

Hegemony: Explorations into Consensus, Coercion and Culture

**A workshop at the University of Wollongong
14 &15 Feb 2005**

Imperial Hegemony and Colonial Labour

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Introduction

The object of this paper is to extend Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony to the colonial setting. There is not a great deal of explicit discussion by Gramsci about colonialism but it is safe to say that much of his commentary on the "Southern Question" and briefer notes on Italian foreign policy and international relations are suggestive and occasionally explicit about colonial matters. The writings of the Subaltern Studies school represent one attempt to apply Gramsci to the Indian colonial context – the most extended work in this idiom is R Guha's *Dominance Without Hegemony*. I will be arguing in this paper that Guha's political and "culturalist" approach takes us some distance from Gramsci and presupposes a rather ahistorical and one-dimensional concept of hegemony. Much of the empirical research for this paper is derived from a larger comparative work on colonial labour regimes in which I am one of four researchers. Examples will be drawn for British colonialism in India and Malaya and French colonialism in Indochina between 1860-1940. The paper begins with an exposition of Gramsci's concept of hegemony, extends this concept into the colonial context, and then suggests how its application might proceed. The conclusion will return to criticisms of Guha's interpretation.

Hegemony in Gramsci – A Brief Sketch

Antonio Gramsci's writings extend our understanding of modern politics while reaffirming traditional axioms about power. He directed much of his political and analytical energies towards a singular historical conjuncture – and thereby illuminated some wider truths about the capitalist era. In his view the capitalist era was a centuries-long process of establishing, sustaining, extending and deepening the ownership relations and the forms of labour exploitation that constituted the basic capitalist economic structure. The idea of a "determinate market" and the "the laws of motion of capital" were the foundation of the Gramscian understanding of the terrain of modernity. A critical and historicist (i.e. Marxist) view of the economy requires;

"The description of a 'determinate market', viz. The description of the determinate social form, of the whole as opposed to the part, of the whole which determines – to a determinate extent – that automatism and ensemble of uniformities and regularities that economic science attempts to describe with the greatest exactness, precision and completeness. (FSPN, p. 171)"

This structure of capitalism with its determinate market also produces specific conjunctures – the operation of the national market in a given phase in specific circumstances. The economy is thus to be understood as 'the coordinated activity of a

social group, that act with certain principles towards certain goals'. The activity, the group, the principles and the goals are capitalist; as long as the capitalists maintain their overall social control the economic structure will contain recognisable laws, an intelligible teleology and manifest 'machine-like' qualities. Critical political economy presses the point that the capitalist economic structure is a historical (neither natural nor permanent) formation, and that it contains an inner logic which generate law-like possibilities, tendencies (the falling rate of profit) and counter-tendencies. The transformation of the capitalist economic structure cannot occur until an equally determined, self-conscious and coherent group (the modern prince) organises a socialist revolutionary movement. The capitalist economy is thus a product of a conscious, organised and coherent class with a transformative project – the state is the most organised element in prosecuting that project.

While Gramsci's interventions presuppose a particular conception of the determinate market economy, his theoretical innovations were not fundamentally "economic", but lay in trying to comprehend the political and cultural trajectory of capitalism once these economic relations were established and subject to expanded reproduction. Gramsci's concept of hegemony lies at the heart of his theoretical innovation. The concept 'translates' the necessary economic relations of the capitalist economy into their political and philosophical postulates and implications. In this way Gramsci accepted the analytical priority of the economy, its historical dependence on an organising and self-conscious political class, and yet rejected any simplistic form of economic determinism.

The hegemony of capital was extensive enough to have broad applications in theorising the operation of capitalism, and specific enough to assist in understanding the complex currents of Italian politics during the fascist period. It might be better to claim that Gramsci's major intellectual contribution to socialist theory was to take an implicit idea in Marx and make it explicit through detailed historical investigations. Gramsci's theory is best understood through its historical application rather than his attempts at periodic (and changing) theorisations. A point that Gramsci made about interpreting Marx.

Hegemony can be understood as the means (the cement) employed to establish and reproduce relations that cohere the organised dominant social group (a ruling class) and impose effective control over the subaltern classes – hegemony organises leaders and led. The means to organise the leaders and led can be separated (at a first approximation) into coercion and consent – force and persuasion. Both these means are organised by the modern state within national territory. The art of war, the art of politics and the rule of law are thus intimately connected as instruments of the state mobilised to maintain class hegemony. In his search for an adequate theory of political and ideological hegemony (to match Marx's account of economic hegemony) Gramsci worked through contemporary history back to the Greeks, but it was Machiavelli who he identified as the founder of the modern science of politics. Modern - because Machiavelli was searching for the territorial principle, market relations and leadership group necessary for the creation of a determinate capitalist market. This point, brilliantly argued in Althusser's *Machiavelli and Us*, asserts that Gramsci's primary object of analysis was not some hypothetical

“universal laws of political power”, but rather the forms of hegemony developed in recently formed European City-states.

