

A Note on the Manufacturing of Hegemony and Counter-Discourse: The Case of the Arab Spring

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Abstract

This paper addresses *hegemony* and *resistance* as generic phenomena and offers a brief reflection on the processing of the dominant discourse in society and the ways in which it sustains assent in the consciousness of the mass public. The so called “Arab Spring” is taken as a case study to illustrate how the struggle over power is taking place in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). At a broad theoretical level, I seek to scrutinise the functional correlation between the discourse of the established elite and its rival alternative discourses. Why do certain versions of discourse prevailed over a long period of time while others still remain on the periphery? How are *hegemonic* discourses produced and reproduced? What is the role of the various social institutions, the media in particular, in promulgating specific discourses and dismissing others? Providing answers to these questions entails at least references to two major fields of research; cultural studies and discourse analysis. There is a need to fathom the discursive structure of discourse with reference to language, ideology, and culture in general. Thus one needs to consider the axial role of the mass media outlets, notably the various virtual public spheres in the struggle of dominance and resistance.

Keywords: Arab Spring; Discourse; Hegemony; Ideology; MENA; Power; Resistance.

1. Introduction

It is abundantly ostensible that the post-modern era has yielded a matrix of non-orthodox discourses some of which have resided at the margins for quite a long time. Whilst the well-established discourses that remained salient and steady for many decades still stand out to some extent as dominant, others are struggling, and sometimes negotiating, a place within the mainstream ideology.

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Undeniably, asymmetrical doctrines such as communist or capitalist, religious or secular, racist or anti-racist, conservative or progressive and the like could vehemently be espoused by the members of the same community, neighborhood and possibly the members of the same family. This is partly due to volatile nature of the new world that we live in where the technological refinements, especially in digital communication, have given us an unprecedented opportunity to access huge amount of information and knowledge instantly. These new realities led to the breakdown of the classical means of censorship, yet transferred the struggle for hegemony and dominance to another space. In what follows, I proceed by a succinct historical sketch of the theory of ideology and hegemony. Then I project this theoretical outlook in the context of the Arab Spring in order to reflect upon the interplay between hegemonic discourses and their counter-discourses in a highly controversial phenomenon.

2. Is ideology an Instrument of Domination?

On the face of it, there has been a growing scholarly interest in the study of hegemony, its function in society and thus its mechanistic relationship with resistance. The implications of the theory of hegemony touches on a wide range of disciplines within the social sciences and humanities, notably political economy and a wide range of themes that fall under the general rubric of Discourse Studies. In the light of the late revolutionary flux in some Arab countries, this paper aims, albeit rather broadly, to transcend the political wrangling of the numerous contesting ideologues in order to expound the workings of domination and resistance amid the chaotic atmosphere created by the popular uprisings. In other words, I will examine two parallel discourses: the emerging discourse of protest by a large segment of the public against the practices of the establishment, and the dominant discourse of the latter which resorted, in its frustrated endeavor to contain the social upheaval, to a repressive rather than progressive strategy. There is a scant literature that paid systematic attention to the local cultural factors in the making of politics and shaping the public mindset in the MENA region which is still suffering from the repercussions of the Arab Spring. Through this modest contribution I aimed only to initiate research about the defects in the *cultural superstructure* that led to the current deteriorating status quo. There is a need, I believe, to focus more closely on the problem of ‘culture’ in the contemporary Arab societies to better fathom the intricacies of the upheavals that made the region more vulnerable than ever.

It might perhaps be a requisite to clarify – albeit in very brief manner- the theoretical nexus between some of the key notions used in here such as ‘discourse’ and ‘ideology’. How these are conceptualised and applied by the main schools of thought in the emerging field of Discourse Studies. Particularly, it is important to draw attention to the vague meanings inherent in the term ‘discourse’ and its organic correlation with both ideology and hegemony. Following the Foucauldian tradition, the complexity that envelops the dialectic between social power and resistance is quintessentially contained in the core fabrics of discourse per se. Indeed defining ‘discourse’ has branched off into different directions and hence the term was put into use in a myriad of ways.

