

# Gramsci's Political Thought

## An Introduction

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# **INTRODUCTORY ESSAY**

# Reading Gramsci

Stuart Hall\*

Gramsci's influence on people like me, who first read him, in translation, in the early 1960s, has been profound. Our interest in Gramsci was not scholastic. We approached Gramsci for ourselves in our own way. Reading Gramsci has fertilised our political imagination, transformed our way of thinking, our style of thought, our whole political project.

Certainly, 'appropriating Gramsci' has never licensed us to read him any way that suits us, uncontrolled by a respect for the distinctive grain and formation of his thought. Our 'reading' is neither wilful nor arbitrary—precisely because that would be contrary to the very lessons we learned from him. It is, after all, Gramsci himself who first taught us how to 'read Gramsci'. He re-tuned our intellectual ear to the historically specific and distinct register in which his concepts operate. It is from Gramsci that we learned to understand—and practise—the discipline imposed by an unswerving attention to the 'peculiarities' and unevenness of national-cultural development. It is Gramsci's example which cautions us against the too-easy transfer of historical generalisations from one society or epoch to another, in the name of 'Theory'.

If I were to try to summarise, in a sentence, what Gramsci did for people of my generation, I would have to say something like this: simply,

he made it possible for us to read Marx again, in a new way: that is, to go on 'thinking' the second half of the 20th century, face-to-face with the realities of the modern world, from a position somewhere within the legacy of Marx's thought. The legacy of Marx's thought, that is, not as a quasi-religious body of dogma but as a living, developing, constantly renewable stream of ideas.

If I had to make that general claim more specific, I would probably choose to emphasise—out of an array of possible arguments—the following points.

First, his boldness and independence of mind. Gramsci came to 'inhabit' Marx's ideas, not as a strait-jacket, which confined and hobbled his imagination, but as a framework of ideas which liberated his mind, which set it free, which *put it to work*. Most of us had been fed on a diet of so-called Marxist writing in which the explicator, mindful of the quasi-religious character of his (definitely *his*) task, allowed himself only the occasional free-range moment of textual emendation. Consequently, we experienced the freedom and freshness of Gramsci's writing as liberation, revolutionary in its impact. Here, what was undoubtedly a limitation from a textual point of view—namely, the fragmentary nature of his writings—was, for us, a positive advantage. Gramsci's work resisted even the most concerted effort to knit up its loose ends into a seamless garment of Orthodoxy.

Then, there is the way in which Gramsci, without neglecting the other spheres of articulation, made himself *par excellence* the 'theorist of the political'. He gave us, as few comparable theorists ever have, an *expanded* conception of 'politics'—the rhythms, forms, antagonisms, transformations specific and peculiar to it as a region. I am thinking of the way he advances such concepts as 'the relation of forces', 'passive revolution', 'transformism', 'strategic conjuncture', 'historical bloc', the

new meanings given to the concept of 'party'. These concepts are required if we are to think the political in modern terms, as the strategic level into which other determinations are explosively condensed.

Next, I would want to fasten on the manner in which his notion of 'hegemony' forces us to reconceptualise the nature of class and social forces: indeed, he makes us rethink the very notion of power itself—its project and its complex 'conditions of existence' in modern societies. The work on the 'national-popular', on ideology, on the moral, cultural and intellectual dimensions of power, on its double articulation in state and in civil society, on the inter-play between authority, leadership, domination and the 'education of consent' equipped us with an enlarged conception of power, and its molecular operations, its investment on many different sites. His pluri-centered conception of power made obsolete the narrow, one-dimensional conceptions with which most of us had operated.

The same could be said for the astonishing range of his writing on cultural questions, on language and popular literature and, of course, his work on ideology. The notion of the production and transformation of 'common sense', of 'the popular' as the cultural terrain which all ideologies must encounter and negotiate with, and to whose logic they must conform if they are to become historically organic, changed the thinking of a whole generation on these questions. His work on the necessarily contradictory nature of the subjects of ideology, their fragmentary, pluri-centered character, have been extraordinarily generative. They helped us to cut through the arid wastes of a progressively abstract definitional debate about ideology, to look at the cultural logics and forms of practical reasoning where the languages of the popular masses take shape and where the historic struggle to create the forms of a new culture is engaged. Nothing is so calculated to

destroy the simple minded notion of ideology as correct thoughts parachuted into the empty heads of waiting proto-revolutionary subjects as Gramsci's stubborn attendance to the real, living textures of popular life, thought, and culture which circumscribe the historical effectivity of even the most coherent and persuasive of 'philosophies'.

Gramsci held aloft, with fortitude and courage, the torch of critical thoughts and political commitment amidst the darkening storm-clouds of fascism. We have drawn inspiration, in our own 'Iron Times', from his courage and commitment. It is therefore a bizarre turn in the wheel of fortune that he should have made his most profound mark, on my own political thinking, in two related directions apparently quite foreign to his own practice and circumstances.

It is by trying to understand Gramsci that I have come to have some glimmer of an understanding of the profound transformation which is now under way in Western liberal-bourgeois societies under the aegis of the 'new Right'—the moment of revolution-and-reaction, of 'reconstruction in the very moment of destruction' which, under the name of Thatcherism, Reaganism and the other forms of crisis-resolution in capitalist societies, have come to dominate our epoch.

It is by studying this 'counter-hegemony' at work that one begins to understand what a 'hegemonic political project' might be like. Hence it is also Gramsci who has helped me to begin to understand the enormity of the task of *renewal* which socialism and the Left now has before it if it is ever to become a truly hegemonic project.

I mean by that, capable not simply of winning and holding office, or of putting into effect an outdated programme, but of laying the basis for a whole new conception of life, a whole new type of democratic socialist civilisation. Still, when I look at Gramsci's embattled face, that wild shock of hair, the unexpected orthodoxy of those wire-framed glasses, or

into those luminous eyes, I like, fondly, to imagine that this is a reversal of fortune which, perversely, the Sardinian would have relished.

\* This article was first published in *Rinascita* and *Marxism Today*.

# 1 Introduction

The collapse in 1989 of the East European regimes led by communist parties, and the far-reaching changes taking place in the Soviet Union, have dealt a severe blow to Marxism in Britain and all over the world. It seems clear that 1989 was a historical turning point, marking the demise of the great socialist project which began in 1917.

However, so long as they existed, these repressive, bureaucratic regimes in the Soviet Union and East Europe, claiming to be based on the principles of Marxism, continually discredited it. Now that they have come to an end, the opportunity arises to renew the socialist movement and win support for democratic forms of socialism. I believe that the ideas of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci have a vital part to play in the process of renewal.

The Communist Party in Britain has been in decline since the end of the Second World War and this decline was not arrested by the remarkable growth of interest in Marxism which developed in the late 1960s. These years witnessed a spread of radical movements and ideas on an international scale, especially in the United States and Western Europe, reaching its highest point in the dramatic events in France in May 1968. In Britain, there was the movement against the war in Vietnam, the growing militancy in the trade unions, the upsurge of the students' movement in universities and colleges, and the new wave of feminism, re-creating the women's movement—as Women's Liberation—in an entirely new and deeply influential form; there was

also the ecology movement and a great variety of community movements.

The rise of these social movements was accompanied by a great expansion of the influence of Marxist ideas. Members of the Labour Party, the Communist Party, and of the various parties associated with Trotsky's thought such as the International Socialists (later the Socialist Workers' Party) and the International Marxist Group, were active in all the new movements and played an important part in the spread of Marxism; this, however, mainly took the form of a tremendous expansion in the publication of books and journals about Marxism, and in the teaching of Marxism in universities and colleges. Its influence did not spread widely so as to affect the lives and outlook of the mass of the people. It is not a major social force in Britain.

It is possible to draw attention to a number of factors affecting Britain which help to explain this situation, such as the special characteristics of the British labour movement. But it is not the purpose of this book to examine these. Here I want to consider two factors: firstly, that Marxist theory has from the beginning suffered from a major defect, *economism*, and secondly that the Soviet model of socialism has had a profoundly negative influence.

## Economism

Classical Marxism, as developed by Marx and Engels, did not succeed in working out an adequate theory of politics. Two different approaches to politics, especially to the state, were developed in their writings. On the one hand, political institutions tended to be seen as a reflection of the economic structure. Thus in *The Communist Manifesto* the state is described purely as an instrument of class domination, as 'nothing but a

committee for managing the common affairs of the bourgeoisie'. But on the other hand, in some of their later writings, Marx and Engels recognised that the state could acquire a degree of independence from the economically dominant class, and that a complex relation could develop between classes, political parties and the state.

These two different approaches to politics were never reconciled by Marx and Engels or worked into a coherent theory. In practice the first approach, which has become known as *economism*, became by far the most influential. This was a major defect in classical Marxism. It has prevented an adequate understanding of the nature of capitalist domination, and of the strategy required to end that domination and advance to socialism. While it was subjected to a powerful criticism by Lenin, there were important limitations in his approach. It was Gramsci who showed, by his work in developing his concept of *hegemony*, how these limitations of Leninism could be overcome, and how the full potentiality of Lenin's critique of economism could be realised. In order to understand Gramsci's work, therefore, it is necessary to begin by considering the nature of economism.

