The Problem of Hegemony: Rereading Gramsci for Organizational Communication Studies

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The purpose of this essay is to reread the concept of hegemony "against the grain" of interpretations currently dominant in communication studies generally, and in critical organizational communication studies specifically. I argue that the received reading of hegemony as domination through consent has lead to a bifurcation of critical studies into two models of power: a) a dominance model, in which relations of power and resistance are conceptually resolved in favor of the reaffirmation of the status quo; and b) a resistance model, where resistance to structures of domination is valorized in a largely uncritical manner. I attempt to resolve this dichotomy by suggesting that the concept of hegemony be reread within Gramsci's larger philosophy of praxis. Such a move, I claim, enables critical scholars to reclaim the dialectical underpinnings of the Gramscian framework, and to recognize the mutually implicative relations amongst communication, power, and resistance.

One of the principal contributions of critical communication studies to our understanding of human behavior is the exploration of the complex relations amongst communication, power, and the social construction of reality. Central to much of this work has been the deployment of the concept of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) as a means to understand the processes through which certain conceptions of reality come to hold sway over competing worldviews. Scholars in various subdisciplines within our field, including mass communication (Dow, 1990; Gitlin, 1982; Trujillo, 1991), rhetoric (Makus, 1990; Strine, 1991; Tompkins, 1985; Zompetti, 1997), and organizational communication (Clair, 1993b, 1994; Conrad, 1988; Deetz, 1992; Helmer, 1993), have developed rich and nuanced understandings of communication as central to the processes through which social actors and institutions...
develop competing definitions of the world. Such political readings of communication processes have produced analyses of power as a central, constitutive feature of social life.

In the field of organizational communication studies, the concept of hegemony has been important in extending the insights of the “interpretive turn” (Pacanowsky & O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1982; Putnam, 1983; Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983) and its concern with the processes through which organization members create structures of meaning. In this context, “hegemony” is a term used to demonstrate that organizational realities are neither imposed coercively on people, nor emerge spontaneously and consensually as a result of equal participation in the meaning-making process. Rather, hegemony is conceptualized as noncoercive relations of domination in which subordinated groups actively consent to and support belief systems and structures of power relations that do not necessarily serve—indeed, may work against—those groups’ interests (Burawoy, 1979; Deetz & Mumby, 1985, 1990; Mumby, 1987, 1988; Rosen, 1985, 1988). Critical organizational communication scholars have shown how these “structures in dominance” exist not simply ideationally, but through the communicative constitution of quotidian, taken-for-granted realities.

In this paper I want to extend our understanding of the concept of hegemony by arguing for its broader application to the field of organizational communication. I suggest that in communication studies generally, and in organizational communication specifically, hegemony has been appropriated mostly in a way that limits its heurism for studying issues of power and communication. In particular, I argue that the equation of hegemony with the notion of “domination through consent” elides the extent to which Gramsci’s formulation is dialectical, emphasizing a complex interplay between power and resistance. As such, the principal goal of this paper is to reread the concept of hegemony by situating it within the larger framework of Gramsci’s “philosophy of praxis,” thus reclaiming an enriched understanding of power dynamics for organizational communication studies.

My argument will develop as follows: First, I provide briefly a rationale for my particular interpretation of Gramsci. Second, I reread the concept of hegemony by contextualizing it within Gramsci’s larger philosophical framework. Here, my goal is not to provide a more “accurate” or “correct” reading than others in our field, but rather to suggest the possibilities that emerge when a broader framework is adopted. Third, I briefly review and critique existing theory and research in communication studies that draws on the concept of hegemony. Finally, I suggest how this rereading might influence critical organizational communication studies, particularly in the light of recent developments in postmodern theory (De Certeau, 1984; Foucault, 1979; Hassard & Parker, 1993).
Situating Gramsci Within My Interpretive Frame

There is little that can be said with a great degree of certainty about Gramsci and his work. There are, however, some well-documented historical facts (Hoare & Nowell Smith, 1971). As is well known, his most important and influential work was written while he was a prisoner in Mussolini's fascist jails. Between his imprisonment in 1928 and his death in 1937 (seven days after his official "release" date) Gramsci compiled thirty three "quaderni," or notebooks, addressing subjects as diverse as Italian history and politics, the education system, the role of the intellectual, philosophy, the Italian Communist Party, the American industrial context, and myriad other issues. His work is dense, fragmented, redundant, and often internally contradictory (Anderson, 1976; Bocock, 1986). Furthermore, making sense of Gramsci is complicated by an elliptical writing style intended to preserve his radical writings from the prison censor. Thus, Marx becomes "the philosopher of praxis," Lenin is "llitch," Trotsky is "Bronstein," and Marxism is "the philosophy of praxis." If one adds to this the fact that Gramsci, largely denied access to Marxist texts, relied heavily on commentaries and periodicals of the day (Hoare & Nowell Smith, 1971, p. xc), then the difficulty in interpreting his work is compounded.

Given this hermeneutic context, one can never claim to be providing a definitive interpretation of Gramsci's writings. All readings must, inevitably, struggle with and mirror the partial and fragmentary character of his work. My own reading is no different. However, one way to engender a—perhaps illusory—degree of coherence is to provide the reader with, as one reviewer of this essay put it, "the rationale for, domain of, and limits to [my] own interpretations."

As a critical theorist of organizational communication, I am interested in theorizing the relationships among communication, power, and organization. Of central concern to me are the communicative processes through which social actors variously identify with, resist, and transform the systems of meaning that structure their experiences of the world. In this sense, I view organizations as principal sites of meaning and identity formation where relations of autonomy and dependence, power and resistance, are continuously negotiated amongst competing interest groups. As such, I am constructing a particular reading of Gramsci, focusing on the possibilities that his concept of hegemony provides for revitalizing the relationship between power and resistance.

More specifically, I explore the concept of hegemony as a way of developing a greater rapprochement between two currently disparate bodies of literature: a) critical research—undergirded by a neo-Marxist dominance model—which argues that organizations are sites of domination, in which moments of resistance are inevitably appropriated by the dominant ideology (Buraow, 1979; Rosen, 1985); and, b) research—
influenced by a postmodern/resistance model—which celebrates resistance rather uncritically, and at the expense of appropriately situating such resistance in the wider context of capitalism and patriarchy (Bell & Forbes, 1994). While both perspectives examine critically the dynamics of organizational power, each approaches those dynamics in a mutually incompatible manner.

My reading of hegemony is an interested and political one that attempts to remain consistent with Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis and its moral-political intent. Gramsci’s interest lay in social transformation and emancipation of people from the oppression of capitalist relations of production. In this context, he viewed the “organic intellectual” (1971, p. 6) as playing a central, organizing role in this process of emancipation through the critique of existing structures of power. In contradistinction to the “traditional intellectual” who occupies an elite position and has a vested interest in the reproduction of the status quo, the organic intellectual is concerned with the everyday connections between theory and practice that enable people to think in self-reflexive and critical ways. As Zompetti (1997) suggests, such a conception involves a telos in which critique is the first step in the move toward social change. My standpoint in this essay is less that of the disinterested traditional intellectual, and more that of the political motivated, critically inclined, organic intellectual who is interested in articulating possibilities for critique and change.

I therefore interpret the concept of hegemony within the larger framework of Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis in order to illuminate one way in which critical researchers might more effectively engage with the dialectical character of organizational life. In this sense, I see the notion of hegemony as embodying simultaneously (and in a tension-filled and contradictory manner) the dynamic of power and resistance. The concept of hegemony provides a way to read organizational communication processes and to argue that there is no simple dichotomous correspondence model that allows one to interpret communication processes as expressions of either power/domination or resistance. It is precisely in the struggle between various groups over interpretive possibilities and what gets to count as meaningful that the hegemonic dialectic of power and resistance gets played out. I am interested in providing critical researchers with a more nuanced way of recovering and examining this dialectic. In order to achieve this, I turn to a wider discussion of Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis.

