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GRAMSCI AND THE THEORY OF HEGEMONY

By Thomas R. Bates

In November 1926 the General Secretary of the Italian Communist Party, Antonio Gramsci, was arrested and subsequently sentenced to twenty years in prison by the Fascist State. His long and miserable confinement, which resulted in his death in 1937, also resulted in one of the most significant contributions to twentieth-century Marxist thought, the theory of "hegemony." Unfortunately, he was unable to elaborate this theory in a systematic way before his frail body finally gave out on him in the summer of 1935. The theory lies fragmented and dispersed throughout his *Quaderni del carcere,* waiting to be pieced together like an old jigsaw puzzle. The historian, placed in the uncomfortable role of archeologist, risks creating the illusion of a theory which wasn't there, or arbitrarily emphasizing a casual idea. What justifies a postmortem construction of the theory is the fact that the concept of hegemony is the unifying thread of Gramsci's prison notes, and appears to be the logical conclusion to his total political experience.

The basic premise of the theory of hegemony is one with which few would disagree: that man is not ruled by force alone, but also by ideas. "The foundation of a ruling class," he wrote, "is equivalent to the creation of a *Weltanschauung.*"[1] Marx had likewise observed that "the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class."[2] Gramsci, however, found this simple fact much more suggestive than had Marx, for whom it was but a corollary of economic theory. The *homo economicus* of industrial England, which had captivated Marx in the British Museum, cast less of a spell in the economically backward land of Saint Francis, Vico, and Croce. The tug of this idealist tradition can be seen in Gramsci's estimation of the power, both creative and conservative, of ideas. To ideas he ascribed the vital function of preserving the "ideological unity of a whole social bloc."[3] Not that ideas were powerful enough to eliminate class struggle, but they were obviously capable of muting it sufficiently to allow class societies to function. Without this ideological factor it would be difficult to explain how western civilization had survived at all.

Gramsci had no wish to argue with Marx's nostrum that every state is a dictatorship, but he also realized that the pleasing simplicity of the aphorism had led to serious political errors on the part of the Italian Left in its confrontation with Fascism. Taken too literally, it had become analytically useless, making it impossible to distinguish between forms of rule and to interpret properly the character of historical periods. It may be that every state

[1] *Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di Benedetto Croce* (Turin, 1966), 75; hereafter *Il materialismo storico.*

[2] "The Communist Manifesto, " *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy,* ed. Lewis Feuer (New York, 1959), 26.

[3] *Il materialismo storico,* 7.

is *ultimately* a dictatorship, and will bare its teeth when confronted by a serious challenger, whether from the outside or from within, but it is not true that dictatorship is the sole form of political rule. There is another form, and it is "hegemony." The concept of hegemony is really a very simple one. It means political leadership based on the consent of the led, a consent which is secured by the diffusion and popularization of the world view of the ruling class.

The term "hegemony" is certainly not new to western political discourse, and has traditionally signified domination of one sort or another. In Gramsci's case, however, the pedigree can be traced specifically to the political vocabulary of the Russian revolutionaries in their turn-of-the-century polemics. The term was introduced by Plekhanov, Axelrod, Lenin, and others in their dispute with the "Economists" over the issue of "spontaneity." In advocating the hegemony of the proletariat over the peasantry, and of the party over the proletariat, Plekhanov's group was in essence affirming the necessity of elite leadership in a backward cultural situation.[4] As carried forward by Lenin in his frequent tirades against "tail-endism," the term continued to signify little more than the political leadership of a proletarian vanguard, whose mission was to instruct the masses as to their true interests and divert them from the perilous path of reformism. More precisely, this meant winning the allegiance of the huge peasantry to the revolutionary program of the tiny proletariat. The Italian scholar Norberto Bobbio has aptly observed that Gramsci's debt to Lenin for the concept of hegemony is less than Gramsci claims. According to Bobbio, the term was used more by Stalin than by Lenin, who preferred the terms "leadership" and "management" (*rukovoditel* and *rukovodstvo*), and when he did use "hegemony" it was synonymous with "leadership."[5] Gramsci also used the word in this sense while he was General Secretary of the Party. It was not until his prison meditations focussed on the role of intellectuals in Italian history that he began to see the larger possibilities of the Leninist concept.

A letter of May 1932 reveals Gramsci's own image of the historical significance of the concept. It originated in the revolt against "orthodox" or positivistic Marxism. The effort of Benedetto Croce to "liquidate" orthodox Marxism was superfluous, said Gramsci, because orthodox Marxism had already been superseded by Leninism, which resolved the problems to which Croce had addressed himself:

> It happened that in the very period in which Croce elaborated this so-called club of his, the philosophy of praxis was elaborated by its greatest modern theorists in the same sense, and the moment of "hegemony" or of cultural leadership was systematically upgraded precisely in opposition to the mechanistic and fatalistic concepts of economism. It is possible to affirm that the essential feature of the most modern philosophy of praxis consists precisely in the historico-political concept of hegemony.[6]

[4]E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923,* 3 vols. (Baltimore, 1969), I, 29–31.

[5]Norberto Bobbio, "Gramsci e la concezione della societa civile," *Gramsci e la cultura contemporanea,* ed. Pietro Rossi (Rome, 1969), 94.

