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What is hegemony now? Transformations in media, political economy, and cultural studies

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As I write this, the Russian military is continuing its now months-long bombardment of Ukraine, ostensibly in an attempt to prevent the latter from joining NATO. In response, the Western powers that comprise NATO—including the U.S.—are deciding what steps they might take in order to prevent such an incursion again in the future, mostly relying on economic sanctions and other tools of market coercion. To take the meaning of hegemony used in international relations (IR), this is yet another “morbid symptom” of a world “After Hegemony.”¹ Hegemony in this context is the rule of a single power in the world order, mostly on the model of the military and economic dominance of the British up until the second world war. Gramsci’s original conception of hegemony is often understood to have two components: the component of coercion and the component of consent. In the international relations understanding of hegemony, culture—or what Gramsci called common sense leading to consent—is a mere superstructural phenomenon which follows from that hegemonic dominance: Rudyard Kipling wasn’t part of the official imperial strategy, but his novels and editorials helped cement the legitimacy of the efforts, the “White Man’s Burden” of bringing “civilization” to the world.

That said, the propaganda war is as hot as the real one right now, with the major Western media marching in lockstep with the military, featuring U.S. Defense Department and White House spokespeople several times a day. During this moment, if you were to turn on NPR or one of the major TV news networks, Russia and Ukraine are the top news of the day, with a potential struggle ensuing over the meaning and framing of both. In Stuart Hall’s formulation of the role of media in articulating the hegemonic position, we see this level of the legacy media operating in much the way it has for a long time, with access being one of the primary vectors through which those in power are able to constitute both the topics and the framing of the “common sense” concerns of the day.² These so-called “superstructural” institutions continue to operate as if they maintain their “hegemonic” role, as Hall paraphrases Gramsci, “in securing and cementing societies ‘structured in dominance,’ and in actively conforming the whole of social, ethical, mental and moral life in their overall tendencies to the requirements of the productive system.”³

This more nuanced understanding of hegemony understands coercive force as less important than the cultural consent in maintaining the legitimacy of the state. In

¹ Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

² Stuart Hall, “The Rediscovery of ‘Ideology’: Return of the Repressed in Media Studies,” in *Culture, Society and the Media*, ed. Michael Gurevitch et al. (London: Routledge, 2005), 81, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203978092-9>.

³ Stuart Hall, “Culture, the Media and the ‘Ideological Effect,’” in *Mass Communication and Society*, ed. James Curran, Michael Gurevitch, and Janet Woollacott (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1979), 334.

his work on media rituals, Nick Couldry adapted Hall's early work on the media's role in cementing hegemony and establishing what he called, "the myth of the mediated centre," more recently saying, "Media institutions work hard to *sustain* that myth, telling us we are all watching, that this programme or event shows 'what's going on' for us as a society."⁴ For much of the postwar era, this more nuanced understanding of hegemony provided a powerful counterweight to the "realpolitik" of political science and international relations. It has led generations of students to consider media and culture as important sites of political struggle, and to see representation as a key lever in the transformation of those societies "structured in dominance." Is this because these media and cultural theories were more adroit in capturing the dynamics of cultural cohesion and change in Western capitalist democracies? Or did these theories make more sense due to the articulation of hegemony that adhered in those societies during that time? And as the nature of that hegemony is shifted, what theoretical and strategic shifts do scholars and activists need to make to account for the way media functions?