Gramsci’s Philosophy of Praxis

While reading Gramsci it is helpful to keep in mind that he was a Marxist revolutionary. His intellectual project is directed always toward the overthrow of capitalism as an ideological, political, and
economic system, and to the realization of a socialist society (see especially, Gramsci, 1971, pp. 125–205). However, within this context he develops a philosophical and theoretical framework that runs counter to the often mechanical formulations of some Marxist theorists, who posit a deterministic relationship between the economic base and socio-political superstructure of capitalism (Bottomore, 1983, pp. 143–144). Gramsci’s work, then, is oriented toward and engaged with contemporary philosophical issues and political exigencies, and always recognizes the necessity of contextualizing Marxist thought historically. His writings clearly develop Marxism not as a transcendental, trans-historical body of immutable principles, but rather as a philosophy of praxis that must be explicated and applied to current material conditions. Gramsci’s philosophy is thus one of “absolute historicism” in that it is time-bound and subject to alteration and eventual dispersal:

Even the philosophy of praxis is an expression of historical contradictions, and indeed their most complete, because most conscious, expression; this means that it too is tied to “necessity” and not to a “freedom” which does not exist and, historically, cannot yet exist. If, therefore, it is demonstrated that contradictions will disappear, it is also demonstrated implicitly that the philosophy of praxis too will disappear, or be superseded. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 405)

Gramsci’s heavy emphasis on the role of theory—as embodied in his philosophy of praxis—is a critical element in his explication of the concept of hegemony and in his effort to articulate the process by which social actors are able to develop a critical consciousness of its processes. In the next section, I describe how hegemony is contextualized within this larger philosophy in order to develop a more dialectical conception of hegemony, principally through linking it to other concepts in Gramsci’s philosophical model.

**Contextualizing Gramsci’s Notion of Hegemony**

Gramsci develops the concept of hegemony as the means by which to critique and transcend crude, dogmatic versions of Marxism which rely almost exclusively on economic models of class struggle. The latter equate freedom with changes in the ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange. Gramsci, on the other hand, situates the economic as simply one element in a dialectical, materialist model that emphasizes Marxism not as a scientific tool of analysis, but as a whole new ethical-political philosophy. In this context, the concept of hegemony resides at the nexus of his thought. Early in *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci situates hegemony in the following manner:

What we can do, for the moment, is to fix two major superstructural “levels”: the one that can be called “civil society,” that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called “private,” and that of “political society” or “the State.” These two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of “hegemony” which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of “direct domination” or command exercised through the state and juridical government. (1971, p. 12)
In this context hegemony is defined as:

The "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is "historically" caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. (1971, p. 12)

Here we have two elements of Gramsci's model. First, the separation of civil society and political society/the State. The former consists of those institutions such as religion, the mass media, the education system, the family, and so forth, that function largely on the terrain of ideology, shaping experiences and worldviews. The latter—political society, or the State—functions mainly as a system of coercion and consists of the police, the army, and the judicial apparatus, which enforce a system of beliefs at the point at which "spontaneous" consent fails. These two passages also indicate that hegemony resides primarily in the realm of civil society (although it can be exercised also by the State). Defined elsewhere by Gramsci as involving "intellectual and moral reform" by the dominant groups (1971, p. 133), hegemony involves the production of a worldview, inclusive of a philosophical and moral outlook, that is actively supported and articulated by subordinate and allied groups.¹

The concept of hegemony does not operate in Gramsci's philosophy in a pejorative fashion. Rather, it is a descriptive term (or, when speaking of the hegemony of the working class, a positive term) that functions as a means to explain how a particular group comes to exercise intellectual and moral leadership over other groups. It is true that Gramsci spends much of Prison Notebooks addressing the means by which bourgeois thought and political structures function hegemonically (see, e.g., 1971, pp. 279–318), but he is also heavily concerned with articulating the other side of the dialectic; that is, with explaining the means by which the "reign of freedom" (socialism) may be realized.

However, a pejorative, undialectical reading of hegemony has been dominant in communication studies generally, and in critical organization studies specifically. This has led, I suggest, to an overemphasis on issues of domination (even if such domination is read as consensually derived and noncoercive) with a corresponding neglect of resistance and transformation as the dialectical "other" of the exercise of relations of power and domination. Indeed, in addressing Gramsci's appropriation by social theory generally, Stuart Hall complains: "I see Gramscian concepts directly substituted for some of the very things we went to Gramsci to avoid. People talk about 'hegemony' for instance as the equivalent of ideological domination. I have tried to fight against that interpretation of 'hegemony' for twenty years" (Grossberg, 1986, p. 59).

Certainly, critical organization studies is replete with studies (both theoretical and empirical) that emphasize ideological systems of domination in which capitalist relations of production are continually...
reproduced (Barker, 1993; Burawoy, 1979; Helmer, 1993; Huspek & Kendall, 1991; Rosen, 1985, 1988). For the most part, the possibilities for resistance are minimized or—where they are discussed—are framed as ultimately functioning to reproduce the prevailing set of hegemonic relations.

For example, Burawoy’s (1979) critical ethnography of a machine tool plant takes as its starting point Gramsci’s discussion of Fordist relations of production in the United States in which the latter states that “hegemony here is born in the factory” (1971, p. 285). Burawoy attempts—in a reversal of the usual managerial question—to ascertain why “workers work as hard as they do.” His answer is that workers engage in a highly elaborate game of “making out” that functions as a set of constitutive behavioral rules for the workplace. While ostensibly the game is made sense of by workers as a way to defeat official managerial production policies that limit workers’ abilities to maximize pay, Burawoy’s analysis suggests that, paradoxically, this same game functions as the principal means by which capitalist relations of production are produced and reproduced. What initially appears as an act of resistance on the part of workers is shown to reproduce the “dominant hegemony.” While Burawoy’s study represents one of the few attempts to systematically apply Gramsci’s concept of hegemony to an organizational context, his analysis is oddly undialectical and pays little attention to the multiple, contested, and shifting dimensions of organizational power relations. Indeed, as Collinson (1992, 1994) and others have pointed out, despite the fact that Burawoy sets out to provide an account of workers’ consciousness as it is produced at the point of production, he actually has no theory of subjectivity per se (Jermier, Knights, & Nord, 1994; Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994).

If, as Hall suggests, readings such as Burawoy’s do not reflect accurately Gramsci’s notion of the dialectic between resistance and consensual domination, it is important to re-read Gramsci’s articulation of the process through which political struggle is carried out. In making the case for an ideological “war of position” rather than a confrontational “war of maneuver” against bourgeois hegemony, Gramsci argues that “All men [sic] are intellectuals . . . but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals” (1971, p. 9). Later, in discussing the function of philosophy in contemporary society, he argues for the need to show that “all men [sic] are ‘philosophers,’ by defining the limits and characteristics of the ‘spontaneous philosophy’ which is proper to everybody” (1971, p. 323). Here, Gramsci is suggesting the initial starting point for the means by which subordinate groups are able to articulate a coherent worldview which is an alternative to the dominance of capitalism. But how is this alternative brought to fruition?

Gramsci contrasts this spontaneous, everyday philosophy with his philosophy of praxis, arguing that “philosophy is criticism and the superseding of religion and ‘common sense.’ In this sense it coincides
with 'good' as opposed to 'common' sense" (1971, p. 326). For Gramsci, then, philosophy is inseparable from politics in that its primary aim is to bring individuals to a political awareness of their circumstances. Such awareness goes beyond common sense understandings of the world, and resides in the ability to demystify, critique, and act against hegemonic systems of meaning and power. The philosophy of praxis thus entails a critical understanding of self that permits a recognition of one's connection to others, both conceptually and materially:

Consciousness of being part of a particular hegemonic force (that is to say, political consciousness) is the first stage towards a further progressive self-consciousness in which theory and practice will finally be one. Thus the unity of theory and practice is not just a matter of mechanical fact, but a part of the historical process... This is why it must be stressed that the political development of the concept of hegemony represents a great philosophical advance as well as a politico-practical one. For it necessarily supposes an intellectual unity and an ethic in conformity with a conception of reality that has gone beyond common sense and has become... a critical conception. (1971, pp. 333–334)

The philosophy of praxis therefore challenges simultaneously the notion of philosophy as simply the realm of ideas (in this sense, for Gramsci “philosophy in general does not... exist” [1971, p. 326]), as well as the idea that action (political or otherwise) is separate from thought or theorizing. Gramsci situates the philosophy of praxis not as a body of ideas that confronts other philosophies, but as a collective activity with a material force, the goal of which is to engage the social forces and their ideologies that produce common sense (i.e., unreflective) conceptions of the world.

