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Devin Bales  
*Portland State University*

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# Gramsci, Dugger and Hegemony

## Working Paper No. 14

**Authored by:** Devin Bales

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**Abstract:** This inquiry seeks to establish connections between William Dugger’s understanding of subreption leading to corporate hegemony with Antonio Gramsci’s understanding of power and the *hegemon*. Specifically, this inquiry examines the similarities between both authors’ descriptions and understandings of power in a civil society. Going further, I draw parallels between Gramsci’s description of ‘passive revolution’ as a key process for achieving hegemony and Dugger’s explanation of the role ‘subreption’ plays in the rise of corporate hegemony in the United States. Finally, this inquiry explores connections between Gramsci’s writings on ‘Americanism’ and Dugger’s research into ‘corporate hegemony’. While Dugger does not cite Gramsci, the parallels in their ideas suggest that likely Dugger has read Gramsci and draws from key ideas that he advanced.

***Journal of Economic Literature* Classification Codes:** B24, B31, B51

**Key Words:** William Dugger, Antonio Gramsci, Hegemony,  
Passive Revolution, Subreption

This inquiry seeks to establish connections between William Dugger's understanding of subreption leading to corporate hegemony with Antonio Gramsci's understanding of power and the hegemon. Gramsci, a prominent Italian Marxist thinker and politician in the early to mid-twentieth century, wrote frequently about the role of power in economic and social systems. While incarcerated by Mussolini's fascist regime, Gramsci formalized his ideas about power in society, placing great emphasis on clarifying the term "hegemony," the social and ideological control of one group over another via power. Contemporary scholar, and self-proclaimed anarchist, William Dugger also writes of the role that power plays in economic and social systems, and explains how subreption acts as the primary tool corporations employ to leverage power into corporate hegemony. While never referencing Gramsci directly, Dugger appears to draw heavily from his ideas; specifically, in his 1980 and 1988 papers in which corporate hegemony is the primary focus. While Dugger's connection to radical institutionalism is clear, this inquiry looks to highlight how his ideas surrounding power in society parallel those of Antonio Gramsci.

### **Gramsci, Power and Hegemony**

Gramsci's ideas concerning power in relation to political and civil society are unparalleled. He was an active scholar and politician from 1920 until his death

in 1937. Influenced heavily by Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin, Gramsci extended ideas about power between classes by clarifying the notion of hegemony—the domination of one or more classes by a single, leading class—and explaining how bourgeoisie hegemony was reproduced through culture. He stresses that the hegemonic class must control the intellectual value system of the society, and that more often than not, this is achieved through coercion rather than force. While he writes most often about hegemony in the context of Italy, he extends his scope to other parts of Europe and the United States, discussing the nuance he observes in various contexts. This inquiry focuses on Gramsci’s more general conception of hegemony, but will discuss his specific comments on American Coporatism as they overlap, in context, with Dugger, who writes about corporate hegemony in the United States. To understand the process through which power becomes hegemony, we first explore Gramsci’s description of hegemony.

Gramsci describes hegemony as a situation in which one group exerts its unquestioned power over other groups in both spheres of society. In describing society, Gramsci (1971, 12) describes two superstructural levels, “civil society”—all organizations typically thought of as private, those that shape culture and values—and “political society” or “the State.” Civil society includes intellectuals, the educational apparatus, trade unions, media and other institutions that shape the thoughts and beliefs of a society, while the State is the governing body which rules

via direct domination. Gramsci (1971, 12) contrasts direct domination—governing bodies wielding power by forcing people to act in a certain manner—in political society with hegemony in civil society: he suggests that for one group to exert full and stable dominance over other subaltern groups, they must control the values and ideas of civil society. Hegemony suggests stability. Leading groups that pursue only direct domination can achieve unstable power at most, but those who leverage power to control civil society can become a hegemon.

Gramsci believes the leading role of the dominant class must include control over ideology and consciousness: the leading class must dominate cultural, ideological, and intellectual life. Writing about the role of the Italian bourgeoisie—the contemporary hegemon—and what other social groups, like the proletarians, could do to counter hegemonic power, Gramsci describes the role of intellectuals, educators and leaders of other prominent institutions in the maintenance of hegemony. Gramsci (1971, 12, 102) explains how the leading class deputizes their intellectuals who rationalize and naturalize philosophies. Intellectuals, those thought to be on the forefront of developing and spreading ideas, and other leaders in civil society set or reset the status quo. These ideas are disseminated and replicated by educators, whom Gramsci (1971, 350) does not limit to those acting in a “scholastic” role, but loosely defined as any person, group or institution passing ideas and values from one generation to the next. Going further, Gramsci

(1971, 338, 255) invokes actors like the catholic clergy in eighteenth century Italy, and corporations in the United States and Europe in the early 1900's. In their time, both played roles in perpetuating the values of dominant groups over the subaltern. By leveraging power to control civil society, hegemonic actors convince subaltern groups to willingly participate in the societal structure, despite it being against their best interest.

