

CHAPTER 1

Democratic Ideology, Hegemony and Education

The State of American Democracy and Democratic Consciousness

Since the birth of the U.S. republic, dominant strains of American political thinking and institutional practice have worked to limit and erode the idea of active participation by ordinary people in the project of self-government. The impulse to contain the presumed evils of participatory democracy is built into the foundation of American government, the Constitution. It is explained and defended in the famous essays of the *Federalist Papers*.

This political tradition has to its credit some undeniable contributions to democracy, in particular the protection of essential individual rights and freedoms. In a world where religious fanaticism, political repression, ethnic cleansing, and other affronts to individuals and groups are too often official government policies, the protection of individual rights and freedoms is no small accomplishment. However, the limited-participation, individualistic vision that has dominated American democracy has proven unable to cope with the serious social problems that have accompanied late-twentieth-century American capitalism.

Now even the limited participatory aspects of American liberal representative government are falling into decay. Americans' faith in government, and their interest in public affairs have hit bottom.

Alienation has become a central indicator of modern political crisis [in the U.S.], whether it is measured by plummeting electoral participation figures, widespread distrust of politicians, or pervasive apathy about things public and political.¹

This is especially true of young people. As Michael Oreskes of the *New York Times* puts it,

While apathy and alienation have become a national plague, the disengagement seems to run deeper among young Americans, those 18 to 29, setting them clearly apart from earlier generations.²

Oreskes cites two separate reports to support this claim. First, a report by the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press states that this generation of young citizens “knows less, cares less, votes less and is less critical of its leaders and institutions than young people in the past.” A second report, by People for the American Way, argues that there is a “citizenship crisis” and that “America’s youth are alarmingly ill-prepared to keep democracy alive in the 1990s and beyond.”³

Young Americans appreciate their presumed freedom to do what they want. When their actions or speech are questioned they are often quick with the cliched defense, “This is a free country, isn’t it?” But they “fail to grasp the other half of the democratic equation: the responsibility to participate in the hard work of self-

1. Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), xiii.

Although voter participation in the 1992 presidential election (55% of the voting age population) was the highest since 1972, this was likely an anomaly, due to the appeal of third-party candidate Ross Perot among alienated voters who had not voted in recent years (Robert Pear, “55% Voting Rate Reverses 30-Year Decline,” *New York Times*, 5 November 1992). The voter participation rate in the midterm congressional elections of 1994, despite all the hoopla about the Contract with America, was only 44.6%—lower than the rates in the last two midterm elections (45% in 1990 and 46% in 1986) (“Low-Income Voters’ Turnout Fell in 1994, Census Reports,” *New York Times*, 11 June 1995, p. 28). As is well known, both these participation figures are embarrassingly low in comparison with voter participation rates in most other Western democracies.

2. Michael Oreskes, “A Trait of Today’s Youth: Apathy to Public Affairs,” *The New York Times*, 28 June 1990, A1.

3. *Ibid.*

government.”⁴ They show little interest in government, politics, current events or public life.⁵

Among Americans, and especially young Americans, there is a widespread sense of political alienation and a mass rejection of the idea of participation in public life. The only times many Americans get involved in public debate, or even vote, is when a major political scandal surfaces, or when they perceive the threat of a war, a tax increase, or some other problem that might directly affect their personal lives. Alienation from public life leads to a diminished sense of citizenship as merely flag-waving, artificial patriotism. Such citizens pledge their allegiance to the flag, and then stand by as their government and corporate leaders go about their business, with or without regard for liberty and justice.⁶

Current Directions in American Social Life

If American citizens remain withdrawn from public life, our society will continue to be shaped, by default, by members of the following two groups: (1) the richest, most powerful, and influential business and finance leaders, who help shape the economy in which most people earn their living and seek satisfaction of their consumer needs and wants; and (2) those who do participate regularly and powerfully in public life and government. This second group includes both issue-oriented interest groups⁷ and, again, powerful business and finance leaders, who because of their economic importance can exercise their influence through both formal and informal means. In many cases the members of these two groups represent the same or similar social class interests—those of business and the upper classes.⁸

4. People for the American Way, *Democracy's Next Generation: A Study of Youth and Teachers* (People for the American Way, 1989), 14–15.

