The Humanitarian Aid Regime as Hegemony

Theory Essay on Gramsci

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I. Introduction

In the past five decades over two trillion dollars has poured into the international humanitarian aid system and dispersed to the world’s “bottom billion” (Moyo, 2009). Or, at least that is the claim. Yet, the poorer countries just seem to stagnate in poverty or get even worse. There has been much research done as of late regarding the effectiveness of international humanitarian aid, though little of that research dares to delve into the underlying systemic causes in the international order that perpetuate the status quo. When looking at the systemic issues involved in humanitarian aid, it becomes clear that the humanitarian aid regime can be seen as a cultural hegemony.

The primary purpose of this essay is to analyze the current international humanitarian aid regime using Antonio Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony. First, I will explain the theoretical background of Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony. Then, I will analyze the international humanitarian aid system in a Gramscian context. And last, I will conclude with a review of the theory’s strengths and weaknesses when applied to this issue, as well as recommendations for future research and study.

II. Theoretical Background

Before engaging in this analysis, it is important to understand the concept of cultural hegemony. Gramsci expanded upon the Marxist concept of a ruling class dominating the working class by introducing the cultural aspect to this relationship. Cultural hegemony is the philosophical and sociological theory that a society can be dominated by one social class through the manipulation of culture (values, perceptions, and beliefs) so that its ruling class worldview is imposed as the societal norm. This is then perceived as the universally accepted ideology and status quo beneficial to all of society, yet it really only benefits the ruling class. The ruling class
maintains its power and legitimacy not only through coercion and force, but especially by propagating its own interests through cultural norms until they become common sense. The lower classes are essentially coopted into the worldview of the bourgeoisie through the use of cultural components such as religion, folklore and pop culture. It is through this power relationship that the lower classes consent to a particular social order, such as capitalism.

Antonio Gramsci was born into a lower class family in Sardinia, Italy in the late 1800s. He eventually won a scholarship to the University of Turin just as Turin was starting to industrialize and he became active in socialist circles which were influenced by the current political climate in Russia and the rise of fascism after WWI in Italy. He ultimately became a leader in the anti-fascist Socialist Party of Italy, but was jailed by the fascist regime for about 10 years before his death in the mid-1930s. It was during this time in prison that Gramsci wrote most of his body of work in notebooks. His life experience allowed him to have a unique worldview where he was exposed not only to the rural working class of Italy during the rise of fascism, but also the intellectual socialist elites within the city of Turin. His unique position in society not only allowed him great insight, but also heavily influenced his expansion of Marxist philosophies.

Gramsci’s greatest influences in developing the theory of cultural hegemony came from Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin. Karl Marx was the founder of communism and provided the anti-capitalist foundation for Gramsci to expand upon. Marx theorized about a workers revolution that would overtake the ruling class. He was influenced by industrialization in late 19th century Germany and the problems associated with the new capitalist society, particular the exploitation of workers. Gramsci pulled his idea of ideology from Marx and expanded upon it into the cultural realm. Vladimir Lenin, a Russian, expanded upon Marx’s communism to include the
idea of hegemony, though he did not develop it in the way that Gramsci did. Vladimir, like Marx, focused more on the economic components and also disregarded the rural poor and instead focused on the urban working class. Lenin also believed in and implemented a vanguard of intellectual elites that would lead the socialist revolution of the masses. Gramsci diverges from this idea of intellectual elites and argues that there are thinkers among the working class, or organic intellectuals, who are capable of bringing about a counter hegemony.

III. A Gramscian View of the International Aid Regime

I chose Gramsci’s theory to understand the international humanitarian aid regime because it looks at the modern capitalist world system through a critical lens, yet expands beyond the limits of simple economics and into the realm of culture. It is especially applicable because, in most cases, international humanitarian assistance is not seen as an overtly threatening or forceful intervention on behalf of the global elite. It is typically seen by the international community as a necessary good that must be done to assist our fellow human beings. This is directly in line with Gramsci’s theory because he claims that the hegemonic regime maintains power not through force or threat, but primarily through cultural means that alter the universal worldview of a particular society to align with the interests of the ruling class.