How is this relevant to my goal of rereading the concept of hegemony? Briefly, I argue that Gramsci's philosophy of praxis—insofar as it situates philosophy in the everyday—provides an important means by which to make more explicit the processes through which social actors come to recognize the connection between theory and practice, and to develop a critical conception of reality that moves beyond common sense. Thus, examination of hegemonic struggle—at least in its current dialectical formulation—is concerned with explicating the degree to which social actors are able to discursively penetrate (Giddens, 1979) the everyday conditions of their existence. In other words, within the framework of the philosophy of praxis, the critical analysis of communication processes is concerned with analyzing the relationship between “common sense” and philosophical “good sense.” An example will help clarify this issue.

Paul Willis' (1977) Learning to Labor examines how a group of working class “lads” constructs a resistant high school sub-culture that paradoxically, Willis argues, serves to prepare them for insertion into the labor process as expropriated labor. Like the game of making out in Burawoy's study, the lads’ self-defined culture of “having a laff” simultaneously subverts the dominant school culture and reproduces
capitalist relations of domination. Unlike Burawoy's study, however, Willis shows a greater sensitivity to the tensions between the lads' cultural penetrations on the one hand, and their tendency to reify dominant cultural norms on the other. Willis develops the notion of "partial penetration" (1977, p. 119) to illustrate this tension: While the lads develop a collective awareness of the connections between the dominance of a middle-class model of education (which marginalizes them) and the reproduction of an inequitable, class-based economic system, it is their very rejection of this model and the valorization of violence and physical work that positions them for incorporation into capitalism as manual labor.

Particularly interesting for my purposes is Willis' explanation for why this partial penetration fails to develop fully into class consciousness and social transformation. Without referring directly to Gramsci, Willis invokes the notion of the "hegemony of commonsense" (1977, p. 162) to show that cultural insight is mitigated by the ways in which the lads draw on ideologically produced, cultural stereotypes. As such, their view of the world is shaped by the two basic dichotomies of manual versus mental labor, and masculinity versus femininity. These dichotomies are articulated together such that the first term in each is privileged while the latter is denigrated and marginalized. Hence, the lads construct what they view as a "commonsense" view of the world in which manual work is the only appropriately masculine work, and masculinity itself is constructed as active, goal-oriented, and heroically tough. At the same time, mental labor—as embodied in the conformist "ear'oles" at school—and femininity—represented by girlfriends and "mum"—are both seen by the lads as passive, ontologically fixed states of being, and thus "naturally" inferior. In the maintenance of this "common sense" distinction, the male wage packet plays a pivotal symbolic role. As the embodiment of (male) working class labor, the wage packet comes to signify freedom, independence, and the importance of the breadwinner role. The wage packet takes on a centrality because it is "won in a masculine mode in confrontation with the 'real' world which is too tough for the woman" (1977, p. 150). As Willis further states, "The wage packet as a kind of symbol of machismo dictates the domestic culture and economy and tyrannies both men and women" (1977, p. 150).

In Willis' study, then, consciousness and insight are confounded by common sense. While the lads are able to partially penetrate the conditions of their relationship to the capitalist mode of production, such penetration is limited by forms of ideological dislocation which construct "human nature" rather than capitalism as the limiting condition of their existence. Hence, certain people are born to think, others to labor; women like doing housework and looking after men, while "real men" are action-oriented. Willis poignantly summarizes the
dialectical tension between these penetrations and limitations when he states:

The astonishing thing . . . is that there is a moment—and it only needs to be this for the gates to shut on the future—in working class culture when the manual giving of labour power represents both a freedom, election and transcendence, and a precise insertion into a system of exploitation and oppression for working class people. The former promises the future, the latter shows the present. It is the future in the present which hammers² freedom to inequality in the reality of contemporary capitalism. (1977, p. 120)

This example serves as an illustration of how, within Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis, common sense and philosophical good sense are always linked dialectically. I argue that, as critical theorists, we need to examine more closely this dialectic as it is manifested in everyday communication practices. If we read the concept of hegemony as contextualized by the philosophy of praxis rather than as a single, one-dimensional analytic term, then it becomes a more powerful construct by which to examine the relations amongst communication, power, resistance, and organizing. As such, the concept of hegemony takes on an added significance as a more nuanced way to understand how interpretive struggles between different interest groups are carried out.

In the dialectical relationship between domination and resistance, this revisioning of hegemony helps to overcome the latent structural-functionalism inherent in many critical communication studies, in which the dominant ideology is conceived as largely inpenetrable, and as simply reproducing capitalist relations of reproduction (Althusser, 1971). Ironically, and despite the widespread appropriation of the notion of hegemony in communication studies, it is this functionalist reading of ideology which has tended to be dominant. Within this model, social actors tend to be viewed as passive, unquestioning bearers of the dominant ideology, and the possibilities for critique are pre-empted by the seamlessness and pervasiveness of this dominant ideology. In contrast, my reading of hegemony suggests that it always includes the recognition of contradiction and disjuncture in social structures. Social actors are thus seen as active appropriators of interpretive possibilities, limiting the unproblematic reproduction of structures of dominance and creating possibilities for struggle and resistance.

In the next two sections I examine the ways in which the concept of hegemony has been interpreted in critical communication studies generally, and in organizational communication studies specifically. I argue that much of this work is consistent with the functionalist, undialectical reading of hegemony mentioned above. My goal is to suggest the limitations of reading hegemony through either the lens of dominance or through the lens of resistance. Neither perspective, I suggest, accounts adequately for the ways in which social actors engage with structures of power.
Hegemony and Critical Communication Studies

The conception of hegemony as ideological domination is consistent with critical work done in many areas of communication studies, particularly mass communication (see, e.g., Altman, 1990; Cloud, 1996; Dow, 1990; Goldman, Heath & Smith, 1991; Hanke, 1990; Loeb, 1990; Trujillo, 1991). For example, Dow (1990) defines hegemony as "the various means through which those who support the dominant ideology in a culture are able continually to reproduce that ideology in cultural institutions and products while gaining the tacit approval of those whom the ideology oppresses" (p. 262). More recently, Cloud refers to hegemony as "the process by which a social order remains stable by generating consent to its parameters through the production and distribution of ideological texts that define social reality for the majority of the people" (1996, p. 117). In both definitions the audience for the dominant ideology is positioned as the passive recipient of its ideas; reality is defined for those who give it tacit approval. Both definitions, I argue, are redolent of a large body of research in mass communication. Many studies present detailed analyses of various dimensions of the hegemonic process at work, often demonstrating the power of "the dominant ideology" to incorporate and neutralize challenges to this hegemony (Altman, 1990; Dow, 1990, 1992; Goldman et al., 1991; Hanke, 1990; Loeb, 1990).

As I suggest above, such work is more consistent with an Althusserian structural-functionalist position rather than a Gramscian humanist perspective. For example, Dow's (1990) ideological analysis of the Mary Tyler Moore Show illustrates how, despite its ostensible feminist theme of an independent, single woman making good in a male working environment, the show actually draws heavily on cultural stereotypes to reify traditional definitions of women's roles in relation to men. Dow shows how patriarchal norms are reasserted through Mary Richards' construction as a daughter to Lou Grant, and as a symbolic wife and mother to the other characters. In addition, Mary's relationships with other women consistently take on a secondary role in the show, and are generally played out in the private realm outside of work. In short, the show's articulation of Mary "as a familial adjunct to other characters can be seen as a hegemonic device defusing the threatening aspects of the 'independent' woman" (1990, p. 267).

An exception to the tendency to treat hegemony as ideological domination is the work of Fiske (1986, 1989, 1994), who criticizes the failure of ideological criticism to recognize the polysemy of media texts. Arguing that all messages are open to alternative, oppositional readings that subvert the dominant ideology, Fiske calls for critics to "identify the semiotic excesses of the text, those potential meanings that escape the control of the dominant culture. This will enable us to identify where and how members of subordinate subcultures can use these semiotic opportunities to generate meaning for them, . . . mean-
ings that serve their interests, and not those of cultural domination” (1986, p. 405).

Fiske and others (e.g., Steiner, 1988) provide a useful corrective to the overly functionalist and reductive readings of the dominant ideology thesis that characterize much research in critical communication studies. However, one might argue that Fiske replaces a Marxist functionalism with a romanticization of popular culture and its ability to resist the dominant ideology. In this sense, Fiske’s position is reminiscent of Lukács’ (1971) characterization of the working class as occupying an epistemologically privileged position simply by virtue of their alienation from, and commodification by, capitalism. Lukács romanticizes, totalizes, and essentializes the working class, arguing that their positioning within capitalism makes them uniquely situated to recognize, resist, and transcend its oppressive conditions, creating possibilities for proletarian revolution.3 Fiske’s critique of the dominant ideology thesis results in a similarly totalizing theory of resistance, flattening out the complexity and multidimensionality of the Gramscian model of hegemony.