5. *Ibid.*, 16, 30–31.

6. Walter Karp finds this false, antidemocratic patriotism, which he calls “nationalism,” to be rampant in late-twentieth century American society. Walter Karp, “The Two Americas,” in *Buried Alive: Essays on Our Endangered Republic* (New York: Franklin Square Press, 1992), 13–26.

7. There are many of these groups, but some of the obvious ones are the National Rifle Association, anti-gun groups, anti-abortion groups, abortion rights groups, the Christian Coalition, etc.

8. E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America* (Hinsdale, IL: Dryden Press, 1975, orig., 1966), 20–45.

As people have become increasingly alienated from public life, those left as stewards of American society have established a record of their achievements. If this record portends future developments, most Americans have reason for concern. Below are just a few indicators of the disastrous direction in which our political guardians are taking us, as many Americans remain politically disengaged.

Enormous Concentration of Wealth

- “The share of net worth . . . held by the top 1 percent of households jumped from below 20 percent in 1979 to more than 36 percent in 1989.” The number of American billionaires leaped from 21 in 1982 to 71 in 1991. “The wealthy’s share of the total wealth expanded as much during the Reagan boom as it did in the 100 years—roughly 1830 to 1929—in which America transformed itself from an egalitarian land of small farmers into the world’s reigning industrial power.”⁹
- During the 1980s, the income of the richest Americans (those in the top 20% of the nation in family income) increased their share of national family income from 46.7% to 51.4%.¹⁰
- While corporate presidents’ earnings “soared to 160 times that of the average worker, union membership sank, and pay and productivity . . . stagnated.”¹¹

Shrinking Middle Class; Growing Lower Class

- Between 1972 and 1988, real weekly pay of both white collar and blue collar workers fell by 11% in constant dollars.¹²
- Between 1969 and 1989, the percentage of Americans with middle incomes fell from 71.2% to 63.3%. During the same

9. Sylvia Nasar, “The Rich Get Richer, But Never the Same Way Twice,” *The New York Times*, 16 August 1992, section 4, 3.

10. Kevin Phillips, *Boiling Point: Democrats, Republicans and the Decline of Middle-Class Prosperity* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 279.

11. Nasar, 3.

12. Kevin Phillips, *The Politics of Rich and Poor* (New York: Random House, 1990), 18.

period, the percentage of Americans with low incomes (less than half the median income) rose from 17.9% to 22.1%.¹³

- Since 1979, “the percentage of all Americans working full time but earning less than the poverty level for a family of four, about \$13,000 a year, has risen by 50 percent.”¹⁴
- The percentage of young workers (age 18–24) earning less than the poverty level has more than doubled, from 23 percent in 1979 to 47 percent in 1992.¹⁵

Tax Burden Shifted Downward

- During the 1980s the top federal tax bracket was cut from 70% to 30%.¹⁶
- Between 1960 and 1986, the effective tax rate on corporate profits was cut from 46% to 21%.¹⁷
- As a result of the 1986 federal tax reform, families earning a million dollars a year or more received a 31% tax cut, saving them over \$280,000 per year. People earning \$30,000–\$40,000 got only an 11% tax cut, giving them about \$467 a year in additional take-home pay.¹⁸

Homes and Homelessness

- “The U.S. leads the 19 major industrial nations in homelessness and in percentage of people living in big homes [5 rooms or more].”¹⁹

13. U.S. Census Bureau report, cited in “Middle Class Shrinks, U.S. Says,” *The New York Times*, 22 February 1992, I, 9.

14. Jason DeParle, “Sharp Increase Along the Borders of Poverty,” *The New York Times*, 31 March 1994.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Sylvia Nasar, “The Rich Get Richer...”