Despite its theoretical complexity, I intend to employ the Gramscian notion of ‘hegemony’ to demystify the struggle over power that broke up in the late 2010 in Tunisia and spread to other neighbouring countries. I would argue that drawing insights from Gramsci’s ideas on hegemony would better elucidate the functional relation between the state and civil society in such a revolutionary case which is, it should be highlighted, away from being a classic class struggle. Accordingly, the swift analysis provided herein could be subsumed under the

realm of political discourse analysis which deals, as Professor Teun . A van Dijk clarifies, “especially with the reproduction of political *power*, *power abuse* or *domination* through political discourse, including the various forms of resistance or counter-power against such forms of discursive dominance” [1]. In a narrower scope, the concept of hegemony is approached from a Gramscian perspective which, in very mundane terms, advocates that power can be primarily operated through consent in a given social context, and only secondary through the use of physical force.

There is a lengthy body of literature on the nature of discourse, its components and properties, relationship with the exercise of power and social structures, *inter alia*. The definition problem of discourse would by no means lead us to trace the etymological origins and usage of this concept in a variety of disciplines, see for example, van Dijk [2,3]. It is widely advocated amongst the contemporary linguists that discourse should not be reduced to denote a ‘text’, rather, it is “what makes the text context-bound, in the widest sense of the term” [4]. This pragmatic definition stresses the actual use of language in a real social context-one should bear in mind that *Context* is also another key word that should be well defined.

In the last two centuries, much contestation has emerged over the concept of ideology which is still encased with some degree of lacunae precisely within those disciplines that label themselves as ‘critical’ and seek to make peripheral discourses more visible. Indeed ideology has evolved through time to acquire numerous, usually ‘pejorative’, connotations since its first introduction by Destutt de Tracy in the late 18th century [5]. In the course of the time it was loaded with much negativity notably in the Marxist doctrines, see Barth [6], Eagleton [7], van Dijk [8]. The Marxist critic Raymond Williams considers ideology as a “relatively-formal and articulated-system of meanings, values and beliefs, of a kind that can- be abstracted as a 'worldview'-or 'class outlook” [9]. Most contemporary scholars account for ideology as a *belief system* that generates interrelated meanings and ideas which ultimately construct a specific worldview that will be shared amongst the members of a specific social grouping. This view has been well expounded by the advocates of the social constructivist theory [10].

With regard to the neo-Marxist trend that has essentially been identified with the works of Antonio Gramsci, ideology acquired other set of less negative meanings. The basic notions within his theoretical paradigm on discourse processing in society, particularly the ways in which ideology operates in the discourse of the dominant class, were not solely bound up with the economic structure. Additionally, Gramsci stated that the dominant group in a given society does not promote its own ideological beliefs by coercive means only but also through consensus. This consent, as he put it, “is carried by systems and structures of beliefs, values, norms and practices of everyday life which unconsciously legitimate the order of things” [11]. Certainly, Gramsci’s works represent a departure away from the traditional Marxist emphasis on ideology which had been replaced henceforth by the concept of ‘hegemony’.

One has to keep in mind that it is relevant to attribute a neutral position to ideology and thus to consider the role of language use in the enactment of social power. Language is a seminal component in this debate because, Michal Billing writes, “the paradox of ideology is a variant of a general paradox of language.” [12]. Hence, it is essential to reflect on the link between the structure of language and the distribution of power relations, and to

trace images of dominance and how polarized views are expressed and justified by means of linguistics analysis. In other words, understanding the use of language through a meticulous examination of grammatical, lexical and semantic choices would showcase how ideology is embedded in discourse. However, it must be stressed once again that a critical investigation of the ideological construction of realities involves much more than general knowledge about the linguistic categories of language and its lexical or grammatical peculiarities, the underlying socio-cognitive background through which language is produced and understood is equally important. It is quite plausible therefore to cast more light on the cognitive and social aspects of ideologies and how they are processed and comprehended by the different actors in a given communicative context.

3. Hegemony and the ‘War of Position’ in the Arab Uprising

Ideology is a new term compared with hegemony, in a temporal sense. The latter is derived from the Greek word *hegemon* which simply refers to a leader or someone in a powerful position. Yet, hegemony as a concept in the modern political and social theory has acquired a much more diverse set of meanings and a far reaching complexity which was initiated, in the first place, by Gramsci’s antidogmatic and neohumanist criticism of the Marxist orthodoxy. Professor Peter Ives declares that “before Gramsci, the term ‘hegemony’ was more or less limited to meaning the predominance of one nation over others” [13]. A wealth of purposeful insights was suggested about the nature of authority, legitimacy, power and dominance within the Marxist framework.