Stevenson (1995) makes a similar critique, claiming that Fiske “forecloses the possibility of a theory of ideology by always reading the popular as a form of resistance” (p. 97). In other words, Fiske reverses the relationship between audience and text, arguing that the latter is open to the former, rather than being characterized by “discursive closure” (Deetz, 1992). While Fiske does not maintain that media texts are so open that any meaning can be derived from them, he does appear to consistently minimize the ways in which media institutions have the cultural, political, and economic capital to privilege certain realities over others. In this sense, the securing and reification of certain world views is rooted at least partly in the ability of the media to obscure ideologically the connections between group interests and media representations. Fiske’s model thus ignores the extent to which representational practices exist within unequal social, political, and economic relations.

Condit’s (1989, 1994) rhetorical studies of mass media texts provide a third conception of hegemony in our field. Her intent is to articulate a position that transcends the dichotomous character of the debate between dominant ideology theorists and writers who argue for a model of resistance to hegemonic codes. Like Stevenson, Condit (1989) is critical of Fiske’s theory of polysemy, arguing that there are rhetorical limits to the “openness” of media texts. Readings of texts, she argues, are always limited by historical contexts, social group memberships, and the parameters of dominant public discourses that define how social issues (e.g., abortion) are encoded in the media. Such factors, Condit suggests, require that “we dispense with the totalized concept of ‘resistance’” (1989, p. 117) in favor of a model which recognizes that “hegemony is a negotiation among elite and nonelite groups and
therefore always contains interests of nonelite groups, though to a lesser degree" (p. 119).

Condit (1994) further elaborates this model by explicitly taking up the Gramscian conception of hegemony and reinterpreting it to refer to "concordance" amongst different interest groups. As such, she positions her analysis in opposition to critical work that interprets hegemony from the standpoint of dominant ideology critique. The latter position, she argues, has three characteristics:

First, it takes an oppositional stance to the document under study, and this stance is usually derived from a revolutionary perspective. Second, its central focus is on describing the dominant themes and hidden contradictions of a discourse, and sometimes on showing how these serve the status quo or ruling interests. Finally, dominant ideology criticism usually employs critical reading procedures that seek to locate instances of decontextualized language usage that will support the critic's oppositional stance. It justifies this reading strategy via the rationale that all observation is ideologically driven. (p. 211)

In contrast to the ideological critic's oppositional stance, Condit argues for a "hegemonic perspective" in which the role of the critic is to "describe the plurivocal nature of public discourse and to account for the rise to dominance of particular public vocabularies by exploring how the texts articulate to the interests of multiple groups" (1994, p. 215).

While I am sympathetic with Condit's attempt to move beyond any simple notion of ideological domination, I think she gives up too much in her alternative model. Her avowedly "accommodationist" (1994, p. 210) position appears to bind her to a liberal pluralist model that undermines the possibility for radical critique. As Cloud (1996) indicates, Condit downplays the existence of real social and economic divisions, and neglects the extent to which concordance or compromise can be a facade that obscures deeper level conflicts and contradictions. This limitation, I would argue, evolves out of Condit's unnecessary rejection of the concept of ideology tout court as a viable analytic construct. In this sense, despite her critique of Fiske, she too is subject to the same criticism that Stevenson (1995) levels against him—she has no theory of ideology. Contrary to Condit's position, I would suggest that there is no necessary incompatibility between ideology critique and hegemony as an analytic construct. Indeed, there are many sophisticated conceptions which move beyond the dominant ideology thesis and situate ideology within a nuanced theoretical terrain (Eagleton, 1991; Hall, 1985; Larrain, 1979).

In the field of communication, probably the best known of these is Stuart Hall's development of a "marxism without guarantees" (Hall, 1983, 1985; Morley & Chen, 1996) which lays out explicitly a nonreductionist, nonfunctionalist conception of the relationship between ideology and hegemony. Hall's alternative position mediates between a Marxist "correspondence theory" of the relationships among ideology,
class, and economic structure (necessary correspondence) and a poststructuralist emphasis on difference and sliding signifiers in which there is posited an arbitrary connection amongst class, ideology, and economic structure (necessarily no correspondence). His theory of "no necessary [non]correspondence" (1985, p. 94) rejects any kind of teleological model and argues for a move away from the connections between ideology and the genetic origins of class, suggesting instead a focus on actual practices (discursive and nondiscursive). From such a position, it becomes difficult to examine ideological struggle from either a class reductionist position, or from an extreme poststructuralist perspective in which nothing exists outside of the text. Thus, Hall shows how ideology, as an analytic construct, can be used to provide a nuanced, dialectical conception of hegemony.

In effect, Hall provides us with a communication reading of Gramsci, exploring the ways in which hegemonic struggle occurs at the level of signification. For example, in his analysis of the racial signifier, "black," Hall (1985) lucidly demonstrates how the "fixing" of meaning occurs around the articulation of that term within a particular chain of signifiers. Thus, in the context of social struggle, black is transformed from a pejorative to a positive signifier through its rearticulation in an alternative signifying chain: "Black, then, exists ideologically only in relation to the contestation around those chains of meaning, and the social forces involved in that contestation" (Hall, 1985, p. 113).

Hall's work is relevant to this essay insofar as it has important (and underexplored) implications for critical organizational communication studies. In brief, he takes up Gramsci's project in two ways. First, he is interested in unpacking the ways in which the everyday, practical world of common sense is constructed in the context of relations of ideology and power. Hall, therefore, "denaturalizes" common sense and—like Willis—shows how it is the product of institutionalized, sedimented meaning systems. Second, while Hall is concerned with explicating how this process of consent to a dominant social order emerges in liberal democracies, he is just as interested in showing how "hegemony is never permanent" (Lewis, 1992, p. 280), involving an ongoing process of articulation and rearticulation, with different groups attempting to frame competing definitions of reality within their own. While some groups possess more cultural, political, and economic capital than others, and are better able to "fix" meaning, Hall makes clear that such process are always contested. In other words, hegemony embodies simultaneously processes of domination and resistance.

In the next section I address directly critical studies in organizational communication. I suggest that critical research has become dichotomized around an opposition between dominance and resistance approaches to organizational communication. Rereading the concept of hegemony within the philosophy of praxis allows for greater attention to the dialectic between domination and resistance, and hence allows
for greater sensitivity to the processual, communication dimensions of hegemonic struggle.

Domination and Resistance in Organizational Communication Studies: A Hegemonic Reading

The development of the field of critical organization studies has, I would argue, been characterized by the emergence of a duality. On the one hand, much critical research, particularly that influenced by neo-Marxism, has focused on explicating and critiquing the processes through which structures of domination are produced and reproduced. Such work has generally neglected (though not completely ignored) processes of resistance on the part of subordinated groups. When resistance has been addressed, it generally has been in the context of a theory of (hegemonic) domination (e.g., Burawoy, 1979; Clair, 1993b, 1994; Mummy, 1987, 1988; Willis, 1977). On the other hand, recent developments in the “postmodern turn” with its emphasis on “local knowledge” and marginalized voices have led to a greater focus on resistance as a dynamic element of organizing processes (e.g., Bell & Forbes, 1994; De Certeau, 1984; Jenkins, 1988; Jermier, Knights, & Nord, 1994; Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994; Trethewey, 1994). In this work, however, resistance is frequently examined with little attention to the larger social and political context within which such resistance occurs. Often inspired by the work of Foucault (1979, 1980a, 1980b) and De Certeau (1984), such analyses see acts of resistance where neo-Marxist analyses see behavior that ultimately reproduces the dominant constellation of power relations. I argue that this is problematic insofar as a false dichotomy is created in the critical literature between organizational domination and resistance.

