

## **Reflections on an Anthropological Approach to Hegemony in Catholic Majority Societies across Europe**

Ingo W. Schröder (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale)

### **Introduction**

The following theoretical reflections were inspired by my search for a broader comparative and analytical framework for my ongoing study of the situation of the Catholic Church in Lithuanian society. The Catholic Church (along with the Eastern Orthodox Church) represents the longest-lasting institution of European society – for this reason alone anthropologists should feel obliged to pay special attention to it. Another aspect that makes the Catholic Church particularly interesting is the ‘stable, long-term existence of a formal religious standard’ (Brandes 1990), an orthodox version of faith supported over a very long time span by the authority of a highly stratified organization. Such conditions invoke analytical concepts like hegemony, symbolic violence, and religious habitus, which I will discuss in this paper. I suggest that there is a type of societies across Europe where the authoritative position of the Catholic Church has been particularly salient, because this church has been dominating the religious field without any strong ‘competitors’ for centuries. These I have called ‘Catholic Majority Societies’. They are comprised of Ireland and France in Western Europe, Portugal, Spain, and Italy in the Mediterranean region, as well as Poland, Lithuania, Slovenia, and Croatia in Eastern Europe. Such societies represent the most obvious counterargument to the theory of a marketplace of religion – the historical dominance of the Catholic Church has not been perpetuated unchanged to the present, however. There are other forces at work that need to be investigated.

In the following I will present three analytical perspectives on religion in the contemporary world and explore their usefulness for the study of religious processes in Catholic Majority Societies. They are (1) Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, which serves to analyze how culture and consciousness are the

product of power inequalities, class experiences and historically accumulated understandings of the social order; (2) Bourdieu's theorizing of the 'paradox of the doxa', the fact that the established order of things perpetuates itself easily, rather than being challenged or subverted by those disadvantaged under the existing conditions: a church that dominates the religious field can thus be understood as a particularly effective means of promoting hegemony and the misrecognition of elite domination as the natural order of things; and (3) the concept of secularity.

As Christianity in general, European Catholicism has played only a marginal role in the anthropology of religion. Even as the anthropology of Christianity is becoming recognized as a subfield of anthropological research in its own right, its main foci have been either the 'marginal' versions of Christianity like Pentecostalism or the expansion of Christianity into new, formerly non-Christian environments. Most 'classical' ethnographies of Western and Southern European Catholicism date back to the 1980s and 1990s (cf. Ellen Badone on Brittany, William Christian, Jr. on Spain, Joao de Pina Cabral on Portugal, Lawrence Taylor on Ireland; edited volumes by Wolf 1981, Badone 1990). For obvious reasons, studies of Eastern European Catholicism are just beginning to be published (cf. Hann 2007). Much of existing research has focused on folk religiosity, exemplified by pilgrimages and popular Marian devotion. A typical example of this dominant interest in popular Catholicism is Badone's collection of essays (1990). The book as a whole focuses on the tension between official and popular religion, which has been exacerbated by the changes introduced by Vatican II reforms. Until today the main suggestions for future research offered by Badone in her introduction and Brandes in his afterword remain valid today:

- a stronger focus on the urban context
- the study of the clergy and the church institutions on their own terms, rather than through the eyes of the laity
- overcoming the neglect of the loss or absence of faith which has been characteristic of most religious anthropologists' exaggerated appreciation of religion

Another characteristic of the emergent field of the anthropology of Christianity is a general tendency to focus in a disproportionate way on experience and the cultural logic of religion, while neglecting power and politics. Thus my discussion of the following concepts also bears witness to my interest in putting political economy back into the anthropology of Christianity.