Much of the literature that I reviewed about this issue reiterates or describes Gramsci’s theory, though some does so without actually citing Gramsci (or any other theorist) as the source. Perhaps this is because much of critical social theory in international relations really stems from a Marxist or neo-Marxist perspective and so it would be intuitive for those who are researching international studies or a related field. However, one article (Katz, 2006) explicitly uses Gramscian analysis to explore not only the concept of the “civil society” as a global cultural hegemony, but also provides an interesting exploration of how the very system of international
aid is actually providing the framework for a counter hegemony to rise up against the current civil society world order.

Another common theme in the literature is the concept of globalization and its neoliberal ideology that promotes the capitalist system. Expanding upon this theme is the idea that Western, capitalist states have set up international organizations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations in an effort to secure global governance for their economic interests. It is through this system that a vast majority of aid is delivered. Yet, this aid is often conditional or tied to certain sectors. It is heavily regulated behind the scenes to benefit the donor countries, ultimately, while pushing a public agenda that claims to reduce world poverty, relieve humanitarian crises or build needed infrastructure in developing nations.

Valerie Kaussen (2011) explores this concept with a case study on Haiti after the 2010 earthquake where billions of dollars were poured into the country. Yet, even today, local Haitians are still struggling with little or no infrastructure improvement, food and water shortages and uninhabitable living conditions while American companies have profited a great deal from the aid contracts they received for work in Haiti. Robert Hunter Wade (2002) does the same with a focus on the U.S. as a donor to the World Bank. He explains that after the Cold War especially, the dominant worldview in our international system is that the open market economy is the cornerstone of the best societies. Because of the perception that an open market economy is the way to building the best society, despite evidence to the contrary on many occasions, there is a perceived mutual benefit that has been accepted by not only the global ruling class (developed nations, especially the U.S.) but also those who aspire to be the ruling class. This is precisely Gramsci’s concept of the dominant worldview being accepted or consented to by those who it does not benefit.
Yet another theme in the literature is the idea of how the aid is disbursed and to which countries. Countries with more neoliberal policies are rewarded and neoliberalism is incentivized, even if it is not in the interest of the local people. The prescription for every poor country also seems to be open markets, corporate tax incentives for transnational companies, and low regulations for labor laws and the environment. The literature points out that none of this helps the local people get out of poverty and in many cases kills local industries, also known as competition to capitalist countries’ industries. Oliver Cunningham (2012) uses Haiti as a case study of this concept as well, though the implications are universal. He argues that the decisions about who gets aid and how they get it perpetuate the hegemony of the international humanitarian aid regime and cause aid to be disbursed not based on need, but instead based on the interests of the donor countries or the elites in power in the recipient countries. He makes the point that this is not in the best interests of those who need the aid the most.

A seemingly alternative view presented in the literature comes from Hattori (2003). She presents the idea that the receiving countries accept the restrictions and guidelines of international assistance and have significant agency in the system. By doing so, they consent to the capitalist model of the global system. However, this seems to qualify even further how the international aid system is a Western hegemony by inciting the consent component of Gramsci’s theoretical model with the creation of what he calls the “historical bloc.” The acceptance and perceived or actual agency in the donor-recipient relationship is used to establish a coalition, or bloc, that propagates the capitalist worldview.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that there is ample evidence that the international humanitarian aid system is a Western, capitalist hegemony, with the U.S. as the leader. Even the potential
alternative view offered by Hattori seems to reinforce this idea and actually solidifies Gramsci’s theory by introducing us to the concept of consent and how it plays into the establishment and reinforcement of the dominant world view. Gramsci’s theory is quite strong when used to analyze a system, such as the humanitarian aid regime, from a critical perspective to help bring flaws or shortsightedness to the surface.

One of the major gaps in the research presented in the literature is that the international humanitarian aid system is not necessarily a monolith, so not all organizations that provide aid will fit into the hegemony. Though, Gramsci’s theory still seems to reach into this realm by offering up the concept of organic intellectuals that spring out of the masses and also by the concept of counter hegemony. I would be interested to see more research on small, local and/or indigenous non-governmental organizations to determine if they might one day be a successful counter hegemony to the status quo.

Bibliography