This characterization of the field appears consistent with Clegg’s (1989) argument that the study of power in organizations has been marked by the emergence of two largely irreconcilable models. In the first, scholars have adopted a Hobbesian, sovereign model in which power is seen principally as a causal, top-down phenomenon. From this perspective, agents act in various ways to influence the behavior of others. Clegg argues that this model has a well-established tradition that runs from Hobbes through Marx to the more recent “community power debate” (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Dahl, 1957; Lukes, 1974) and the study of ideology as shaping interests (Larrain, 1979). In this conception, power is seen as a negative, prohibitive phenomenon. However, Clegg describes a second model, originating with Machiavelli, in which power is conceived as contingent and non-totalizing. This model has been developed by writers such as Foucault (1979) and Laclau and Mouffe (1985), and sees power as a productive, disciplinary, strategic phenomenon which has no specific center (e.g., the King, or capitalism), but is dispersed widely and unevenly.
Clegg (1989) attempts to resolve this dichotomy by developing a model of “circuits of power” (pp. 187–240), the analytic focal point of which is “our irremediable entrapment within webs of meaning together with our organizational capacity to transform these” (pp. 239–240). This model situates power as neither simply prohibitive nor productive, but recognizes it as simultaneously enabling and constraining human thought and action.

While Clegg (1979, p. 105) assigns the notion of hegemony to the sovereign model of power, I would suggest that Gramsci's philosophy is more consistent with an attempt to overcome the dichotomy that Clegg delineates. In this section, therefore, I suggest that Gramsci's concept of hegemony and its attendant philosophy can be read as another useful way of resolving this dichotomy—one that Clegg does not develop. This conception of hegemony allows for a critical perspective on organization studies that explores the dialectical—and mutually defining—character of the relationship between domination and resistance.

I provide below a brief discussion of the critical organization literature that adopts a “dominance” perspective. I then juxtapose against this work more recent organization studies that incorporate a resistance model. Finally, I show how the broadened conception of hegemony articulated above can overcome the limitations of both bodies of research.

The Dominance Model in Critical Organization Studies

Much of the critical work conducted in organization studies provides readings of the complex relations amongst communication, organization, and power as a way to understand and critique the production and reproduction of relations of domination (Barker, 1993; Clair, 1993a, 1994; Clegg, 1975, 1989; Conrad, 1983, 1988; Conrad & Ryan, 1985; Deetz & Kersten, 1983; Deetz & Mummy, 1990; Huspek & Kendall, 1991; Markham, 1996; Mummy, 1987, 1988; Mummy & Stohl, 1992; Pringle, 1989; Rosen, 1985, 1988; Witten, 1993). While not all of these studies take up explicitly the concept of hegemony, all have in common the notion that relations of domination cannot be understood through the principle of coercion, but must be explained rather as a process whereby subordinated groups actively participate in the construction of their own subordination.

Placed in the larger context of social theory, much of this work is consistent with Lukes' (1974) development of a three-dimensional view of power, the importance of which lies in its critique of behavioral models of power (see Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Dahl, 1957) and its argument that power is often—and most insidiously—exercised in situations of apparent consensus. In claiming—against the behavioral theorists—that conflict is not a prerequisite for power, Lukes sets the stage for a body of research which argues that people often accept a
reality that, unknown to them, works against their best interests. Lukes (1974, p. 47) even cites Gramsci to make the case that the exercise of power often prevents people from thinking in certain ways, thus shaping their very needs and wants. In this conception, a social group remains in power by preventing other groups from framing their thoughts and interests in ways that might challenge the dominant group’s position. Lukes’ thesis, then, is an important marker in the development of a notion of hegemony that is consistent with the idea of domination through unreflexive consent to prevailing ideas, values, and ways of doing things.4

In the field of organizational communication, this conception of hegemony often is examined via the discursive practices of organization members. For example, the study of organizational storytelling has been a particularly rich and evocative area of research which has focused principally on the ways in which members’ stories reproduce the status quo (e.g., Helmer, 1993; Mumby, 1987, 1988; Witten, 1993). Witten’s (1993) study of workplace obedience is a good example of the dominance model at work, as she provides a sophisticated analysis of the connection between storytelling and organizational control. Witten argues that the very structure of stories militates against possible challenges to dominant readings insofar as the kinds of truth claims that stories make are rarely called into question. In this way stories—whether apocryphal or not—are interpreted as a principal vehicle for the production and reproduction of dominant (managerial) organizational values. From this perspective stories, by definition, embody a “moral imperative” that leads auditors to particular conclusions about what is good, right, and possible (Therborn, 1980); organization members are unlikely to read against the grain of such imperatives because they represent embedded, institutionalized value systems.

My own (1987, 1988) critical reading of a story circulated amongst employees at IBM (in which a low-level employee challenges the CEO) reflects a similar orientation. Operating via a pejorative conception of ideology, I highlight the connections among discourse, ideology, and power to show how dominance relations are symbolically reproduced. The principal focus here is on stories as discursive practices that ideologically obfuscate deep structure relations of power. In this sense, a “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Ricoeur, 1970) is the operant interpretive frame. The assumption is that while the story can be read at a surface level as embodying the themes of empowerment and an egalitarian approach to rule-following, an uncovering of its deeper structure reveals its complicity with the hegemonic order of things. While my analysis does not eliminate the possibility of resistant readings on the part of employees (suggesting that disjunctures will always exist between dominant meanings and individual interpretations of stories—what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) refer to as the impossibility of a “sutured totality”), I subordinate such readings to the
prevailing conception of ideology as linking systems of signification to relations of domination (Giddens, 1979).

While organizational storytelling has been an important focus for critical analyses, there are numerous other symbolic practices that have been analyzed under the aegis of the dominance model. These include metaphors (Deetz & Mumby, 1985; Markham, 1996), rituals (Rosen, 1985, 1988), work songs (Conrad, 1988) and everyday talk (Huspek & Kendall, 1991). For example, Rosen's (1985, 1988) critical ethnography of an advertising agency examines respectively a corporate breakfast and company Christmas party as ritual practices that reproduce capitalist relations of production and simultaneously hide their basic contradictions. Again, both analyses are premised on the assumption that rituals serve rather than subvert the prevailing hegemonic order. Thus, even in ritual situations that border on the "carnivalesque" (Bakhtin, 1984) and openly parody extant power relations, Rosen (1988) applies a hermeneutics of suspicion that highlights how such rituals (involving skits at a Christmas party) actually serve to symbolically secure and obscure the continued extraction of surplus value from employees.

Why, then, has the dominance model been so prevalent in critical organization studies? Part of the answer lies, I think, in the conceptual terrain out of which it emerged. In some respects, critical studies developed simultaneously with the interpretive turn in organization studies and as a response to the latter’s rather descriptive approach to meaning formation processes and the concomitant neglect of the political character of such processes. For example, my (1987) analysis directly challenges an earlier, descriptive reading of the same IBM story (Martin, Feldman, Hatch & Sitkin, 1983). Similarly, Smircich and Caläs’ (1987) claim that organizational culture studies are “dominant but dead” reflects a concern that the descriptive character of this work has led to its absorption into the functionalist hegemony, such that the study of “culture” has become one more way for managers to co-opt employees and make organizations more efficient and profitable. In part, then, the dominance model is an attempt to reclaim the richness of the interpretive turn and to demonstrate the complexity of meaning-making processes (Deetz & Mumby, 1990); in other words, such processes cannot simply be “read off” from the surface manifestations of organizational life. In this sense, the dominance model attempts to bring together the richness of the hermeneutic tradition with the critical insights of neo-Marxist theory (Deetz & Kersten, 1983).

My discussion of the dominance model is intended not as a statement of its failure as a mode of critique; to the contrary, the work stemming from this perspective has augmented greatly our understanding of the relationship between communication and the politics of everyday organizational life. My concern is rather to highlight that frequently this work is based on a rather narrow, undialectical reading of the
Gramscian problematic. With hegemony principally defined in terms of domination through active consent to the ideology of the capitalist mode of production, there is little work that examines how this ideology "sets limits to the degree to which a society-in-dominance can easily, smoothly and functionally reproduce itself" (Hall, 1985, p. 113). It could be argued that critical organization studies are sometimes guilty of a rather functionalist, Althusserian (1971) reading of ideology in which the dialectical character of hegemonic relations remains unexplored. In such a formulation, it is more difficult to theorize resistance.