17. Steve Brouwer, *Sharing the Pie: A Disturbing Picture of the U.S. Economy* (Carlisle, PA: Big Picture Books, 1992), 9.

18. Phillips, 1994, figure 4, 113.

19. Andrew L. Shapiro, *We're Number One!* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 77.

- Homelessness in the U.S. doubled between 1983 and 1987, and by 1992, the U.S. Coalition for the Homeless put the number of homeless Americans at three million.²⁰ A 1994 report by Andrew Cuomo of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development “argues that seven million people were homeless at some point during the latter half of the 1980s.”²¹

Prisons and Schools

- The U.S. has the highest rate of incarceration in the world, jailing 426 of every 100,000 people. The U.S. prison population has more than doubled since 1979.²²
- The U.S. ranks seventeenth in the world in public spending on education per Gross Domestic Product.²³ Federal spending on education fell 18% between 1979 and 1991.²⁴

These and similar trends have been especially severe in America's cities. Cities have become plagued with the sharp contradictions of extreme wealth and poverty; flight of manufacturing jobs which pay a middle-class wage; burgeoning homelessness; cutbacks in federal expenditures for urban services and programs for the poor; continued de facto school segregation between city and suburb; the destruction of communities by violence and drugs; the lack of economic opportunity for minimally skilled people, and especially people of color; worsening patterns of racial and gender bias and discrimination; rising tension between the police and communities of people of color; and continual fiscal austerity, limiting the possibilities for public policy responses to these problems.

The quality of life of the majority of Americans has deteriorated dramatically in recent years. The foundation for our collective future as a society is cracking. The 1992 street uprising in Los Angeles following the acquittals of police officers who had been videotaped

20. *Ibid.*, 78.

21. Kevin Sack, “Andrew Cuomo,” *The New York Times Magazine* 27 March 1994, 42.

22. Tom Wicker, “The Iron Medal,” *The New York Times*, 7 January 1991.

23. Shapiro, 56.

24. Brouwer, 21.

beating Rodney King, is both a symptom of this deterioration and a warning. As Cornel West sees it, "What we witnessed in Los Angeles was the consequence of a lethal linkage of economic decline, cultural decay and political lethargy in American life."²⁵

The Need for Public Democracy

If the United States is to address its mounting social problems, there will have to be much broader and fuller participation in the decision-making processes that shape society. People must reenter—or in many cases enter for the first time—the public life of their society. Privately oriented individuals must become active, effective, publicly oriented citizens. They must organize to take control of the powerful institutions of society, or create new social institutions through which to build social justice, fairness, equality, economic opportunity—in short, the conditions necessary for the self-development of all members of society.²⁶ Democracy must be revived and widely expanded to ensure that society's broadest possible interests will be served.

However, social change as fundamental as the invigoration of American democracy cannot take place in the present political and ideological climate. A challenge must first be mounted to the existing system of hegemony, that is, to the system of ideas and social practices that helps maintain the domination of corporate and upper-class interests over those of the rest of the population.²⁷ In the United States, this domination is maintained, in part, by a system of ideas and practices that promotes large-scale alienation and disengagement from public life.

Current dominant *conceptions* of democracy and of a citizen's role in a democracy, following a long tradition in liberal political

25. Cornel West, "Learning to Talk of Race," *The New York Times Magazine*, 2 August 1992, 24.

26. Carol Gould, *Rethinking Democracy: Freedom and Social Cooperation in Politics, Economy and Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 110.

27. Antonio Gramsci, one of the earliest, most important theorists of hegemony, defines social hegemony as the "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life" by the dominant class. See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and transl. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1985), 12.

and social thought, are only minimally concerned with participation in public life. They are oriented chiefly toward individual, private economic activity as the fulfillment of the promise of democracy. The *traditional practice* of democracy in the United States has also been one of limited participation by most people in government and public affairs. This combination of dominant American ideas and traditional practices of democracy, has contributed to what can be called an American hegemonic ideology of democracy that favors low levels of popular democratic participation and a withering of the public sphere.