[6]Letter to Tatiana, 2 May 1932, *Lettere dal carcere,* ed. Elsa Fubini (Turin, 1965), 616.

Gramsci's recognition of the concept of hegemony as a watershed between nineteenth- and twentieth-century Marxism was fundamentally appropriate. For, as he develops it, "hegemony" is clearly his theoretical response to that *fin de siècle* crisis of Marxism and to those far-reaching questions about consciousness and society posed in the Italian revolt against positivism.

The "upgrading" of the factor of cultural leadership in history required a reappraisal of the Marxist concept of "superstructure," which could no longer be construed as a pale reflection of socioeconomic organization. Gramsci's study of the role of intellectuals in society led him to break down the superstructure into two great "floors," which he described as "civil society" and "political society." Civil society is composed of all those "private organisms"—schools, churches, clubs, journals, and parties—which contribute in molecular fashion to the formation of social and political consciousness. Political society, on the other hand, is composed of those public institutions—the government, courts, police, and army—which exercise "direct dominion."[7] It is synonymous with the "state." The ruling class exerts its power over society on both of these "floors" of action, but by very different methods. Civil society is the marketplace of ideas, where intellectuals enter as "salesmen" of contending cultures. The intellectuals succeed in creating hegemony to the extent that they extend the world view of the rulers to the ruled, and thereby secure the "free" consent of the masses to the law and order of the land. To the extent that the intellectuals fail to create hegemony, the ruling class falls back on the state's coercive apparatus which disciplines those who do not "consent," and which is "constructed for all society in anticipation of moments of crisis of command . . . when spontaneous consensus declines."[8]

Implicit in this theory is a definition of the "intellectual" by his sociopolitical function:

An independent class of intellectuals does not exist, but rather every social group has its own intellectuals. However, the intellectuals of the historically progressive class . . . exercise such a power of attraction that they end . . . by subordinating the intellectuals of other social groups and thus create a system of solidarity among all intellectuals, with links of a psychological (vanity) or caste nature. This fact is realized spontaneously in historical periods in which the given social group is truly progressive.[9]

A case in point—and, indeed, Gramsci's primary model in elaborating this concept—was the role of intellectuals in the Risorgimento. The "organic intellectuals" of Italy's new ruling class were the Moderates, who exercised this "spontaneous" power of attraction over all other intellectual groups and, most notably, over the Mazzinian Party of Action.

Paradoxically, the success of the Moderates was also the failure of the Risorgimento.

They wanted to "dominate," not to "lead," and furthermore they wanted their *interests* to dominate, not their persons. That is, they wanted a new force to become arbiter of the nation: this force was Piedmont and the Monarchy.[10]

[7] *Gli intellettuali e l'organizzazione della cultura* (Turin, 1966), 9; hereafter *Gli intellettuali.*

[8] *Ibid.* [9] *Il Risorgimento* (Turin, 1966), 71. [10] *Ibid.*, 106.

The result was a "passive revolution," meaning that the struggle was led not by a class but by a state, which created a dictatorship without hegemony.[11]

The Moderates, representing a monarchical state which entered the peninsula like a foreign power, were uneasy and unfamiliar with their new subjects. They feared nothing so much as the possibility of an intervention of this unknown quantity in the Risorgimento, and did everything to prevent outbursts of excessive popular enthusiasm. The dreaded possibility of a mass movement was represented by the Party of Action and its popular militia under the charismatic leadership of Garibaldi, and by the genuine desire of the peasantry for a great land reform. Here then was the chance to bring the peasant masses into the work of building a unified nation-state.[12]

But the Party of Action lacked the "Jacobin" qualities necessary to take command of the masses. Gramsci, who had been cured of his youthful anti-Jacobin prejudices by the frustrating experiences of the *dopoguerra,* now recognized their vital role in the creation of hegemony. The function of Jacobins in modern history, he believed, was to liquidate reactionaries, prevent counterrevolution and premature compromise. Unfortunately, the Party of Action had no Jacobin content, no "inflexible will to become the leading party."[13] Gramsci did not mean that the Actionists might have become the rulers of the new state, but that a Jacobin interlude would have involved the masses in the making of Italian history, and this would have made it a different story indeed. Even in "failure" it would have planted a tradition of mass participation in political life, opened new democratic horizons, brought the North and South together in a unified experience, and thus laid the foundation for a truly national political culture.

The Actionists failed to pose a distinct and popular alternative to the Moderate's conservative program of government and consequently were themselves the victims of Moderate hegemony. The historic defeat of the Actionists accounted, in Gramsci's opinion, for that perplexing feature of the Post-Risorgimento State called *trasformismo,* a term invented by Italians to describe the fact that the more governments changed, the more they remained the same.

> This so-called "transformism" is nothing but the parliamentary expression of the fact that the Party of Action was co-opted, bit by bit, by the Moderates, and that the popular masses were decapitated, rather than absorbed into the ambit of the new state.[14]

The failure of the Liberal State to create genuine hegemony meant simply that it failed to become truly liberal. As its nineteenth-century critics would have put it, the "legal" Italy failed to become the "real" Italy.