One of the key shifts to note is that the "mediated centre" is ever more mythical. So while the "Mainstream Media" cover the violence being inflicted on the people of Ukraine, the expansion of military budgets and diplomatic pressures, the refugees on the run from Russian bombardment, on social media the most pressing news is of the "violence" of the actor Will Smith slapping the comedian Chris Rock at the 2022 Oscars ceremony, after the latter made a joke about the wife of the former, Jada Pinkett Smith, who suffers from alopecia and was therefore bald. The event has spawned endless think pieces, Twitter rants, TikTok hot takes, YouTube takedowns, and belligerent Facebook posts, not to mention segments on daytime talk shows, late night comedies, and so on. Most condemn this use of "violence," but that term is shown to be an empty signifier in the face of the myriad of ideological vectors intersecting here: race because the two men in the story are black; gender because of the dynamics of one man insulting a woman (in part for her deficit of femininity) and another rising up to "protect" her; ableism as the joke is based on the fact that the woman has a medical condition; and so on. But the libidinal and ideological energies behind this quasi-moral panic are less important than the fact that they all serve as clickbait for the segmentations of the distributed online culture industry: the contest for who can claim a hegemonic, "commonsense" position on "the slap" translates almost instantly (and proportionately) into advertising revenues—for both legacy publishers and social media prosumers themselves.

⁴ Nick Couldry, "Illusions of Immediacy: Rediscovering Hall's Early Work on Media," *Media, Culture & Society* 37, no. 4 (May 2015): 642, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443715580943>.

But then again, maybe this was just in my feed. It was our spring break, and I went on Facebook more often than usual, making the mistake of clicking on a few posts about this story, and soon seeing my feed flooded with content on the topic. The social and cultural element of the production and distribution of this content was amplified by algorithms, which attempted to cater to my interest, trigger emotional reactions, and keep me engaged on the site. No doubt many of these posts were promoted by the publishers themselves. And many others appeared more prominently in my feed because of the engagement they were receiving from others.

The question of what hegemony—or what Gramsci saw as a combination of “domination” and “intellectual and moral leadership”⁵—is, therefore, a more complex puzzle, where communication and media are only one piece. As Couldry puts it,

[T]he myth of the mediated centre is no longer enough to grasp all that media are doing, and that we are now doing with media. It is not that large-scale ‘media’ have disappeared, or that media’s claims to be socially ‘central’ have diminished – arguably those claims have become more insistent. Rather the whole terrain of media (and media institutions) has been reshaped by huge external forces.⁶

This transformed landscape creates ripples in terms of theory as well as method. In terms of theory, the way that media operates in most Western democracies is now highly contingent on what sources one looks to for information. Over the past decade, the Pew Research Center has tracked the way news consumption has shifted from mainstream print and broadcast outlets to social media, with older demographics being among the latest to move from cable and network TV to Facebook. The latter has not been accompanied by a relevant dose of media literacy, making so-called fake news a much more toxic source of misinformation for these social media newcomers.

But even knowing this shift exists tells us little about what people are actually reading or watching, and where. Pew can track the number of people who get news from Facebook or Twitter, but without granular ethnographic data, the process of opinion formation is a black box. If I move off of Facebook and open the Chrome app on my phone or tablet, a curated list of news items appears, with some local stories about Chicago, about academia and free speech, about the latest leaks on new tech hardware, and most recently, on the moral-panic-*cum*-culture-war around Lia Thomas, a transgender swimmer who has recently made headlines for competing—

⁵ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 57.

⁶ Nick Couldry, “Illusions of Immediacy: Rediscovering Hall’s Early Work on Media,” *Media, Culture & Society* 37, no. 4 (May 2015): 642, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443715580943>.

and occasionally winning—in the women’s division of the NCAA finals. The latter has spurred legislation and op-eds across the country, written mostly by cis-gendered white men who have never before cared about the “sanctity of women’s sports,” but who now see this as another flank in the electoral battle ahead. Google doesn’t exactly care which side of this debate I fall on, but knows that, for whatever reason, I will frequently click on those stories. Therefore that is what News is for me: microtargeted, reactive, and likely sponsored in some part by the publications feeding clickbait stories on the topic.

In the past, as a researcher, I could look to the major publications to discern the dominant hegemonic discourse on a topic: as Hall notes, the oligopoly of mass media institutions made “access to the very means of signification” one of the key means of maintaining hegemony.⁷ Now hegemony appears an impossibly atomized proposition, acting, like light, as both a particle and a wave, having more to do with which apps people have downloaded, which apps are able to send notifications, which apps or webpages are able to store cookies on which individual devices, and whether you have auto-play or other settings enabled. In this context, hegemony itself feels like an impossibility, a situation reflected in the fact that we now seem unable to agree on basic facts.