## **Theory**

### *1. Hegemony*

The concept of hegemony is an element of Antonio Gramsci's theorization of subaltern culture and consciousness. Hegemony emerges out of a variety of actions and ideas rooted in class experiences and historically accumulated understandings. Gramsci has produced neither a neat definition nor a coherent theory of hegemony. In his writings, hegemony can encompass all kinds of power relations from direct coercion to willing consent that structure a world of inequality between power elites and subalterns. "A key dimension of inequality for Gramsci is the inability of subaltern people to produce coherent accounts of the world they live in that have the potential to challenge the existing hegemonic accounts (which by definition see the world from the perspective of the dominant) in any *effective way*" (Crehan 2002: 104; emphasis in the original). Subalterns have their own view of the world, of course, but unlike the hegemonic one, this is fragmentary, incoherent, and contradictory. It is expressed in what Gramsci calls 'folklore' – an oppositional culture to the 'official' view of the world or, in a less structured fashion, the 'common sense' of the subaltern. This subaltern worldview is produced through the lived experience of subordination. It may evolve into counterhegemonic discourses over time, but more likely the subaltern tend to absorb uncritically an existing – that is, hegemonic – conception of the world.

In anthropology notions of hegemony have mostly been adopted via the somewhat streamlined, 'cultural' understanding of the concept by the British Marxist literary scholar Raymond Williams. He more or less identifies hegemony with culture, which saturates all aspects of everyday life "to such a depth that the

pressure and limits of what can ultimately be seen as a specific economic, political, and cultural system seem to most of us the pressures and limits of simple experience and common sense. ... It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives. (Williams 1977: 110) It was Williams who introduced the explicit equation of hegemony and tradition, as 'the most evident expression of the dominant and hegemonic pressures and limits' (1977:115).

A further development of the understanding of hegemony has been introduced by Marxist anthropologists Gerald Sider and Gavin Smith. Sider considers hegemony to mean 'the dominance of one particular class in the domain of culture', which is 'expressed in, and through, the specific institutions of "civil society": churches, schools, newspapers, public buildings and spaces, systems of status symbols, and so forth.' (2003: 208). He continues: "Hegemony, as I define the term, is that aspect of culture that, usually in the face of struggle – or simply noncompliance – most directly seeks to unify work and appropriation and to extend appropriation beyond work into neighborhood, family, forms of consumption – in sum, into daily life" (2003: 210). Hegemony operates through a combination of political, economic, and cultural pressures. It operates between the public and the private, between formal culture created by a state-orchestrated cultural politics aimed to organize consent in order to facilitate a political project and popular culture which the potential to provide the basis for effective collective action against the uneven distribution of power resources. Sider's and Smith's application of the concept of hegemony thus aim to reveal the specific dialectic between 'economic' practices and social constructs of 'culture' and 'civil society' at a particular historical moment.

## *2. Bourdieu*

Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of religion shows obvious parallels to that of Gramsci, although he rarely acknowledges Gramsci's influence on his thinking. Bourdieu has presented only one detailed study of religion (Bourdieu 1991), but has

provided numerous useful concepts for the analysis of religion elsewhere in his works. His general stance toward religion is one of critical detachment, which ultimately sees God as a socially constructed illusion and religion as an unnecessary system of symbolic meaning that serves chiefly to perpetuate social domination and whose answers to 'ultimate questions' are in the last instance groundless. His main interest concerns the 'paradox of doxa', the fact that the established order of things is broadly respected and perpetuates itself so easily, rather than being challenged or subverted by those disadvantaged under the existing conditions. Religion is seen as a particular effective means of promoting the 'misrecognition' of elite domination as the natural order of things by creating the illusion that elites are religious and therefore moral and deserving of their power and that participation in the fields that they dominate is unquestionably worthwhile. Therefore religion is to Bourdieu, following the footsteps of Feuerbach and Marx, indeed the 'opium of the people', since it anesthetizes them to ease their pain and it inebriates them to such a degree that they see the entire game as fair and worth playing, when in reality it is unfair and it fuels their opium addiction (Rey 2007: 91).

Of special value to the study of religion are Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and collusio. In Bourdieuan terms, an individual's religious habitus is that dimension of the habitus that manifests itself in the religious field. It can thus be seen as the principle determining subjective influence on what particular interests, tastes, dispositions and needs regarding religion one has and how the individual perceives of, uses and responds to religious symbols and engages in religious action and finally, what forms of religious capital he or she deems worthy of pursuit. Collusio, a less often cited concept from Bourdieu's toolbox, describes a kind of collective habitus shared by the members of a social status group, representing this group's understanding of the doxa. Bourdieu himself defines collusio as 'an immediate agreement in ways of judging and acting which does not presuppose either the communication of consciousness, still less a contractual decision, [which] is the basis of practical mutual understanding, the paradigm of which might be the one established between members of the same

team, or, despite the antagonism, all the players engaged in a game' (Bourdieu 2000: 145). Social change and the assimilation to new (religious or other) identities imply the erosion of one's participation in an originally expected collusion and the adaptation to another.