According to Gramsci's theory, hegemony and dictatorship are mutually dependent phenomena. The authoritarian character of Liberal Italy was, no less than that of Socialist Russia, a result of the weakness of its hegemony. In both cases, the lack of "spontaneous" consent in civil society obliged the state to resort to force. Gramsci described societies characterized by the predominance of force as "economico-corporative." By this he meant societies in which there was no general agreement about how society should be organized,

[11] *Ibid.*, 106-107. [12] *Ibid.*, 88. [13] *Ibid.*, 86. [14] *Ibid.*, 100.

no generally accepted world view harmonizing with economic and social reality. In such situations, politics is the direct and unrefined expression of the dictatorship in the economic sphere.[15]

It was no surprise to Gramsci that the beginning of every great sociopolitical transformation, be it bourgeois or proletarian, is characterized by a period of dictatorship, the length of which depends precisely on the ability of the dictatorship to promote general acceptance of the change occurring in the economic structure. In the Risorgimento Gramsci discerned "the last reflection of the historical tendency of the Italian bourgeoisie to maintain itself within 'corporative' limits."[16] In other words, the Moderate leaders of the Risorgimento were not able to unify the bourgeoisie on a national scale, to distract them from their narrow, self-interested pursuits long enough to instil in them a clear vision of their common historical tasks and a confident sense of national purpose. A social class cannot convince others of the validity of its world view until it is fully convinced itself. Once this is achieved, society enters a period of relative tranquility, in which hegemony rather than dictatorship is the prevailing form of rule.

Gramsci incorrectly identified this period of hegemony with Croce's idea of the "ethico-political" in history. This was an understandable error, since Croce illustrated his concept in two historical works, *A History of Italy, 1871–1915,* and *History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century* (1815–1915),[16a] which obviously excluded those periods of revolutionary struggle and dictatorship which preceded and followed the period covered by his narrative. Gramsci criticized this exclusion of violent struggle, as if the ethico-political period were "something that had been dropped from the heavens."[17] However, Croce's concept of the "ethico-political" was not temporally defined, since it applied to all times. In every historical period he aimed to discover the quality of universality, in every struggle some sign of the human spirit seeking to realize its freedom. Indeed, Croce had first arrived at this concept of history through his study of the Neapolitan Revolution of 1799, but his initial attraction to the Jacobin, anti-monarchical elements in this revolt turned to disgust as he saw the outcome in a reactionary police state.[18] His disillusionment by the ethico-political "failure" of that revolt helps to explain his later reluctance to tackle periods of bloody strife and his final description of Fascism as a "parenthesis" in Italian history. Gramsci's error, therefore, was only formal. He accurately sensed the bias in Croce's concept, which *in application* could be equated with the concept of hegemony.

One reason for the similarity between Gramsci's and Croce's theories has already been suggested. Both men were rebelling against the positivist view of history which prevailed in Italy at the turn of the century. Both sought to restore to Italian historiography the full significance of the human personality

[15] *Il materialismo storico,* 12. [16] *Gli intellettuali,* 41.

[16a] *A History of Italy, 1871–1915,* trans. Cecilia M. Ady (New York, 1963); *History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century,* trans. Henry Furst (New York, 1963).

[17] "Benedetto Croce and His Concept of Liberty," trans. Samuel Putnam, *Science and Society,* **10** (Winter 1946), 289.

[18] A. Robert Caponigri, *History and Liberty: The Historical Writings of Benedetto Croce* (London, 1955), 21-26.

and an appreciation of the complex moral drama played out in the political sphere. Despite the formal similarity of their philosophical motives, however, their political motives were entirely opposed. If Croce's aim was to create an alternative to Marxism, Gramsci's was to offer Italians a Marxist alternative to Croce. Identifying himself as a protagonist in his own theory, Gramsci imagined himself locked in fierce ideological combat with the "Lay Pope" of Liberal Italy, whom he regarded as the most important educator of the ruling classes.[19] But one suspects that an underlying motive for the intensity of his attack on Croce was that he himself had learned so much from the old master. In fact, Gramsci frankly acknowledged the "instrumental value" of Croce to Italian Marxism:[20]

He has drawn attention to the importance of cultural and intellectual factors in historical development, to the function of great intellectuals in the organic life of civil society or of the state, to the moment of hegemony and consensus as the necessary form of the concrete historical bloc.

A large measure of Gramsci's debt to Croce can be found in the latter's *Etica e politica,* a series of essays written in the early 1920's and later published by the House of Laterza in Bari. In *Etica e politica* Croce took a Machiavellian approach to the study of politics, an approach which he had long ago inherited from the "Machiavellian school" of Italian theorists, particularly Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto. Gramsci could not have been displeased with this approach, which shared with Marxism a profound skepticism toward traditional political categories. For all modern Machiavellians, the fundamental categories of power are force and consensus, and these are not mutually exclusive but interdependent realities. Croce, just as much as Gramsci, believed that there could be no consensus without force, no "liberty" without "authority."[21]

Croce's inspiration is apparent in Gramsci's concept of civil and political society. The effort of some scholars to trace these concepts to Marx and Hegel only leads to confusion because, though he borrowed their language, Gramsci did not borrow their meanings.[22] For both Marx and Hegel, "civil society"

[19] *Il materialismo storico,* 249. [20] *Ibid.,* 201.

