‘Hegemony’ means leadership or dominance (especially of one country or social group in relation to others)

For our purposes it is most useful to think of it in terms of leadership

Hegemony = Leadership

But what is ‘Leadership’? What does it involve? What does it mean to lead?
To Lead means

To determine the direction which will be taken in the future

To persuade

To impress

To intimidate

To coerce

To seduce

To inspire imitation

To convince others of your moral authority

To convince others of your legitimacy

To convince others of your unique competence

To convince others of your indispensability

To convince others of your invincibility

To convince others that your interests and objectives coincide with their interests and objectives

To neutralise opposition or prevent it from emerging

To set the terms of debate
• The term ‘hegemony’ entered the lexicon of Marxist political theory during debates amongst Russian socialists at the end of the 19th century

• It became particularly important for Lenin in trying to formulate a theory of revolution which made sense under Russian conditions in the early 20th century
• Marx had thought that the industrial working class would be the natural supporters of communism and that it would acquire a mass following in countries with a large and highly-developed industrial working class.

• Russia had a very small and dispersed industrial working class: the vast majority of its population were poor peasant farmers.
• Lenin developed the idea that the working class might still lead the revolution, even if most of the actual revolutionaries were peasants. He proposed a coalition of the peasant and working classes, with the working class taking the lead.

• Lenin also believed that the workers themselves required the leadership of a revolutionary party in order to make revolution possible.
The term ‘hegemony’ as it is used in contemporary cultural studies and political theory is principally derived from the writings of Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937)
Gramsci was the leader of the Italian Communist Party, the main opponents of Benito Mussolini’s fascist party, who took power in the 1920s.

He already had been a journalist, a newspaper editor, a trade-unionist and a political organiser for many years when he was arrested and imprisoned for his political activities in 1928.

The magistrate sentencing him to prison declared ‘we must silence this mind for 1000 years’.

In prison Gramsci wrote a great deal in his famous ‘prison notebooks’ about Italian history and politics, problems of political organisation, culture and philosophy.

Gramsci was a follower of Lenin, but he saw that under different social and cultural conditions, Lenin’s theory of revolutionary organisation would have to be revised.
Gramsci saw that Italy was a very different sort of country to Czarist Russia: it was more socially diverse, more prosperous, with formal political democracy, a well-developed mass media sector and a complex web of social and cultural institutions which many different social groups participated in.

Under these conditions, the ruling social groups were obliged to win the support of some other social groups, and to maintain that support, in order to retain their positions.

Under these circumstances, some social groups had to be *persuaded* to accept the authority of others.

This meant that the ruling groups had an ongoing task of maintaining their position: they couldn’t simply take it for granted, or use brute force.

This meant that *hegemony* was an issue not just for revolutionaries who wanted to establish a coalition of radical forces, but those in power who wanted to remain in power: they also had to exercise forms of leadership which could hold together the social coalitions which would underpin their position.
Gramsci called the ruling groups ‘hegemonic’, stressing the fact that they must exercise certain kinds of leadership to remain in power.

He called the non-hegemonic groups ‘subaltern’ (a military term designating the lower ranks of an army).

Gramsci stressed that in a highly complex society like modern Italy, at least some of the subaltern groups must consent to the leadership of the hegemonic groups.

At one point in his writings, Gramsci famously suggests that Hegemony = Coercion + Consent.

But it’s really the consent which is important. Without consent there is no hegemony.

However, it is important to note that for Gramsci, consent can be either active or ‘passive’.

What might ‘passive consent’ mean?
How is consent won?

This is one of the biggest and most complicated questions to emerge from Gramsci’s work.

It is also one of the key questions for all radical thought: in a demonstrably unequal and exploitative society, how are people persuaded to accept a subordinate position?
One of Gramsci’s key ways of addressing this concept is through his idea of ‘common sense’.

‘Common sense’ is the set of everyday assumptions which members of a given social group take for granted about the nature of the world and their place in it.

Gramsci stresses that key cultural institutions (churches, schools, media outlets, universities, etc.) can play the role of propagating certain kinds of ‘common sense’ which support the established social order, making it appear either positively desirable, or simply unchangeable.