“The state that Machievelli expects from the Prince, for the unification of Italy under an absolute monarch, is not the state in general (corresponding ‘to its concept’) but a historically determinate type of state, required by the conditions and exigencies of nascent capitalism: a national state. M&U, p. 10. “

This first approximation focussed on the use of violence, organization and persuasion in the formation of a new political order and its evolution into a coherent state. It presents the historical and theoretical origins of the ‘philosophy’ devised by the new hegemonic group, as well as the political organisation (the state) that they had formed to impose their will. There was no historical evidence to support the idea that ‘democracy’ created this new state, but there were organisations outside the old state (in the area of the new contractual market relations) also known as civil society. Democracy might follow when the new hegemony was fully imposed.

Gramsci’s thinking was saturated by ideas derived from the European enlightenment, particular those of Marx and Hegel. It was also saturated with a profound knowledge of history, sociology and linguistics, especially but not exclusively from Italy and the writings of its leading contemporary intellectual Benedetto Croce. It follows that Gramsci’s was particularly attentive to concepts and evidence showing how relations within and between the hegemonic and subaltern classes in modern Italy were formed and maintained. Unified Italy - created from disparate states at different levels of “development” - was a late capitalist state linked to the wider global marketplace. Understanding hegemony in an Italian context required a detailed understanding of its internal structure (i.e. The Southern Question), its integration into the wider capitalist economy, as well the shape of the most advanced international capitalism (Fordism and Americanism). To further complicate matters global capitalism had moved beyond the international movement of commodities: finance capital and labour were increasingly internationally mobile. Interesting Gramsci also speculated that Asia would be central to the Pacific relocation of the world economy.

In the 1920s and 1930s it was by no-means clear that capitalism would survive. The capacity of national leaders was sorely tested by internal and external threats, there was no unambiguous hegemonic power (more an unstable and competing equilibrium) and the subaltern classes (nationally and internationally) were beginning to see themselves as potential ruling classes. Most of the leading capitalist powers relied upon colonial empires to sustain their wealth – but colonial insurrection was on the rise. There was both an organic crisis of the capitalist economy and hegemonic crises in politics, culture and amongst the intelligentsia. Exceptional and Bonapartist regimes were imposed to ‘manage the crises’. The ‘morbid symptoms’ when the old-order refused to die and the new was yet to be born, were observed. In this context Gramsci sought to address a particularly perplexing question: with obvious economic, political and intellectual crises in Italy and throughout the capitalist world, how could the system survive? The strength

of capitalist hegemony (and the inadequacy of the alternative – the modern prince) is Gramsci's provisional answer.

Hegemonic Principles

One assumption was obvious – an understanding of the Italian state was inexplicable outside of the dominant global hegemony of the capitalist mode of production. The inner logic of the historical era of capitalism was inscribed in its necessary production relations (forms of property). Those relations indicated its potential for growth, technical innovation, accumulation and just as importantly territorial rivalry, warfare and inner contradictions including periodic crises. Each crisis might be resolved through creating a new accumulation regime (and thus a new labour process); resolving territorial claims (by war, annexation, treaty and diplomacy); and restructuring the state. But every crisis was resolved at great cost to human life and creative potential. The very possibility of capitalism continuing required that the leaders and led of the modern production process (capitalists and wage labourers), with their relationship of mutual but differentiated dependence, being reproduced. While the streams of surplus value created by colonial workers could arrest the dwindling profits at home, this merely limited the crisis. For Gramsci understood that the hegemony exercised by the capitalist class ultimately depended on their capacity to sustain the production, circulation and realisation of surplus value – without this process continuing their control was threatened. Thus the necessary (if not sufficient condition) for sustaining hegemony required economic transformation, that is addressing the 'labour question' in a systematic way. The factory – the site where labour is controlled, disciplined and exploited - represents the primordial hegemonic form.

Thus the fables of liberal, social contract and related accounts of historical processes of dispossession, violence, coercion and theft of surplus labour, were part of the intellectual hegemony of the new property owning classes – they had to invent a vaguely plausible explanation for their acquisition of wealth and power. The problem for the construction of this intellectual hegemony was that it contradicted much of the lived experiences of the subaltern classes, the memories of the domesticated industrial working classes, and the historical inquiries of many intellectuals. Moreover, whenever hegemony was threatened the threat of violence became explicit, undermining the notion of a voluntary and negotiated 'social contract' between the leaders and led. To shore-up this weakening hegemony other 'primitive and atavistic' ideas had to be either reactivated or created. The most common was the idea of an inclusive 'national ethnic family' and the exclusive racially and ethnically based idea of national enemies, designed to limit the parties invited to participate in this imaginary social contract and thereby attain citizenship.