[21] Benedetto Croce, *Etica e politica* (Bari, 1967), 178-79. Croce's understanding of this relationship was practical as well as theoretical. As Minister of Education in Giolitti's short-lived Cabinet of 1920, he had urged his liberal hero to take forceful action against a strike movement in the civil service. Furthermore, he gave Mussolini a vote of confidence even after the murder of Matteotti in 1924; cf. Cecil Sprigge, *Benedetto Croce: Man and Thinker* (New Haven, 1952), 17-18. In this same period, according to H. Stuart Hughes, Croce was moving towards a "grudging endorsement" of liberal democracy: Hughes, *Consciousness and Society* (New York, 1958), 215. This is true, just as it is true that he endorsed the most illiberal and undemocratic means to achieve it. Only in 1925 did Croce realize that he had gotten more force than he bargained for.

[22] The term "civil society" has a long history. It was used by the English Economists and French Physiocrats of the 18th century to denote the "private" realm of social and economic intercourse, a supposedly "natural" and beneficent order best left alone by the state. Hegel, in his *Philosophy of Right* (1821), overturned this Lockian notion by defining civil society as a realm of chaos and corruption, in contrast to the state, which he invested with universal values. Marx adopted the concept of civil society from Hegel,

refers to social structure; more precisely, to what Marx termed the "relations of production." According to Marx it is this sphere of social conflict that provides the horsepower of history. Likewise for Gramsci, civil society is a sphere of potent historical action, but it belongs not to the structure but to the superstructure of society. It is not the sphere of commerce and industry, but of ideology and "cultural organization" in the broadest sense.[23] Gramsci's concept can rather be traced to Croce's idea of the "church," defined in *Etica e politica* as "the formation of moral institutions in the largest sense, including the religious institutions and revolutionary sects, including the sentiments and customs and fantasies and myths of a practical tendency and content."[24] For Croce, as for Gramsci, the "church," or civil society, is the sphere in which intellectuals (Croce's "political geniuses") operate, whether in cooperation with the state or in opposition to it. For both men, whatever "ethical" content a state may have is to be found in this sphere, not within the state proper.[25]

Croce's development of ethicopolitical history was inspired by two political aims. One, as Gramsci correctly observed, was the destruction of Marxism. His other purpose was to combat the "Actualist" philosophy of Giovanni Gentile, whose concept of the "Ethical State" provided the theoretical foundation of the Fascist dictatorship.[26] Gramsci's attitude towards this dispute is extremely important for understanding his own view of the state and its relation to hegemony. It is interesting that Gramsci appears to take Croce's side in rejecting the Gentilian Ethical State, in which civil and political societies are fused, as well as his "governmental concept of morality":

> The concept of the citizen as functionary of the state descends directly from the failure to divide political society and civil society, political hegemony and politico-state government; in reality, therefore, from the anti-historicity of the concept of state that is implicit in the concept of Spirit. . . .[27]

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only to turn it against him, denying that the state could transcend the private interests and conflicts of civil society; cf. Bobbio, "Gramsci e la concezione della società civile," *op. cit.*, 80–85, and Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (London, 1970), 13–21.

[23]Norberto Bobbio contends that Gramsci's concept was inspired more by Hegel than by Marx, as Hegel's "civil society" included not only industry and commerce, but also the cultural and juridical forms attached to these activities; cf. "Gramsci e la concezione della società civile," *op. cit.*, 80–85. Gramsci himself acknowledged a debt to Hegel for his definition of civil society as the sphere in which a social group exercises hegemony over the entire society, and embodying the "ethical content" of the state; *Passato e presente* (Turin, 1966), 164. However, this was to give Hegel too much credit, for Hegel rather deduced the ethical content of the state from his abstract ideal of the state, for which he was justifiably criticized by Marx; cf. Avineri, *op. cit.*, 22–25.

[24]Croce, *Etica e politica,* 230. Croce derived his categories "church" and "state" from the German historian von Ranke, and found a more distant antecedent in Vico's distinction between "certainty" (force) and "truth" (morality): *Etica e politica,* 285.

[25]*Ibid.*, 230–31.

[26]Croce states his anti-Marxist and anti-Fascist aims in *Etica e politica,* 226, 286–88. Gentile's concept of the Ethical State, and Croce's objections, are discussed by Henry S. Harris in *The Social Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile* (Urbana, 1960), 226–36.

[27]*Passato e presente,* 32.

The "anti-historicity" of the Gentilian concept resulted from his inability to distinguish the "ethical" phase from the "economico-corporative" phase in history. More specifically, the philosopher of Fascism did not understand Fascism. According to Gramsci, Fascism was a product of the post-war crisis, which was a hegemonic crisis of world-historical proportions.