American society is deteriorating precisely because most people are not participating purposefully and powerfully in public life, either as individuals or as members of organized groups. Most Americans have neither the experience (democratic practice) nor the inclination (ideological impetus) to participate in shaping their society. Nor do they have the necessary knowledge and skills for effective democratic participation. If the United States wishes to halt its current slide toward social decay and begin to build a just, inclusive, prosperous, and democratic future, the current hegemonic ideology of democracy will have to be challenged. It will need to be replaced by an alternative ideology and related practice of *public democracy*.

Hegemony and the Role of Intellectuals in Social Stability and Social Change

Hegemony is an ongoing process, “a complex interlocking of political, social and cultural forces,” that supports a particular social order.²⁸ Hegemony is maintained through all of society’s cultural and social processes, as they interact with, and enter into the practical consciousness of individuals.²⁹

28. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 108. There are many interpretations of Gramsci’s ideas on hegemony. In this book, the terms “hegemony” and “hegemonic ideologies” will be used in the sense laid out by Raymond Williams. That is, the terms will not be used to mean merely dominant sets of ideas or explanations of the world, but will also include the sense of concrete everyday practices that are connected with such ideas, in a mutually reinforcing, dialectical relationship.

29. *Ibid.*, 110.

The process of hegemony creates for most people a “sense of reality” that attempts to place beyond question or criticism much of social life, including the existing relations of domination and subordination within which different social groups live.³⁰ Through the process of hegemony, people come to see unequal power relations in society as merely “the pressures and limits of simple experience and common sense.”³¹ Injustice and inequality are taken for granted as natural, commonsense realities.

Nevertheless, because hegemony is a living social process, it carries within it seeds of change. As Raymond Williams describes it:

A lived hegemony . . . is a realized complex of experiences, relationships and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits. . . . It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own. We have then to add to the concept of hegemony the concepts of counter-hegemony and alternative hegemony. . . .

The reality of any hegemony . . . is that, while by definition it is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive. At any time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in the society.³²

In order to understand how a hegemonic ideology of democracy in the United States might be challenged, it is necessary to examine the role of intellectuals in establishing and maintaining hegemony. As has been said, hegemony is a complex social process that results in the manufacture and reinforcement of public consent to the existing social order. Intellectuals play a central role in this process.³³ They take key positions in civil society and government, and serve the dominant classes through their work in the institutions of business, education, religion, communications, culture, politics, and so on.³⁴ They direct and manage the organizational and technical work

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*, 112–13.

33. The term “intellectuals” is used here in a broad sense, referring not only to academics, but also to whole strata of technically skilled and educated people, from artists to corporate leaders to politicians.

34. Gramsci, 12.

of business. Intellectuals perform similar functions in the bureaucratic and political work of government. They also fill directive and technical positions in the law enforcement, justice, and penal systems, as well in the military. Through these roles, intellectuals help shape the everyday practices of the vast majority of individuals. In addition, intellectuals take active roles in ideological production as teachers, writers, artists, philosophers, scientists, religious functionaries, news and other media figures, entertainers, and so on.

If intellectuals fail to play their roles in the construction and management of social hegemony, or if they play counterhegemonic roles, mass consent to a social order can begin to erode. If this occurs, dominant groups must attempt to reestablish public consent to the social order. If the erosion of public consent becomes very deep, it can sometimes only be reestablished around somewhat altered social relations and practices. When this happens, social change occurs.