The hegemony of capitalism brings into being a social order that combines the universal problems of relations between leaders and led, and specific problems that come from the particular nature of capitalism - wage labour and forms of production, technology, and forms of exploitation and appropriation. The political problem is creating a restricted citizenry that does not limit the ruling classes capacity to govern. Once the property hegemony is well established and inscribed into the structure of the legal order and the organisational bureaucracy (public and private) the subject people (the led), can be

increasingly but conditionally identified as citizens. Trade unions and left political organizations that work to create a transformative concept of citizen-worker have to be rigorously regulated, circumscribed and if necessary proscribed. Thus the feared citizen-worker must be reborn as the citizen-owner/consumer.

Capitalism cannot remain a viable form of production until a solution that simultaneously addresses the economic, political and philosophical problems created by its reproduction has been created. Capitalist hegemony requires the formation of the appropriate factory, parliament and university. Each is distinctive form of practice, but operating in a moderately coherent and connected fashion. The factory is the necessary foundation of capitalist hegemony, it is place where labour is redefined, where new instruments of production are introduced, where new disciplining techniques are refined, it imposes the tyranny of private property and it generates unimaginable wealth to a small property owning class. Without control of production the hegemony of capital is doomed. But while a necessary condition, control of the production process is never sufficient. Economic power has to be translated into political hegemony. Or the means of securing private property – political dictatorship, conquest and military occupation – needs refinement into a more persuasive and legalistic form.

Politics is the most unstable and creative part of this hegemonic structure; it never fully masks its coercive origins, nor the vast energies and complex bureaucracies required to overcome the interminable squabbles within the property owning classes. Moreover the hegemonic capitalist class has to understand, manipulate and incorporate the subaltern classes including its most talented leaders, organisers and creative minds. Because all people are thinkers striving to understand their lived experiences, hegemony is not fully achieved until the most sophisticated philosophers and the most simple-minded popular novels express a new and shared common sense. It becomes increasingly difficult to think the world outside of these dominant conceptions. The artificiality and novelty of a new social formation thus becomes naturalised – a new human nature is reified.

Organised religion – for Gramsci the Catholic Church – is a possible vehicle to help construct this hegemony, although it contains traditions, interests and complex theologies that frequently sit uneasily with the logic of capitalism. But Gramsci suggests that an analysis of the practices of the local (married) priest including their integration into the property and political relations (party and state) of the village might tell us something more instructive about their hegemonic role than reading leading church theologians. More importantly the secular world of the state-based education system, the privately owned mass media and the state owned radio system provides the arena for the disciplining of body and mind.

Gramsci's ideas about hegemony provide methodological principles rather than prescriptive universal conclusions. There are quite specific characteristics that define capitalism, and without understanding them it is nonsensical to explore its distinctive forms of hegemony. On the other hand every society dominated by capitalists bears the imprint of its past and its location in the global capitalist division of labour. These matters cannot be known *a priori* but require extensive empirical investigation. Each investigation

will reveal unique forms of capitalist hegemony. In general terms the new organisation of the rising bourgeois class (forged outside the feudal state) transmogrify into a new state designed to universalise private property and wage labour. This state precedes and maintains the determinate capitalist market relations.

Gramsci's presentation and investigations of capitalist hegemony is thus open to multiple forms of historical causation, consequently he privileges philosophical and methodological procedure over ontological certainties – he is particularly scathing of Bukharin's attempt at a systematic sociology of society. Gramsci reads Marx in a particularly radical way. He reads him conceptually: if we assume the dominance of the capitalist mode of production what are its necessary laws of motion; and what is the appropriate state and ideology that can maintain the capitalist hegemony? He then investigates the concepts historically, that is how are the circumstances of capitalist hegemony created and reproduced in particular settings? Finally, he rereads the concept against history and vice versa. It is not the case as Finocchiaro argues in *Gramsci and the History of Dialectical Thought* that Gramsci reads Marx through Croce (and vice versa), that would simply justify an idealist interpretation of Gramsci. Instead history – congealed human practices – is the final arbiter in determining the adequacy of the concept.

Gramsci's assertion that Marxism is an 'absolute historicism' signals the power of Gramsci's interpretation – he separates the critique of capitalism from the complicated intellectual legacies of Marx and Engels and provides the means of constantly enriching critical thinking without invoking the textual authority of its high priests. It is this step that allows to shape a critical theory within and beyond its marxist origins. Our task then is to read Gramsci in a Gramscian way – can we add anything or perhaps clarify the theory of hegemony through its application to colonial circumstances?