The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born. In this interregnum the most varied of morbid phenomena appear.[28]

Gentile, of course, saw nothing morbid in Fascism. He did not view it as a raw dictatorship defending the interests of a decadent class. In fact, he aspired to base Fascism on a national consensus, to be achieved not through violence but through the sweet voice of reason. He saw Mussolini not as the Tyrant but as the Tutor of his people.[29] According to Gramsci, however, Fascism could not possibly create a new "ethical phase" out of the post-war crisis, because it was itself no more than an expression of the persistence of the crisis. Gentile's concept of the state was, like Hegel's, self-justifying, whereas in reality the ethics of a state can only be evaluated historically, in the realm of civil society.[30]

But what if civil society is in no condition to judge the state? What if the majority of people do not know what is best for them or, if they do know, are ignorant of the means to achieve it? In this situation is it not incumbent upon the state to shoulder the destiny of society; to assume, even if temporarily, an ethical content of its own? Gramsci's Leninism shows through clearly in his response to this problem:

The state is the instrument for adjusting civil society to the economic structure. But it is necessary that the state *will* to do it, that is, that the representatives of the change in the economic structure lead the state. To wait for civil society to adjust itself by means of persuasion and propaganda to the new structure, for the old *homo oeconomicus* to disappear without being interred with all the honors he deserves, is a new form of economic rhetoric, a new form of vacuous and inconclusive economic moralism.[31]

[28] *Ibid.*, 38.

[29] A. James Gregor, *The Ideology of Fascism* (New York, 1969), 226.

[30] Gramsci's critique of Gentile's totalitarian theory of state has led a number of scholars to conclude that the theory of hegemony is somehow liberal or social-democratic: cf. Bobbio, "Gramsci e la concezione della società civile," *op. cit.*, 93–96; Giuseppe Tamburrano, *Antonio Gramsci: la vita, il pensiero, l'azione* (Manduria, 1963), 258–59, 295. This view has gained favor in Italy to the extent that Stalin and the Russian regime had fallen into disfavor. As late as 1958, however, the P.C.I. maintained the recognizably Stalinist view that there is no practical difference either between civil society and the state, or between hegemony and dictatorship; cf. Palmiro Togliatti, "Il leninismo nel pensiero e nell'azione di Antonio Gramsci," *Studi Gramsciani* (Rome, 1958), 14–35. Taken literally, Togliatti's claim is patently incorrect: hegemony and dictatorship are not the same thing. But this does not mean that the concept of hegemony is not totalitarian: on this score the Old Left understands Gramsci better than his post-Stalinist interpreters. Also see Gwyn Williams, "The Concept of 'Egemonia' in the Thought of Antonio Gramsci: Some Notes on Interpretation," *JHI*, **21** (Oct. 1960), 586–99.

[31] *Il materialismo storico*, 266–67.

This was Gramsci's final answer to those moderate socialists like Turati, Treves, and Mondolfo, who had turned against the Bolsheviks in 1917 on the grounds that the Russian people were not ready for socialism. Of course they weren't ready for socialism! The point was to prepare them, and this could certainly be done better by leaders dedicated to socialism than by leaders dedicated to a "capitalist stage" of development. But does not the acceptance of this historical task oblige socialists to embrace the concept of the State-as-Educator; in other words, the Hegelian State? It does, and Gramsci frankly recognized this fact. Indeed, his real criticism of the Hegelian State, in a positive sense, was that it conceives of its educational tasks too narrowly.[32]

There is an obvious logical conflict between Gramsci's critique of Gentile and the Fascist State, and his positive program for the Socialist State. This conflict, characteristic of his prison thought, is responsible for the contradictory interpretations held by contemporary scholars. Only when his critique is placed in the perspective of his program do we perceive the difficulty of extracting liberal sweetening from what is really sour grapes. What bothered Gramsci most was not how Fascists played the game, but that they won the game. The modern phenomenon of "statolatry" was not, to his way of thinking, the prerogative of reaction, but might just as well serve the cause of revolution:

> For some social groups which, before ascending to autonomous statehood, did not have a long period of their own independent cultural and moral development . . . a period of statolatry is necessary and rather opportune. This "statolatry" is nothing but the normal form of "statehood," of initiation, at least, to autonomous statehood, and to the creation of a "civil society" which was not historically possible to create before the ascent to independent statehood. . . . In any case, such "statolatry" must not become theoretical fanaticism and be considered perpetual. It must be criticized, so that it develops, producing new forms of statehood. . . .[33]

What Gramsci is saying here is that dictatorship, in certain historical circumstances (such as Russia in 1917), may be the only *means* to create hegemony, and that, paradoxically, it may take an exceptionally strong state to abolish the state. But he also warns against "theoretical fanaticism"; that is, making the state a law unto itself. This caution against statolatry *en permanence* may be understood as his true critique of statolatry in its reactionary form, as well as prudent advice to the Stalinist regime. In reality, he concludes, "only the social group which poses the end of the state and of itself as the goal to be achieved can create an Ethical State. . . ."[34]

With the theory of hegemony Gramsci sought to explain a number of puzzling historical phenomena. The problem which had most troubled Gramsci as a young socialist was the widening gap between the mechanistic prognoses of orthodox Marxism and the movement of reformism in the twentieth century. Like Lenin and many other left-wing socialists, he was overwhelmed by the apparent "indifference" of the masses. Lenin's response to this dilemma was

[32] *Note su Machiavelli* (Turin, 1966), 128–30.
[33] *Passato e presente,* 166.
[34] *Note su Machiavelli,* 128.

two-fold: first, he rejected the notion that workers would acquire revolutionary consciousness "spontaneously" from the material conditions of their lives, and second, he formulated the theory of imperialism, the "highest stage of capitalism," to explain the formation of labor "aristocracies" which split the proletarian movement and led it further down the path of reformism.[35] Though nowhere does Gramsci criticize Lenin's theory, it is clear that his own response is contained in the theory of hegemony, which does not seek an explanation in economic data, but in "cultural" data.