In sum, Bourdieu sees religious belief and action, like everything else, as prestructured, attributable to the agent's religious habitus and collusion as member of a social collectivity, on the one hand, and the power relations, both institutional and personal, on the other, which unfold in and structure the religious field, that is, the conflicts of interests and the struggle over religious capital. The structuring forces are responsible for a misrecognition that reproduces an illusion, thus legitimizing the elite's power and dominant social status and perpetuating the inequalities of the social order. In the religious field it is the orthodoxy, the dominant church, which by striving to justify the existence of the dominant classes as dominant inculcates in the dominated classes a decisive form of misrecognition and thus contributes to the structuring and reproduction of the illusion. A key role in this process falls to the discursive construction of religious capital, the most important element of which are the 'goods of salvation', i.e., the sacraments and officially recognized membership in a church. The struggle over religious capital causes the underprivileged masses to seek meaning, consolation, and salvation in religion, rather than looking elsewhere for the power to change the misrecognized and unequal social order. As is evident in Bourdieu's general theory of the economic rationale of different forms of capital, religious capital derives much of its importance in society from the fact that it is transferable into other forms of capital. Thus it enables elite agents or institutions of the religious field to perform better in the economic, political, and cultural fields.

Are Catholic Majority Societies cases in point of a religious hegemony and a dominant religious habitus? The immediate answer is that they used to be, at least. Until the middle of the 20th century there was indeed a close connection between the church and the secular elites of politics and business. Religion was a key resource in achieving compliance with the status quo of societal hierarchy.

The situation has been changing, however – in Eastern Europe with the help of state-induced atheism under socialist regimes, but just as surely in Western and Southern Europe where the process was propelled by the forces of modernization. The hegemonic position of the Catholic Church has been eroded – not, however, by a marketplace of other religions challenging the Catholic monopoly – and nowadays Catholic Majority Societies rather represent cases of a failing religious hegemony and of a Catholic habitus that is, more or less slowly, losing its impact on people's lives.

In what terms can this erosion of Catholic hegemony be analyzed? Inspiration may be derived from looking at a third theoretical concept, namely, secularity.

### *3. Secularity*

Anthropologists have been on the forefront of criticism of secularization theory; I would argue, however, that the notion of secularity can play a key role in an effort to understand the decline of religious hegemony. Various forms of secularity are indeed the driving forces that erode the Catholic monopoly, rather than the competition from other religions. To quickly recap on secularization: it has been discredited as a normative concept of a global shift away from religion, but can be a useful concept if carefully applied with reference to specific historic conditions. Secularization describes the process of change that affects the societal role of religion, concomitant to a general loss of the authority of both the church and religion. Secularity can be observed on three levels of society:

- macro/societal: a shrinking relevance of the values that are institutionalized in church religiosity for the legitimization of everyday life
- meso/organizational: religion is becoming a way of life among others, a matter of choice, where sacred values can be mixed with secular ones, that can be followed outside of the church institution
- micro/individual: decline of individual involvement in the church and religious matters

Understood in this 'soft' sense, secularity implies not so much the overthrow of Catholic hegemony by a counterhegemonic ideology, but its erosion by four different trends toward pluralism:

1. the intrusion of new religions; this is only a minor phenomenon in Catholic Majority Societies so far, because the Catholic habitus has proved much more resistant to change than the actual involvement with the church, due mostly to the historic interconnectedness of religion with all kinds of social networks and to the political influence of the Catholic Church in the public sphere.