Hegemony in the Colonies

Colonies in the capitalist era may be divided into two groups. What is generally called 'settler colonies' where indigenous people are marginalised and people, institutions and hegemonic forms are brought from a capitalist metropolis. It is instructive to analyse these colonies to further understand the operation of hegemony – frequently they operate closer to the pure logic of the determinate market because residual and oppositional traditions are absent. The process of labour disciplining and accepting occupational and geographical mobility as a condition of work has been well inculcated, and accepting the role and limitations imposed on the new citizen is well advanced. To maintain this rather advanced form of hegemony the indigenous population and non-hegemonised immigrants have to be racially stigmatised, regulated and precluded from citizenship. Historical investigations of the principles of territorial annexation and expropriation, the mobilisation of racist ideology and restricting (through racial categories and immigration policies) citizenship is a particularly fertile ground for understanding the economic, political and theoretical principles of modern capitalist hegemony. We shall not be discussing this form of colonialism in any further detail.

The second and more complicated form of colony involves the domination of large indigenous populations and the attempt to impose capitalist hegemony over a refractory and frequently resistant population. The objects of colonial possession and the formation of a colonial bureaucracy and officials are to effect quite dramatic social change. The principles of colonial rule are surprisingly straightforward. They include the following:

*Impose law and order – secure borders and mark out territory. Negotiate where necessary with existing rulers and incorporate them or their rivals into the new authority to give it some legitimacy. Negotiate or impose borders with neighbouring rulers or states to close off any territorial ambiguities.

*Change the existing order of property relations in various ways. Some combination of reserved land for sections of the indigenous population is required especially if you are dependent on a good supply of food and seasonal labour. Within the reserved land ownership rights held by existing or newly imposed headman may need to be made more explicit. This strengthens the hand of the headman in relations to his villagers and weakens it in negotiations with colonial authorities – its substantially strengthens the bonds of dependence on the power of the colonial state. Land outside of the reserves (including minerals, forest and strategic waterways) become public lands available for sale or gift by the colonial state. The principle of *terra nullius* is widely used in all colonial settings.

*Impose market relations in production, produce for the imperial market and relocate and transform control over labour. The formation of a labour market and the formation of a disciplined workforce are the most difficult issues. Frequently labour has to be imported from far afield.

We will now turn to examining some of these issues in colonial India and Indochina.

Commodifying Colonial Labour – India and Indo-china, 1860-1940

Bringing these two ‘colonies’ under formal imperial control was necessarily complex: needless to say from different situations, and via divergent processes, colonial control was ultimately achieved. The essence of this process was that state control was exercised by powerful and more economically advanced European nations with well-organised military and administrative structures. More than a century of the British East India Company’s control of the South India ceased in 1858 after the Indian Mutiny, when the British Government assumed direct control of the Madras Presidency. British rule in India was centred in Calcutta and then divided into three principal Presidencies.

The Madras Presidency, our particular object of interest, comprised much of the south and specifically South-west India. It was perhaps the most diverse part of the country. It was not economically, culturally or ethnically integrated. Its particular interest for the purposes of this discussion was that it included Tamil Nadu and more specifically Tanjore located on the delta of the Kaveri River. It was from here that millions of Indian indentured workers left from the 1830s into the 1930s for tea, sugar and rubber plantations in Ceylon, the West Indies, Fiji and Malaya.

Fort St George in the city of Madras ruled the Presidency. In reality the word ruled is something of a misnomer because political and economic power was unstable and shared (perhaps contested is a better word) between Britain, Calcutta, Fort St George and the vast - largely Indian staffed - bureaucracy that extended into every village. Villages and villagers were subject to extensive control, though not without struggle and resistance, by external forces. In Madras the British were imposing state control over the turbulent chaos that emerged from the collapse of the Vijayanagar kingdom and undisciplined private British interests derived from occupation, seizure and purchase. Beneath the British rulers and senior administrators came the Indian bureaucracy that penetrated into every village.

In Indochina the process of achieving colonial control was shorter and of more recent origin. Private commercial and religious incursion occurred since 1850, weakening the Nguyen dynasty and expanding French global colonial interests. This resulted in a negotiated annexation, the so-called Patenotre-Nguyan van Tuong treaty in 1884. The southern 'frontier' region of the kingdom (Cochinchina) became a colony and the Tonkin (north) and Annam (central) regions became French protectorates. It then took nearly 15 years to pacify the fractious villages and villagers. Once achieved the French created a parallel bureaucracy with (and overseeing) the traditional mandarin-based bureaucracy. Despite the different contexts of the colonisation of India and Indochina certain similarities emerged.