On the other hand, we also know that there are increasingly sophisticated means by which propagandists are making sure the “right” people see the right kinds of information. These means are also operating under the radar of basic media studies methods, at least in terms of our being able to discern which people are seeing which messages—along the lines of what Nielsen used to be able to tell us about how many people watched (or at least were tuned into) a certain television broadcast.

In place of these broadcasts, and the relatively public information of ratings demographics, we have dark social and feeds curated according to data-driven psychographics. Though I am skeptical of some of the claims made by former Cambridge Analytica operative Brittany Kaiser in the documentary *The Great Hack*, the fact that the Trump campaign pumped nearly \$100 million into targeted Facebook advertisements using these methods undoubtedly had some behavioral effect on the users exposed to these messages. When you further extrapolate—and assume that the Facebook ads were linked to YouTube videos, Reddit posts, and flat-out fake news sites (like *The Denver Guardian*)⁸—the ecology of reinforcing information easily

⁷ Stuart Hall, “The Rediscovery of ‘Ideology’: Return of the Repressed in Media Studies,” in *Culture, Society and the Media*, ed. Michael Gurevitch et al. (London: Routledge, 2005), 81, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203978092-9>.

⁸ Laura Sydell, “We Tracked Down A Fake-News Creator In The Suburbs. Here’s What We Learned,” NPR, November 23, 2016, sec. The Industry,

becomes an echo chamber that is similar to the ideological effect of the mid-century mass media, but completely custom-built, ephemeral, and often reinforced (via likes, shares, comments, etc.) by the individual relationships that characterized the “two-step flow” of early behavioral understandings of administrative media research.⁹

In short, the ability of well-funded, well-resourced organizations to channel this flow, to create an entire self-reinforcing media ec(h)osystem is a possible analogue to the hegemonic mass media of the past, but without even an attempt to appear objective or balanced, much less transparent about who is composing the messages. Indeed, as the QAnon phenomenon illustrates, it may be more convincing for the true sources—and even the messages themselves—to remain inscrutable. Here the revelations of another recent documentary are illustrative. Cullen Hoback’s six-part series *Q: Into the Storm* gives a genealogy of this subculture’s practices and conventional wisdom, which were developed first in the deepest recesses of 2Chan, 4Chan, and eventually 8Chan—possibly amplified and fostered by one of the owners of the latter website. But, importantly, few of the many adherents to the conspiracy theory needed to bother visiting the otherwise unsavory message board: the “Q drops” posted there were helpfully repackaged and reinterpreted by a bevy of bloggers, Tweeters, QTubers, and podcasters, many of whom, not incidentally, gained a great deal of revenue from the followers they amassed. Others, like Marjorie Taylor Greene, parlayed their expertise in all things Q into political power, in the form of a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives.

While this is arguably still far from a dominant hegemonic ideology, according to polling by the Public Religion Research Institute, it has been able to convince close to 30% of the Republican base and 20% of Americans as a whole of their key tenets—the lynchpin being a ruling class of bloodsucking pedophiles responsible for stealing the election from Donald Trump. Importantly, the study found that, for those relying mostly or solely on right-wing news sources, nearly 50% of respondents adhere to some of the key beliefs. Key among those news sources are the startup networks OANN and Newsmax, which were briefly carried as satellite channels on DirecTV but now operate largely in advertiser-supported, online, video-on-demand spaces, making their definition as TV stations rather dubious. But perhaps more than media reach is what is undoubtedly a media effect: the movement was able to mobilize hundreds of armed followers to conduct the closest thing to a coup in U.S. history, and has been

<https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/11/23/503146770/npr-finds-the-head-of-a-covert-fake-news-operation-in-the-suburbs>.