But common sense is not just nonsense - it would not be effective if it didn’t offer people a convincing picture of the world, and it therefore usually involves important grains of truth: which Gramsci calls ‘good sense’.
In *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al. 1978), Stuart Hall and his colleagues offered a classical, detailed account of the crisis of Fordism in Britain and its cultural and political consequences. They saw a whole range of factors producing a *crisis of consent* which opened the way to challenges to the Fordist consensus from both Left and Right. They saw the New Right taking advantage of the situation by trying to persuade people that the crisis was caused by a breakdown of respect for ‘traditional’ values, law and order, and by excessive immigration.

In 1979, Margaret Thatcher was elected Prime Minister. Her government embarked on a long-term programme to weaken trade unions, privatise large sections of the economy, and prepare Britain for a ‘post-industrial’ future, while reassuring conservative voters with appeals to ‘traditional’ values.
Hall and his colleagues theorised this situation in a classically Gramscian vein. Let’s see how they applied some of the key concepts:

• What was the nature of the crisis?
According to Hall et. al., it was a crisis of hegemony. Consent for the post-war consensus and for the authority of the industrialists, trade-union leaders, and government agencies who had been the most influential figures in British politics and society has broken down as a range of conflicting demands and pressures were brought to bear on it.

• How did the New Right respond? By telling people a convincing story about the nature of the crisis that nonetheless supported their own interests: by producing a new common sense according to which individual enterprise, weakened trade unions, a revitalised business sector and a tough ‘law and order’ policy would solve Britain’s problems.

• How were people persuaded to go along with this? Partly just by being lied to by the press (which was appallingly biased against the labour movement, and became more so after Murdoch’s victory at Wapping), but also by being real concessions (such as cheap ex-council homes) being targeted at key social groups (especially skilled manual workers). And importantly - the story told by the Right had some powerful elements of truth in it. Cultural changes brought about by feminism, immigration etc. really did threaten the way of life of many white working class people and really were being exacerbated by forces beyond their control (this was the grain of good sense in the new common sense).
The strategy of the New Right was to make possible the beginnings of the neoliberal project in Britain.

Over time, as resistance was broken down and disaggregated, it became less necessary for advocates of neoliberalism to appeal to the classic narrative of the New Right.

The ‘common sense’ which emerged in the 1990s was one which tended to stress the importance of individual achievement and self-expression above even traditional values, and which tended to legitimate itself by presenting itself as the only way of being properly ‘modern’.

The classic exponent of this position was Tony Blair. In a famous speech he described both the conservative Right and the left-wing of the labour movement as ‘forces of conservatism’, holding Britain back and resisting progressive change. For Blair, progress meant the spread of liberal social values and the full implementation of the neoliberal economic programme.
Neoliberalism

A social philosophy

A political project

A programme - a set of government policies

An ideology
Neoliberalism stresses the value of **individual competition** and **private enterprise** as the main engines of economic and social creativity, and believes that **market** mechanisms are the best means to allocate resources in most situations, so it pursues a policy agenda informed by these assumptions:

- Privatising public assets, including public services
- Cutting taxes, especially progressive redistributive taxes
- Restricting trade union activities and discouraging trade-union membership
- Deregulating labour markets: removing protections from workers while making easier for employers to hire and fire at will.
- Deregulating financial markets: reducing government oversight and legal restrictions on all forms of financial speculation
- Reducing public spending
- Encouraging competitive and entrepreneurial attitudes amongst the public
- Deliberately encouraging commercial attitudes and behaviours in the public sector
This basic neoliberal economic programme can be linked to a range of different social policies.

In the UK and the US, the ‘New Right’ led by Reagan and Thatcher combined neoliberal economics with conservative social policies which promised to ‘restore’ ‘traditional’ ‘family values’, build up the military state, crack down hard on crime, limit the development of multiculturalism, and shore up traditional sources of social authority.

In the 1990s and 2000s in the same countries, the Blair and Clinton governments combined a neoliberal economic agenda with socially liberal policies such as promoting equality for gay people and supporting women’s participation in the labour market.

Today neoliberalism is without serious question the governing ideology of contemporary capitalism, tending to promote a culture characterised by individualism, competition, consumerism, and tolerance for very high levels of inequality. It’s worth reflecting on the multiple ways in which these values are promoted and normalised through the media, popular culture, the education system, etc.
What’s the difference between liberalism and neoliberalism?

**Foucault** makes a persuasive argument that the key difference is neoliberalism’s stronger emphasis on the value of competition, and its belief that it may be necessary and legitimate to use the state to achieve its objectives by compelling people to behave in particular ways.