Indochina became a single entity under a French Governor-General, while the three 'countries' were administered by Resident Superiors. Each province had its own Resident. Beneath the Resident was a Vietnamese administrative system, created to parallel and superseded the traditional mandarin-based kingdom. Once established the colonial powers began to interfere directly in village organisation. There seems no reason to accept the view that the British and French systems were fundamentally different (indirect versus direct colonialism), nor to see colonialism as a superficial overlay (an administrative superstructure) over a traditional village (economic infrastructure) system.

Continuity and Change in the Village

Perhaps the most contentious issue in historical accounts was the extent and significance of changes wrought upon peasant societies by the colonisers. These social relations included power relations within the village community, but they extending to ownership and access relations over land – or more specifically tenure relations. It is these relations that are of direct relevance to the issue of introducing commodity relations. To measure the extent and consequences of changes to land tenure presupposes a base from which to make comparisons. While we can easily agree that a large number of regional variations existed, we are nevertheless required to construct something of an "ideal-type" or to use a different theoretical vocabulary an "ideal-average". Vietnamese historiography has a greater consensus on this matter than its Indian counterpart. We should recognise that this might be the result of the more homogeneous, controlled and ideological nature of Vietnamese research. Caveats aside we can make eight generalisations about the Vietnamese village:

1. Villages were close to self-governing communities of peasants and artisans.

2. There were limited and insecure ownership rights to land by village families who worked the land.
3. There was a significant proportion of land held in common or land available for temporary occupation and exploitation.
4. There was limited capacity to amass large areas of land, though some families and their kin did control more productive and extensive areas than others.
5. Ultimate ownership of the land was in the hands of the Emperor. Thus the village was held responsible for paying its annual taxation burden.
6. Taxation took two broad forms – the provision of a portion of the harvest in kind, and conscription to civil works (corvee labour) and military service when required.
7. There was limited trade within and between villages and modest urbanisation - thus commodity exchanges were not widespread.
8. The Emperor's responsibilities were to provide peace, security and public works.

In Southern India, especially in the Tanjore area, things were rather more complicated. We can discern the following features:

1. Villages were clearly differentiated by class and caste and while control was based in local families, power was already being accumulated by the larger landowners.
2. A long tradition of slave, bonded and landless labour was evident in these villages, including a group of hereditary agricultural slaves (the basis of the Harijans or Scheduled Castes)
3. Ownership rights were even more complicated than in Indochina. Until the late nineteenth century there was unoccupied agricultural land, common land, land granted to temples and seemingly private land. The shifting kingdoms that dominated the region were however the ultimate landowners and they demanded considerable tribute.
4. Taxation was in kind, some in cash and also based upon service to the state.
5. Trade was similarly limited and the caste system reflected the replication of artisanal skills in most villages.
6. Unlike the relative stability of the Vietnamese dynasties and the sophistication of the bureaucracy, Southern India was subject to local and foreign wars and occupation.

Because the real world is more complex than any generalisation can grasp, we would be wise not to overgeneralise, or deny that many villages (especially in India) had incipient and sometimes all-to-real class relations and well-entrenched pre or proto-capitalist modes of exploitation. There were intrigues, injustice and conflict within villages and periodic peasant wars and uprisings against exploitative rulers who over-taxed the peasantry or under-serviced the public hydraulic infrastructure. The tradition of revolt seemed to have been stronger in Vietnam than in India. From the point of view of the commodity form, however, three points remain crucial:

1. There was very limited commodification of land – there were rarely simple or unambiguous forms of individual or family tenure and thus land alienation was technical impossible. Land of course was seized, conquered, exchanged and cleared. Indeed the strength of any kingdom or empire ultimately depended on the stability

and extent of its territory and the surplus labour of those who farmed it. In the South of India there was institutionalised slavery (generally war booty) which frequently was used to relocate labourers into frontier agricultural settlements.

2. There were limited commodities entering the marketplace at least from the village economy. There was, however, an extensive internal and international trade, linking centres of wealth and power. There was an agricultural surplus to both appropriate and trade and a complex array of urbanised and aristocratic needs to fulfil.
3. There was consequently only limited creation of wage labour and the creation of labour power. Slaves were bought and sold and used for personal service, military duty and productive work. Thus some people were commodified and bound. Some wage labourers existed and limited rural and urban proletarianisation had occurred. In poor villages landless proletarians existed and poor peasants supplemented their subsistence needs through wage labour. This was more extensive in India than Vietnam, but in neither case typical.

The principal theoretical point to be made is that in the pre-colonial village, whether we examine land ownership, commodity exchange and labour regimes, the commodity form was limited and subordinate to the dominant forms of production relations. To take the theoretical point one further step, we can usefully speak of a dominant Tribute-based mode of production in which the principal form of surplus labour was the coercive expropriation of produce and labour. Commodity relations were latent rather than manifest. To relocate labour and remake it required slavery or indenture. The colonial State was the instrument to realise these changes.