Economism can be defined as the interpretation of Marxism which holds that political developments are the expression of economic developments; the line of causation proceeds from the economy to politics which tends to be deprived of any autonomy of its own. One form of economism is the view that history possesses a necessary movement, independent of the human will, derived from the continual growth of the productive forces. Capitalism is seen as developing inexorably towards economic crisis and collapse as the contradiction between the forces and the relations of production become greater. An economic approach is reflected in the widespread use of the metaphor 'base and superstructure' which is derived from Marx's famous preface

to the *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* (1859). The significant developments are understood to be those taking place in the economic base, whereas political struggles are considered only part of the superstructure erected on the base.

This kind of 'mechanical determinism', as Gramsci called it, was very influential among some of the socialist parties adhering to the Second International in the years before the First World War, among which the German Social Democratic Party was the most prominent. In Gramsci's view, mechanical determinism tended to promote a passive attitude of waiting for the inevitable economic collapse and this discouraged the exercise of political initiatives by the labour movement. This could leave the movement helpless in the face of a political crisis, and was one of the causes of the collapse of the parties of the Second International in 1914.

Gramsci considered that an economistic outlook also lay at the root of the failure of the Italian Socialist Party to give the kind of leadership required in the revolutionary upsurge of 1919-20, and which resulted in its suicidal passivity in the face of the subsequent rise of fascism. Because of their economistic outlook, the Italian Socialist leaders did not consider that revolution would arise from a shift in the balance of class forces brought about by a series of political initiatives. Rather, it was believed that, as the contradictions of capitalism grew, the necessary mass movement would spontaneously arise and sweep the socialist party into power. Thus the Italian Socialist leaders made no serious attempt to build up a broad alliance around the working class composed of the new social forces arising among the peasants and the urban petty bourgeoisie; instead, they allowed these forces to be mobilised by Mussolini's Fascist Party, leaving the labour movement isolated and ensuring a popular basis for the ultimate triumph of fascism.

Lenin criticised a particular form of economism in his writings against certain trends in the movement at the beginning of the century, in particular in *What is to be done?* (1902). Lenin argued that the trade union struggle could only develop trade union consciousness, and that in order to develop political consciousness the workers had to take up the struggle against the oppression of the Tsarist autocracy as it affected all other social classes, strata and groups of the population, in all aspects of their lives and activities, religious, scientific and cultural. In *Two Tactics of Social Democracy* (1905) he opposed the Mensheviks for accepting the political leadership of the Russian capitalists in the struggle against Tsarism. The Menshevik strategy would leave the Russian labour movement in what he called a 'guild' or 'corporatist' phase, limited to trade union struggles in defence of sectional interests. By contrast, Lenin argued that the working class should move beyond the corporatist phase and should, in alliance with the peasantry, act as the leading (hegemonic) force in the democratic struggles against Tsarism.<sup>1</sup>

Later on in 1917 the revolution triumphed when the Russian working class, under the leadership of the Bolsheviks, succeeded in combining the class struggles against the capitalists with a range of massive democratic movements—of the peasantry for the land, of the workers, peasants and soldiers against the war, and of the oppressed nationalities for their freedom. The working class emerged as the national leader of all these democratic struggles. Since Lenin developed in practice and in theory the concept of leadership by the working class of a broad alliance of social forces, Gramsci regarded him as the founder of the concept of hegemony (SPN 381).

Lenin's achievements can perhaps be summed up by saying that, in his writings as well as in his political practice, he stood for the primacy of politics. If it is accepted that capitalism does not contain within itself

some essential quality which propels it towards inevitable collapse, it follows that the outcome of any economic crisis depends on the conscious actions of human forces, that is, on political interventions.

However, there remained a crucial shortcoming in Lenin's theory of politics. In his booklet *State and Revolution* (1917), one of the most influential of all his works and a central reference point for subsequent Marxist discussions about the state, he defines the state as 'an instrument of the ruling class', and as a 'machine for the repression of one class by another'. It follows that parliamentary democracy under capitalism is only democracy for the ruling class; it is a dictatorship over the working class. In a socialist revolution it is necessary for the proletariat to destroy the parliamentary democratic state and replace it by a fundamentally different type of state, soviet democracy, which will be the dictatorship of the proletariat over the capitalists. Thus Lenin assumes that there is a mechanical relation between economics and politics—between changes in the economic structure and changes in the form of the state. For capitalism the appropriate form of state is a parliamentary democracy; for socialism it is a system of direct democracy based on soviets.

Lenin wrote *State and Revolution*, and other works expressing the same views, in 1917-18 when the Russian working class was mobilised around the soviets, whereas the opposing classes were grouping around the Constituent Assembly (a form of parliamentary democracy) which was dissolved by the Soviet Government early in 1918. His approach at this particular period was not the same as that taken by Marx and Engels at earlier periods, or indeed as his own views at other stages of the movement in Russia. But his writings on the state in 1917-18 became an integral part of the body of theoretical principles which were taken over by the Communist Parties of the Third International (the

Comintern) after his death, and which became known as Marxism-Leninism.

The Marxist-Leninist theory of parliamentary democracy was a serious handicap for the Communist Parties in Britain and other countries with parliamentary institutions. In practice they began to abandon the theory in the 1930s when they sought to build broad people's fronts against the danger of fascism and war. They strove for unity between all democratic forces—social democrats, communists, liberals and all those who opposed fascism and its destruction of civil liberties and parliamentary democracy. After the second world war, the value of parliamentary institutions and their potentialities for radical social change were more fully recognised by Communist Parties in Western Europe than they had been before. Thus in 1951 the British Communist Party adopted a new programme, *The British Road to Socialism*, which declared in favour of a parliamentary road to socialism rather than a soviet road; the parliamentary state was to be transformed into a socialist parliamentary state, instead of being replaced by a state based upon the principles of direct democracy and workplace organisations. But while this was a major step forward, it still left the theoretical problem of the nature of democracy, and the relation between socialism and democracy, unsolved. Gramsci's concept of hegemony showed the way forward, based on the recognition that popular democratic struggles, and the parliamentary institutions which they have helped to shape, do not have a necessary class character. Rather, they are a terrain for political struggle between the two major classes—the working class and the capitalist class. In order to advance to socialism, the labour movement has to find the way to link these popular democratic struggles with its socialist objectives, building an alliance which will enable it to achieve a position of national leadership (hegemony). The

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great achievement of Gramsci was to elaborate this conception of hegemony, setting the Marxist theory of politics free from economism.

## The Soviet model of Socialism

The highly centralised, bureaucratic and repressive system built up in the Soviet Union under Stalin was totally at variance with Marx's idea of socialism as an association of self-governing producers with the state completely subordinate to society. Many Marxists have argued that the Stalinist system was not the only possible kind of socialism; nevertheless, its existence had the effect of severely restricting the growth of Marxist ideas in Western Europe.

One of the principle conclusions that can be drawn from the East European experience is that socialism cannot be imposed from above, through the agency of the state. Socialism has to be constructed from below, on the basis of a continual extension of popular participation in politics, involving profound changes in habits and consciousness; the socialist project is a process which is likely to extend over a long period.

This conclusion is entirely in line with Gramsci's thinking on the nature of the transition to socialism. His concept of *civil society* is of particular importance in this respect. He distinguished between the public institutions of the state on the one hand, and civil society on the other—all the private, voluntary organisations such as trade unions, political parties, churches, community and charitable organisations. He argued that the hegemony of a dominant class is exercised in civil society by persuading the subordinate classes to accept the values and ideas which the dominant class has itself adopted, and by building a network of alliances based on these values. The advance to socialism consists in the building by the labour movement of a counter-hegemony,

requiring a prolonged process of moral and ideological reform. Gramsci called this strategy a 'war of position', distinct from the 'war of movement' which occurred in the Russian Revolution when state power was seized in a single historical moment.

Moreover, Gramsci envisaged the process of creating a socialist society quite differently from the way it was done in the Soviet Union under Stalin. He suggested that socialism consisted in the continual extension of civil society with its relations of autonomy and self-government, together with the gradual decline of the coercive, hierarchical and bureaucratic elements of the state. But exactly the opposite process took place in the Soviet Union: the elements of civil society which existed in Lenin's time were eliminated under Stalin by the system of single-party domination, and this continued under Brezhnev.

The advent of Gorbachev in 1985 stimulated vast changes, including a rapid growth of civil society. At the present time it is not clear whether Russia and other republics making up the Soviet Union will eventually move to a new form of democratic socialism or will revert to capitalism as some of the East European countries seem resolved to do. But whatever happens in those countries in the future, the entire historical experience from 1917 onwards does seem to confirm the remarkable insights in Gramsci's thinking, and to strengthen the belief that Marxism is capable of developing so as to take into account the complex changes in world capitalism that are now taking place, laying the foundations for the advance to new forms of popular, democratic and participative socialism in Britain and elsewhere.