⁹ Elihu Katz, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and Columbia University Bureau of Applied Social Research, *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1955).

subsequently perceived as so influential that GOP lawmakers around the country have been loath to denounce this spectacular demonstration of civic violence.

Cultural Hegemony in the Postwar Social Formation

When the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) was founded, the culture industry—and therefore the question of hegemony—looked incredibly different. The dominant political economic model in the North was one of expanding social democracy, leading the many strains of the New Left to fear that the political economic system would remain as it was: As Chantal Mouffe observed recently, “nowadays we have to defend the social-democratic institutions we previously criticised for not being radical enough. We could have never imagined that the working-class victories of social democracy and the welfare state could be rolled back.”¹⁰ This political context made the Gramscian conceptualization of hegemony essential to the overall strategy—and the cultural realm a key target for undermining the contemporary reproduction of the mode of production. In short, in terms of hegemonic forces, it was a very different moment. The media were more concentrated, the economy was less repressive, and cultural hegemony more completely secured by the political establishment.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, we can see three eras marked by different configurations of the relationship between culture, politics, the dominant mode of production, and the commodification of culture. In terms of the culture industry per se, Lawrence Lessig proffers a useful distinction in his book *Remix*. He describes a pendulum between what he calls “read-only” and “read/write” culture, using the now ancient distinction between recordable consumer DVD and CDs.¹¹ In the pre-recorded culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, culture itself was predominantly R/W in the sense that much of the culture out there was available for creative re-use by everyday citizens. All music was potentially folk music; all literature potentially open to local (and even reactionary) interpretation.

In that first phase, culture itself was relatively small and local. It primarily consisted of unrecorded folk culture and the culture of the avant-garde elite; it was therefore a source of resistance and pleasure in a society where needs and desires were increasingly fulfilled by commodities. The potential opposition of culture to capitalism—the fact of a potential space where the relation of capital and commodity

¹⁰ Íñigo Errejón and Chantal Mouffe, *Podemos: In the Name of the People* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2016), 22–23.

¹¹ Lawrence Lessig, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008).

did not reign, reified, complete—gave hope to the critics of the early Western Marxist tradition (and led them to despair when it appeared culture itself would suffer the same fate as everything else in industrial capitalism).¹² This open, dynamic phase of cultural production was undermined, in Lessig’s interpretation, by the advent of recorded culture. In the phase that followed, culture became read-only because the technology of production and distribution required massive capital outlays and expensive infrastructure, and were therefore monopolized by large, corporate entities who further secured their control through increasingly prohibitive copyright. In this sense, we need to contextualize Western Marxist perspectives on the colonization of culture by industry in relation to the more orthodox Marxist critique of the dissipation of the popular struggle due to the subordination of work to the logic of management, such as those of the contemporary critics Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy called “Monopoly Capital”—a connection that Robert McChesney and John Bellamy Foster recently noted in detail, drawing a direct line from this *Monthly Review* perspective to the work of Raymond Williams and the Birmingham School.¹³

1964 was indeed a moment of nearly unrivaled corporate media oligopoly. In the United States, there were three major television networks, all tightly connected to the American imperial project. Britain had only two networks: one public (the BBC) and run by the state, and one private, commercial network, ITV. Most communities saw a limited number of national and multinational corporations transmitting one-way broadcasts to otherwise idle consumers whose only agency was in the act of reading (or “decoding”) ideologies with or against the grain. Up until that moment, the U.S. movie industry—which still dominated global screens—had been largely governed by the contours of the Hayes Code, which mandated that those depicted participating in deviant activities—drinking, adultery, homosexuality, etc.—meet a grisly end so as to instruct the audience in the appropriate behavior.