The Resistance Model in Critical Organization Studies

Recently organizational scholars have begun to address more extensively the phenomenon of resistance. Inspired principally by developments in postmodern theory, such work problematizes the neo-Marxist "grand narrative" that conceptualizes power via a totalizing "sovereign" model predicated on the dominance of the capitalist mode of production (Foucault, 1980a, 1980b). Following the work of writers such as Foucault, De Certeau (1984), and Deleuze and Guattari (1983), researchers have begun to examine the discursive practices of organization members as they attempt to create spaces of resistance that subvert the dominant social order (e.g., Bell & Forbes, 1994; Benson, 1992; Burrell, 1993; Collinson, 1994; Jenkins, 1988; Jermier et al., 1994; Lamphere, 1985; Maguire & Mohtar, 1994). In contrast to the dominance model, such resistance is not read as ultimately reproducing extant relations of power, but rather as involving productive acts that reconfigure the terrain of struggle.

While this resistance model is less well developed than the dominance model in critical organization studies, a number of authors have begun to explore the ways in which marginalized organization members actively appropriate for their own use the resources of the organization. For example, Bell and Forbes' (1994) study of tactical resistance among female secretaries examines office folklore as "interstitial space" to show that "blatant critiques of patriarchy, hierarchy, organizational domination, and controlling practices are the graffiti of organizational crawls spaces; this is a site of resistance and pleasure" (1994, p. 193). Their primary exemplars of resistance and pleasure are office graffiti such as "I have PMS and a handgun. Any questions?" and "Mary called in dead today. She used up all her sick days." Thus, "in a deconstructive move, PMS as a 'variable' in organizational relations refuses to obey authority, decenters the notions of rule making and rule breaking, and locates cognition in bodily cycles, not as an essentialist move, but as a counterpoint to the rhythms of work in an industrial society" (1994, p. 191).

From the perspective of the dominance model, Bell and Forbes make no attempt to situate these acts of appropriation and resistance within the context of capitalist hegemony and the struggle over the production
of surplus value. In many respects, their conclusions are in opposition to what a more "hermeneutically suspicious" neo-Marxist reading might provide; the latter might well focus on the extent to which the female office workers studied are drawing on standard female stereotypes to perpetuate the patriarchal image of female workers as weak, subject to their bodies and bouts of hysteria, and hence as reproducing their own subordination to patriarchal, capitalist relations of production.

Other critical organization studies that thematize resistance include the following: Jenkins' (1988) account of textual poaching amongst the discourse community of Star Trek fans; Lamphere's (1985) critical study of how women factory workers subvert formal organizational structures through the introduction of family rituals into the workplace; and Collinson's (1994) case studies of "resistance through distance" and "resistance through persistence." All of these studies have in common the notion that, far from unwittingly engaging in consent to hegemonic relations, organization members have a variety of discursive and behavioral resources upon which they can draw in order to create a space for articulating alternative identities and social realities.

However, as a means of characterizing the dynamic of hegemonic struggle in organizations, I would argue that the resistance model is—like the dominance model—insufficiently dialectical. While the studies described above highlight important ways in which social actors resist the imposition of dominant systems of meaning, there is often little attempt to analyze the ways in which resistance itself can be complex, contradictory, and tenuous. Resistance does not simply occur in opposition to dominance, but is often implicated with it in mutually defining ways.

One study which attempts to develop a dialectical reading of the relationship between domination and resistance is Scott's (1990) historical analysis of the resistant practices of subordinate groups. Scott argues that most critical and Marxist studies of power have focused on issues of domination rather than issues of resistance (i.e., "power over" rather than "power to") because of their almost exclusive concern with the public contexts for the exercise of power. Distinguishing between "public transcripts" and "hidden transcripts," Scott suggests that much of the creative resistance of subordinate groups takes place not in public, but rather in discourse and behaviors that occur "off-stage" and beyond the direct surveillance of those in power. Arguing that "relations of domination are, at the same time, relations of resistance" (1990, p. 45), Scott focuses his attention on the "infrapolitics of subordinate groups" (1990, p. 19); that is, low profile forms of resistance that create dissident subcultures beyond the purview of "official," dominant political structures and systems of meaning.
For Scott, the frontier between public and hidden transcripts is defined not by a wall, but rather by a zone of constant struggle between dominant and subordinate groups. For example, subordinate groups can outwardly or denotatively express acquiescence to the prevailing order, while simultaneously and connotatively defying it. This conception of struggle is perhaps best summed up by the Ethiopian proverb that Scott uses as the epigraph to his book: “When the great lord passes the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts.” An organizational example might be workers who resist management practices by “working to rule,” thus following managerial rules so faithfully that normal organizational functioning is upset.

Scott’s analysis is thus extremely useful in its demonstration that surface level “quiescence” may actually function as a cover for deeper level challenges to the apparent seamlessness of the dominant power structure. In this sense, his study provides a provocative reversal of the thesis suggested by both Willis and Burawoy. That is, rather than suggesting that apparent resistance obscures deeper level reproduction of relations of domination, Scott argues that the “manufacture of consent” provides a convenient cover for subordinate groups to create a space for resistance and the development of politically alternative worldviews. From this perspective, Scott offers “a way of addressing the issue of hegemonic incorporation” (1990, p. 19) without ignoring the fundamentally dialectical character of power.

Curiously, however, Scott provides a surprisingly heavy-handed reading of Gramsci, equating the latter’s conception of hegemony with “false consciousness.” As far as I can tell, Gramsci never speaks of “false consciousness,” and certainly not in the crude Marxist sense of a “veil of illusion” that obscures the “true reality” of subordinates’ domination. Scott’s misreading becomes clear when he provides the following quotation from Gramsci as evidence of the latter’s focus on hegemony as “dominated consciousness”:

The active man-in-the-mass has a practical activity, but has no clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity. . . . His theoretical consciousness can indeed be historically in opposition to his activity. One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed. But this verbal conception is not without consequences . . .; the contradictory state of consciousness does [often] not permit of any action, any decision, or any choice, and produces a condition of moral and political passivity. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 333, quoted in Scott, 1990, pp. 90–91)

Scott uses this quotation to demonstrate that Gramsci radically bifurcates thought and action; Gramsci, he claims, sees hegemony working primarily at the level of thought (as dominated consciousness) which thus leads to political passivity at the level of action. I would argue that this is a significant misreading of Gramsci. Indeed, the first ellipsis in the above quotation leaves out the phrase “which nonetheless
involves understanding the world in so far as it transforms it.” According to a footnote by Gramsci’s translators, this is a reference to the 11th of Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach*, which Gramsci interprets as evidence for the notion that the philosophy of praxis articulates thought and action as mutually and dialectically constituted (Hoare & Nowell Smith, 1971, p. 333).

Scott’s bifurcated reading of Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis obscures the latter’s situatedness in everyday life. Gramsci is not presenting a theory of how the elite dominates subordinate groups, as Scott suggests, but rather is providing a subtle reading of the dialectical struggles over meaning that occur in the various realms of civil society. Gramsci recognizes that every social actor engages in this process of struggle, if only at the level of “common sense.” Philosophical good sense and a more critical conception of relations of power is the result of the creation of social blocs that share ethical-moral, ideological, and political interests.

Within my alternative reading, Scott’s discussion of the dialectics of power that characterizes the relationship between public and hidden transcripts becomes quite compatible with the Gramscian conception of hegemony. Thus, when Scott argues that “any dominant ideology with hegemonic pretensions must, by definition, provide subordinate groups with political weapons that can be of use in the public transcript” (1990, p. 101) he is articulating precisely Gramsci’s notion of hegemonic struggle. In this sense, hegemony always involves struggle over systems of meaning and the processes by which social reality is framed. While meanings may be temporarily fixed and certain interpretations hold sway, there is constant slippage between discourses and meanings, such that alternative and competing definitions of the world arise.

Below, I suggest how this broader reading of the Gramscian problematic of hegemony enables critical organization scholars to overcome the dichotomy of domination and resistance. In doing so, I explain the possibilities that an expanded, dialectical conception of hegemony provides for resolving the dualism between Marxist (domination)- and postmodernist (resistance)-inspired analyses of organizational life.

*Hegemony as Dialectic: Resolving the Dualism in Critical Organization Studies*

The first move in resolving this dualism lies in recognizing that hegemony is not an either/or condition of organizing. Indeed, hegemony is more appropriately conceptualized as a continuum ranging from the total integration of worldviews into a single, all-encompassing ideology—Laclau & Mouffe’s (1985) “sutured totality”—to situations in which there is widespread resistance and a plurality of voices competing for pre-eminence (the limiting condition of which is perhaps Bakhtin’s [1984] notion of the “carnivalesque”). In reality, neither of these
absolutes are realized; all social and organizational contexts are characterized by greater or lesser degrees of integration/resistance. Figure 1 portrays this relationship.