Whereas classical liberalism (e.g. Adam Smith) had promoted commercial values and behaviour as encouraging a civilised attitude, and believed that ‘enlightened self-interest’ would lead to benefits for all, this tradition had not tended to see ruthless competition as necessarily good in itself. Adam Smith seems to have imagine a world in which we would all find our specialised economic niche, rather than one in which we would be constantly competing with each other.

More fundamentally, classical liberalism tends to assume that if the state leaves people alone, then they will spontaneously develop the entrepreneurial habits which it values. By contrast, neoliberalism uses the state to force people to behave like competitive entrepreneurs, whether they want to or not.
The term ‘neoliberalism’ was first used in 1938 by Arthur Rüstow, at the Colloque Walter Lippmann a conference in Paris organised by liberal thinkers horrified by what they saw as the victory of various forms of collectivism (socialism, communism, fascism, social democracy).

The most lastingly influential attendee of that conference was the Austrian economist and political philosopher, Friedrich Hayek.

After World War II, Hayek would set up an international society dedicated to the spread of neoliberal ideas: The Mont Pelerin Society.

In 1944 Hayek had published the work that would become the greatest political influence on Margaret Thatcher, his anti-collectivist diatribe The Road to Serfdom. He taught at the London School of Economics in the 1940s and moved to the University of Chicago in 1950, from where his ideas would spread gradually through the network of right-wing intellectuals, journalists and politicians, think-tanks, journals and lobbying groups fostered by the Mont Perelin society and its allies.
Although they found early favour with some politicians, such as Enoch Powell, neoliberal ideas were considered the preserve of the lunatic right-wing fringe in the 1950s and 1960s. Even if they were sympathetic to them, mainstream politicians of the Right thought that it would be impossible to implement them without provoking social revolution. Even most right-wingers were uncomfortable with Hayek’s cold-hearted individualism, and had accepted that the state had a duty to maintain a certain level of social cohesion. On the Left, figure such as Hayek were regarded as of no real consequence - deluded, probably evil, but longing for a Victorian model of capitalism that would never return.

But with the breakdown of the post-war consensus at the end of the 1960s, neoliberal ideas became increasingly appealing to certain sections of the capitalist class and their political representatives
In the early 1970s, one of the most advanced socialist governments in the world was arguably the government of Chile, who had been elected democratically in 1970.

President Salvador Allende was the first avowed Marxist to be elected head of a Latin American government in free elections.
The Chilean government experimented with the use of early computer network technologies to assist in national economic planning and decision-making, developing the groundbreaking CyberSyn network for this purpose.
It was all too much for the Americans. In 1973 the CIA backed and largely instigated a military coup against the democratically-elected Allende government, installing General Pinochet as the head of a regime that would become infamous for its dictatorial human-rights violations.
They installed a team of economists from the University of Chicago to run Chile’s economic policy. ‘The Chicago Boys’ were led by Hayek’s chief student, Milton Friedman.

Pinochet’s regime, which lasted until 1990, is now widely recognised as the first neoliberal government. It did succeed in promoting economic growth, but at the expense of social equality, political liberty and any semblance of democracy.
Around the world, neoliberalism made progress on many different fronts. It spread across Latin America as the orthodoxy promoted by US-backed right-wing regimes (some democratically elected, some military dictatorships) in the 70s and 80s.

David Harvey in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* cites the 1975 budget crisis in New York (when the City government almost went bankrupt, leading to enormous cuts in public spending), and the adoption of liberalising economic reforms in China after 1978, as two key instances. In both cases, albeit in very different scales, very similar policies have led to huge growths in social inequality.

The International Monetary Fund had adopted neoliberal policies as dogma by the mid 1970s, and imposed these on every government it assisted, both in the ‘first’ and ‘third’ worlds, including imposing huge cuts on public spending on the UK’s Labour government in 1976/

The case of China obliges us to think carefully about the concept of ‘neoliberalism’. Although the Chinese government has remained nominally Communist and Marxist to this day, its pursuit of an aggressive growth strategy has led it to adopt policies of privatisation, of reducing taxes, of slashing public spending, etc. etc. To all intents and purposes these have been identical to the policies pursued by ideological neoliberals in the West and in Latin America. But there is little evidence that Chinese policy-makers have even often been aware of the work of figures such as Hayek and Friedman.