In order to challenge the dominance of privatized democracy in the United States, there is a need for intellectuals who will serve the cause of expanding democracy. These intellectuals will be needed as spokespeople and leaders of social movements that challenge privatized democracy with new visions of public democracy. In fact, full participation in public democracy will require the development of *all* members of society as intellectuals, so that all are capable of engaging in public life, and when necessary, taking up roles as leaders for social change. Antonio Gramsci's understanding of intellectuals supports this egalitarian vision of a democratic society in which all citizens are intellectually prepared to participate in public life.

Two Types of Intellectuals

Gramsci identifies two main types of intellectuals—*organic intellectuals* and *traditional intellectuals*. Both types play important roles in determining whether a social order will be maintained or whether an existing hegemony will be challenged.

Traditional intellectuals are intellectuals whose positions in society were established under previously existing social relations of production. They have remained in existence despite far-reaching

social transformations. Examples of traditional intellectuals are ecclesiastics, such as theologians, clergy and religious administrators, religious teachers, and charity workers; and secular intellectuals such as philosophers, academics, scientists, and artists.³⁵ Traditional intellectuals tend to see themselves as an autonomous, independent social group, un beholden to other social classes as they pursue physical or metaphysical "truths." To a limited extent they are correct. Some intellectuals still feel more closely allied to their own traditional institutions and historical practices than they do to the institutions and causes of current social classes and groups—whether dominant or subordinate. However, these intellectuals find themselves drawn increasingly toward enlistment in the positions and causes of newer social classes and groups. Traditional intellectuals become targeted for recruitment to the causes of both dominant and subordinate social groups.

An example of this phenomenon is provided by the traditional intellectuals of the Catholic Church. The Catholic clergy are ostensibly loyal to the Church's stated primary mission of saving souls and helping people live a more spiritual life. This is certainly the way the Pope and the Church hierarchy in Rome would have it. Historically, however, the Church has usually aligned itself with the existing social order in any given country, and its intellectuals have supported that social order through their organizational and ideological work. Even when the Church's intellectuals have focused almost exclusively on spiritual life, this has had the effect, by default, of supporting existing material social relations.

But through the theology of liberation, Catholic clergy and lay intellectuals in Latin America and other parts of the world have become embroiled in a quite worldly class struggle. Many have chosen a "preferential option for the poor," and now organize and work on the side of the poor for greater social justice and more equitable social relations. Others have continued to support the existing social order. But in countries like El Salvador and Brazil, where social inequality and injustice are stark, and where the forces for and against fundamental social change have become so hotly engaged, there has been little room for Church people to remain outside the struggle. In recent visits to Latin America, the

35. *Ibid.*, 7.

Pope himself has felt compelled to call publicly for greater social justice and equality, even though he strongly rejects liberation theology, and has done much to attempt to neutralize its clergy practitioners.³⁶

A similar case can be made about traditional, secular intellectuals. They often present themselves as autonomous, non-class-aligned individuals, busily pursuing their truths in the arts, sciences or other academic fields. Yet the social base that provides for the independence and 'intellectual freedom' of these intellectuals is relatively narrow and weak. Take, for example, the university. The university is perhaps the single most important institutional base for these intellectuals, yet this is clearly a site that is highly influenced by the dominant classes. Universities receive significant portions of their operating monies from corporate grants and contracts, which tie scientists, artists, and other intellectuals into projects that directly and indirectly serve corporate interests. Universities are even more dependent on the state. To the extent that the state acts in the service of the dominant classes, universities and their intellectuals are further brought into the service of the dominant classes.

However, as Louis Althusser points out, universities, as ideological state apparatuses, are sites of ideological struggle.³⁷ Some traditional intellectuals in universities will no doubt be recruited to work for the dominant classes. Some will attempt to maintain an independent stance, serving as well as they can the ideals of their intellectual and institutional traditions. Nevertheless, what these independently oriented traditional intellectuals create—lectures, research papers, articles, books—are cultural products, which as such will become the object of ideological contestation. Both dominant and insurgent social groups will attempt to use these cultural products (when they deal with relevant social issues), to support their hegemonic or alternative hegemonic positions. Other traditional intellectuals will work directly in the service of insurgent subordinate social groups. Through their research and organizational work they

36. Alan Cowell, "Pope Challenges Brazil Leaders on Behalf of Poor," *New York Times*, 15 October 1991, A-15.

37. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127-86.

will support the causes of the poor, people of color, feminists, environmentalists, and others who challenge the injustices of the existing social order. So traditional intellectuals are indeed a group that is open for recruitment to the causes of both dominant and subordinate social groups.