Though the relationship between Cultural Studies, Marxism, and political economy was always fraught, Stuart Hall was both the founding editor of the *New Left Review* and the second director of the CCCS. Both projects—CCCS and the *New Left*—had the objective of finding new levers of social and cultural change in the absence of either the material degradation of unhinged capitalism (i.e., class immiseration effecting class-led revolution) or the potential utopian or populist

¹² Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott, *Cultural Memory in the Present* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

¹³ Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital: An Essay on the American Economic and Social Order* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966); John Bellamy Foster and Robert W. McChesney, “The Cultural Apparatus of Monopoly Capital,” *Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine* 65, no. 3 (July/August 2013): 1–33, <https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-065-03-2013-07-1>.

vitality of avant-garde culture. In other words, Cultural Studies' discourse of the hegemonic role of the culture industry emerges from a certain material and social context, where the state, economy, and culture existed in an unprecedented arrangement of what Jefferson Cowie has recently termed *The Great Exception*.¹⁴

In the United States, in parallel with the culture industry's colonization of the sphere of potential avant-garde resistance, labor organizations were recognized in collective bargaining agreements, removing the possibility of the sit-down strike from workers on the line. But there were workers on the line, and, their power in the system of production recognized, they were given better wages and benefits and a more secure social safety net, funded by extremely progressive taxation. By 1944, the top marginal tax rate in the US was 94%. This wasn't reduced until 1964, when it became 77%. Our current top marginal rate is less than half that: 37%. Unemployment insurance, Social Security, and financial arrangements made it possible (and even patriotic) to fund the suburban, car-driving, air-conditioned lifestyle with a reasonable dose of government-backed consumer debt. Whatever ideological effect mass culture had on society, it was always secondary to the ideological effect of the apparent tilt (for white folks, anyway)¹⁵ towards a more equitable society.

Cultural Studies à la CCCS emerged from this second era. At this moment, hegemony was not only understood in terms of an ideological common sense but was shot through with the political economic contours of the mid-century welfare state. On the one side, the capitalist bargain struck with labor and the welfare state muffled the energy of class struggle; on the other, the dizzying flood of newly industrialized popular culture lacked a coherent critical complement. In Hall's description of the need for a new approach at the time, he notes the importance of socialist humanism and the need to examine the role that culture was playing in keeping people from thinking about the problems of capitalism.

The purpose of discussing the cinema or teen-age culture in *NLR* is not to show that, in some modish way, we are keeping up with the times. These are directly relevant to the imaginative resistances of people who have to live within capitalism—the growing points of social discontent, the projections of deeply-felt needs. Our experience of life today is so extraordinarily fragmented. The task of socialism is to meet people where they are, where they are touched, bitten, moved, frustrated, nauseated—to develop discontent and, at the same time, to

¹⁴ Jefferson Cowie, *The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

¹⁵ Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liveright, 2013).

give the socialist movement some direct sense of the times and ways in which we live.¹⁶

Of course, the concern over media representation was never “Merely Cultural,” as Judith Butler put it succinctly—neither in terms of the material institutions necessary to produce and reproduce media *qua* culture, nor in terms of the multitude of subaltern subjectivities that emerged in what Nancy Fraser has recently called “The Triple Movement.”¹⁷ Fraser’s concept owes much to that of Karl Polanyi’s “double movement,” which he coined in the interwar period but used to describe a longstanding dynamic within societies that imposed the “disembedded” free-market economy as a means of distributing the necessities of survival. Since the free market is a conscious political construction (rather than an already existing force), it necessitated the process of what Marx called “primitive accumulation,” removing the means of subsistence from the lower classes and forcing them into a laboring relationship with the new owners of these means, on pain of starvation and death. This dispossession would inevitably lead the masses to rise up in what Polanyi called a “double movement,” demanding protection from the state, often fueling the rise of fascism and authoritarianism, as Polanyi observed it had at the time.¹⁴ Under the banner of fascism, he includes Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the U.S. New Deal, but unlike his contemporary critic Friedrich Hayek, he sees the rise of these forces of protection as inevitable: the freedom promised by liberals is only possible when what is meant is, “Freedom not as an appurtenance of privilege, tainted at the source, but as a prescriptive right extending far beyond the narrow confines of the political sphere into the intimate organization of society itself.”¹⁸