The apathy and indifference of the masses to the appeals of the revolutionaries expressed for Gramsci the fact of their subordination, not only to the force of the state, but also to the world view of the ruling class. To achieve a revolutionary perspective, the worker must first be freed of the ideological fetters imposed on him by the cultural organizations of the ruling class. How does this come about?

> Critical understanding of oneself . . . comes through the struggle of political "hegemonies," of opposing directions, first in the field of ethics, then of politics, culminating in a higher elaboration of one's own conception of reality. The awareness of being part of a definite hegemonic force . . . is the first step towards a progressively higher self-consciousness, in which theory and practice finally unite.[36]

The hegemonic struggle requires the leadership of intellectuals, for, on a mass scale:

> Critical self-consciousness signifies historically and politically the creation of intellectual cadres. A human mass does not "distinguish" itself and does not become independent "by itself" without organizing itself (in a broad sense), and there is no organization without intellectuals . . . without organizers and leaders. . . .[37]

Class consciousness is, then, the product of an ideological struggle led by the intellectual "officers" of competing social classes. The phenomenon of "false consciousness," which from the standpoint of economic determinism is simply incomprehensible, represents from Gramsci's standpoint simply a victory of the ruling-class intellectuals in this struggle. Conversely, the phenomenon of the passing of "traditional" intellectuals (those of a decadent ruling class) into the proletarian camp, which Marx recognized but never paused to explain, is explained by Gramsci as a victory for the proletarian intellectuals, who are aided by the fact that their class represents the "progressive" stage of human development.[38] Gramsci attributed far more

[35]V. I. Lenin, "What Is To Be Done?" and "Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism," in *Essential Works of Lenin,* ed. Henry M. Christman (New York, 1966), 53–176, 177–270.

[36]*Il materialismo storico,* 11. [37]*Ibid.,* 12.

[38]*Il Risorgimento,* 71. Marx makes a fleeting reference to this phenomenon in the "Communist Manifesto," *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy,* 17.

importance to this process than Marx had, but of course Marx had not witnessed the startling power of twentieth-century ideologies.

Gramsci was one of the few modern Marxists to attempt a theoretical explanation of the "generation gap" or the "radicalism of youth". According to Gramsci, the older generation *always* educate the young. The question is, which elder generation shall do the educating? The passing of bourgeois youth into the proletarian camp indicates the failure of the bourgeoisie to educate their own offspring properly, and to prepare them for the succession. These youth must then turn to the elders of the proletariat for guidance.[39] However, when the bourgeois elders see this happening on a national scale, they will intervene politically and militarily to stem the tide, to cut off the lines of communication between their young and the progressive forces. But this effort backfires.

The struggle, of which the normal external expressions are suffocated, attacks the structure of the old class like a dissolving cancer, weakening and putrifying it. It assumes morbid forms of mysticism, sensualism, moral indifference, pathological degenerations. The old structure does not provide and is unable to satisfy the new exigencies. The permanent or semi-permanent underemployment of the so-called intellectuals is one of the typical expressions of this insufficiency, which assumes a harsh character for the youngest, insofar as it leaves no "open horizons."[40]

Gramsci retained a skepticism towards these alienated *fils de bourgeois,* a skepticism which was not, however, mere prejudice, but was an historical judgment informed by the experience of the Italian labor movement. How was one to explain the passing of entire groups of left-wing intellectuals into the enemy camp? More precisely, how was one to explain the phenomena of socialists entering into bourgeois governments and of revolutionary syndicalists entering into the nationalist and then the Fascist movement? Gramsci viewed these puzzling events as the continuation on a mass scale of the *trasformismo* of the nineteenth century. The "generation gap" within the ruling class had resulted in a large influx of bourgeois youth into the popular movements, especially during the turbulent decade of the 1890's. But in the war-induced crisis of the Italian State in the early twentieth century, these prodigal children returned to the fold:

The bourgeoisie fails to educate its youth (struggle of generations). The youth allow themselves to be culturally attracted by the workers, and right away they . . . try to take control of them (in their "unconscious" desire to impose the hegemony of their own class on the people), but during historical crises they return to the fold.[41]

This view of bourgeois radicalism, considerably more skeptical than that expressed in his early writings, suggests that he may have been influenced in

[39] *Gli intellettuali,* 43. [40] *Ibid.*

[41] *Ibid.*, 42; also *Il Risorgimento,* 157. Unfortunately, Gramsci does not adduce any concrete evidence in support of this hypothesis, but one assumes it is based on first-hand impressions.

prison by his rereading of Robert Michels' study of 1911, translated as *Political Parties*. . .(1962). Like Gramsci, Michels believed that the conversion of bourgeois intellectuals to the proletarian cause was indispensable to the development of revolutionary consciousness. But he was also highly skeptical of their motives and reliability, and warned against their "Bonapartist" tendencies.[42] Gramsci had good reason to believe Michels, as Michels himself had turned Fascist.[42a]