For Harvey, neoliberalism is not best understood simply as a collection of ideas and policy prescriptions, but as a project to restore to the capitalist class the power that it lost in the middle decades of the twentieth century, when it was forced to accept major social reforms and when the Communist world was really anti-capitalist.
Arguably, neoliberalism can be seen as having been implemented in the US and the UK in two main phases

• The New Right combined neoliberalism with socially conservative rhetoric, in a way which often seems quite contradictory in retrospect (for example, advocating traditional family values, but pursuing labour market politics which were obviously going to disrupt established patterns of family life. This lasted until the election of Bill Clinton in 1994 and Tony Blair and 1997.

• The so-called ‘Third Way’ of Clinton and Blair combined neoliberal policies with socially liberal ones, while offering some attempts to mitigate the worst effects of poverty. In fact arguably this has remained the typical agenda of governments of whatever party since the 1990s.

Arguably the third way was in fact more rigorously and consistently neoliberal than the new right. For example, New Labour were genuinely committed to reducing child poverty. But reducing child poverty is a perfectly acceptable policy goal for neoliberals, because they believe that everyone should get a fair chance to compete with everyone else in the labour market. Neoliberals tend to advocate equality of opportunity and social mobility. What they oppose is the idea that governments should do anything to make social outcomes more equal.
The situation since 2008 and the great recession has made two facts about neoliberalism increasingly clear.

• Neoliberalism remains *hegemonic*. It defines the common-sense parameters of both widely-circulated cultural assumptions, and of elite world-views. Governments and established political parties seem incapable of making any real critique of it.

• Harvey is right to see it as essentially a class project. Governments such as ours came close to bankrupting themselves *in order to shore up the power and wealth of they very financial institutions who had caused the crash!* Neoliberalism is supposed to be against government intervention in the economy...but exactly the same governments and agencies who have taken a consistently neoliberal position for decades colluded in forcing government to give huge amounts of assistance to the banks. Isn’t this all contradictory?

Philosophically yes - it is totally contradictory. But not if you think about it in terms of class interests. Both neoliberalism as a general programme, and the willingness of governments to abandon its most basic principles, have in common one thing: they help the rich get richer and stay richer at everyone else’s expense.
Propagating a sympathetic common sense is not the only way for hegemonic groups to secure consent however. Often such groups have to make real concessions to the demands of the subaltern.

On the other hand, when the subaltern are thoroughly disorganised and disunited, or when social conditions leave them with very little power to threaten their rulers / leaders with sanctions, then they can often be simply ignored.

Normally, it is necessary to win over some key sections of the subaltern groups in order to secure hegemony, while the rest can be ignored.

Consent for neoliberalism in countries like the UK has essentially been secured by a combination of these mechanisms. In particular:

• majority populations have been offered the opportunity to participate in certain forms of consumption on a massive scale

• key groups - managers, some media professionals, politicians - have been persuaded really to accept that neoliberalism represents the only way to do things.

• young people, especially women, have benefitted from a radical liberalisation of social values

• those social groups who have the least chance of benefitting from the massive rise in consumption, the least chance of becoming managers, and the who see the least immediate benefit from social liberalisation have been largely ignored (hence the rise in UKIP support, partly).
So we can see neoliberalism as a strategy adopted by certain sections of capital (essentially, the banks: ‘finance capital’) as a way of taking advantage of the collapse of the Fordist consensus at the end of the 60s, in order to re-establish the hegemony which they lost in the early-mid 20th century.

Obviously a big part of the context here is the general shift from a society based on mass manufacturing to one in which manufacturing mainly happens in other parts of the world, and other economic sectors become much more important.
It’s important to keep in mind that ‘common sense’ is not just about the conscious assumptions that people hold in their heads. It’s also about the everyday routines and habits which people live through, which can be seen to embody certain sets of assumptions even if they are not consciously adhered to by individuals.

One of the most important techniques for maintaining hegemony is to create situations in which people must conform to such assumptions whether they really believe in them or not.

For example, the neoliberal education system and labour market largely forces people to behave as competitive individualists even if they don’t adhere consciously to such values.

This theme is taken up later in the work of thinkers such as Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault.
For Gramsci, following Lenin, ‘hegemony’ remains a key issue for those who want to change existing power relationships as well as those who want to maintain them.

For Gramsci, those who wish to change society must effectively win support for their aims from a wide cross-section of social groups, exercising leadership over them and persuading them that it will be in their interests to accept that leadership.