## The Prison Notebooks

The story of Gramsci's life, from his birth on 22 January 1891 in the

Sardinian town of Ales until his death in 1937 after ten years in Mussolini's prisons, has been movingly told by Giuseppe Fiori;<sup>2</sup> and the principal events in his life are set out at the end of this book. His first experience of the leadership of a mass movement was gained when he edited the weekly journal *L'Ordine Nuovo* ('The New Order') which helped to inspire the great factory councils' movement in Turin in 1919-20. His ten years of intense political activity culminated in 1924-26 when he was general secretary of the Italian Communist Party. During these two years the influence of the ultra-left in the party, mainly due to its first general secretary Bordiga, was largely overcome and the great majority of the party was won over to Leninist principles as Gramsci understood them. His active political life was ended by his arrest in November 1926. The *Prison Notebooks* were written between 1929 and 1935. In spite of the extraordinarily difficult conditions, the lack of any Marxist classics which he had to quote from memory, and his bad health which became steadily worse under the harsh prison regime and the lack of medical attention, he succeeded in filling 2,848 closely packed pages in 33 notebooks. In 1935 illness prevented him from writing any more, and he died on 27 April 1937, three days after his release from prison.

He is considered by Italian Communists to have been the leading figure in the foundation of their party, because of his practical activities as a political leader, and through the inspiration of his thought as set down in his *Prison Notebooks*. The *Notebooks* were not published in Italy until 1948-51 (in six volumes); but an invaluable continuity was provided through the leadership of his outstanding colleague Palmiro Togliatti, who was a member of the *L'Ordine Nuovo* group with Gramsci in 1919-20, and leader of the Italian Communist Party from the time of Gramsci's arrest until his death in 1964.

Gramsci was a polemical thinker, for his thought was stimulated through criticising and commenting on the ideas of others. So his notebooks are filled with critical comments, ranging in length from a few lines to several pages, on articles and books, past and contemporary (for he was able to get some contemporary Italian journals and books in prison), on Italian and European intellectuals and on historical events. From 1933, when his health deteriorated rather sharply, he began to rearrange some of his notes into longer series on the same subject; examples are the notes on Machiavelli's politics entitled 'The Modern Prince', and the notes on Italian history. Yet the *Notebooks* remain essentially fragments never intended for publication, and many of the most important concepts which Gramsci develops are not defined with any precision. More than once he insists on the provisional, tentative character of his notes; many of the statements are only a 'first approximation', and some of them might be abandoned as a result of further research, and even the opposite might turn out to be more correct (Q 438 and 935).

This tentative, undogmatic approach is one of Gramsci's most attractive characteristics. But it has the consequence that, in spite of the coherence of his thought, it is not at all easy, in reading through the *Notebooks*, to grasp the full significance of his contribution to Marxism. The aim of this little book is to provide an introduction to Gramsci's political thought as set down in his *Prison Notebooks* and earlier writings. Any attempt at a simplified presentation of his ideas is bound to lose a great deal of the flavour and richness of his writing; there can be no substitute for reading the *Prison Notebooks*. At the same time any introduction, however simple, is bound to involve interpretation of his thought. This is necessary because of its tentative and provisional character; and also because there have been great political, economic

and social developments in Italy, Britain and other capitalist countries since Gramsci was writing. An immense literature has grown up around Gramsci in Italy, and a small selection of this has now become available in English translation. Some valuable contributions have been made by Marxist writers in Britain to the development of his ideas and their application to our own history and recent political developments. I have tried to take into account everything which is available in English. This element of interpretation must therefore be born in mind by the reader. The next chapter gives a preliminary outline of Gramsci's concept of hegemony and of the other concepts which are related to it.

## 2

# Gramsci's Concept of Hegemony

**1** *Coercion and consent.* The starting-point for Gramsci's concept of hegemony is that a class and its representatives ■ exercise power over subordinate classes by means of a combination of coercion and persuasion. In his notes on Machiavelli's *Prince*, Gramsci evokes the mythical Greek centaur, half animal and half human, as a symbol of the 'dual perspective' in political action—the levels of force and consent, authority and hegemony, violence and civilisation. Hegemony is a relation, not of domination by means of force, but of consent by means of political and ideological leadership. It is the organisation of consent. In some passages in the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci uses the word *direzione* (leadership, direction) interchangeably with *egemonia* (hegemony) and in contrast to *dominazione* (domination). The use of the term hegemony in the Gramscian sense must be distinguished from the original Greek meaning, the predominance of one nation over another. (There are, however, a few passages in the *Prison Notebooks* where Gramsci uses hegemony in its ordinary sense of predominance to refer to relations between nations or between town and country.)

2. *The Leninist foundation.* The foundations of the concept of hegemony were laid by Lenin who built on the work which had been done by the pioneers of the Russian labour movement. As Perry Anderson has shown, the term hegemony was first used by Plekhanov and other Russian Marxists in the 1880s to denote the need for the

working class to lead an alliance with the peasantry for the overthrow of Tsarism.<sup>3</sup> The working class should develop a national approach, fighting for the liberation of all oppressed classes and groups. This was developed by Lenin, as we saw in the previous chapter: the Russian working class should, in alliance with the peasantry, act as the leading (hegemonic) force in the bourgeois-democratic revolution for the overthrow of the Tsarist autocracy. In this way the working class, then a small minority of the population, would be able to win the support of the great majority of the people.

3. *Hegemony becomes a concept.* For Lenin, hegemony was a strategy for revolution, a strategy which the working class and its representatives should adopt to win the support of the great majority. Gramsci adds a new dimension to this by extending it to include the practices of a capitalist class or its representatives, both in gaining state power, and in maintaining that power once it has been achieved. The first note on Italian history, written in the first of the 29 *Prison Notebooks*, is headed 'Class political leadership before and after attaining governmental power'. Gramsci distinguished between domination (coercion) and 'intellectual and moral leadership':

A social group can, indeed must, already exercise 'leadership' before winning governmental power (this is indeed one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power); it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to 'lead' as well (*SPN* 57-68).<sup>4</sup>

Thus Gramsci transforms hegemony from a strategy (as in Lenin) into a concept which, like the Marxist concepts of forces and relations of

production, of classes and of the state, is a tool for understanding society in order to change it. He developed the idea of leadership and its exercise as a condition for achieving state power into his concept of hegemony. Hegemony is a relation between classes and other social forces. A hegemonic class, or part of a class, is one which gains the consent of other classes and social forces through creating and maintaining a system of alliances by means of political and ideological struggle. The concept of hegemony is constructed with the aid of a number of other concepts which are related to it. That is why any short definition of hegemony is inadequate. I will now give a brief outline of these concepts, which will be discussed in more detail in later chapters.

4. *The relations of forces: economic—corporate/hegemonic.* The notion of building up a system of alliances is central to the concept of hegemony. In 'Some Aspects of the Southern Question', (SPW II) the notes he was writing at the time of his arrest, Gramsci said:

The proletariat can become the leading and the dominant class to the extent that it succeeds in creating a system of alliances which allows it to mobilise the majority of the population against capitalism and the bourgeois state

The working class can only develop into a hegemonic class by taking into account the interests of other classes and social forces and finding ways of combining them with its own interests. It has to go beyond sectional, or what Gramsci calls *economic-corporate* struggles, and be prepared to make compromises, in order to become the national representative of a broad bloc of social forces. Thus the relation between the two fundamental classes of capital and labour is not a simple one of opposition between two classes only, but is a complex one involving

other classes and social forces. Each side strives to strengthen its own pattern of alliances, to disorganise the alliances of the other, and to shift the balance of forces in its favour.

5. *National-popular*. For Lenin, hegemony was conceived mainly in terms of an alliance of classes or parts of classes. Gramsci adds a very important new dimension with his concept of *national-popular*: a class cannot achieve national leadership, and become hegemonic, if it confines itself only to class interests; it must take into account the popular and democratic demands and struggles of the people which do not have a purely class character, that is, which do not arise directly out of the relations of production. Examples are the radical and popular struggles for civil liberties, movements for national liberation, the women's movement, the peace movement, and movements expressing the demands of ethnic minorities, of young people or of students. They all have their own specific qualities and cannot be reduced to class struggles even though they are related to them. Thus hegemony has a national-popular dimension as well as a class dimension. It requires the unification of a variety of different social forces into a broad alliance expressing a national-popular collective will, such that each of these forces preserves its own autonomy and makes its own contribution in the advance towards socialism. It is this strategy of building up a broad bloc of varied social forces, unified by a common conception of the world, that Gramsci called a *war of position*.