Organic intellectuals arise in connection with the emergence of new social classes. Unlike traditional intellectuals, who see themselves as independent of class interests, organic intellectuals perform essential economic, social, and political functions for the classes with which they are connected. The capitalist class, for example, develops its own (or recruits from other classes) managers, technicians, lawyers, politicians, academics, and cultural agents such as artists and writers. These groups organize and maintain the unequal social relations of capitalism through their work in business, government, and cultural production.³⁸

Subordinate social groups, especially those that are rising to challenge the inequalities and injustices of the existing social order, can also develop or recruit their own organic intellectuals. These are the people who, regardless of what jobs or professions they have, serve their social classes or groups as leaders and organizers. Such leaders as Cesar Chavez and Martin Luther King, Jr. were prominent examples of organic intellectuals of subordinate groups. But there are also thousands of lesser known organic intellectuals who organize and lead movements for social change at the local level. So while organic intellectuals of the dominant classes work to support the existing hegemony, organic intellectuals of subordinate social groups act as change agents working against the hegemonic social order. Examples of organic intellectuals of subordinate groups are the leaders, advisors, organizers, and writers who serve feminist, civil rights, environmental, and other social activist groups.

In addition to their organizational and leadership roles, another important function of progressive organic intellectuals is to assimilate traditional intellectuals and enlist them in social change projects.³⁹ Traditional intellectuals have important skills, resources, and institutional locations that give them, potentially, significant cultural, ideological, and organizational power. If they are not enlisted in

38. Gramsci, 5.

39. *Ibid.*, 10.

progressive causes, they may become the kind of “accommodating intellectuals” who, despite their attempts to remain objective and “professional,” serve the status quo by default. Or they might become fully incorporated into the existing hegemonic order as active agents in its maintenance and reproduction.⁴⁰

Intellectuals, Ideology, and Social Change

As progressive social groups develop organic intellectuals, these intellectuals provide the focus and direction necessary for their groups to organize as movements. They do this, in part, through their articulation of alternative ideologies. Alternative ideologies create new understandings of the social world, and new visions that help mobilize people to struggle for social change.

Gramsci makes the point that *all* members of society have certain intellectual capacities, which they utilize in varying degrees in their work and in other spheres of their daily lives. Individuals use their intellectual abilities to understand and evaluate common conceptions of the social world and govern their participation in social life. They can either go along with dominant social conceptions and practices, or challenge them and seek to change them. The task for progressive social groups then, is to develop the critical intellectual capacities of every one of their group members, to develop each member as a potential leader—an organic intellectual—who will create new, liberating conceptions of the world and work with others to bring them into existence.⁴¹

The idea of “organic” intellectuals “refers both to the relation of intellectuals [as leaders and organizers] to the classes in whose behalf they speak, and to the breakdown of the distinction between leaders and the led.”⁴² Since any member of a social group has the intellectual capability to play a social and political leadership role, anyone can potentially become an organic intellectual, working to expand American democracy. This is an egalitarian conception of

40. Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux, *Education under Siege* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), 39.

41. Gramsci, 9.

42. Stanley Aronowitz, “The Future of Socialism?” in *Social Text* 24 (1990): 106.

intellectuals and of political leadership. It contrasts sharply with other views, whether conservative, liberal or left, which see intellectuals as a natural elite, separate from, and above common people.