Gramsci explains that through control of ideology, hegemonic groups manufacture consent among subaltern groups. By dictating what civil society deems as important, a leading group need not rule by force, but through constant reinforcement of their value system. Additionally, leading groups often concede just enough power to keep subaltern groups convinced that they control the ideas and values of society. Pulling from the marxist idea of false consciousness, Gramsci (1971, 247) writes that hegemonic groups convince subaltern groups that they are in charge. They concede just enough power to allow subaltern groups to think they are free, and in control of the system when, in reality, subaltern groups participate in and perpetuate the reality created by the hegemon. In effect, the subaltern groups are willing, though unaware, participants in hegemony. While Gramsci (1971, 120) describes this process as coercive, he suggests coercion in the long-term, not the short. In the immediate, subaltern actors participate willingly, but are coerced into believing they are in control. This distinction is important, as

Gramsci stresses that the stability that defines hegemony necessitates the belief by the subaltern classes that they control their actions. While the term coercion implies immediate deceit, the Gramscian coercion occurs via the long run dissemination of ideas and values. Ultimately, the ideology of the hegemonic class permeates both civil society and political society.

While Gramsci makes a distinction between the way power is exerted in political society, through direct dominance, and the way it is exerted in civil society, through long term cultural coercion, he makes it clear that in hegemony, the control of civil society seeps into control of the State, not vice versa.

Hegemony implies control of civil and political society. In order for a leading class to exert power and maintain its stability the values of the leading group must be the dominant values. Sometimes groups exert direct domination, but fail to maintain their position because they lack control of civil society. Other times, a group's values dominate civil society via organic intellectuals—those who become deputies independent of a clear political force—before they come to political power. Occasionally, this remains unclear until after the leading group takes command of political society. The latter situation is described by Gramsci (1971, 106) as “passive revolution.” To illustrate both cases, Gramsci (1971, 112-114) uses a variety of examples; he cites the short lived 1849 Roman Republic to demonstrate the lack of staying power direct dominance holds, and the Italian

Risorgimento to show how controlling civil society leads to longer periods of control. The former, leveraged their power for only four months while the latter led to the unification of Italy. In the Risorgimento, ideas were thoroughly disseminated and became the common values, eventually leading to control of political society. While Gramsci discusses a plethora of situations in his *Prison Notebooks*, he dedicates multiple essays to Americanism. As Dugger's work on corporate hegemony is specifically American, and this inquiry seeks to draw parallels between Gramsci and Dugger, Gramsci's writings on Americanism are given particular attention.

Writing on "Americanism," sometime between 1929 and 1935, Gramsci suggests that the question of hegemony has yet to arise in the United States, and hints that the American means of production may be a candidate for future hegemony. First, Gramsci (1971, 281) explains that the United States' relative youth as a nation—compared to European nations—allows it to be free from lingering ideas about class. He implies that the relative equality among the classes in the United States is taken for granted by American scholars, and that the notion of natural equality, where no class can completely exploit another via the economic structure, has allowed for scholars to avoid focusing on power. However, Gramsci (1971, 285) noticed power structures developing, and goes on to say of the United States, "Hegemony here is born in the factory and requires for its exercise only a

minute quantity of professional, political and ideological intermediaries.” In other words, Gramsci posits that, in the 1930’s, the American machine process had planted its ideological roots in civil society and was headed toward hegemony. While this One of the first American economists to focus on the role of power in the United States economy is William Dugger.

### **Dugger, Subreption, Power and Corporate Hegemony**

Throughout the 1980’s, contemporary anarchist and radical institutionalist, William Dugger focused his scholarship on explaining power’s central, though often unnoticed, role in American institutional structures. Specifically, Dugger’s (1980) and (1988) papers on the rise and institutional dominance of a few large corporations explore the role subreption plays in allowing the corporations to amass power unfettered. In these papers, Dugger explains how subreption—the covert process through which the values and structures of one institution become those of another—allows corporate ideals to control economic and social life. Before explaining, Dugger provides readers with intuitive definitions of potentially unfamiliar yet important terms.

Dugger’s working definition of power includes assumptions about the position of the power holder and those subject to the power: his definition of power comes with subtext. Dugger (1980, 897) clearly defines power as, “The ability to

tell others what to do with some level of certainty that they will listen.” Beyond this simple definition, Dugger (1980, 898) adds that power tends to be more secure when those subject to power need not be coerced in order to follow. If group A holds power over group B, group A holds some level of certainty that they can control group B, but the level of certainty held by group A depends heavily on the amount of coercion necessary in order for group B to follow orders. While human intuition might suggest a natural resistance to subjugation, Dugger argues that submission to power often occurs without the subject’s knowledge. This ignorance makes power more secure. Dugger explains the key vehicle through which this situation manifests as subreption.