6. *Passive revolution*. In analysing the war of position carried on by the two fundamental classes for hegemony, Gramsci draws a basic distinction between the strategy employed by the capitalist class and that which is appropriate for the working class. The strategy of the bourgeoisie has a special quality which he called *passive revolution*. He developed this concept out of his analysis of the Risorgimento, the

movement for the unification of Italy in the mid-nineteenth century. Although there were a number of popular uprisings in the course of the Risorgimento, the national unification of Italy (involving the expulsion of the Austrians) and the accompanying rise to power of the capitalists in Northern Italy, was achieved mainly through the agency of the state of Piedmont, its army and monarchy, instead of mobilising the majority of the population by supporting the demands of the peasants for agrarian reform. Thus the Risorgimento was a 'revolution from above', made in the main through the agency of the Piedmontese state: a passive revolution.

Gramsci suggests that a strategy of passive revolution is the characteristic response of the bourgeoisie whenever its hegemony is seriously threatened and a process of extensive reorganisation is needed in order to re-establish its hegemony. A passive revolution is involved whenever relatively far-reaching modifications are made to a country's social and economic structure from above, through the agency of the state, and without relying on the active participation of the people. Social reforms which have been demanded by the opposing forces may be carried out, but in such a way as to disorganise these forces and damp down any popular struggles. It follows that the appropriate strategy for the working class is an *anti-passive revolution* founded on the continual extension of class and popular-democratic struggles (see paragraph 11 below on the *war of position*).

7. *Intellectual and moral reform.* The task of creating a new hegemony, in opposition to that of the capitalist class, can only be achieved by means of a transformation of popular consciousness, of people's ways of thinking and feeling, of their 'conceptions of the world', and of their standards of moral conduct. Gramsci compared this with the wholesale transformation of popular consciousness brought about by the

Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century and by the French Revolution. (He adapted the term 'intellectual and moral reform' from the French writer Georges Sorel (1847-1922) who in turn took it from Ernest Renan, one of whose books was entitled *La Réforme Intellectuelle et Morale*).

8. *Common sense*. In considering the process of intellectual and moral reform, Gramsci was concerned to break down the separation between Marxism as a philosophy and people's actual consciousness. He argued that 'all men are philosophers', because all men and women have some conception of the world, some set of ideas which enables them to make sense of their lives. But the way in which many people perceive the world, their philosophy, is often confused and contradictory, containing ideas absorbed from a variety of sources and from the past, which tend to make them accept inequality and oppression as natural and unchangeable. Gramsci used the term *common sense* to denote this uncritical and partly unconscious way in which people perceive the world. Common sense is not to be seen in purely negative terms; it contains positive elements as well, and people's practical activity, their resistance to oppression, may often be in contradiction with their conscious ideas. Common sense is the site on which the dominant ideology is constructed, but it is also the site for the resistance to that ideology. The task for Marxism is to be a criticism of common sense, and through a process of interaction to develop its positive nucleus into a new, coherent, socialist common sense.

9. *Civil society*. We have been analysing different aspects of the relations of forces—the contrast between economic-corporate and hegemonic, the importance of national-popular struggles and the nature of ideological struggle. Capitalist society is understood as a complex network of relations between classes and other social forces, dominated

by the struggle between the two fundamental classes, capital and labour. These social relations are embodied in a great variety of organisations and institutions including churches, political parties, trade unions, the mass media, cultural and voluntary associations. One set of institutions, the apparatuses which make up the state, are separated from all the rest in having a monopoly of coercion. All these social relations and the organisations which embody them (other than the state with its, coercion) are called by Gramsci *civil society*. The social relations which make up civil society are distinct from the relations of production, and the organisations within civil society are distinct from the apparatuses which make up the state. (The nature of this distinction is explored in Chapter 9.) Civil society is the sphere of class struggles and of popular-democratic struggles. Thus it is the sphere in which a dominant social group organises consent and hegemony. It is also the sphere where the subordinate social groups may organise their opposition and construct an alternative hegemony—a counter-hegemony.

10. *Historic bloc*. A class which is advancing towards hegemony in civil society must also achieve leadership in the sphere of production. It is only because the bourgeoisie acquires a decisive control over the productive process that it can also become the hegemonic class in civil society and achieve state power. But the control of the capitalists over production has never been absolute; it has always been contested by the workers, and there have been struggles by them and their trade unions over the conditions of work and over the terms for the introduction of new machines. The metaphor of base and superstructure is therefore unsatisfactory. It is misleading to think in terms of a sharp separation between a sphere of economics (production of surplus value) and a sphere of politics (struggle for state power). On the contrary, the social

relations of civil society interpenetrate with the relations of production. Although the *Prison Notebooks* contain many references to base and superstructure, the direction of Gramsci's thought, and his rejection of economism, is against it. Instead, he uses the term *historic bloc* to indicate the way in which a hegemonic class combines the leadership of a block of social forces in civil society with its leadership in the sphere of production. Stated briefly, the notion of historic bloc may not seem very clear; it is discussed more concretely in Chapter 10 on the factory councils' movement of 1919-20.

11. *The nature of power.* Marxism-Leninism has tended to take the view that power is concentrated in the state, and that the aim of revolutionary strategy is the capture of power (symbolised by the storming of the Winter Palace in 1917). Only *after* the capture of power by the working class can the construction of socialism begin.

Gramsci suggests that power is best understood as a relation. The social relations of civil society are also relations of power, so that power is diffused throughout civil society as well as being embodied in the coercive apparatuses of the state. Gramsci used the term *integral state* to describe this new conception of the nature of power, which he summed up as 'hegemony armoured by coercion'. It follows that the political struggle of the working class for socialism cannot be confined to the winning of state power, but has to be extended to the whole of civil society. It is necessary to win a substantial measure of hegemony in civil society as a condition for gaining control over the state. The achievement of control over the state is only part (though a decisive part) of the transition to socialism.

12. *War of position.* In one of the best-known passages in the *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci compared civil society to a powerful system of 'fortresses and earthworks' standing behind the state. And he drew a

comparison between Tsarist Russia and the West:

In the East the state was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between state and civil society, and when the state trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed (*SPN* 238).

Thus power was highly concentrated in the state in Tsarist Russia and the capture of power in a single historical moment was possible. But in countries where civil society is well developed, as in Western Europe, a 'war of movement' has to give way to a different strategy, a 'war of position'. Revolution is a process of expanding the hegemony of the working class—of the building up of a new historic bloc—and is not a sharp rupture at a single moment when state power passes from one class to another. Thus the transition to socialism consists of two distinct processes, interacting with one another: the growth of working-class hegemony, and the transformation of the state into a socialist state.

Perhaps even this brief outline of the concept of hegemony and the associated concepts is enough to convey the far-reaching character of Gramsci's contribution to Marxist political theory. The concept of civil society as the sphere of class and popular-democratic struggles, and of the contest for hegemony between the two fundamental classes, adds a new dimension to Marxism. It develops very significantly the Marxist theory of political power and of the revolutionary process.

# 3

## The Relations of Forces

### Transcending the corporate phase

**A** subordinate class can only become a hegemonic class by developing the capacity to win the support of other classes and social forces. It has to learn to go beyond sectional or corporate activities, when it is concerned only with its own immediate interests, and advance towards the hegemonic phase by taking into account the interests of other classes and groups as well. The relation between two fundamental classes, feudal and capitalist, or capitalist and working class, has never been a simple one of opposition between two classes only, but a complex network of relations involving other classes, groups and social forces.

Gramsci's principal note on the relations of forces (*SPN* 180-83) is one of the key passages in the *Prison Notebooks*. He begins with the proposition that the level of development of the material forces of production provides the basis for the emergence of the various social classes, each one of which has a specific position within production itself.

So far Gramsci is simply giving the classical Marxist definition of the emergence of a class. His distinctive contribution comes with his analysis of the relation of political forces. He takes the rise of the capitalist class as his example, and distinguishes between three phases

in the development of collective political consciousness and organisation. The first two of these are *economic-corporate* (often shortened to *corporate*) while the third is *hegemonic*.

1. The first and most elementary phase is when a tradesman feels obliged to stand by another tradesman, a manufacturer by another manufacturer, etc., but the tradesman does not yet feel solidarity with the manufacturer. The members of a professional group are conscious of their common interests and of the need to organise, but are not yet aware of the need to associate with other groups in the same class.

2. The second and more advanced phase is that in which consciousness is reached of the common interests of all the members of the class—but still purely in the economic field. Already at this juncture the problem of the state is posed, but only in terms of winning legal and political equality with the ruling group: ‘the right is claimed to participate in legislation and administration, even to reform these—but within the existing fundamental structures.’

3. The third phase is that of hegemony, ‘in which one becomes aware that one’s own corporate interests, in their present and future development, transcend the corporate limits of the purely economic class, and can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups too’. This is the most purely political phase. It is the phase in which previously germinated ideologies come into conflict until only one of them, or a combination of them, tends to prevail, bringing about a unity of economic, political, intellectual and moral aims, and ‘posing all the questions around which the struggle rages not on a corporate but on a “universal” plane, and thus creating the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate groups.’