The Impact of the Colonial State

The colonial state was a fairly complex and frequently cumbersome beast: it was neither omniscient nor omnipresent. In broad terms the state worked to reorganise the village, its internal dynamics and their relationships with the wider colonial political economy, and ultimately the metropolis. The starting point (at least heuristically) in understanding this transformation was in the field of land taxation and land landownership. Colonies were expected to be self-sufficient or preferably pay tribute to the coloniser. Self-sufficiency implied that the colonial administration, public works, law and order and the armed forces would be paid from taxes extracted from the population. Initially colonial taxation adapted the pre-colonial tribute system. Subsequently, as the society and production was transformed, various commodities – especially salt, alcohol and opium – and trade (via customs excise and other duties) expanded and transformed the tax system. Thus the trajectory was from in-kind to monetary taxes. At least in the initial phase of colonialism once ‘order’ was imposed, the transformation of land ownership was the next important step.

In Indochina the following innovations occurred:

- Taxation was based upon a careful identification of the complex pattern of fields, as well as their differential fertility and productivity. Cadastral maps were drawn to identify both ownership and optimal taxation.

- Ownership was given a clearer and personal form – the producer and their family were carefully noted.
- Communal land was taken into state ownership and either granted or sold.
- Taxation was reassessed on the basis of ownership, fertility and now paid by individuals in cash.
- Rates of taxation were significantly increased.
- The village headman was now imposed by the state to collect tax, administer the law and maintain control. The maire (mayor) as he was now called was not selected or elected by the village but imposed by the colonial state.
- Finally the village land was ultimately the property of the state, occupied by tenants of the state. The state was the legal owners and its property rights were transferable.
- Land that was unused – that is vacant, waste, deserted or previously used communally was now directly alienated by government. By this innovation some twenty per cent of all arable land was transferred to non-indigenous ownership.

In Madras developments were more complex. There were several different forms of control over the villages. The first involved the installation and recognition of a landowning class of Zamindars. The colonial state entrusted them to lease land to the peasants and collect rentals for the colonial state. This system was subject to inevitable corruption and provided an inefficient mechanism to deliver the necessary surplus. The alternative form of control, closer to the French approach, was imposed in the 1850s. The Ryotwari system transformed villages into collectivities of individual tenant farmers who were individually assessed and provided cash tribute to the state. The enforcement of taxes required a very large group of Indian inspectors and tax officials. The principal features were as follows:

- Each field had to be mapped, its features listed and its tenant identified.
- Taxation rates were raised from around 20-25% to 50% or higher, and was paid in largely in cash.
- State monopoly prices for principal crops were established.
- A large unwieldy and corrupt public service with an almost unbelievable set of regulatory forms was there to make this system work.
- Previously designated public land was granted in large sections to temples and to a range of pliant village notables. A group of landed aristocrats were thereby created by state patronage.
- The sale of property rights was now simple to negotiate.
- The British state remained ultimate landlord and thus changed ownership and tenure relationships several times.
- A considerable level of disturbances, riots and periodic famines indicated the destabilisation caused by these changing tenure relations.
- An already differentiated peasantry became more strongly shaped by ownership, tenancy and wage labour relationships.
- Despite the official ban on slavery de facto slavery was tolerated well into the twentieth century and debt bondage remained widespread. Perhaps the bulk of the 20-30% of peasants that were landless were bonded for the bulk of their relatively short lives.

Because taxes were paid in cash, rice wheat and other prices were determined by the state and land tenancies were bought and sold, we can argue that land was commodified. Within villages, human relationships to the land changed significantly. Land ownership was consolidated and enlarged, the percentage of tenant farmers increased significantly, the percentage of landless labourers expanded and the level of rural indebtedness grew. The incipient class relations we have already noted became manifest.

In Tonkin the subsistence village dominated by peasants gave way to a new model of agrarian classes replicating metropolitan French experience. As the taxation impost grew, new ownership relations took effect and the demography of the countryside was dramatically altered. The already overcrowded Red River Delta between Hanoi and Haiphong witnessed increased starvation, landlessness and indebtedness. Labour was now forced to look much further afield for paid employment either because they had been reduced to landlessness or in order to repay debts. Meanwhile land that had been expropriated by the state was given as concessions to French settlers, Catholic religious orders and private companies. Some of this land was used for commercial agriculture, some for mining and in the south most for plantations. Workers were recruited to develop and sustain these new enterprises in Indochina and to other French colonies.

In Tanjore a dire situation emerged. The famines of 1876-78 killed an estimated four million in the Madras region and affected nearly ten times that number. The tradition of slavery intensified. Poverty, illness and dispossession were especially notorious. Little wonder that single male workers were forced into indenture and spent a minimum of five years working out some of their debts overseas. The most pernicious form of bond, debt bondage, was widespread. Debt bondage was frequently inherited but could just as easily be acquired by borrowing to maintain ownership over a marginal holding. Once having fallen into debt and given the punishing rates of interest extracted by the richer peasants or professional money lenders (who were also present in colonial Indochina), it was almost impossible to regain nominal freedom. Around Tanjore was the largest concentration of bound labour in India.