Another historical phenomenon which finds an explanation in the theory of hegemony is the strange connection between philosophical achievement and political decadence:

It can be said that every culture has its speculative and religious moment, which coincides with the period of complete hegemony of the social group which it expresses, and perhaps coincides exactly with the moment in which real hegemony disintegrates at the base, molecularly. But the system of thought, precisely for that (reacting to the disintegration), perfects itself dogmatically, becomes a transcendental "faith." Thus, one observes that every so-called epoch of decadence (in which the old world is disintegrating) is characterized by a refined and highly "speculative" thought.[43]

An example of such speculative thought was the historicism of Benedetto Croce. One of Gramsci's primary aims in the *Quaderni del carcere* was to create an "Anti-Croce" comparable to Engels' *Anti-Dühring,* and capable of shattering Croce's hegemony in Italian culture. After all, were not Croce's own historical writings essentially an "Anti- Marx?" And had not Croce, in his effort to liquidate Marxism, incorporated some of its methods into his own philosophy? Gramsci observed that a traditional culture, tottering on the edge of an historical abyss with a young and vigorous culture at its back, may turn around and grasp at its executioner in an effort to save itself. Marxism, for instance,

is sufficiently robust and so productive of new truths that the old world resorts to it in order to furnish its arsenal with the most modern and effective arms. This signifies that Marxism is beginning to exercise its own hegemony over traditional culture, but the latter, which is still robust and, above all, is more refined and finished, tries to react like conquered Greece. . . .[44]

The theory of hegemony has important implications for revolutionary strategy and, in fact, the theory responds precisely to the impasse of classic

[42]Robert Michels, *Political Parties* (New York, 1962), 107–08, 205–12.

[42a] Gramsci's personal copy of Michels' work was a French translation published in Paris (1914) which was sent to him in prison by his sister-in-law Tatiana Schuct in Aug. 1929. Michels was drawn to Fascism in the 1920's when he found his theory of charismatic leadership fulfilled in the person of Benito Mussolini. The *Duce* rewarded Michels with a chair at the University of Perugia in 1928; cf. S. M. Lipset, *Political Parties* (New York, 1962), 32–33.

[43]*Il materialismo storico,* 43.

[44]*Ibid.,* 157. This essay is translated by Louis Marks in *The Modern Prince and Other Writings* (New York, 1967), 90–117.

revolutionary strategy which, in the Second International, was based on the assumptions of economic determinism. These fatalistic assumptions led to a variety of strategical errors. The "economists" failed to understand "how mass ideological facts always lag behind mass economic phenomena and how at certain moments the automatic drive produced by the economic factor is slowed down, cramped or even broken up momentarily by traditional ideological elements."[45] One of the most successful "ideological bluffs" of the bourgeois intellectuals was the myth that real democracy and social equity could be achieved through parliament and universal suffrage, a myth to which the parties of the Second International almost entirely succumbed. Gramsci believed that parliament and polling booth are mere forms, the real content of which is determined by effective control of the cultural organizations, of the lines of communication in civil society.

The "normal" exercise of hegemony in a particular regime is characterized by a combination of force and consensus variously equilibrated, without letting force subvert consensus too much, making it appear that the force is based on the consent of the majority.[46]

The parliamentary game was, therefore, an enormously effective means for creating the illusion of popular sovereignty.

The powers-that-be in the state have a great advantage in the struggle for hegemony, by virtue of their superior organization, information, and means of communication. Alongside parliament, they have the yet more modern instrument of "public opinion," the potential of which was foreseen by Gramsci as by few others.

Public opinion is strictly linked to political hegemony. It is the point of contact between civil society and political society, between consensus and force. The state, when it wants to initiate an unpopular action, preventively creates the adequate public opinion; that is, it organizes and concentrates certain elements of civil society.[47]

The complex superstructures created by the modern nation-states are resistant to the most catastrophic of economic crises, as proved in the immediate *dopoguerra* and again in the great financial crash of 1929. Gramsci compared the cultural organization of these advanced societies to the "trench system" in modern warfare: though shelled they can still put up an effective resistance.[48] For this reason he rejected Rosa Luxemburg's thesis (in *The Mass Strike: The Political Party and the Trade Union;* appeared in Italian as *Lo Sciopero generale. Il partito e i sindicate* in 1919) that economic crisis is the necessary and sufficient catalyst for a successful revolutionary thrust. Gramsci described this thesis as a form of "iron economistic determinism" and "historical mysticism."[49] He recognized that it might be valid in the case of Russia in 1917, but this was a special case:

[45] *Note su Machiavelli,* 37; trans. Louis Marks in *The Modern Prince and Other Writings,* 135–88.

[46] *Note su Machiavelli,* 103.

[47] *Passato e presente,* 158.

[48] *Note su Machiavelli,* 66–67.

[49] *Ibid.,* 65.