Gramsci illustrates the first two corporate phases from the experience of a rising capitalist class composed of traders and manufacturers. The

development of the working class follows a similar path. The first and most elementary phase is the formation of trade unions to protect the economic interests of different groups and sections. The second phase is when consciousness is reached of the common interests of all members of the working class, when the demand is made for legal and political equality, for legislation to protect trade union rights and for the right to vote, but within the framework of capitalism.

As the working class moves into the third, hegemonic phase in which it begins to challenge the hegemony of the capitalist class, more and more workers become aware of the need to take into account the interests of other social groups and classes to find ways of combining their interests with those of the working class. They begin to develop a political consciousness in place of a corporate consciousness (which Lenin called a 'trade-union consciousness').

In the passage just quoted, Gramsci places the emphasis on the role of ideological struggle—on intellectual and moral reform—in order to achieve a transformation of the outlook of the workers and also of the members of the other classes and groups whose allegiance is needed in order to build up the hegemony of the working class. Hence ideology acts as the 'cement' or cohesive force which binds together a bloc of diverse classes and strata. The nature of ideological struggle—of intellectual and moral reform as Gramsci called it—is further examined in Chapter 8.

Gramsci then passes on to political struggle and the passage already quoted continues:

It is true that the state is seen as the organ of one particular group, destined to create favourable conditions for the latter's maximum expansion. But the development and

expansion of the particular group are conceived of, and presented, as being the motor force of a universal expansion, of a development of all the 'national' energies. In other words, the dominant group is coordinated concretely with the general interests of the subordinate groups, and the life of the state is conceived of as a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria (on the juridical plane) between the interests of the fundamental group and those of the subordinate groups—equilibria in which the interests of the dominant group prevail, but only up to a certain point, i.e, stopping short of narrowly corporate economic interest (*SPN* 181-2).

Thus although a hegemonic class predominates in the state, it does not use the state simply as an instrument to impose its interests on those of the other class groups. Rather, the life of the state is seen as a 'continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria', that is, the state is understood in terms of the complex relations of forces between the two fundamental classes and other classes and social forces. The nature of the state and of power is further considered in Chapter 9.

Summing up the argument so far, it can be said that a class becomes hegemonic in the extent to which it transcends its corporate phase and succeeds in combining the interests of other classes and social forces with its own interests, and in becoming the universal representative of the main social forces which make up the nation.

When a hegemonic class succeeds in constructing a bloc of social forces capable of enduring for an entire historical period, Gramsci calls it a *historic bloc*.

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## Historical illustrations

One of the questions which Gramsci asks in several passages in the *Prison Notebooks* is why the medieval communes in Italy—the autonomous city states like Florence, Genoa and Venice—were unable to create a united Italian nation, comparable to the French and English nations under their absolute monarchies. He argued that the answer must be found in understanding why the Italian bourgeoisie of the communes was unable to transcend its economic-corporate phase and create a national state based on its hegemony. This was the problem which was tackled by Machiavelli in his *The Prince* (1532); but his plans were never adopted. As Gramsci says: 'An effective Jacobin force was always missing, and could not be constituted; and it was precisely such a Jacobin force which in other nations awakened and organised the national popular collective will' (*SPN* 131).

What Gramsci means by a Jacobin force is explained in his notes on the French Revolution. He says that the Jacobins strove with determination to ensure a bond between town and country and they succeeded triumphantly. They made the demands of the popular masses their own. They did not concern themselves solely with the immediate and narrow corporate interests of the bourgeoisie as the hegemonic group of all the popular forces. They represented not only the needs and aspirations of the actual physical individuals who constituted the French bourgeoisie, but also the needs of 'all the national groups which had to be assimilated' to it. This meant identifying the interests and requirements common to all the national forces, in order to set these forces in motion and lead them into the struggle. And at the end of the eloquent passage in which Gramsci describes the achievements of the Jacobins (*SPN* 77-79) he says:

Not only did they organise a bourgeois government, i.e. make the bourgeoisie the dominant class—they did more. They created the bourgeois state, made the bourgeoisie into the leading, hegemonic class of the nation, in other words gave the new state a permanent basis and created the compact modern French nation.

It is arguable that Gramsci's account of the French Revolution verges on the idealistic. In practice the forging of the alliance between the Jacobins and the peasantry was accompanied by many difficulties which led to the use of force on a considerable scale; conscription had to be used to get the peasants into the army in sufficient numbers, and a powerful and highly centralised state apparatus was constructed in the course of the revolution. But this is fully consistent with Gramsci's approach, for he holds that the domination of the bourgeoisie is maintained by a combination of force and consent—'hegemony protected by the armour of coercion'—in a constantly changing balance depending on the actual conditions at any time.

The balance between coercion and consent was very different in the Italian Risorgimento, the movement which led to the unification of Italy in the nineteenth century and to the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie. Gramsci shows that this was achieved in a very conservative way by the Moderate Party, which represented the rising bourgeoisie of the northern Italian towns, and was at first led by Cavour, prime minister of the independent state of Piedmont. The principal instrument for the unification of Italy and the expulsion of the Austrians was the Piedmontese state with its monarchy and army. Thus the process of fundamental social change and creation of a nation was achieved

without relying on the democratic struggles of the people and, in particular, without mobilising the peasants against the landowners. Instead, the Moderates forged an alliance with the southern landowners, leaving the peasants in a state of 'sullen passivity'. The Risorgimento took the form of a revolution from above, which Gramsci called a *passive revolution*. This throws light on the whole process of revolutionary change and is further considered in Chapter 6.

## National and international

In considering the relations of forces within any country, international relations have to be taken into account, but as Gramsci insisted, the point of departure must be national:

In reality, the internal relations of any nation are the result of a combination which is 'original' and (in a certain sense) unique: these relations must be understood and conceived in their originality and uniqueness if one wishes to dominate them and direct them. To be sure, the line of development is towards internationalism, but the point of departure is 'national'—and it is from this point of departure that one must begin (*SPN* 240).

The recognition that each country must find its own way to socialism in accordance with its own original and unique history and traditions has become widespread since Gramsci's time, and there is no doubt that his own political activities and writings have made a major contribution towards this understanding. The great impact of the factory councils' movement was possible because it was not a mechanical application of

the Russian soviets to Italy, but a creative adaptation of the experiences of the Russian Revolution to the very different Italian conditions. (It is examined in Chapter 10.) The defeat of the factory councils movement in 1920 led Gramsci to make a deeper study of the special features of the Italian liberal state which had disintegrated under the impact of fascism; and this study took shape in the 'Lyons theses' which were presented by Gramsci and Togliatti to the Third Congress of the Italian Communist Party in 1926 and also in Gramsci's unfinished essay on the Southern Question (SPWII). This analysis of Italian conditions became one of his main preoccupations in prison, reflected in his notes on Italian history, Italian literature and the Italian language, and in the immense number of notes on Italian intellectuals which are scattered throughout the *Prison Notebooks*. The path to socialism could only be found on the basis of a thorough understanding of the 'original and unique' history of Italy.

The impact of the Russian Revolution of 1917 was so great that it was natural for revolutionaries in other countries in the years immediately following to think that the socialist revolution in their countries would have the same essential features as it had had in Russia—features which eventually came to be embodied in the term 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. In this connection it is important to remember the amount of time that Lenin devoted to studying the special characteristics of Russian capitalism as it developed out of feudalism in the closing years of the last century. This study absorbed a large part of his energies during the first years of his political life and culminated in the publication in 1899 of his book *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*. Neil Harding, in his penetrating study of Lenin, has said that this book is 'arguably the most important' that Lenin ever wrote.<sup>5</sup> The theoretical conclusions he drew from it were the foundation for his

political strategy in the years that followed.

Lenin once said that 'the most essential thing in Marxism is the concrete analysis of concrete conditions' and that genuine dialectics consists in 'a thorough detailed analysis of a process'. In stressing the necessity for studying the original and unique history of one's own country, Gramsci was only following in the footsteps of Lenin. His concept of hegemony was a new tool, developed out of his own experiences and his study of Italian, French and Russian history, for analysing the complex relations of forces existing at any time. 'It is necessary,' he also wrote, 'to draw attention violently to the present as it is, if one wants to transform it' (Q 1131). A revolutionary party should continually make a cool, scientific analysis of the strength of the opposing forces as well as of its own, verging on pessimism. This should form the basis for working out and taking political initiatives, verging on optimism, in the spirit of Gramsci's favourite motto: pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will.<sup>6</sup>

# 4

## The Maintenance of Hegemony

### Organic crises

In the previous chapter hegemony was described mainly in terms of the rise to power of a revolutionary class, and the three historical examples which were mentioned—two from Italy and one from France—concerned the achievement of hegemony by the capitalist class. Of equal importance is the maintenance of hegemony *after* state power has been gained. As Gramsci says in the passage already quoted, even when a social group has become dominant and holds power firmly in its grasp, it must continue to ‘lead’ as well. Hegemony can never be taken for granted, but has to be continually fought for afresh. This requires persistent activities to maintain and strengthen the social authority of the ruling class in all areas of civil society, and the making of such compromises as are needed to adapt the existing system of alliances to changing conditions and to the activities of the opposing forces.