It is therefore worth restating that, in the Gramscian sense, hegemony describes a process of struggle rather than an existing state of consensual domination that is continually produced and reproduced. In addition, this process of struggle is not contextualized as one which is contained within (and hence reproduces) the dominant social order. Such a notion contradicts Gramsci's philosophy of praxis, the goal of which is the fomenting of radical political change. Given this, how do we situate the Gramscian problematic as mediating between the Marxist privileging of domination and the postmodern privileging of resistance? What are the advantages of such a conception for critical organization studies?

First, Gramsci’s humanist philosophy of praxis overcomes some of the limitations of overly structuralist, Althusser-inspired analyses of organizing as the reproduction of capitalist relations of production (e.g., Burawoy, 1979; Rosen, 1985, 1988). Althusser’s (1970, 1971) anti-humanist reading of Marx both marginalizes possibilities for human agency (because subjects are simply reproduced through the functioning of Ideological State Apparatuses), and creates a bifurcation between science (marxism) and ideology (humanism) that leads to a rather positivist conception of truth (Therborn, 1980, p. 8). Gramsci’s dialectical model overcomes this rather monolithic conception of power; his focus on civil society and the “war of position” mitigates the power that the State assumes in classic Marxist models and, thus, creates greater possibilities for examining gaps and fissures in the prevailing ideology. Certainly, Willis’ (1977) study of “the lads” is an excellent example of how organized action in the civil realm mitigates the power of the State—in this instance as embodied in public education—and its ability to produce continually subjects who fit neatly into the capitalist mode of production.

Second, and following from this, Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis allows for a richer conception of resistance than that suggested by the writings of Foucault and de Certeau, both of whom tend to situate resistance at the individual level and within the confines of the dominant disciplinary regime. For de Certeau, resistance is premised on the ability of the marginalized to surreptitiously utilize the political and cultural capital of the powerful for their own ends. Thus, resistance involves “clever tricks of the ‘weak’ within the order established by the

Figure 1.
Hegemony as a Dialectical Continuum.

Total Integration ------------------------------Widespread Resistance
(“Sutured Totality”) ("Carnival")

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‘strong,’ an art of putting one over on the adversary on his own turf” (1984, p. 40). However, this is a somewhat anemic conception of resistance, for it appears to deny the possibility of collective forms of action generating genuine and far-reaching changes to the status quo. De Certeau seems to accept the hegemony of capitalism as a given, and to explore ways in which social actors, as consumers, can “make do” within the given order. Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis is, by definition, premised on the possibilities for collective struggle and change. As a Marxist, he is concerned with articulating ways in which hegemonic struggle—carried out principally in the sphere of civil society and through processes of consent—can lead to the movement from capitalism to socialism.

Third, Gramsci’s concept of hegemony—as framed within his philosophy of praxis—overcomes the domination/resistance duality by positioning social actors neither as unwitting dupes who unreflectively reproduce the status quo, nor as individuals who, by virtue of their marginalized status, can create a pristine space of resistance that subverts the dominant order. Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis recognizes both the possibilities for social change and the tenacity of the dominant hegemony that resists such change. In this sense, Gramsci’s notion of hegemony sets us the critical problematic not of uncovering the truth that underlies an ideologically constructed reality, but rather of identifying “the mechanisms and procedures by which truth and true realities are produced and imposed” (Cocks, 1989, p. 83). Gramsci thus rejects both the fatalism of crude forms of historical materialism (where change resides in the contradictions of the economic infrastructure) and the relativism that sees all forms of resistance as legitimate. Critical organization studies can both overcome this dualism and address more directly this dialectical tension through a careful examination of the multiple interpretive possibilities to which organizational actors have access, and which shape the potential for political struggle.

Fourth, while Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis incorporates only a rudimentary theory of language, his theoretical framework provides a useful perspective from which to critically analyze the communication micropractices that are both the medium and outcome of hegemonic struggle. In Gramsci’s formulation, language becomes one of the means by which common sense is transformed into philosophical good sense; as such, he recognizes that immediate experience is mediated fundamentally by linguistic processes that shape categories of ordinary thought (1971, p. 323). Hegemonic processes are played out much of the time at the level of discourse. As Hall (1985), Laclau and Mouffe (1985), Laclau (1991), Fraser (1989, 1990/91), and others argue, discourse creates subjectivities, structures experience, and constitutes what counts as meaningful and important, hence articulating “the differences (social, political, and economic) that make a difference.” Gramsci provides critical scholars with a materially grounded philosophical framework.
through which to read such a discursive model. His humanistic, moral-political philosophy focuses explicitly on the mechanisms in particular historical contexts which prevent the realization of free, rational, and autonomous choice-making. Below I provide an extended example of how these issues might be realized through empirical study.

Collinson’s (1988, 1992) study of the tensions between resistance and conformity amongst male engineers in a truck manufacturing plant effectively embodies this dialectical conception of hegemony. Through a complex analysis of shopfloor discourse, focusing principally on humor, Collinson shows how the engineers’ talk is reducible neither to a mechanism for the discursive reproduction of capitalist relations of domination, nor to the means by which an “authentic” space for resistance is constituted. Collinson argues that such reductionist moves are premised on relatively simplistic and essentialist (usually class-based) conceptions of subjectivity.

In contrast, Collinson engages in a critical analysis of the relationship between power and subjectivity, demonstrating the complex and contradictory character of workers’ practices of resistance and compliance. Such contradictions are examined via an understanding of the intersections among humor, shopfloor culture, gendered masculine identity, and organizational relations of power. Collinson (1992) shows how management’s introduction of a new bonus scheme, aimed at improving production, is actually transformed by workers into a resource for resistance, organized around the three oppositional discursive practices of space, time, and production. Thus, in developing an oppositional space workers create a “leisure culture,” a “shopfloor underlife” where tabloid newspapers are shared, gambling occurs, and the toilets become a “free place” for eluding managerial surveillance. Similarly, workers appropriate time in a resistant manner, sometimes working “flat out” to create free time, taking unofficial breaks, and developing a “hidden economy” with that free time. Finally, the system of production is co-opted through the utilization of company resources to make “foreigners” (a euphemism for articles manufactured for personal consumption, e.g., spare parts for private automobiles).8

While such collective resistance limits management attempts to wrest control of the labor process from the workers (i.e., through the manipulation of the new bonus scheme and through workers distancing themselves from a new “friendly” corporate culture aimed at increasing worker consent), Collinson demonstrates that this resistance is mitigated by conservative definitions of masculine identity—rooted in the discursive maintenance of both aggressively heterosexual personas and traditional family breadwinner roles—and forms of collective resistance that only occasionally transcend economic instrumentalism (what Gramsci would call “corporate consciousness”). Thus, while discursive penetration of, and resistance to, managerial control occurs, the potential for praxis and transformation is weakened by a gendered
identity that is sexist, that carefully separates the private, domestic sphere and public, work sphere, and that places pecuniary interests above political interests.

My point in discussing this example is to show that in analyzing hegemonic struggle it is important to demonstrate the ways in which discourses and actions can be simultaneously resistant and consensual, uniting and dividing, radical and conservative. No class or group can claim existential authenticity for its potential to resist dominant systems of power. Gramsci recognizes this in his nonreductionist formulation of class struggle and its realization through the philosophy of praxis. Thus, Collinson's (1992) description of the engineers as engaging in a "collective critical narcissism" (p. 80) and masculine individualism embodies simultaneously the coincidence of, on the one hand, resistance to the commodification of their labor and, on the other, conformity to a conservative masculine identity that is reactionary and divisive. As Gramsci states, "Individualism is merely a brutish apoliticism" (1971, p. 147).

Like Willis' (1977) study, we see again in Collinson's study the dialectical relationship between common sense and philosophical good sense. The engineers in Collinson's study are able to penetrate partially the workings of capitalist relations of production, but their ideologically grounded, common sense understandings of competitive individualism prevent them from recognizing their collective interest in a unified struggle. Gramsci's point is precisely that as long as common sense characterizes individuals' modes of thinking, their ability to penetrate ideological meaning systems will be limited. In his own words, the engineers have not come to a recognition that "one's own corporate interests, in their present and future development, transcend the corporate limits of the purely economic class, and can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups too" (1971, p. 181). As such, while their actions may resist managerial practices, their common sense understandings prevent them from seeing the connections between capitalism and patriarchy, and hence they are complicitous in the ongoing subordination of women and minorities through their sexism and racism. As Hall (1985) shows in his extension of Gramsci's philosophy, ideological struggle is premised on the development of a critical consciousness that recognizes that systems of oppression are not natural and inevitable, but are produced through the arbitrary privileging of one group's interests over others.