Gramsci's concept of organic intellectuals is central to a theory of the process of radical democratic social change. Organic intellectuals of subordinate groups can organize cultural and political struggle for a new hegemonic order based on principles of justice, freedom for the self-development of all, and a radical, public democracy in which "every citizen can govern."⁴³

The Importance of Education

In order to serve the needs of advanced capitalism, American society has had to create at least a minimally educated and trained general workforce, as well as large numbers of technically specialized intellectuals, and intellectuals of the managerial and directive type. It has also been necessary to socialize these workers and intellectuals to accept an ideology of privatized democracy that justifies or makes allowances for the relations of domination, inequality, and injustice inherent in American capitalist society.

The primary institution for training and socializing workers and intellectuals is the education system.⁴⁴ The extensive U.S. system of public and private schools, from elementary through university level, serves the educational and ideological purposes of the American social status quo. However, it also offers possibilities for initiating ideological and social change.

One possible source of social change lies in the fact that, as Althusser states, schools are contested ideological terrain. This means that efforts by the dominant social groups to educate and socialize a compliant workforce are likely to meet resistance. Students may reject the best-laid plans and programs offered by a school. Of course, as Paul Willis demonstrates in *Learning to Labor*, students' resistance to official school culture and expectations can itself be incorporated into the dynamic process of young people's socialization to working-class jobs and working-class lives.⁴⁵ So student

43. Gramsci, 40.

44. Gramsci, 10.

45. Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

resistance to school culture does not alone guarantee the formation of a counterhegemonic social movement. Still, the fact that young people can and do draw on their own cultures and knowledge to resist socialization to the dominant order, raises the possibility that their resistance could be organized to support public democratic ideals. This could happen if some young people among them received the support and guidance, either inside the school or outside, to nurture their intellectual development along critical, activist lines. These young people could become progressive organic intellectuals and take on leadership roles among progressive social groups.

Another pool of potential social change agents is created as a byproduct of one of the most basic functions of the American educational system—educating the managers and technicians who will run American business and government. In order to generate a cohort of highly qualified intellectuals to manage the machinery of the social order, it is necessary to create a relatively large pool of highly educated and trained people from which the system-serving intellectuals can be drawn. The selectiveness of the process means that many who receive a fairly high level of intellectual training will not—or at least will not at all times—be incorporated into the types of positions for which they have been trained.

Such a selection process “creates the possibility of vast crises of unemployment [and underemployment] for the middle intellectual strata, and in all modern societies this actually takes place.”⁴⁶ The underutilization of a large cohort of intellectuals is potentially very dangerous for the existing social order. These intellectuals could become a source of leadership for movements of resistance and struggle for social change.⁴⁷ What prevents this from happening in many cases is the demobilizing power of American hegemonic ideologies of democracy, which encourage individualistic, privately oriented activities at the expense of public democratic action.

The question that arises is, who can provide the support and guidance to help develop a counterhegemonic consciousness and public activist stance among students and alienated adults?

46. *Ibid.*, 11.

47. *Ibid.*, 11. It is interesting that conservative economist Joseph Schumpeter elaborates on precisely the same problem in his classic book on capitalist political economy. See Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1950, orig. 1942), 152–55.

One source of counterhegemonic leadership in society can be found outside the schools, among the numerous social activist movements and groups, some of which are working consciously to expand American democracy. These include such groups as feminists; civil rights organizations; community-based organizations; groups organized around the social, cultural, and political concerns of people of color; and environmentalists. As will be discussed later, such groups can provide spaces in which young people and others can learn to understand critically the ideologies and the concrete injustices of the hegemonic social and political order, and organize to challenge it.

The current battle for a counterhegemonic vision and practice of public democracy has been joined on many cultural and ideological fronts. Some of the groups in this struggle have understood that it is not enough to fight strictly for greater political power. They have come to realize, following Gramsci, that the only way to create an expanded public democracy in which they can hold greater political power is by working to change American culture.