Hegemony is therefore “about ‘manufacturing consent’: winning the consent of dominated classes through ideological domination, persuading the dominated classes to view the world in a manner favourable to the ascendancy of the dominant class; consent, in other words, goes hand-in-hand with, and is often more effective than coercion”[14]. In order to sustain the norms, values, attitudes and customs that serve continuously to provide the necessary legitimacy to the dominant ideology, those who govern rely heavily on the various social institutions to manipulate the consciousness of the public. Practically speaking, this is manifest in all aspects of our everyday life, notably in the design of education programme curricula, the media output, art, music, literature, drama, and the legal system.

The labels “Arab Spring” and “Arab Uprising” are used interchangeably to refer to the popular revolutions that took place in some Arab countries from the late 2010 onward. The social movement started with ubiquitous peaceful protests calling for political and economic reform which, after being brutally repressed, turned into armed insurgencies. Broadly speaking, the large-scale grassroots revolt was a *prima facie* evidence of a widespread spirit of discontent and indignation amongst the populace on the one hand, and a serious crisis in polity on the other hand. It is worth noting in passing that although each revolutionary case had its own distinctive features, it should not be considered in isolation from the rest simply because the countries concerned shared the very same condition that fuelled the social eruption. The dramatic repercussions of the upheavals are still unfolding up to date, with the most devastating consequences particularly in Syria. Arguably, the Tunisian case has been quite successful in its smooth transition from dictatorship to participatory democracy with minimum casualties, whilst the conflict in the other states turned into regional armed clashes, or at worst civil wars driven by sectarian chauvinism [15]. Unfortunately, with the escalation of violence and lack of constructive dialogue between the various conflicting parties, there is little hope for outright consensus, at least

in the short term.

It could be said that the revolutionary motion was triggered, in essence, by youth people mostly student unions, social activists and a mass of ordinary citizens who did not share any common political agenda or ideological orientation. Rather, they were united with a strong impulse for radical change and peremptory rupture with the past authoritarian rule. It is also essential to note clearly that the traditional parties and forces of opposition that have been censored, silenced or excluded from the political scene by the official authorities did not join the fray only lately, yet they made the social movements less arbitrary.

In retrospect, the mass demonstrations embarked first in a little town in Tunisia and spread rapidly to the rest of the MENA following different scenarios and having varying degrees of impact. However, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria have obviously undergone enduring experiences in a hostile conflict between the coercive power of the state and a militant resistance incorporating a large segment of the public. Whilst Tunisian president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali fled away in a relatively short time, Egypt's president Hosni Mubarak quit under the ongoing pressure of daily mass public protests and Libya's Muammar Qadhafi was murdered by the rebels, and the Yemeni president was forced to resign after a failed assassination attempt. However, with strong back up from Russia, China and Iran, the Syrian Baath leader Bashar Al-Assad has confirmed his determination to adopt security policy to crack down the opposition which ended up by a tough civil war wagging up to this moment.

There were certainly some local and international factors that facilitated the materialisation of the social distress into a real nerve-racking political crisis. Some observers emphasised the impact of the demographic shift that produced a new age structure featured by high rates of population growth that were not in conformity with the slow economic development, particularly with the rising rate of unemployment amongst the youth [16]. However, I assume that this was not quite sufficient to produce a transnational crisis with such magnitude. There is indeed a long list of intertwined factors which include, for example, high levels of political corruption, lack of social justice and economic equality and oppressive authoritarianism. After all, it needs to be highlighted that the sudden rebellions occurred less because of any organised political will to overthrow the established governments and to challenge the existing power relations than because of a spontaneous reaction by the citizenry to the deterioration of their wellbeing which was seen as an outcome of the mismanagement of a corrupt elite. Yet in the course of time, political parties and a spectrum of pressure groups joined the civil society to form a much more mature and robust bloc of resistance with various political demands and agendas.

On the whole, the countries of the MENA region have been living under autocratic regimes for decades right away after their emancipation from the Western colonial powers in the wake of the Second World War. The state formation following the success of liberation movements led to the emergence of charismatic figures who subsequently became the sole leaders of these newly established entities endowed with absolute powers. Thus the state or, in Gramsci's terms the 'political society', deployed its power in different forms and by different means to quell any counter discourse that might challenge its preponderant ideology, usually by illegitimate use of physical coercion. The participation of the civil society in the political life was prohibited rather than encouraged. Very little concessions were made during the last sixty years or so putting the interests of the few ruling members and their relatives at the heart of its highest priorities. Also, it sought to maintain the circulation

of one voice through one political party and one or a few state-run TV channels.