Relocating and Commodifying Labour

Encouraging workers to migrate long distances to become wage labourers proved difficult. Slavery as such was no longer acceptable in a civilised colonial state. In 1833 slavery was abolished in Britain and its empire. Slavery was unacceptable to the French. So a complex mode of control somewhere between slavery and free wage labour was used. Workers were persuaded and occasionally press-ganged into putting their thumb printed on a contract (an indent) that many could neither read nor understand. From Madras Presidency some 11 million workers went to work in the tea and later rubber plantations of Ceylon (the forebears of the Tamil Tigers), to the sugar plantations of the West Indies, to the tea plantations of Assam and hundreds of thousands to the rubber plantations of Malaya. These indentured workers were organised into gangs by the Kangany, shipped overseas and worked as sub-contracted gangs in the planting and harvesting of rubber. These rubber concessions were granted by the colonial state to British investors looking for the means to grow and market the profitable tropical

harvests. Indians were much preferred as coolie labour in Malaya and elsewhere. The more readily available Chinese workers were regarded as too militant and too well organised. Indians were considered docile and thus better workers.

In Tonkin landless peasants signed contracts to be transported to work on rice plantations in the Mekong Delta, the coalmines near Haiphong, the nickel mines of New Caladonia or to the new rubber plantations being established on the red soils north and west of Saigon. Labour was now mobile and was readied for new forms of work. This 'new system of slavery' saw work undertaken under military-style discipline, under dangerous and very strenuous conditions. Food was inadequate and frequently bad, housing consisted of rudimentary barracks, corporal punishments were rife while the failure to meet work quotas was punished by fines. It was possible to work for months even years without payment. In many plantations workers were effectively imprisoned within fenced and patrolled plantations.

This system of plantation wage labour was in most respects more insidious than slavery. The indenture effectively commodified the person (not just their capacity to labour) while placing merely a nominal value on their skills as workers. Unlike many established slave settlements indentured labourers were incapable of reproducing themselves – they were denied the opportunity or resources to establish families. If we follow Meillassoux's analysis of slavery, these indentured workers were more intensively enslaved than many typical slaves. Over time a substantial section of Vietnamese and Indian indentured workers settled in these frontier regions of capitalism, brought women or married female indentured workers and produced families. Indentures were abolished, workers organised and conditions improved. Over decades of struggle a proletariat, even a class-conscious proletariat, came into existence.

Peripheral Commodity Relations

We are now in a position to suggest a few observations. The most important conclusion is that the process of changing labour relations and the forms of labour exploitation had not occurred by magic or from a deep-seated individual desire to embrace capitalism. It had been initiated by colonial states seeking to impose capitalist property relations. To achieve those changes consistent, persistent and theoretically informed action had to be taken. The eradication of communal and non-transferable rights in landed property was the crucial first step. The ideas of Locke and John Stuart Mill were resolutely imposed. But even this change involved a cruel twist. Race and cultural traditions (including the reification of religious values) were now mobilised by the colonisers to draw a rigid distinction between the imposition of new property relations and delaying or removing legal, political and educational rights of citizenship. This was justified on the grounds that the childlike qualities of non-European races would require a very long process of political adolescence before maturity might be reached. Rather than seeing 'tradition' as something that might be displaced by social change it was actually cultivated and used to justify enslavement and the denial of citizenship.

Looked at from a Gramscian perspective, we might say that colonialism created a very effective mode of coercion over the indigenous subjects, but failed to a very large degree

on forming a new hegemony. Race and religion were effectively harnessed as means to evade the requirements of investing the colonial subject with the rights of man. French socialists, including some of the early governors were acutely aware of this contradiction in their imperial project. British liberals, including those who followed the advanced ideas of John Stuart Mill seemed less worried by the racial justifications of imperialism and colonial exploitation. This helps explain the complex relationship between Vietnamese radicalism and French republicanism and critical response of Indian nationalists to English liberalism.

In our two case studies land was commodified while the case of labour was vastly more complicated. The commodification of land and the dispossession of the peasantry were the pre-condition for labour emigration, commodification and disciplining. The colonial state was either deployed directly or devolved its authority to private employers to facilitate the disciplining and punishment of this developing working class. Workers were unable to leave their employers, were unable to organise, collectively bargain or strike. They were beaten, starved, imprisoned and fined. They were preyed upon by unscrupulous overseers – through the offers of loans for gambling, alcohol or opium – while being racially vilified and sexually abused. The work regimes beggar belief. The profits made by companies, banks and imperial investors were immense. Somewhat paradoxically perhaps, the state slowly intervened to stop the worst excesses. Left to their own devices the companies were becoming dangerously like genocidal machines.