Certainly research is beginning to be conducted in critical organization studies that provides dialectical understandings of hegemonic struggle as it unfolds in the workplace. Much of this work points to the ways in which social actors are constructed as complex, non-unitary subjects who are interpellated by various and contradictory discursive practices (see Gottfried, 1994; Gregg, 1993; Holmer-Nadesan, 1996; Sotirin, 1997; Trethewey, 1994; Young, 1989). In such studies, hege-
mony is explicated not as simple domination through consent, but rather as embodying possibilities for critique and praxis. The realization of such possibilities is not a straightforward either/or condition; the "veil of illusion" does not either lift or remain in place. Instead, hegemony is seen as manifested through partial, dynamic, fragmented, discontinuous moments of struggle. Sometimes such moments coalesce into a collective and praxis-oriented identity, in which case change becomes a real possibility; at other times, change remains latent because of the strength of "common sense" views of the world.

Conclusion

In this essay I have attempted to reread Gramsci’s concept of hegemony by situating it more broadly within his philosophy of praxis. Gramsci’s dialectical model of hegemonic struggle enables critical organizational scholars to recognize that discursive practices intersect in multiple, frequently contradictory, ways to provide myriad interpretive possibilities. While the realization of these possibilities is constrained by many factors, including the political, social, and economic context of their occurrence, critical organization scholars must be sensitive to the complex discursive terrain of organizational life. Neither models of dominance nor resistance alone provide an adequate understanding of the struggles over meaning and power that characterizes the dynamic of organizing. The broadened conception of hegemony argued for in this paper allows us to "dereify" the duality of domination and resistance, and offers critical scholars an opportunity to more adequately theorize this dynamic.

In this context, Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis can be viewed as consistent with and augmenting the work of current organizational communication scholars who address issues of democracy in the workplace (Cheney, 1995; Deetz, 1992, 1995; Harrison, 1994). In situating the workplace as a part of civil society and hence a contested political space, researchers render problematic the idea that (particularly for-profit) organizations are somehow exempt from accountability in their role in (anti-)democratic processes. Little work exists that attempts to articulate explicitly the relationship between organizations and civil society, and the little extant work tends to offer simplistic conceptions of identity, power, and participative processes (e.g., Ahrne, 1996). More complex analyses of the relationship between organizing and civil society (e.g., Deetz, 1992) are necessary to generate greater understanding of organizations as political sites of struggles over interests.

In addition, as a moral-political philosophy, Gramsci’s work provides an important way for critical scholars to situate themselves in relation to those whom they study. His model suggests neither a political elitism—an accusation leveled at critical theory by some (see Alvesson
& Willmott, 1992)—nor an uncritical epistemological privileging of the views of subordinate groups. Rather, his philosophy of praxis argues for a dialectical relationship between critical scholars and social actors, such that knowledge claims about the world are the product of both. As Strine (1991, p. 195) states, "by closely aligning their theoretical work with their identified social group's internal struggles for self-empowerment and local sovereignty, organic intellectuals can ideally generate counter-theories of social and cultural process, explanations that are at once historically grounded, contextually nuanced, and politically emancipating." As such, critical organization scholars can play an important role in the development of "local praxis" (Strine, 1991, p. 199), in which critique becomes theorizing about situated forms of control and empowerment. In this context, Conquergood's (1991) model of critical ethnography as advocacy, and Boje and Rosile's (1994) "consulting" work in South Central Los Angeles are indicative of "organic" forms of critique and praxis.

How we conceptualize hegemony has consequences for the ways in which we think about the social actors who engage in processes of organizing. A dialectical understanding of hegemony allows for a critical conception of organizations and society that is more sensitive to the nuances of resistance and control. I believe that our complacency about hegemony as a heuristic construct has led us to overlook many of the radical implications embedded in Gramsci's theorizing about this concept. Hopefully this essay's rereading of hegemony will enable us to position its broader articulation as central in our attempts to understand the dialectics and mechanics of organizational power.

ENDNOTES

1. Anderson (1976) has shown that the precise relationship between hegemony, consent, and civil society on the one hand, and domination, coercion, and the State on the other is subject to conceptual slippage in Gramsci's writings. Anderson identifies Gramsci as articulating three distinct and conceptually incompatible configurations of these relationships. First, hegemony is exercised in the terrain of civil society through processes of consent; the State retains the exercise of coercive power; and the economy is identified as the site of work discipline (Gramsci, 1971, p. 12). Second, Gramsci identifies hegemony as functioning through both the State and civil society; in this sense, the State also performs the function of "elevating the great mass of the population to a given cultural and moral level" (1971, p. 258). Third, Gramsci elides the distinction between the State and civil society, such that "the general notion of the State includes elements which need to be referred back to the notion of civil society (in the sense that one might say that State = political society + civil society)" (1971, p. 263). As such, within the scope of Gramsci's writings, the State: 1) contrasts with civil society; 2) encompasses civil society; and 3) is identical with civil society (Anderson, 1976, p. 13). Despite these conceptual difficulties, for the purposes of this essay hegemony can be most usefully read as an analytic term aimed at understanding the dialectical character of political struggle in the realm of civil society.

2. Willis uses the pseudonym "Hammertown" to designate the industrial city where "the lads" live.

3. Hartsock (1997) claims that in formulating feminist standpoint theory she was attempting to build on Lukács' position and "translate the notion of the proletariat
(including its privileged historical mission) into feminist terms" (p. 368). In part because of this, feminist standpoint theory has been critiqued for essentializing women’s abilities to provide insight into the relations of domination structured through patriarchy (Hekman, 1997).

4. In critiquing Lukes’ model of power, Clegg (1989, p. 159) argues that the former’s position is the apotheosis of the sovereign, dominance perspective, with its apparent denial of any kind of sovereignty for the social actor. As Clegg states, “the denial of this sovereignty within a moral theory in which liberal, free and responsible individuals do hold conceptual sway is the ultimate act of negative, prohibitory power” (p. 159).

5. It should be noted that Althusser (1971) takes his distinction between “ideological State Apparatuses” and “Repressive State Apparatuses” directly from Gramsci’s (1971, p. 12) distinction between “civil society” (“the ensemble of organisms commonly called ‘private’”) and the State. However, Althusser obliterates the realm of civil society in his model because of its humanist overtones, and thus repositions ideological apparatuses as functioning also through the State.

6. De Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* is written partly in direct response to Foucault’s (1979) rather dismal characterization of the pervasiveness of disciplinary, panoptic society. De Certeau argues that, far from simply being the subject-effects of panopticism, social actors are able to act in ways that creatively appropriate aspects of the disciplinary society to serve their own ends. In this context, acts of consumption become creative acts of production.

7. Several commentators, particularly Smart (1983, 1986), have made connections between Gramsci’s conception of hegemony and Foucault’s historiographies of various power-knowledge regimes and their disciplinary mechanisms. However, I would argue that one advantage of Gramsci over Foucault, particularly for critical organization studies, is that the former explicitly situates the problematic of hegemony within a moral framework. That is, he develops a humanist Marxism with the emancipatory goal of establishing a more democratic social order. One of the criticisms of Foucault, particularly that made by Habermas (1987), is that his refusal to take a moral stance in his analyses of power leaves unanswered the question, “Why fight?” That is, given his rather neutral analytic frame and, given the apparent ubiquity and intractability of power, what is it that makes one form of discipline more liberating than another and thus worth fighting for?

8. My intent here is not to valorize these acts of theft, although one could view them as a response to the process of expropriation and extraction of surplus labor that the engineers experience at the hands of management. However, viewed from the perspective of the philosophy of praxis, these acts represent a form of self-interestedness that lacks recognition of the need for collective, critical consciousness. While the engineers may be able to coordinate efforts to steal from their employer, they are unable to act collectively in ways that transcend pure economic motivations and that recognize the need for coordinated political activity which might transform the workplace.

REFERENCES