The ruling elites specifically in dictatorships, Clement Henry and Robert Springborg write, “seek legitimacy by manipulating symbols and finding scapegoats for any troubles, while also engaging in rent-seeking and misallocating human and physical resources” [17]. The political society therefore invested much effort to create a distinctive sense of belonging that revolved around its dominant discourse by having a firm hold on information industry and knowledge community (the mass media, schools and universities in the first place). However, with the development and dissemination of communication technologies such social control apparatuses, which were under the complete monopoly of the state, turned out to be futile to preserve the integrity of the mainstream ideology. Other alternative voices, which were mostly foreign and diverse, became easily accessible through the Internet and other alternative privately-owned TV channels.

In fact, power as a process that involves, amongst many other things, the ability to control the political output and intervene strongly in the management of economy is seminal to the authority, legitimacy and most importantly presence of the state as a cohesive and integrated organism. For quite a long time, the autocratic governments intensely monitored all aspects of the economy and thanks to the revenues of oil and other natural resources they were able to cover the deficit of economic policies. Yet, with the increasing motion towards sharp liberal tendencies imposed by globalization the state intervention in the marketplace was restricted [18]. The twist in the politics of global economy following the fall of socialist doctrines, which most Arab regimes endorsed for long, had without doubt a tremendous impact. One example is the inability of the governments to further sponsor welfare policies and the public service in general. Clearly, the financial subsidies offered by the state and its ongoing support of the poorer segments of society, which form the largest layer in the social strata, bought off the consensus of the population. With the inevitable move towards more liberal policies the state retreated to manage security and administrative affairs only which created a widespread malaise, especially with the rising rate of unemployment amongst the youth. As a result, the state’s *raison d’être* was questioned by a frustrated civil society when it seemed fairly weak to sustain economic development in the turbulent environment of the post-cold war era.

Over many years, the establishment did not accept any challenge to its expansive hegemony over a mosaic of subaltern groups. Furthermore, it did not attempt to negotiate the popular requests, but most of the time resorted to coercion and violence. One might ponder then why the hegemonic patriarchal discourse of dictatorship prevailed for generations and managed in many occasions to overcome similar challenges of much more organised and efficient movements, yet disintegrated quickly in the last uprising? To better understand such a key question, a deep reflection on the historical conditions under which those dictatorships emerged and survived is necessary. However, an in-depth account of this point would far exceed the scope of this modest paper. The passive reaction of the military, as in the Tunisian case, to the orders of the ruling elite isolated the latter and considerably strengthened the opposition. However, the rapid collapse of dictatorship should not be confined to the neutrality of the army but it was also boosted by the convulsion within the inner circles of those regimes. The increasing number of dissidents of high rank positions displayed another setback for the ruling elite and unravelled the fragility of the state institutions. It should come as no surprise that the collapse of those in power was left to time. Whilst dictatorship came to the scene again in Egypt, post-Ghadafi Libya went into

total anarchy, and a civil war broke up in Syria leading to the rise of religious extremists, and terrorist militias in midst of a feverish sectarian strife. Indeed, the highly concentrated power and the expansiveness of the dominant ideology and thus its continuous disempowerment of other voices could all be seen as the symptoms of the deficit of the ruling party. On the other hand, the *subaltern* groups succeeded simply because they were able to form alliances in a relatively short time despite the momentous and flimsy nature of such alliances which disbanded shortly thereafter, most clearly in the post dictatorship period. The course of the subsequent events was to some extent predictable when sectarian disputes, regionalism and archaic ideological hostilities were resurrected to impede a successful political transformation. The difficulty to form a homogenous political leadership was expected to bring about the failure of the social uprisings. As there emerged neither an alternative hegemonic force nor a consolidated consensus on power sharing amongst the subalterns, the likelihood of political mayhem remained high. Furthermore, the lack of conscious leadership is perhaps one of the most serious blinkers that faced the smooth progress of the uprising towards a real democratic phase where power would be restored to elected institutions rather than be left to paranoid rulers. Another important aspect of the struggle of hegemony and resistance is taking place in the media sphere. Since the publication of Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* in 1922, many scholars and academics posed serious questions vis-à-vis the power of the media (print journalism then) and its influence on the public mind and politics as well. As this industry expanded throughout the twentieth century, the so nicknamed Forth Estate established itself as a major power with its own ideologies and political agendas. As far as the Arab Uprising is concerned, it was obvious that the mass media, specifically the new media outlets that escaped the monopoly of the state, gave a pragmatic boost to the counter hegemonic discourses and further accelerated the motion of change. The social media formed uncensored space of influence and opinion making that attracted the youth in particular. Hence most of the social activists utilized the virtual public spheres created by Facebook and Twitter, for example, to organize regular meetings and demonstrations. Thus, video footage of the recurrent flagrant abuse of civilians, kids and women were filmed by smart cell phones and ultimately found their way onto the network. It was precisely this flow of videos depicting inhuman atrocities and torture that have generated feelings of fury instead of fear and had a great share in transforming the peaceful protest towards counter violence. There can be no doubt that Aljazeera satellite channel has explicitly showed its support for resistance. This backup could also be found in a few other TV channels, but Aljazeera has come to attract much attention thanks to its innovative and creative style that was appealing to the mass audiences.¹ Yet it was accused by some critics of being a mere propaganda broadcaster of the Qatari foreign ministry. In fact, the coverage of the channel pushed the uprisings ahead as it created a unique sphere for the rebels and other marginalized voices which was not often allowed elsewhere. For the first time, political and military leaders of the opposition and their counterparts were routinely invited to defend their conflicting views on air.² However, the state backed TV stations stuck to their traditional discourse which failed to weight the magnitude of the crisis by simply portraying those in resistance as traitors and anarchists. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that without the assistance of the alternative media which played the role of an educator of the masses, the uprising in the MENA would not have happened with such impact and size.