Labour was thus commodified in a formal sense. It was subject to the brutal regime of capitalist discipline. But labour was not subject to the impersonal laws of motion of capital. The apparent separation of the economy from the polity had not occurred. The rationality of capitalism as a mode of production, the result of the amassing of the means of production by a class of highly competitive entrepreneurs, the organisation and strategic deployment of finance capital, and the structuring of a competitive labour market was far from complete. Instead we have all the formal (totally exploitative) characteristics of capitalism without its (social and productively innovative) substance. Kathleen Gough argued nearly 25 years ago that we need to conceptualise a “colonial mode of production”; a mode that combined market relations in land and labour with a sustained drain of the economic surplus to the imperial centre. This perpetuated primitive accumulation for the metropolis, without expanded reproduction in the colony. “Therefore [she argued] most production relations [in the colony] remained ones of only formal subsumption under capital.” (p. 413) This seems pretty much the last word on the subject.

Conclusion

There are some interesting and perhaps troubling conclusions from these colonial examples and our earlier interpretation of Gramsci. An understanding of colonialism enables us to better understand the origins of capitalism, especially in its heartlands. The violence and brutality of its origins are clearly on display. The ruthless reaction to those who might challenge its imposition is easier to see. It is no accident that Edward Thompson suggested that in order to understand the process of dispossession and transformation of the English working class we might look at contemporary colonial

phenomenon. There is, however, in Gramsci's analysis recognition that the inclusion of colonial and pre-capitalist people into the global marketplace was necessary and probably desirable. There is very little of the modern predilection for protecting the 'primitive' and 'traditional'. Joining the world of labour control, psychological and sexual discipline, and the mutual rights and dependencies of citizenship were important benefits in Gramsci's worldview. Connection to a world-historical language and having access to the global storehouse of science and literature was a precondition for self and collective government. The very possibility of a socialist society presupposed the formation of a new common sense and indeed a new person.

Where the real contradiction lay was in the refusal of most colonial regimes to see the implications of limiting capitalism to the fundamentals of property and wage labour, and refusing to create wider hegemonies. Racial strategies were deployed, ethnic differences exacerbated, pseudo-traditional leaders and laws were forged and earlier principles of community self-government were extinguished. Shameless acts of forced migration, genocidal labour regimes and inhumane treatment of minorities, women and children abounded. There seemed no moral, ethical or human principle motivating this orgy of exploitation. Colonialism revealed what capitalism unrestrained by its collective organization and ideology (the modern state), freed from the press, the church and the moralist might contemplate.

Thus an interesting parallel exists between the idea of commodification and capitalist hegemony. The origins and immediate requirements of both are best understood as the imposition on subject people of the will of a national or imperial ruling class – in this process the state is the common instrument and coercion the widespread tactic. The deepening of the commodity form and the deepening and widening of the capitalist economy facilitates the spread of a racialised and limited citizenship and thus a limited notion of democracy and political involvement (increased consent). Finally a new common sense emerges. But the strength of coercion and the mobilisation of race to the exclusion of a colonial citizen limited the possibility of a deeper hegemony.

Although Gramsci had no principled objection to colonialism he clearly had a view that like his solution to the Southern Question the moral resolution could only be a socialist project. An alliance would be needed between the new hegemonic class with leading elements of the subaltern class to create the material and moral conditions for mutual self-advancement. In this context self-advancement would be a double act of education: the colonial elite learning the art of hegemony and thereby increasing their autonomy in dealing with the imperial elite. This might be thought as the process of national liberation. The related part of this process of liberation requires the national elite to begin the process of dissolving the strong national distinction between leaders and led.

As we can now see the problem with Guha's formulation is contrasting consent and coercion in a rather formulaic way. The construction of metropolitan hegemony was more reliant on coercion than he recognised. For Gramsci writing from goal as the leader of a banned party, composed of murdered, incarcerated and expatriate and intimidated militants, this would have been all too obvious. On the other hand the idea that the

imposition of colonial regimes was overly reliant on coercion and therefore ‘non-hegemonic’ works to reproduce the problematic of an organic difference rather than a historical one between the coloniser and colonised. The supreme virtue of Gramsci’s politics is to articulate the universal ambition of socialism (including a non-racist conception of humanity) with a particularist analysis of specific societies. Running right through Gramsci’s writing and reflecting his university study of linguistics is the principle of translatability. How to translate the limited and particularistic rule of the bourgeois into the universal rule of the subaltern become the issue. Understanding the significance of colonies in both defining the ‘problem’ and searching for a solution has lost none of its salience today