According to Fraser, the “Triple Movement” names the social movements for “emancipation” “that erupted on the scene in the 1960s,” which included

[A]nti-racism, anti-imperialism, anti-war, the New Left, second-wave feminism, LGBT liberation, multiculturalism, and so on. Often focused more on recognition than redistribution, these movements were highly critical of the forms of social protection that were institutionalized in the welfare and developmental states of the

¹⁶ Stuart Hall, “Introducing NLR,” *New Left Review*, no. 1/1 (January/February 1960): 1–3, <https://newleftreview.org/issues/1/1/articles/stuart-hall-introducing-nlr>.

¹⁷ Judith Butler, “Merely Cultural,” *New Left Review*, no. 1/227 (January/February 1998): 33–44, <https://newleftreview.org/issues/1227/articles/judith-butler-merely-cultural>; Nancy Fraser, “A Triple Movement?,” *New Left Review*, no. 81 (May/June 2013): 119–32, <https://newleftreview.org/issues/1181/articles/nancy-fraser-a-triple-movement>.

¹⁸ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001), 265.

postwar era. Turning a withering eye on the cultural norms encoded in social provision, they unearthed invidious hierarchies and social exclusions.¹⁹

Fraser calls them a triple movement because they were seeking to articulate their demands for recognition alongside massive changes to the political economic structures of the welfare state, often with the expectation that the basic level of social support won by the “double movement” would be maintained, but its power democratically accountable and its benefits more widely distributed.

Here, another historical analysis using Polanyi’s categories is useful to flesh out the dynamics of the current moment. In his book *Great Transformations*, Mark Blyth argues that Polanyi is right that there is a double movement demanding social protection from the ravages of the free market, but that it is often then met with a “counter-double movement” in which the owners of capital demand a retrenchment and the return of austerity.²⁰ In our current era, this “counter double movement” is known as neoliberalism, and Fraser highlights the way that neoliberalism appropriates certain demands for recognition that emerged from the path of emancipation opened in the 1960s by promoting the logic of the market as one that ensures the diversity of social identities on a level of equality of opportunities. Indeed, though the forces of the “triple movement” gained power during a startling expansion of the social safety net, they did so with an ambivalent position on the ethics implied by those systems of protection.

Though this more recent tack by Fraser doesn’t address her earlier debate with Butler over the tensions between justices of recognition versus justices of redistribution, she effectively argues that this “emancipatory” path out of the 1960s leads directly into the “woke” neoliberalism of today—and the reactionary reappropriation of the “double movement” in the neofascist articulation of MAGA.

At the same time, the economic “double movement” of the Fordist past reappears in the neo-fascist articulation of Donald Trump’s “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) project. In effect, as I’ve outlined elsewhere, MAGA is a reappropriation of the economic double movement in an age of neoliberal austerity, but (to synthesize Polanyi, Fraser, and Blyth) it is promoted culturally as a “Counter-Triple” movement, suggesting the emancipatory movements of the sixties are the cause of America’s economic decline. MAGA transfigures and channels demands for social protection in the language of xenophobia, racism, sexism, homophobia, and

¹⁹ Nancy Fraser, “A Triple Movement?,” *New Left Review*, no. 81 (May/June 2013): 119–32.

²⁰ Mark Blyth, *Great Transformations: Economic Ideas and Institutional Change in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

transphobia.²¹ In short, three conflicting horizons emerge in the hegemonic fracture of the United States: a project of less State and more market in a neoliberal key; a project of a more capitalist State with exclusion of “the Others”; and a project, ours, of “another” State, a state of protection and care, modulated by the emancipation movements of the past and present - and complicated by an unprecedented media environment.