2. diversification within Catholicism; this takes on two basic forms:

(a) an increasing diversity of groups and religious trends within the church (roughly described as the rather conservative mainstream and more liberal margins, often represented by religious orders)

(b) under the umbrella of 'Catholic identity' there exist a wide variety of divergent attitudes toward Catholicism, all of which nonetheless identify with being Catholic. A good example is provided by the study of Irish Catholics by Tom Inglis (2007), which distinguishes between

- orthodox Catholics (loyal members of the institutional church who accept the church's teachings, adhere to its rules and engage regularly in church practices)
- creative Catholics (those who no longer adhere legalistically to the rules of the church, but rather choose which beliefs and practices to follow and which to ignore, maybe even mixing the former with non-Catholic beliefs and practices)
- cultural Catholics (those who tend to identify less with the institutional church and more with the Catholic heritage of their country; they are open to debate and flexible interpretation of the church's teachings, but not to changing their religion)
- individualist Catholics (those who continue to identify themselves as Catholics, but have developed a nebulous 'New Age' attitude to religion that includes the search for personal authenticity, the



This picture represents the situation of the Catholic Church in Western Europe. I would suggest that the same categories can be applied to Eastern Europe, but another, fairly important one should possibly be added, which could be called 'superficial Catholics', i.e., those who have little knowledge of the church's teachings and practices due to their upbringing under socialism or non-religious family background, so they neither observe them closely nor debate or reinterpret them, but still identify with the church out of a diffuse feeling of propriety and acceptance of Catholicism's place in the national culture.

3. the rise of spiritual capital (cf. Bradford Verter 2003): the notion of spiritual capital draws on Bourdieu's concept of capital as accumulated material and ideational labor in the economy of power. Whereas Bourdieu links religious capital almost exclusively to institutional churches, identifying religious power as the authority of religious specialists to modify the worldview of laypeople, Verter suggests viewing spiritual capital from a different angle, as a form of cultural capital, as "a matter of taste – in other words, as a product of social relations – and thus as a marker of status within struggles for domination in a variety of contexts. Spiritual knowledge, competencies, and preferences may be understood as valuable assets in the economy of symbolic goods" (2003: 152).

As no market of ideas is entirely a free market but always structured into stronger and weaker positions, the shift to the notion of spiritual capital does not reject the idea that some religions enjoy a higher degree of plausibility than others in a certain socio-historical setting. Such plausibility may be achieved because people are born into the religious habitus of a particular social class and develop a 'practical sense' (à la Bourdieu) for this religion, or because the religious specialists of a national church dominate the public discourse on religion. To certain individuals, however, religion can also be considered plausible, and a form of spiritual capital valued highly, specifically because they are perceived as extra-institutional. In sum, the increasing relevance of various forms of spiritual capital at the expense of traditional religious capital in a society

may be taken as another indicator of secularization, of the erosion of the dominant church's hegemony.

4. religious indifference; this appears to be the most obvious consequence of secularization but has been subject to little empirical research. As studies for Western Europe have indicated, religious indifference has been increasing generation by generation, regarding both church attendance (belonging) and faith (believing) (cf. Voas & Crockett 2005). In Eastern Europe it seemed during the 1990s like the socialist trend toward secularity had been reversed, but nowadays, with enthusiasm for any kind of religion declining again, this is no longer as clear as it seemed to be. In Catholic Majority Societies, religious indifference is especially difficult to assess, because it tends to hide behind a high percentage of 'statistical Catholics' in surveys and censuses. One obvious indicator of religious indifference would be an increasingly consumerist attitude toward religion, which becomes apparent in a superficial identification with the Catholic Church on specific occasions but also, and often simultaneously, in the dramatic increase in popularity of a supermarket of spiritual pathways to individual salvation or self-enhancement (New Age).

### **Hegemony and Its Discontents**

Assuming that Catholic hegemony has been overcome seems overly simplistic. Gramsci's concept makes it clear that there is a constant struggle over the upholding or establishment of hegemony. In fact, this approach appears particularly well suited for the analysis of the current situation when the Catholic Churches of both Eastern and Western Europe are struggling for their dominant position in the religious field.<sup>1</sup>

None of the aspects of secularization can be identified as counterhegemonic in the 'hard' sense. The concept of hegemony identifies counterhegemonic ideas as based on the daily-life realities of the less dominant that challenge ruling ideas – of the legitimacy of state power, understandings of

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<sup>1</sup> As ethnographic data show, this struggle is nothing new and has been going on in Catholic Majority Societies throughout history, only its focus has been shifting from a struggle against the heresiarch (à la Bourdieu) or folk religiosity to a struggle against secularity.

inequality, concepts of social categories and other notions which inspire compliance with power. They remain unobserved in the interstices of social life as long as they are not publicly articulated with the intention to challenge the position of the ruling group. (See Durrenberger & Doukas 2008 as an example of the anthropological search for counterhegemony.) In Catholic Majority Societies the situation is much more complex. At first glance it could even be argued that the radically individualist ideology of neoliberal capitalism stands against the collectivist and self-effacing claims of the Christian worldview – but the neoliberal ideology obviously fails to challenge any ruling ideas of power. To the contrary, some understandings of the Christian faith can be seen as counterhegemonic to the ruling ideology of the capitalist class.