This is an idea which has had huge implications for the practice of radical politics. From a Gramscian perspective, effective politics always depends upon persuading other people to come around to your point of view, or else creating a shared perspective and project which can accommodate both perspectives.
Gramsci sees culture as an open field of perpetual struggle, within which different social groups are constantly working to extend their influence and neutralise that of their opponents.

For Gramsci, in a modern society politics is a *war of position*: a kind of trench warfare whereby there are rarely absolute winners and losers, but a constant struggle to win ground from our opponents.
An important question which arises here is: who exactly are these ‘social groups’ who want to exercise hegemony over each other? Are they the same thing as social classes in the classical Marxist sense?

The answer is...maybe. *Sometimes* the social groups who struggle to achieve or maintain hegemony are actually entire social classes (e.g. the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, the proletariat). At other times, they are more specific and discrete sections of classes or ‘class fractions’. For example, within the capitalist class, industrialists and financiers often have conflicting interests; within the working class, there can be many different groups with different levels of education and prosperity, different cultural priorities and different ways of living. For this reason, different sections of different classes will often come together to form a powerful coalition or *Historic Bloc*.

For a historic bloc to be formed, or for any relations of hegemony to obtain at all, the consent of the subaltern sections must be secured.

Is there a hegemonic historic bloc in the UK today? If there is then it obviously includes the banks, who have been rescued from bankruptcy at massive cost to the rest of the population; and it appears not to include public-sector workers and those dependent upon their services, who will have to pay the price by suffering massive cuts. What other social groups might it include?
As well as writing about ‘historic blocs’, Gramsci also sometimes uses the even more abstract term ‘popular will to designate the kind of collective desires which can come into being on the political stage.

This is the starting point for the refinement of the concept of hegemony in the work of Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe, the most influential theorists of hegemony in recent years.

For Laclau & Mouffe, the range of social groups who can compete for influence and power within contemporary societies is too wide and too complex to be understood simply in terms of class. They see hegemonic struggle as taking place not between pre-defined social groups, but between groups who only really become groups in the process of struggle.

One way of understanding their position is to say that it is not necessarily classes or even specific groups of any kind who enter into relations of hegemony and struggle; rather, it is discourses who struggle for hegemony, struggling to become the taken-for-granted common sense of their day.

It is important to note here that for Laclau & Mouffe, ‘discourse’ does not just mean a set of statements, a set of ways of talking about something: it also means a complex of material and institutional practices.

So we can say that the practice and discourse of consumerism is intimately tied to the hegemony of neoliberalism: consumerism is a set of practices and assumptions which work to make shopping into the paradigm for all kinds of social activity (learning, forming relationships, making friends, etc.), both symbolically and materially. It is contested by a number of counter-discourses which would themselves like to displace it: most notably the discourse / practice of ecology.
Laclau and Mouffe see political struggle occurring through

- the ‘articulation’ (connection, linkage) of different terms into ‘chains of equivalence’

- The struggle over the meaning of key ‘nodal signifiers’ and above all those ‘empty signifiers which don’t really mean anything but which become very important to defining a whole discursive field

- The establishment of ‘dichotomic frontiers’ between different sets of terms, between ‘us’ and them

For example, normativity of the mid-20th century ideal of the gendered division of labour involved the hegemonic status of the chain of equivalence woman-mother-domestic-housewife-passive-nurturing-private sphere etc. Arguably the task of the women’s movement was to fight over the meaning of the key term ‘woman’ so as to redefine it in terms of a different chain of equivalence: woman-active-independent-public sphere etc.
In his later work Laclau refined his model such that what he now sees as entering into relations of hegemonic struggle are not simply ‘term’ or ‘discourses’ but demands.

For example, in Austerity Britain, high levels of insecurity mean that one of the political demands which is shared by most of the public is the demand of security and stability. The coalition and the new Cameron government have wanted to link that demand in the following chain of equivalence: security-prudent government finance - austerity-spending cuts - public sector job losses - privatisation.

UK Uncut made a very interesting intervention in trying to break apart this chain and articulate a new one: spending cuts - tax dodging - greedy capitalists-unfairness.

Labour under Ed seemed to be proposing instead something like: security-stable communities - ‘non-predatory’ capitalism - government regulation of capital - smaller spending cuts - economic restructuring to promote equality.

But the articulation between the first two terms in the Tories’ chain had become too firmly cemented as common sense to be shifted. The prevalence of the robot-discourse of ‘aspiration’ shows how firmly neoliberal common sense, expressing absolute deference to the hegemony of finance capital, is still in place.