Lo Piparo, *Lingua, intellettuali, egemonia in Gramsci* (Bari, 1979).

[54] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981), chap. 6; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 25–28; and Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters* (New York, 1975), 258–69.

[55] White, "Method and Ideology in Intellectual History: The Case of Henry Adams," in LaCapra and Kaplan, *Modern European Intellectual History*, 288–89. For Foucault's parallel critique of Marxian conceptions of ideology, see Colin Gordon, ed., *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (New York, 1980), 109–33. Geertz presented similar views in a functionalist framework; "Ideology As a Cultural System," in *Interpretation of Cultures*, 193–233.

the Teddy Boy in the Edwardian suit, the working-class youth who took a bit of Saville Row chic and made it a mockery of upper-class pretensions and an emblem of his own rebellious purposes.[56]

But the nature of that rebellion is unclear, and it is not very illuminating simply to celebrate Teddy Boys for refusing to become mainstream consumers. To move further beyond the duality of accommodation and resistance, we might ponder the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's emphasis on culture as a many-voiced conversation—a commonplace enough idea, except that Bakhtin imagined the conversation not only within the culture as a whole but also within each utterance. "Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others," he wrote. There are traces left by other speakers, by other rhetorical and discursive traditions. Language is marked by a plurality of value-laden perspectives in challenging contact with one another. It is also by its very nature dialogical: each utterance implies a symbolic exchange with at least one other speaker. All these qualities are especially relevant to the language of a hegemonic culture. By virtue of its leaders' effort to win popular consent, a hegemonic culture becomes internally persuasive rather than merely authoritative. It preserves a certain indeterminacy and open-endedness. As a result—so one can infer from Bakhtin—even the most successful hegemonic culture creates a situation where the dominant mode of discourse—and each visual or verbal text within it—becomes a field of contention where many-sided struggles over meaning are constantly fought out.[57]

These arguments parallel some of the dominant tendencies in "post-structuralist" literary criticism. If deconstructionists like Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida have done nothing else, they have explored with extraordinary virtuosity the "intertextuality" and multivalence of literary texts—the proliferation of covert encounters with other authors and works, the wide variety of ways a text can subvert its own apparent meaning. In the deconstructionist view, as in Bakhtin's, the text is an arena for a multiplicity of cultural struggles, not merely a dualistic class conflict.[58] Bakhtin's approach cautions the cultural historian to avoid a kind of even-handed reductionism: first look for the assimilation, then the protest. By insisting that texts can both reinforce power relations and contain a multiplicity of conflicting meanings, Bakhtin has opened an approach to language that was barely begun by Gramsci.

Yet one is entitled to some skepticism. All the talk about "struggle" suggests a mock-heroic picture of the "strong" writer or artist vanquishing, against all odds, external influences and forcing his refractory medium to submit to his own

[56] See the essays in Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *Culture, Media, Language* (London, 1980); and Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds., *Resistance Through Rituals* (London, 1975). For a thoughtful review essay, see Chris Waters, "Badges of Half-Formed, Inarticulate Radicalism: A Critique of Recent Trends in the Study of Working-Class Youth Culture," *International Labor and Working Class History*, 19 (1981): 23–37.

[57] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin, Texas, 1981), 269–315. I am indebted to LaCapra's excellent "Bakhtin, Marxism, and the Carnivalesque"; *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 291–324.

[58] For representative selections, see de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis, 1983); and Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago, 1981).

intentions. There is a hint of special pleading and self-justification as critics seek to appropriate the "strength" of artists. Skepticism deepens when one wonders whether the struggle over meaning might abate if language itself were diffused, increasingly deprived of its capacity to evoke precise (albeit subjective) meanings. Henri Lefebvre, Jean Baudrillard, and William Leiss have all commented on "the floating stock of meaningless signifiers" that seems to increase under the aegis of consumer culture, as advertisers and the mass media assemble and reassemble clusters of symbolic attributes designed to sell commodities.[59] If discourse is devalued, how serious can a struggle over meaning be?