It is now an accepted commonplace that emergent technologies have changed the way many of us make, distribute, and consume media. The continued dominance of corporate media hegemony is simultaneously aided and hampered by the tenuous system of national segmentations, streaming service overlap, and often unenforceable intellectual property rights. But as I've argued elsewhere,²² the efficacy of hegemony as that “mediated centre” is challenged even more fundamentally by the fact that individuals are able to produce and distribute media at the same *temperature*²³ and *bias*²⁴ as the legacy media, as in the social media “broadcasters” peddling QAnon conspiracy theories above. The latter concepts are appropriated from the media ecology paradigm (McLuhan and Innis, respectively) with the understanding that, even in the hands of those authors, it was always about the relative fidelity, production values, and archival and distribution capabilities of the dominant media corporations. The transformations of digital, social media have effectively returned the production of culture to its more democratic roots, where folk music and pamphlets were produced and distributed alongside the works of major publishers and so-called everyday citizens could effectively join in the conversations of the public sphere; while José van Dijck is right that the major platforms eventually develop business models “commoditizing relationships—turning connectedness into connectivity by means of coding technologies”—this was made possible by the democratization of production that remains essential to these mediums.²⁵

In many ways, this conceptualization of the circuit of culture was foretold many years ago, when the newly translated introduction to the *Grundrisse* led Hall, Johnson, and others to speculate on the true nature of culture, which lay submerged beneath the institutional weight of the culture industries. People, the story went, were

²¹ Sean Johnson Andrews, *The Cultural Production of Intellectual Property Rights: Law, Labor, and the Persistence of Primitive Accumulation* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2019).

²² Sean Johnson Andrews, *Hegemony, Mass Media, and Cultural Studies: Properties of Meaning, Power, and Value in Cultural Production*, Cultural Studies and Marxism (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017).

²³ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

²⁴ Harold Adams Innis, *The Bias of Communication* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951).

²⁵ José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

not dupes; they just had no way to register their necessarily alternative readings except through subcultural appropriations that were, by definition, invisible to the dominant culture. Now, the active audiences can produce not only alternative interpretations, but completely original re-articulated productions—such as fan re-cuts of the entire *Star Wars* series, distributed on YouTube. They can be seen, copied, and redistributed by millions, if not billions, even if Disney eventually monetizes those videos, or forces Google to take them down.

The neoliberal state and its competing hegemonic blocs have therefore partially ceded the ideological work of the mass media to fiercely competing ideoscapes, often funded by wealthy donors (cf. Robert Mercer) with little interest in a functioning public sphere: this is facilitated by an absolutely mercenary media who find the ideology (or veracity) of their content irrelevant as long as they can monetize the interactions around it on their platforms. In this conjuncture, Cultural Studies must reconsider—and reconstitute—its understanding of how hegemony functions and the role that the (transformed) culture industries play in maintaining it.

As I suggested at the start of this essay, the very idea of cultural hegemony is challenged by the mercurial, distributed, algorithmically refracted social media environment. In effect, media hegemony is no longer constituted through the editorial decisions and institutional heft of the culture industries; for even those legacy media producers, hegemony is just another word for search engine optimization. There is no longer a true center other than the bloc that holds actual state power. To make matters worse, the contest over who holds this power is itself now refracted through this sensationalistic and fragmented media environment.

On the other hand, there are plenty of noteworthy successes we can notch in this regard. Movements like Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and March for Our Lives are just a few examples of activists having developed an effective counter-hegemonic apparatus—and, to some extent, a more enlightened public, more reflexively conditioned to be accepting of criticism of white supremacist, heteropatriarchy, and, to some extent, capitalism itself. Of course, as many on both the right and the left have pointed out, many multinational U.S. corporations have embraced these movements in an attempt to stem their more fundamental critiques of the American social formation—leading the right to bemoan the problem of “Woke Capital” and the Left to argue that this makes so-called “wokeness” a merely performative marketing strategy.²⁶

²⁶ Ross Douthat, “The Rise of Woke Capital,” *The New York Times*, February 28, 2018, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/28/opinion/corporate-america-activism.html>.