¹ Aljazeera is a Qatari based satellite channel launched in 1996. During the last few years, it has been one of the most influential and also controversial channels. It is often referred to as the undertaker of the Arab Uprising.

² Whether this channel was neutral or biased is actually a subject of old debate about the role and function of the media in society. Namely judgment about the channel's reporting requires a detailed qualitative and quantitative analysis of its content about specific events at a particular time.

4. Conclusion

Notwithstanding the fact that the participants in the protest movement represented a mosaic of political strands and ideologies within society, their 'common will' was being constructed around the necessity for emancipation from the markedly obsolete discourse of the established elite. The official dominant discourse that glorified nationalism, liberation and the necessity to confront the Western imperial policies was no longer appealing to the majority under the changes that occurred at the world's political landscape, notably with the increasing uni-polar hegemony of the US and its overt support of democratization. Nevertheless, the collapse of the hegemonic discourse of dictatorship started once the masses, or at least the majority of the subalterns, ceased to adopt their leader's worldviews as their own. Strikingly, however, the pace of the uprisings took tragic trajectories with the emergence of terror groups and the regress of the "historic block" formed by the resistance activists which added further layers of complexity. In fact, although there has been a huge human and economic cost, authoritarianism did not seem to come to an end with the re-establishment of an active counter discourse to resistance that sought to restore the old structure of power. This is made clear in the case of Egypt after the subsequent appointment of a military leader at the head of the state. The conflict also turned into a bloody sectarian war in the Middle East and opened the way for a protracted conflict between various armed groups. Let alone the large-scale intervention of other foreign powers in the conflict. It is worth noting that a much in-depth research that tackles in detail several socio-historical and political perspectives of the crisis is needed to better grasp the intricate process of today's change and predict its possible development in the long run. Put succinctly, the rationality of the hegemonic front in the Arab states was predicated on two fundamental misconceptions; first, that there is still a more widespread and ubiquitous popular backup to the political ideology of the ruling elite in proportion to those in opposition, and secondly that the coercive power of the state, relying on strict security measures, was able to contain the movement of resistance and assuage the public distress. It is precisely this power without knowledge and obvious *detachment* from the concrete reality out there that led to the fragmentation and dissolution of the ruling party. On the other side, the uprising has brought a radical change but not entirely for the better and the hopes of a smooth political transformation dissipated with the escalation of violence and the loss of internal cohesion within the groups that formed the resistance bloc. Though the latter challenged the dominant discourse, it lacked the instruments of domination most specifically its inability to remain intact. From this, it follows that the label 'spring' does not really fit well within this context and then turns out to be just a hasty 'misnomer'. I should like to emphasize that there are a number of shortcomings that must be acknowledged as this paper offers only a bird's eye view on the struggle over power that is taking place in the political and public spheres. This topic is rather complex and requires a multidisciplinary approach and much more space to be adequately discussed. I made only an abrupt reference to some of the basic notions in the Gramscian tradition to consider how hegemonic discourses are formulated and legitimized against other peripheral ideologies.

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