According to Dugger, subreption acts as the primary means through which business interests began and continue to dominate the interests of other institutions. Dugger (1980, 901) provides both a legal and working definition, explaining subreption as the process through which the values of a dominant group, in this case an institution, coercively ooze into and ultimately become the values of another. With subreption, the less powerful group is unaware of the takeover, as it typically occurs gradually. The following analogy looks to illustrate subreption.

Consider a ship with a crew of one-hundred whisky drinking sailors on a ten-year voyage. After two years, the ship comes in contact with an adversarial vessel. The adversarial sailors drink rum. During the encounter one of the rum

drinkers makes their way onto the whisky ship, but in fear for their life, changes into clothes to match the whisky drinkers. Eventually, the cunning rum drinker—with a vested interest in converting the crew to their preferred drink—begins to discuss the potential benefits of other spirits, like rum. Slowly, other crew members open up to the idea of rum instead of whisky. At their next stop, the rum loving sailor brings rum on board and shares. Eventually, rum becomes the most discussed topic on the ship, and more whisky sailors convert. At the end of the ten years, our original ship is filled with one-hundred-one rum drinking sailors. This example highlights Dugger's understanding of subreption. If the rum drinking sailor would have blatantly coerced others to drink rum, their power would be less certain as their intentions were apparent. But, because the rum drinker gained control of the culture, whisky sailors converted to rum willingly, thinking they were in control.

Dugger's writing on subreption focuses on how large corporations employed subreption to dominate other institutions like education, government and the family. Discussing how corporations came to dominate multiple other American Institutions, Dugger (1980, 901) explains that through subreption corporations amassed power with little opposition. Corporate deception was not necessary. Instead, business missionaries—those who were indoctrinated by business and then went to work in other institutions—made their way into positions of power in other

institutions and implemented means to serve business ends. Universities began to teach business skills and governments passed laws to benefit big corporations, and almost no one noticed. Little resistance occurred and business power grew increasingly secure.

Dugger observes that in the United States, business, certain of its power, has become an institutional hegemon. Going further, Dugger (1980, 901) (1988) writes specifically about the dominance of corporate hegemony. He provides no definition for corporate hegemony. However, he invokes two key ideas when describing the hegemon. First, hegemony dominates all other groups and seeks increasing control. Dugger (1988, 79) notes that the U.S. economy is being dominated by one institution—big corporations—and that the corporations look to build more power. Today, Dugger’s explanation of hegemony is on display with the dominance of big corporations and a growing business school industrial complex. The second key point about Dugger’s use of hegemony is his description of nearly ubiquitous ignorant submission to the hegemon. Corporate ideals dominate and pervade to the extent that institutions and individuals, receiving occasional small victories in personal pecuniary gain, willingly participate in allowing corporate hegemony to grow more secure.

## **Gramsci's Influence in Dugger's Thinking**

Dugger's understanding of power, hegemony and the process through which actors achieve hegemony appear to closely parallel Gramsci's. First, they both describe power in relational terms, the position of one group over another, and note that power can be leveraged in two fashions, directly or coercively. Second, both invoke the notion of hegemony, complete dominance of one group over all other groups. Gramsci writes most extensively on eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century bourgeoisie hegemony in Italy while Dugger writes about corporate hegemony in the United States during the 1980's and beyond. However, both explain the idea of hegemony in a similar fashion, focusing on the importance of controlling culture and ideology for a hegemon. Third, both describe the process leading to hegemony as indirect. By controlling the ideology and culture, the leading group creates a situation that convinces subaltern groups to follow without pushback. Gramsci explains this idea through passive revolution while Dugger invokes subreption. These three parallels suggest that Dugger likely draws from Gramsci.

Dugger and Gramsci understand power similarly. Specifically, they both explain power as the ability to control the actions of others. Gramsci (1971, 27, 112, 208) prefers the term, "control" to convey this ability, while Dugger (1980, 897) explicitly defines power as the ability of one actor to tell another actor what to

do with a high level of certainty they will oblige. While the terminology differs, the idea is the same. Power is about position. One group or institution's position above another in society. Additionally, both make clear distinctions between direct exertion of power through force and leveraging power through civil society. Again, they use different terminology to communicate similar ideas. Gramsci suggests that the hegemon leverages its power through long term coercion in civil society, while Dugger states that big corporations wedged their ideas into other institutions with almost no coercion. This may appear to suggest unaligned understanding of the role coercion plays in achieving hegemony. However, they simply write from different perspectives. Both explain that the coercion is in the long run. Subaltern groups are coerced over time, through the dissemination of ideas that become the status quo. Eventually, power is secure to the point where coercion in the moment is unnecessary. In explaining the process, both stress the importance of controlling values, ideology and culture.

