

Perry Anderson, *The H-Word: The Peripeteia of Hegemony*, London: Verso, 2017. ISBN: 9781786633682 (cloth); ISBN: 9781786633712 (ebook)

Perry Anderson is one of those rare academics who becomes legendary well within his own lifetime. Approaching his 80th year but still remarkably productive, Anderson keeps adding to his already copious output, both through the pages of *New Left Review (NLR)* and with an ongoing stream of books. *The H-Word* combines these two venues, building on several essays that originally appeared in *NLR* and adding additional chapters to produce an intellectual history of the uses of the term “hegemony”.

Anderson announces in the first paragraph of the Foreword the phenomenon to be addressed. Based on the listings in the UCLA catalogue, the term hegemony appeared in only five book titles during the 1960s, 16 in the 1970s, 34 in the 1980s, then exploded to 98 in the 1990s and 161 in the first 15 years of the 21st century. *The H-Word* does not so much interrogate why this happens—the shifting geopolitical context enabling the explosion is evident—as it charts the shifting uses of the term over the centuries of its development.

Anderson quickly traces this history from Ancient Greece through the Russian Revolution, particularly in the works of Lenin and Trotsky, before embarking on the core analysis of the book, the development of Gramsci’s distinctive concept of hegemony and the varied uses and fates of the term thereafter. Especially central in this lineage are a series of Western geopolitical thinkers whose use of the term relates to the vicissitudes of US empire-building, as well as to their own specific views of US empire. Hans Morgenthau, Charles Kindleberger, Robert Keohane, Robert Gilpin, Susan Strange, Joseph Nye, John Ikenberry, and John Mearsheimer are among the well-known mainstream international relations (IR) and international political economy (IPE) scholars whose work comes under interrogation. Placing their work in relation to the development of US imperialism since World War II, Anderson is

able to build from these accounts of thinking about hegemony into a conclusion highlighting the significance of the wars engaged in by the Obama administration.

Along the way, Anderson also highlights the generally quite different uses of hegemony associated not only with Gramsci but with the Italian Communist Party and with a series of leftist scholars who have reshaped Gramscian thought, these including Stuart Hall, Ernesto Laclau, Ranajit Guha, Giovanni Arrighi, Robert Cox, and Stephen Gill. In all of these more Gramscian authors, the central conceptual issue is frequently the specific analysis of the relationship between coercion and consent, as well as the degree to which the focus is on domestic or international relations. Anderson handles these issues with his usual deftness—though with no real surprises, either, given that both much of the material on Gramsci and the very effective chapter on Hall, Laclau, Guha, and Arrighi, have already seen the light of day in *NLR* and other places. In a sense, what Anderson does here that is most significant is to chart the differences between more leftist/Gramscian uses of hegemony and those which have become predominant in mainstream IR and IPE. While the differences are not uniform or consistently productive of incommensurability, Anderson’s charting of them helps clarify the ways that non-Gramscian notions of hegemony have begun to flourish as the US post-Cold War imperial project has evolved.

This is an issue that Anderson also addressed, to some extent, in his earlier book, *American Foreign Policy and Its Thinkers* (2015), but in *The H-Word* he develops the analysis of US geopolitical thinking not only in relation to alternative, leftist uses of the term hegemony but also in relation to uses in places throughout the world over the *longue durée*, including China. Indeed, the sense that hegemonic conflict is now increasingly centered in tensions between a “declining” US state and a “rising” Chinese state pervades the book, particularly in Anderson’s chapter on the development of concepts of hegemony in China (written with the help of a long list of China scholars), as well as in his review of the work of contemporary China scholar Wang Hui (a frequent contributor to *NLR*). In spite of its inevitable limits—it condenses a considerable

amount of geographical-historical complexity into a few pages—this chapter provides one of the most interesting and novel elements of the book, and places the geopolitical discussion in a context for which the sense of current significance, even urgency, is powerfully clear.

Aside from this excursion into Chinese history, there are few real surprises in *The H-Word*, and few real disappointments either—unless one is disappointed by reading a well-known scholar doing many of the things we have come to expect of him. Having said that, I admit to some personal disappointment that here, as elsewhere, Anderson has neglected quite a bit of recent Gramscian scholarship that in various ways challenges some of his own accounts of Gramsci’s “antinomies”. Setting aside the prodigious amount of recently-emerging scholarship in Italian, which I am unable to read, I could mention the sharp philosophical forays of Peter Thomas, in *The Gramscian Moment* (2009), which critiques both Anderson and Louis Althusser on their readings of Gramsci (with definite implications for how we read his notion of hegemony), Adam David Morton’s creative work on Gramsci and global political economy, *Unravelling Gramsci* (2007), which extends and to some extent transforms the framework developed by Cox, and Peter Ives’ work on Gramsci’s use of language and the implications for our understanding of hegemony, *Language and Hegemony in Gramsci* (2004). These and many other recent works are reminders that Gramscian scholarship and leftist interrogation of the H-word—including within radical geography (see, e.g., Ekers et al. 2012)—have not ended with the recent departure of great scholars like Hall, Laclau, and Arrighi (Guha, in his 90s, is still with us), nor have they all been simply sublated or repressed by the emergence of global power struggles that make hegemony the official objective of competing states. Indeed, it seems to me that if we want our own efforts to escape the trap of either revisiting leftist failures of the past or a too-easy alignment with one or another side of emergent struggles between non-leftist political forces—the sad fate of much contemporary politicking—then continuous interrogation of the key terms we use and the ways they relate (or don’t) to different forms of leftist struggle is the order of the day.

Be that as it may, if you want to see how hegemony has been transformed from a critical term in the lexicon of leftist scholars and activists to a less critical but increasingly pervasive term in the lexicon of those interrogating late US imperialism (and perhaps re-emergent Chinese imperialism), then *The H-Word* is a book well worth reading.

References

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