IF ONE DENIES DEVALUATION AND GRANTS the seriousness of the struggle, there remains that most challenging aspect of semiotic theory: its tendency to deny the human subject. (This antisubjectivism does not characterize the psychoanalytic semiotics of Emile Benveniste and Jacques Lacan.) In Derrida's polemics, the self is a symptom of the "metaphysics of presence" that has infected Western culture for centuries. In Louis Althusser's structuralist Marxism the sense of subjective will is an illusion called up by the master-magicians of bourgeois ideology. The denial of the human subject is more generally present in the antisubjectivist view that language is not a tool to express a person's ideas but a system of signs that creates the precondition for notions like individuality and subjectivity. We are cognitively available to ourselves and others only through the guise of language. In Foucault's case, the rejection of human agency is rooted in an effort to capture the blankness and unintelligibility of twentieth-century structures of domination—particularly the discourse of the "human sciences," which seems unspoken by human subjects. The assault on subjectivity has some salutary effects. It offers a reminder that everyone is a creature as well as a creator of his culture—imprisoned by his available idiom even as he seeks to use it as a tool for mastery. It illuminates the ways that notions of selfhood can be socially constructed. And it offers a healthy antidote to humanist ideology, as Dominick LaCapra demonstrated in his analysis of the "commodity fetishism" passages from *Capital*. In LaCapra's view, Marx's "scientific" reversal of commodity fetishism embodies a humanist fetishism granting men "the 'fantastic' powers or unproblematic position of generative centrality that was formerly ascribed to gods—or to commodities." The slogan that people are spoken by language rather than the other way around at least provides a refreshing alternative to humanist pieties.[60]

[59] Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (New York, 1971), 119; Baudrillard, *Toward a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis, 1981); Leiss, *The Limits to Satisfaction* (Toronto, 1975), 47–94; Leiss and Stephen Kline, "Advertising, Needs, and 'Commodity Fetishism,'" *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 2 (1978): 5–27.

[60] Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1983), esp. 3–27, 111–36; Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Toward an Investigation)," in his *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York, 1971), 127–86; Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York, 1972), 55, *Madness and Civilization*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1965), xii; and LaCapra, "Marxism and Intellectual History," in *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 334. For the best introduction to Benveniste and Lacan, see Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York, 1983).

Yet, despite the crimes committed in the name of humanism, the denial of the subject begins on closer inspection to look less like part of a satisfactory theory and more like part of a fashionable ideology. Some notion of human subjectivity still seems necessary to historical understanding. A resolute antisubjectivism not only fails to account for resistance and transformation in "discursive practice" but also threatens to degenerate into as monocausal and mechanistic a model as the economic determinism Gramsci criticized so effectively. Rather than insist on a system, the historian might acknowledge language as another of those structures that may appear immutable and objective but are constantly changing in fluid interaction with human subjects. Indeed, that was Gramsci's own view, which he maintained against the reductionist grammarians of his time.[61]

Antisubjectivism also impoverishes textual analysis. White argued that a semiotic approach to intellectual history establishes its value quantitatively, by accounting for more elements of a particular text than content methods do. He then set out to support that claim through a semiotic analysis of *The Education of Henry Adams*. Concentrating on its intertextuality, its self-consciously literary qualities, White came up with a surprisingly one-dimensional stress on Adams's "nihilism." He dismissed Marian Adams (whose very absence constitutes a presence), overlooked the strain of vitalism that pervades the text, and lost sight altogether of the religious longing that remains barely submerged and occasionally surfaces. Despite its skill, White's analysis leaves much of the text unread—to say nothing of the life behind the text.[62]

The shortcomings of White's work point to the larger limitations of a linguistic view of cultural history and return us to Gramsci. The focus on language can make us conscious of the endless ambiguities involved in communication and remind us that most meanings are not reducible to any binary scheme, even though they may be shaped in part by structures of power. The problem is that, once inside the labyrinth of intertextuality, the historian often seems unable to hear the human voices outside. And that is part of our task as well, to listen to those voices (however dissonant and confused) and try to reconstruct the human experience of history. That, in the end, was Gramsci's greatest strength: his openness to the variety and contrariety of experience. Despite his rationalism and his concern to locate overarching patterns of culture, Gramsci recognized that the ground of all culture is the spontaneous philosophy absorbed and shaped by each individual. This is not far from what William James called "our more or less dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means."[63] Gramsci's feel for the concrete details of social life prevented him from falling prey to bloated abstractions. It would be a supreme irony if this great thinker and linguist, who did so much to free the Marxist tradition from iron necessities and hypnotic formulae, were to be reincarcerated at last in the prisonhouse of language. But somehow, I think the wily Sardinian would slip away.

[61] Lo Piparo, *Lingua, intellettuali, egemonia in Gramsci*, chaps. 2–4.

[62] White, "Method and Ideology," 290–310.

[63] James, "The Present Dilemma in Philosophy," in J. J. McDermott, ed., *The Writings of William James* (New York, 1968), 362.