It may be performative, but a performance always assumes—and to a certain extent prefigures—an audience. So this suggests that there is some general, if uncomfortable, accord with this position. I think it is worth considering the possibility that these movements have a common focus, which simultaneously suggests not only a shift in the terrain of the hegemonic struggle, but a shift in the nature of this hegemony itself. While the discussion of these movements is often framed in terms of a continuation of the “culture wars,” this is especially a perception of those interested in defending what Williams might call a residual—if not archaic—culture, alive mostly in the imagination rather than reality. The ideology of the American Dream that lies at the center of “Make America Great Again” has not been a concrete reality for decades, if it ever was. We now live in an economic moment when precarity reigns, dissipating the ideological effect of the economy that existed during that Fordist exception. In this sense, the state apparatuses of ideology barely function absent the repressive ones, and culture wars look increasingly like street fights rather than rational-critical debate. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore recently put it at the Socialism 2022 Conference in Chicago, “In the United States today, and a good deal of the world, to go back to Gramsci, I’m not altogether sure there is any hegemonic anything: all there is is domination.”²⁷

The repressive, coercive apparatuses are now revealed as the main tools of hegemony, including those of economic repression, with eviction and debt servitude as key sites of discipline and struggle - even as heightened social media attention to policing makes this repression even less legitimate. Moratoriums on evictions and debt servicing, along with other measures temporarily in place during COVID lockdowns as a means of “making us all safe” helped to highlight—and delegitimize—this model of hegemony. In this sense, the struggles at hand are not cultural, but over whose basic safety continues to be jeopardized by the repressive apparatus. These are not marginal concerns. Indeed, we see a society that is still fighting within itself over whether and where it can guarantee the safety of women, trans people, people of color, young people, and those who are immunocompromised or otherwise differently abled.

The movements advancing those rights, those protections, are demanding what I call a rearticulation of hegemonic safe space. Thinking of this in terms of safety and care accords with the recent reinvigoration of the theoretical paradigm of social reproduction, in part in response to these movements. The recently published *Care Manifesto* and a series of other pamphlets, special issues, and organizations in essence fold the earlier “triple movement” for emancipation and recognition, back into the

²⁷ Daniel Denvir, “Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Robin Kelley, and Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò,” *The Dig*, accessed November 30, 2022, <https://thedigradio.com/podcast/ruth-wilson-gilmore-robin-kelley-and-olufemi-taiwo/>.

“double movement” for social protection—in effect, calling for not only the “equal-opportunity domination” of neoliberal identity politics, but for an end to the brutality and carelessness of neoliberal capitalism itself.²⁸

Those currently sheltered by that safe space—especially white, able, cis, hetero males like myself—should support this rearticulation not only because it is the right thing to do, but because to work against it is to implicitly admit that you aren’t concerned about the distinct possibility that your own safety and success in life is somehow bought in exchange for the continued threats and repression of others. Indeed, through the lens of care, it is hard to argue that, while some of us may be better off in this system, very few are actually cared for in any real sense.

The role of media and communication remains central to this shift—as it has been to each of these others. But the contemporary technological affordances of “the media” make it more likely than ever that those previously seen as abject are given a voice (including, evidently, white nationalist men’s rights advocates). This shifts the site of hegemony more to the ideas and values themselves. And of these values, an ethic of equity, care, and repair is not only most defensible, it has material implications for dismantling both the stratified hierarchies that persist and the very system of neoliberal capitalism itself. Would we not all be better off if, in the words of comedian and activist Lindy West, we erred on the side of care?²⁹ And by this I mean care for each other, not care for the latest clickbait headline. At a time when the repressive apparatuses of the state seem to be the main means of hegemony, we need to highlight care as the means and focus of our counter-hegemonic struggle.

²⁸ The Care Collective et al., *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (London: Verso, 2020); Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, “Notes for a Feminist Manifesto,” *New Left Review* no. 114 (November/December 2018): 113–34.

²⁹ Lindy West, *The Witches Are Coming* (New York: Hachette, 2019).

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