This process can be seen at work most clearly in periods when the hegemony of the ruling political forces is endangered and is tending to disintegrate. There may ensue a fairly prolonged period of instability and transition, during which the system of alliances forming the basis for the hegemony of the ruling groups may have to undergo far-reaching changes and a process of restructuring if it is to survive. Gramsci insists on the importance of distinguishing between *organic* changes which are

relatively permanent, and those which appear as occasional, immediate and almost accidental:

A crisis occurs, sometimes lasting for decades. This exceptional duration means that incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves (reached maturity) and that, despite this, the political forces which are struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure itself are making every effort to cure them, within certain limits, and to overcome them. These incessant and persistent efforts ... form the terrain of the 'conjunctural' and it is upon this terrain that the forces of opposition organise (*SPN*).

The term *conjuncture* is more widely used on the continent than in Britain; it is what Lenin used to call 'the current situation' or the balance of political forces existing at the present moment to which political tactics have to be applied. What Gramsci wishes to stress is that the current situation is to be understood, not only in terms of the immediate economic and political problems, but also in the 'incessant and persistent efforts' which are made to conserve and defend the existing system. If the crisis is deep—an organic one—these efforts cannot be purely defensive. They will consist in the struggle to create a new balance of political forces, requiring a reshaping of state institutions as well as the formation of new ideologies; and if the forces of opposition are not strong enough to shift the balance of forces decisively in their direction, the conservative forces will succeed in building a new system of alliances which will re-establish their hegemony. Beneath the surface of the day-to-day events, an organic and relatively permanent, structural change will have taken place.

One conclusion that Gramsci draws from these considerations is that 'a social form always has marginal possibilities for further development and organisational improvement, and in particular can count on the relative weakness of the rival progressive force as a result of its specific character and way of life. It is necessary for the dominant social force to preserve this weakness' (*SPN*).

The organic crisis with which Gramsci was centrally concerned was the crisis in Italy, lasting from about 1910 to 1921, which was eventually resolved by the rise of Mussolini's fascism. In his notes on Italian history Gramsci analyses the shifting system of compromises which had enabled the northern industrialists, in alliance with the southern landowners, to maintain a limited hegemony in the framework of the Italian liberal state from the time of the *Risorgimento* (*SPN*).<sup>7</sup> Between 1910 and 1912, however, there began a profound upheaval in the structure of Italian society affecting all classes and the whole of Italian culture; it was marked by a big rise in the militancy of the working class and of sections of the peasantry, by a growth of nationalism and the imperialist adventure in Libya, as well as by important shifts in the Catholic movement. Under the impact of the First World War and its aftermath, the system of alliances which had ensured the hegemony of the Northern industrialists disintegrated. The much greater strength of the working-class movement, with its revolutionary tendencies, contributed to this disintegration, but the movement was still mainly under reformist leadership, and was unable to build an alliance with the different social forces capable of presenting an effective challenge to the ruling groups. There was a crisis of authority—a crisis of hegemony—consisting in the fact 'that the old is dying and the new cannot be born'.

In these conditions fascism found a mass basis in the urban and rural

petty bourgeoisie who had become much more politically active as a result of the war, and could easily be organised into military-style squads for brutal attacks on the labour movement and its institutions. Mussolini's fascist movement thus succeeded in replacing the old compromises by reorganising all the bourgeoisie's forces in a single political organism combining the party, the government and the state, cemented by a reactionary ideology based on aggressive nationalism. The working-class movement was defeated, not only by a resort to violent repression and by the passivity of the reformist leadership, but also by the ability of the capitalist class to reorganise its forces in a new way, in spite of a serious economic crisis.

In the past 150 years of British history it is possible to distinguish three main periods of transition which may qualify as organic crises in Gramscian terms, and which will be considered in Chapter 7.

The theme of this chapter has been that once a class or social group has achieved hegemony, the system of alliances on which that hegemony is based (historic bloc) has to be continually re-adjusted and re-negotiated. Periodically there may develop an organic crisis in which the historic bloc begins to disintegrate, creating the opportunity for a subordinate class to transcend its corporate limitations and build up a broad movement capable of challenging the existing order and achieving hegemony; but if the opportunity is not taken, the balance of forces will shift back to the dominant class which will re-establish its hegemony on the basis of a new pattern of alliances.

## Caesarism

A crisis of hegemony may have profound effects on political parties and on the form of the state. As Gramsci says, 'social classes become

detached from their traditional parties' and organisational forms and the people who lead them 'are no longer recognised by their class (or fraction of a class) as its expression'. There is a crisis of representation. When such crises occur, 'the immediate situation becomes delicate and dangerous, because the field is open for violent solutions, for the activities of unknown forces, represented by charismatic "men of destiny"' (SPN). Gramsci used the term 'Caesarism' to denote the outcome of 'a situation in which the forces in conflict balance each other in a catastrophic manner, that is to say, in such a way that a continuation of the conflict can only result in their reciprocal destruction' (SPN).

Gramsci suggested that Caesarism does not always have the same historical significance. It can take both progressive and reactionary forms. Caesar and Napoleon I are examples of progressive Caesarism, Napoleon III and Bismark of reactionary Caesarism. Besides the fascist regimes of Mussolini and Hitler, there have been a great variety of exceptional forms of state, such as the colonels' regime in Greece, which qualify as forms of Caesarism.

Gramsci also pointed out that a Caesarist solution can arise even without a Caesar, without any great, 'heroic' and representative personality. 'The parliamentary system has also provided a mechanism for such compromise solutions' (SPN). In other words, a Caesarist outcome may not be 'catastrophic' involving the immediate violent repression of one side by the other, the destruction of democratic rights and the creation of an exceptional form of state. Instead, there may be a shift towards a more authoritarian form of parliamentary government through a succession of stages (which might ultimately lead to an exceptional form of state). In Britain since the 1970s there has been developing a situation of stalemate between the opposing classes in

which 'the old is dying and the new cannot be born'. A shift to the right within the Conservative Party was reflected in the election in 1976 of Margaret Thatcher as leader. There were significant authoritarian elements in the ideology of Thatcherism and in the measures taken by the Thatcher government, such as the legislative attacks on the trade unions and local authorities, and the strengthening of the police and the armed forces. It does not seem justifiable at this stage to characterise this approach as a Caesarist one, but the possibility of a Caesarist outcome of Britain's present organic crisis cannot be excluded. The changes in the relations of forces, and in the system of representation, which were developing in the late 1970s and early 1980s are considered further in Chapter 7.

# 5

## National-popular

In previous chapters it was argued that if a class is to become hegemonic, it has to transcend its economic-corporate phase by taking into account the aims and interests of other classes and social forces, linking these with its own interests so as to become their universal representative. However, the nature of these 'social forces' has not yet been discussed. We can now take a crucial further step. A class cannot achieve national leadership, and become a hegemonic class, *if it confines itself only to class interests*; it must also take into account the popular and democratic aspirations and struggles of the people which do not have a necessary class character.

In Gramsci's important note on the relation of forces quoted in Chapter 3, he says that the development and expansion of a class aspiring to hegemony is 'conceived of and presented as being the motor force of a universal expansion, of a development of all the national energies' (*SPN*). And in describing the decisive role played by the Jacobins in the creation of the French nation, he stresses the popular nature of the hegemony they established 'which in other nations awakened and organised the national-popular collective will, and founded modern states' (*SPN*). Thus hegemony has a *national-popular* dimension as well as a class dimension. As Gramsci says, 'It is in the concept of hegemony that those exigencies which are national in character are knotted together' (*SPN*).

For example, a nation which is oppressed by another develops

traditions of struggle for national liberation, and indeed in the course of history the people of every country develop powerful ideas, expressed by terms like 'patriotism' and 'nationalism' which can, as Gramsci says, have the force of popular religions. A hegemonic class is one which succeeds in combining these patriotic struggles and ideas with its own class interests so as to achieve national leadership. Many historical illustrations spring to mind, in addition to the Jacobins in the French Revolution: to take only one, the Chinese workers and peasants under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party combined the national struggle against the Japanese with social revolution.