In [Russia] the state was everything. Civil society was primordial and gelatinous. In the West, between state and civil society there was a just relationship, and in the trembling of the state a robust structure of civil society was soon manifested.[50]

As the Czarist State lacked a cultural fortress impressive enough to calm down an irate and hungry populace, the lightning "war of maneuver" succeeded without having been prepared by a protracted "war of position" or "siege." Likewise, the moderate Kerensky regime fell before it had time to erect even the foundations of a new fortress. Gramsci attributed Trotsky's theory of "permanent revolution" to these special Russian conditions, and held that this theory no longer applied to Europe.[51] The failure of the revolutions of 1848 and of the Paris Commune in 1871 had spelled the end of the "war of maneuver" in Europe:

In both military and political art the war of maneuver is ever more a war of position, and a state wins a war to the extent to which it prepares itself in peacetime. The massive superstructures of the modern bureaucracies are the "trenches" in which the war of position is ever more frequently fought.[52]

In fighting wars of position, revolutionaries must be able to recognize "organic crises" and their various stages. According to Gramsci, an "organic crisis" involves the totality of an "historical bloc"—the structure of society as well as its superstructure. An organic crisis is manifested as a crisis of hegemony, in which the people cease to believe the words of the national leaders, and begin to abandon the traditional parties. The precipitating factor in such a crisis is frequently the failure of the ruling class in some large undertaking, such as war, for which it demanded the consent and sacrifices of the people. The crisis may last a long time, for, as Gramsci wrily observed, "no social form is ever willing to confess that it has been superseded."[53] In combatting the crisis, the intellectuals of the ruling class may resort to all sorts of mystification, blaming the failure of the state on an opposition party or on ethnic and racial minorities, and conducting nationalist campaigns based on irrational appeals to patriotic sentiment. This is a very dangerous moment in civic life, for if the efforts of the mandarins fail, and if the progressive forces still fail to impose their own solution, the old ruling class may seek salvation in a "divine leader." This "Caesar" may give the old order a "breathing spell" by exterminating the opposing elite and terrorizing its mass support. Or the contending forces may destroy each other, leaving a foreign power to preside over the "peace of the graveyard."[54]

To avoid these pitfalls of an organic crisis is the responsibility of the revolutionary leaders. Gramsci flatly repudiated the politics of *tanto peggio, tanto*

[50] *Ibid.*, 68. [51] *Ibid.*, 67.

[52] *Ibid.*, 84. Gramsci's argument is also a discreet defense of the "united front" tactic and condemns implicitly the "war of maneuver" launched by Stalin in 1928.

[53] *Ibid.*, 42, 50.

[54] *Ibid.*, 49, 51.

meglio ("the worse, the better") as flagrantly irresponsible. This was also, by implication, a repudiation of the Italian Communist Party's attitude towards Fascism in the early 1920's in which Gramsci had unfortunately shared. At least it may be said that Gramsci learned his lesson, whereas the Comintern even in 1934 commented favorably on Hitler's triumph in Germany as a means of "dispelling the democratic illusions of the masses and liberating them from the influence of social democracy."[55] Gramsci also advised against any sort of *arditismo,* or military adventurism, for which the proletariat is less well-suited than the petty bourgeoisie, and which would only fan the flames of reaction. Politics must have priority over military action, for "only politics creates the possibility of maneuver and movement."[56] This was to recognize that revolutions are easier to prepare in liberal-democratic regimes than in totalitarian regimes, for it is precisely the aim of the latter to exclude politics. Gramsci, after his arrest in 1926, was in an excellent position to realize this.

Perhaps the most important practical principle which the contemporary Left can glean from the theory of hegemony is that an old order cannot be made to vanish simply by pointing out its evils, any more than a new order can be brought into existence by pointing out its virtues. A social order, no matter how exploitative, cannot be understood simply as a conspiracy of wicked rulers. Rulers who can make a society work, who can make millions of people do their bidding and make them do it without the lash, are competent rulers. The meek may be blessed, but they shall not on that account inherit the earth. If the wretched of the earth have always been on the wrong end of the stick, it is because someone else knew which was the right end. It is not enough for workers to gripe about the boss. They must make themselves better than the boss, not only in their moral conduct, but also in their technical know-how.

Gramsci severely criticized those left-wing intellectuals who justify the petty crimes and immorality often associated with an oppressed class. To the determinists who justified such behavior on the grounds that man is the product of his social environment, Gramsci replied that "the environment does not justify, but only 'explains' the behavior of individuals, and especially of those historically most passive."[57] Revolutionaries must learn to distinguish between behavior which is revolutionary and behavior which is simply criminal. For even if criminality may be a form of rebellion against the existing order, to ennoble it with ethical approval may only serve to reinforce a norm of conduct inferior to that of the ruling class and, therefore, incapable of superseding it. "History is, on the contrary, a continuous struggle of individuals and groups to change what exists in each given moment. But for the struggle to be effective, these individuals and groups must feel superior to what exists, capable of educating society, etc."[58]

[55]Cited in Angelo Tasca, "Fascism and the European Crisis of the Twentieth Century," in *Italy from the Risorgimento to Fascism,* ed. A. W. Salamone (New York, 1970), 294. It is noteworthy that Tasca was expelled from the party for "right-wing" notions similar to those of the imprisoned Gramsci.

[56]*Note su Machiavelli,* 47, 64. [57]*Passato e presente,* 203. [58]*Ibid.*

The meek, the ignorant, the foolish, and the immoral, no matter how understandable their condition, will never be able to build a new order. Only those who are proud, strong, righteous, and who know how can organize a new society and create a new culture which, after all, proves its *historical* superiority only when it replaces the old.

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