Dugger uses the Gramscian notion of hegemony. Gramsci clarified the term, and Dugger uses it to explain the role of the large corporation in American life. Dugger's use hegemony does not itself imply a parallel to Gramsci, as many used the term between Gramsci's passing in 1937 and Dugger's publication in 1980. What does imply the connection is Dugger's focus on the importance of cultural and ideological control for the leading group. Like Gramsci, Dugger describes that

by controlling the prominent ideas of society, a leading group can establish and maintain hegemony with almost no pushback from those under control. When a group is the hegemon, the level of certainty that their ideas are the accepted ideas of civil society is almost, if not, absolute. This certainty defines hegemony for both Gramsci and Dugger. Recognizing the importance of exerting indirect power for the hegemon, Gramsci and Dugger both take particular care in explaining how hegemony is achieved.

Both Gramsci and Dugger explain how the gradual and covert rise and dissemination of a group's values and ideology lead to hegemony. Gramsci (1971, 3, 106) uses the ideas of "organic intellectuals" and "passive revolution" to explain how a set of ideas emerges, spreads and is then widely accepted. Gramsci explains the process from two perspectives, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat: he provides examples of how a contemporary hegemon came to power and explains what another group would need to do in order to become a new hegemon or act as a counter hegemonic power. In both, the fundamentals are the same. Organic intellectuals, derive and flesh out ideas. These intellectuals need not be intellectuals in the technical sense, they come from all walks of life. They spread ideas through civil society, and are not necessarily directly connected to one another. This constitutes passive revolution. New ideas can and do form and spread throughout a society without a directive from party leaders. However, Gramsci

(1971, 114) makes it clear that if a group is connected as they develop and disseminate ideas, their rise may come about more quickly. Dugger, invokes the Gramscian idea of passive revolution in practice but not in purpose when describing the rise of the large company in the United States.

Dugger explains why institutions would submit to subjugation by large corporations with subreption, passing something off with concealment of the truth. In Dugger's (1980, 902-903) explanation businessmen who became leaders in non-business institutions—the church, the academy and the family—act as the deputies, infusing large corporate ideals into other institutions. Over time, those ideals changed the fundamental values of the infected institutions. The ideology of large corporations was subrepted into churches and schools, and thus as large corporations amassed more power, churches and schools aided, not resisted.

In explaining the process to achieve hegemony, Dugger's subreption parallels Gramsci's passive revolution. Both explain the rise to hegemony as a gradual process where thinkers from a leading group spread their ideas wide and deep enough to become the conventional wisdom. This explanation is pertinent, as the certainty of a group's power is central to the notion of hegemony. The most effective way to achieve such certainty is to control the civil society before the political. Both authors describe the process in the same way. Gramsci refers to passive revolution while Dugger uses subreption. If the leading party's values are

civil society's core values, then hegemony will receive little resistance from sub groups or institutions. While their terminology differs, both highlight the fundamental importance of first establishing control in civil society, through developing and ingraining ideas and values, for the hegemon.

Lastly, Dugger appears to address the gap in American literature Gramsci points out in his essays on Americanism. Written in the early 1930's, Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* were not translated to English until 1971. Writing on the United States, Gramsci (1971 285-287) explains that the relatively brief history and less class-based society of the United States allowed American scholars to avoid the question of hegemony. He sees this as an omission, eventually pointing to the American production system as a potential hegemon. Dugger's 1980 and 1988 papers address exactly what Gramsci suggests is missing, and even build on the brief ideas Gramsci shared decades earlier. By focusing on power and identifying the large corporation as an institutional hegemon, Dugger appears to take a Gramscian perspective and build on Gramscian ideas.

## **Conclusion**

This inquiry has sought to establish clear connection between William Dugger's understanding of subreption leading to corporate hegemony with Antonio Gramsci's understanding of power and the hegemon. Dugger's description of

hegemony closely parallels Gramsci's well-developed notion of hegemony. Specifically, Dugger's explanation of subreption as the leading force in the establishment of corporate hegemony is similar to the Gramscian idea of passive revolution, the idea that a hegemon, through control of culture and ideology in a society, creates a system that convince subaltern groups to willingly participate. Additionally, Gramsci's brief but premonitory comments on Americanism appear to act as a starting point for Dugger's papers on corporate hegemony. Although Dugger has yet to directly cite Gramsci, the parallels in their ideas suggest that he has read and draws heavily from Gramsci.

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