The great variety of movements for democratic rights, for freedom of speech and the right to vote and for many other kinds of civil liberties, which the British people have engaged in over many centuries, cannot be *reduced* to class struggles even though they have been closely related to them. Many of these struggles reflect a conflict between the people and the government, or 'officialdom', which is not the same as the conflict between working class and capitalist class arising directly from the relations of production. The relation between democratic struggles and class struggles is a vast subject which is opened up by the Gramscian concept of national popular.<sup>8</sup> It has been suggested, for example, that the strength of Chartism in the 1830s and 1840s was due to the link which it established between the inherited tradition of radical politics and a developing practice of class struggle.<sup>9</sup>

After the period of Chartism, however, the British bourgeoisie was particularly successful in achieving leadership in the process of broadening parliamentary democracy and in strengthening its hegemony by this means. This led many communists and others in the past, and Lenin's influence was especially strong here, to take the view that parliamentary democracy was an instrument of the capitalist class, and

to counterpose to it direct democracy in the form of soviets, shop stewards' committees and the like; and this is still the view taken on the whole by Trotskyists. A socialist revolution, according to this view, requires the replacement of parliamentary democracy by direct democracy, rather than a combination of both. In consequence a whole sphere of democratic struggle is surrendered to the other side. Instead, parliament and everything associated with it should be seen as a vital terrain, on which the struggle for political and ideological hegemony takes place. The fact is that the authority of the House of Commons has been gravely undermined by a series of developments in the present century—the shift of power to the cabinet, to the prime minister within the cabinet, and to the upper layer of civil servants, for example—and is in danger of being still further eroded as a result of the authoritarian tendencies which have gained ground in the Conservative Party.

There are many other social movements, apart from the struggle for civil liberties, which have their own specific qualities and do not have a necessary class character. The movements which express the demands of women, students, young people, ethnic minorities; the anti-nuclear movement; the various ecological movements concerned with the environment; community activities of many kinds concerned with aspects of health, education, housing and other issues. What all these movements have in common is that they do not arise directly out of the relations of production. Their position has been well described by Laclan and Mouffe:

Their enemy is defined not by its function of exploitation, but by wielding a certain power. And this power, too, does not derive from a place in the relations of production, but is the outcome of a form of organisation characteristic of the

present society. This society is indeed capitalist, but this is not its only characteristic; it is sexist and patriarchal as well, not to mention racist.<sup>10</sup>

There are therefore a variety of popular democratic struggles which have their own specific qualities and cannot be reduced to the class struggle although they are related to it in various ways; and the struggle to gain the leadership of these popular-democratic, non-class aspirations of the people is an essential part of the contest for hegemony between the working class and the capitalist class. These aspirations, and the movements which express them, constitute a political terrain which is fought over by the two fundamental classes contending for hegemony. If the working class is to achieve hegemony, it needs patiently to build up a network of alliances with these social movements; and the process of building these alliances is an essential part of what Gramsci called the *war of position*. These alliances must respect the autonomy of the movements, so that each of them is able to make its own special contribution towards the new socialist society.

The distinction between class struggles and conflicts which do not have a necessary class character is not explicitly made in the *Prison Notebooks* though it is implicit in Gramsci's conception of national-popular. It was first made, as far as I am aware, by Ernesto Laclan in his essay 'Fascism and Ideology' and is perhaps the most valuable advance in elaborating the concept of hegemony which has been made since the publication of the *Prison Notebooks*.<sup>11</sup>

To sum up, the process of transcending the corporate phase and advancing towards hegemony has two main aspects. First, the working class can only become hegemonic if it gains the leadership of an alliance of classes and strata. Second, it must unite popular-democratic struggles

with its own struggle against the capitalist class so as to build up a national-popular collective will; this is one of the major contributions which Gramsci made to the concept of hegemony.<sup>12</sup>

This initial exposition of the meaning of national-popular has been made in terms of the unification of struggles and movements, but the process is in reality inseparable from changes in the outlook and consciousness of those who are involved or from, as Gramsci put it, intellectual and moral reform. This is explored in Chapter 8 on ideology.

# 6

## Passive Revolution

### The Risorgimento

Gramsci's analysis of the contrast between the French Revolution and the Italian Risorgimento (referred to on p.34) led him to develop the concept of *passive revolution*. In the French Revolution the Jacobins were able to mobilise the people for the revolutionary struggle through supporting the demands of the peasantry and building an alliance with them. In contrast, the unification of Italy and the rise to power of the Italian bourgeoisie in the Risorgimento was carried out by Cavour and the Moderate Party in a very different way, with the minimum reliance on popular struggles; their main instrument was the Piedmontese state with its army, its monarchy and its bureaucracy.

The liberal-democratic current was represented by the Action Party of Mazzini and Garibaldi, but it played a subordinate role to the Moderates; and the principal reason for this, in Gramsci's view, was that it failed to develop a programme reflecting the essential demands of the popular masses, and in the first place of the peasantry. Thus the Action Party never succeeded in stamping the Risorgimento with a popular and democratic character. Instead the Moderates, with the aid of their own intellectuals, exercised a powerful attractive force over intellectuals

throughout the peninsula, and succeeded in using the national question to unite all the different sections of the Italian bourgeoisie under their leadership. The Moderates reinforced their ascendancy over the Action Party by the method which became known in Italy as *transformism*, and involved the 'gradual but continuous absorption achieved by methods which varied in their effectiveness, of the active elements produced by allied groups—and even of those which came from antagonistic groups' (*SPN*). For example, Gramsci says that in the period from 1860 to 1900 individual figures formed by the democratic opposition parties were incorporated individually into the conservative-moderate political class, characterised by its aversion to any intervention of the popular masses in state life; from 1900 onwards entire groups from the democratic opposition passed over into the moderate camp.

Thus the Moderates established their hegemony over the Action Party and over the whole movement of the Risorgimento, but the process of national unification and the rise to power of the northern capitalists was achieved without relying on popular struggles. No attempt was made to coordinate the interests of the peasants and of other subordinate classes with those of the bourgeoisie so as to create a national-popular collective will. The majority of the peasants remained under the influence of the Roman Catholic church which was hostile to the new Italian state (having lost the Papal Territories). The Risorgimento took the form of a 'revolution from above', carried out mainly through the agency of the Piedmontese state. The strategy adopted by the Italian bourgeoisie had the character of a *passive revolution*. The Moderates only established their hegemony over the Action Party; in other words, there was hegemony of part of the capitalist class over the whole of that class, combined with an absence of hegemony over the peasants and the great majority of the population. As Gramsci put it, there was 'dictatorship

without hegemony.

One aspect of a passive revolution deserves special emphasis. Referring to the role of the Piedmont state, Gramsci says 'The important thing is to analyse more profoundly the significance of a 'Piedmont'-type function in passive revolutions—i.e. the fact that a state replaces the local social groups in leading a struggle for renewal' (*SPN*). In a passive revolution the state is substituted for the political (hegemonic) activity of the class; the greater the degree of passive revolution in any situation, the more does this process of *substitution* take place.

In setting out Gramsci's analysis of the Risorgimento, an extremely simplified picture of a very complex historical period has been given, very much more simplified than that given by Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*. The people were not entirely passive in the Risorgimento which included many heroic episodes, such as the risings in Milan and Rome in 1848-49 and Garibaldi's expedition to Sicily in 1860. But in its overall character the Risorgimento was a passive revolution which did not have a national-popular quality. Gramsci sums up the result (*SPN*): the leaders of the Risorgimento 'were aiming at the creation of a modern state in Italy and in fact produced a bastard'. They did not succeed either in stimulating the formation of an extensive and energetic ruling class or in integrating the people into the framework of the new state. The Italian bourgeoisie could only achieve a limited measure of hegemony, and the subsequent history of Italy was marked by a system of compromises which were unstable and lacking in popular support. Gramsci considered that the weakness of the Italian liberal state founded by the Risorgimento was one of the factors which made possible the rise of fascism in the 1920s.

## The concept of passive revolution

Having developed the notion of passive revolution out of his analysis of the Risorgimento and the subsequent history of the Italian state, Gramsci takes a further step. He suggests that passive revolution is not only an interpretation of the Risorgimento but also of 'every epoch characterised by complex upheavals'. Whenever the hegemony of the bourgeoisie begins to disintegrate and a period of organic crisis develops, the process of reorganisation which is needed to re-establish its hegemony will to some extent have the character of a passive revolution. In his series of notes collected under the heading 'Americanism and Fordism' he detected an element of passive revolution in Roosevelt's New Deal, consisting of the great expansion in state intervention to help overcome the profound economic crisis of the 1930s. There was also a considerable growth of state intervention in Italy under Mussolini's fascist regime:

There is a passive revolution involved in the fact that—through legislative intervention of the state, and by means of corporative organisation—relatively far-reaching modifications are being introduced into the country's economic structure ... [In Italy] this could be the only solution whereby to develop the productive forces under the direction of the traditional ruling classes in competition with the more advanced industrial formations of countries which monopolise raw materials and have accumulated massive capital sums ... It thus reinforces the hegemonic system and the forces of military and civil coercion at the disposal of the traditional ruling classes (SPN).

Thus fascism in Italy was a form of passive revolution whereby necessary reforms in the economic structure were carried out from above, through the agency of the state.