In addition to social activist organizations of feminists, people of color, environmentalists, and others outside of education, the other key site for the struggle for a new hegemony of public democracy is *inside* the public education system. Within the contested ideological terrain of schools, committed progressive teachers can take on roles as organic intellectuals—as public, transformative intellectuals “who combine . . . thinking and practice with a political project grounded in the struggle for a culture of liberation and justice.”⁴⁸ They can fight for control of their own workplaces, the schools, in order to transform them from institutions of ideological and social reproduction into places where teachers and students examine dominant ideologies and existing social relations from critical, ethical perspectives.⁴⁹ Such work helps develop young people’s capacities for critical thinking. It can also lead students to formulate alternative visions of society, and begin to take action to realize those visions. An educational process such as this would be a powerful preparation

48. Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux, *Postmodern Education* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 109; see also Aronowitz and Giroux, *Education under Siege* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), 36–37.

49. Aronowitz and Giroux, *Postmodern Education*, 108–10.

for students, as young, organic intellectuals who could themselves join the struggle for a new public democracy.

The image of the United States as a world model—a beacon of democracy—is at the center of an ideology that partially masks the systemic relations of domination and subordination, the inequalities and injustices of American society. The dominant American ideology of liberal, republican democracy, together with its associated, sharply limited practices of democracy, encourages people to accept as natural, commonsense realities the continued existence and recent exacerbation of vast inequalities in every area of social life. The project of articulating a radical, participatory, and public vision of democracy and struggling to bring it about is the most important counterhegemonic project that can be undertaken in the United States today.

As Althusser and Gramsci argue, the conflict between established ideological conceptions and practices and alternative ones, takes place in the political, legal, and especially the cultural arenas of society. Much of the struggle to establish a new hegemonic order, under new ideological conceptions and practices of democracy, goes on through the work of feminist, environmental, African-American, Latino, Asian-American, and other organized subordinate social groups. Organic intellectuals play an important role here, organizing people to support these counterhegemonic democratic projects.

Meanwhile, the educational system, as a key apparatus for ideological production and for training intellectuals, is one of the most important sites for the struggle over ideas and practices of democracy. Public education, the one public institution specifically charged with preparing young people to become full members of society, can play a central role in the formation of young people's understandings of democracy, and of themselves as citizens in a democracy. In their function of helping students develop their intellectual abilities, schools also strongly influence the ability of young people to participate intelligently and effectively in a democracy.

Public schools are, literally, instruments of the state. Since the state, and its schools, are instruments of the established social order, it might seem futile to look to schools as possible instruments for challenging dominant understandings and practices of democracy. But if hegemony is understood as a dynamic process, and if schools

are seen as sites of ideological contestation, then it is possible that there is a “transformative role that schools can play in advancing the democratic possibilities inherent in the existing society.”⁵⁰ Educators who seek to play such a role must engage young people in projects of study, dialogue, and action that will enable them to begin to reconstruct the current hegemonic ideology of democracy along more participatory, public, egalitarian, and just lines.

Before beginning a discussion of how educators might engage students in public democratic study and action, it is necessary first to explore the raw material of such a project. It is important to examine closely two major strains of American democratic ideology and practice.

The first tradition sees democracy as a privately oriented, individualistic system with little room for most people to participate in self-rule. This tradition of *Federalist democracy* or *privatized democracy* is rooted in the political thought of Hobbes and Locke, the authors of the *Federalist Papers*, Adam Smith and the utilitarian liberals, and twentieth-century American pluralist theorists and free market economists.

The second tradition proposes an alternative vision and practice of democracy, grounded in the work of Rousseau, Jefferson, Dewey, Mills, and several important feminist theorists such as Carol Gould, Nancy Fraser, Carole Pateman, and Carol Gilligan. This tradition of *public democracy* sees people’s participation in public life as the essential ingredient in democratic government.

It will be the task of the next three chapters to examine the main features of these two democratic traditions.

50. Henry Giroux, *Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 185.