Thus it is necessary to go beyond Gramsci's orthodox Marxist understanding of a comprehensive, clear-cut dichotomy of ruling-class interests and subaltern interests that permeates every society. A Bourdieuan vision of society as divided into specific 'fields', religion one among them, promises a more nuanced understanding. From this perspective, religion is a field of struggle that is shaped by a shifting dialectic of the reproduction of a Catholic habitus and the church's continuous efforts to assert its definition of religious capital, on the one hand, and the erosion of Catholic dominance by the various forces of secularity, on the other. The possible outcome of this struggle can be either the establishment of a new hegemony, religious or secular, or an impasse between the inability of the Catholic Church to provide a meaningful worldview to the majority of the population and the inability of the majority to articulate a coherent system of meaning in opposition to the former hegemony.

Some of the issues identified by Grace Davie in her recent article "Religion in Europe in the 21st Century: The Factors to Take into Account" (*Archives Européennes des Sociologie* 47, 2006) as crucial in understanding the contemporary paradox of the public reappearance of religion across Europe at a moment when the indices of religious activity in the historic churches continue to fall, may prove useful in analyzing the situation of Catholic Majority Societies:

(1) The historic role of churches as part of European cultural heritage remains undisputed.

(2) The historic churches have lost their active role in people's everyday lives, however; 'believing' mostly happens without 'belonging', due to (a) a general decrease of institutional commitment in people's social lives and (b) a general generational decline of religiousness of any kind.

(3) Religion is becoming 'vicarious', i.e., it is performed by an active minority on behalf and with the approval of a much larger number; this situation leads to high expectations regarding the firmness of belief and the moral standard of behavior of the clergy; it is also possible that the churches are offering a space for debates on controversial topics that are difficult to address elsewhere in society.

(4) Church affiliation shifts from a 'culture of obligation' to a 'culture of consumption', and religious choice is most strongly influenced by the intensity of experience, as demonstrated by the popularity of pilgrimages, charismatic forms of worship and the mass appeal of special religious events.

Davie concludes that there are two contemporary religious economies in Europe:

- an incipient market, which is emerging among the churchgoing minorities in which voluntary membership is becoming the norm
- an approach to religion that resists this tendency and continues to uphold the idea of a public utility, in which membership is ascribed rather than chosen. In this economy opting out, rather than opting in, remains the norm (2006: 293).

The latter religious economy appears to be the more typical for Catholic Majority societies. Hegemony is obviously built upon a long historical trajectory: it has produced a long-lasting Catholic habitus and successfully permeated many aspects of the social and political fabric of these societies. However, the Catholic hegemony has been eroded by the different elements of secularity mentioned above. It is neither taken for granted any longer nor is it challenged by a coherent counterhegemonic vision. Rather, the situation is becoming more diffuse. People do not radically break with the hegemonic church, but their attitude is becoming more superficial and more focused on specific occasions of participation than it

used to be in previous generations. All of this means that the Catholic Church's continuing ability to influence public debates and harness political agendas to their hegemonic interest tends to mask an increasing pluralism within society, both concerning people's individual beliefs and their attitudes toward the institutional church.

An informed assessment of this situation is complicated by the definite lack of studies on the production of Catholic hegemony. Gavin Smith has called for a methodological program for ethnography that takes into account both the terrain of what comes to be taken for granted, i.e., the reception of the hegemonic process, and the terrain of the active production of identifiable hegemonic fields (1999: 243). If we are to better understand the hegemonic struggle in the contemporary religious field, anthropology needs to pay closer attention to the understanding of hegemony and the resulting strategies of the church as well as the laity.