Gramsci suggests, therefore, that passive revolution is the characteristic response to an organic crisis. Passive revolution is involved whenever relatively far-reaching modifications in a country's economic structure are made from above, through the agency of the state apparatuses, without relying on the active participation of the people.<sup>13</sup>

The concept of passive revolution can be extended to cover the analysis of socialist as well as bourgeois revolutions. In the transition to socialism, the strategy of the working class must have the character of an *anti-passive revolution*, based on an extension of class struggles and of popular-democratic struggles so as to mobilise ever-wider sections of the population for democratic reforms. The development of this anti-passive strategy requires a deeper analysis of civil society—the sphere of class and popular-democratic struggles. The relation between civil society and the state in the transition to socialism is explored in Chapter 9.

In the next chapter, Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and of organic crisis are discussed in the light of British history.

# 7

## Three Organic Crises in Britain

### The 1830s and 1840s

In Chapter 4 the discussion of Gramsci's concept of organic crisis was illustrated by the crisis in Italian society lasting from about 1910 to 1921, when it was resolved by the rise of fascism. Coming nearer home, it is possible to distinguish at least three periods of transition in the past 150 years of British history which may qualify as organic crises in Gramscian terms. The following remarks are necessarily tentative and sketchy, and greatly oversimplify a complex historical process, but may serve to illustrate the ways in which the British ruling class has maintained its hegemony when confronted with profound economic and social changes and with the growing strength of the working class movement.

The first of these crises of hegemony was in the second quarter of the nineteenth century when the rapid growth of factory industry and of the urban population, combined with all the other changes brought about by the industrial revolution, gave rise to a serious disequilibrium in the political structures inherited from the previous century. For the first time in British history a powerful working-class movement emerged, compounded of the radical democratic tradition of Paine and Cobbett, Luddism, and early trade unionism, and above all the new social force of Chartism. The old ways of ruling were becoming unworkable, and the

1830s and 1840s witnessed a prolonged struggle to elaborate new methods. Part of the answer was the creation of more effective coercive institutions such as the new police forces and the new Poor Law. But what was notable about the mid-Victorian period was the degree to which the urban bourgeoisie was able to gain consent to its leadership in society through a willingness to make the necessary compromises and concessions. It was certainly helped by the division within the working class caused by the emergence of an upper stratum of skilled workers and the reformist outlook they developed. But the key to its success was that the skilled workers achieved a measure of representation within society through the development of their own organisations, especially trade unions, co-operative and friendly societies. The relative stability of the new system rested on the recognition of the autonomy of these new working-class institutions, so that consent to the leadership of the ruling class was actively and spontaneously generated rather than imposed from above. The growth of this autonomous working-class movement under reformist leaders (who were ready to engage in hard-fought trade-union struggles but did not challenge the basic assumptions of capitalism) prepared the way for the extension of the vote in 1867 and 1884. As Robert Gray has written: 'Britain is in many ways the "classic" country, both of democratic struggle (from the English Revolution to the Chartists and beyond) and of its incorporation into political life under bourgeois leadership.'<sup>14</sup>

There were of course many other factors (such as the development of modern political parties in the shape of the Liberal and Conservative Parties, alternating in office), which contributed to the hegemony of the British ruling class after Chartism died down. But the question of autonomy for working-class organisations deserves special emphasis. A ruling class is more authentically hegemonic the more it leaves the

subordinate classes scope for organising themselves into autonomous social forces. The labour movement in a country such as Britain will only be able to mount an effective challenge to the hegemony of the capitalist class if it builds up a broad alliance of social forces under its leadership, based on a genuine recognition that the autonomy of these social forces must be respected, and that they each have their own contribution to make to the new socialist strategy. This is a crucial aspect of revolutionary strategy—Gramsci's war of position—which will be taken up again in later chapters.

### From about 1910 to 1945

In the years from about 1910 to 1914 the stability of British political life was severely shaken by a series of massive popular movements. The struggle between capital and labour reached a new pitch of intensity in a number of great national strikes by miners, railwaymen, dockers and others. There was also the militant campaign of the suffragettes led by the Pankhursts for the extension of the vote to women; and the rise of the Irish national movement leading to the Home Rule Bill, bitterly opposed by the Protestant minority in Ulster, and culminating in the Curragh Mutiny of British army officers in Ireland which was openly supported by Tory party leaders in England. There was a crisis of political authority and of the nineteenth century constitutionalism based on the alternation in office of the Conservative and Liberal parties—a new organic crisis in Gramsci's terms. During the years following the outbreak of war in 1914 the old system was slowly reconstructed to emerge as a new political settlement. The replacement of the Liberal Party as the main opposition party by the Labour Party under social-democratic leadership, committed to parliament, was the most obvious

change. But two other features were very significant. First, a new system for the representation of labour developed outside parliament; trade union leaders were drawn into the state machinery in various ways, appointed to boards and tribunals, consulted and negotiated with by ministers and civil servants. Employers' organisations were treated in the same way, and this resulted in the gradual evolution of the system which has become known as 'tripartism', or as 'corporatism' because it provides for the corporate representation of capital and labour. (The term 'corporate' is here used in a different sense from Gramsci's term 'economic-corporate' which refers to a stage in the development of a class.) The second new feature was the extension of the social and economic activities of the state, which had already received its first big impulse under the Liberal governments of 1906-14.

These two major developments—tripartism and the expansion of the state—were compromises which did not at that time threaten the foundations of capitalism but which contributed to a new equilibrium of social forces, a new form of 'permanently organised consent'. This was established on a much firmer basis during the Second World War and by the Labour Governments of 1945-51, with the setting up of the National Health Service and of a much-improved system of social security, with the vital addition of a commitment to full employment. When the Conservative Party re-established its dominant position in the 1950s it did so on the basis of an acceptance of corporatism, the 'welfare state' and full employment. In the 1950s and 1960s British workers made substantial gains in the shape of higher living standards and better social services, while the trade union movement was growing stronger, especially through the extension of workplace organisation in conditions of full employment. Nevertheless, the working class remained in the economic-corporate stage, and did not mount a serious challenge to the

hegemony of the British capitalist class.

An essential condition for the success of this 'corporate representation of the working class was the dominant influence of social democracy in the leadership of the trade unions and the Labour Party. Central to the ideology and practice of social democracy is its belief that the state is the neutral arbiter between classes; through winning a parliamentary majority, concessions can be obtained in the shape of social reforms which promote the ideals of 'social justice' and 'equality'. Social democracy is therefore opposed to the mobilisation of the people to exert pressure through extra-parliamentary methods of struggle. There is no need for such methods, for reforms can be carried out through the agency of the state. Holding these beliefs, the right-wing leaders of the Labour Party and the trade unions were able to win the workers for economic policies which strengthened capitalism, gaining their consent to these policies through the offer of social reforms. This is the social-democratic form of what Gramsci called a *passive revolution*—the making of relatively far-reaching modifications in a country's economic and social structure from above, through the manipulation and expansion of the state, without relying on the active participation of the people.

## The 1970s onwards

The system of corporatism, accompanied by full employment and the expansion of the 'welfare state' worked well enough during the 1950s when British industry was able to benefit from the growth of world trade before the war-ravaged economies of continental Europe and Japan had recovered. But in the 1960s British manufacturing industry, deprived of its former protection in the privileged markets of the Empire, was

exposed to the full blast of competition from rival capitalist powers and its relative weakness was more and more revealed. During the years of the Labour governments under Harold Wilson from 1964 to 1970, the making of concessions on which corporatism depended became more difficult and there were signs of growing tension between the government and the trade unions. Meanwhile, a New Right was beginning to take shape within the Conservative Party, which rejected corporatism and the search for consensus with the trade union movement, and favoured instead a greater reliance on market forces, major reductions in welfare services and in state intervention in the economy, and legislation to weaken the trade unions who were seen as the principal obstruction to the free play of market forces.

The Conservative government of 1970-74 under Edward Heath reflected this new approach when it launched an attack on the trade unions with the Industrial Relations Act 1971; but it failed to overcome the determined resistance of the trade union movement, demonstrating the remarkable defensive strength it had acquired after three decades of full employment and the rise of the shop-stewards' movement. There followed a new phase of corporatism under the 1974-79 governments of Wilson and Callaghan; incomes policies were pursued in the novel form of the social contract, under which the TUC was offered consultation on a wide range of policies by the government, while in return it was expected to secure the compliance of its members with incomes policies involving wage restraint. In face of the worsening economic crisis, the Callaghan government adopted a strategy of severe deflation and public expenditure cuts, accompanied by a big rise in unemployment. The system of corporatism was much discredited, for it depended on social reform and better living standards which it had failed to deliver. The performance of the British economy compared with its main capitalist

rivals continued to deteriorate.

During the Callaghan years the shift to the right in the Conservative Party, following the election of Margaret Thatcher as its leader in 1976, was greatly strengthened. The New Right of the 1960s developed into the more effective Thatcherism, consisting of three main strands. First, it rejected the Keynesian methods of running the economy with the aim of securing full employment that were followed by Labour and Conservative governments alike during the long post-war boom. Instead, it adopted an extreme form of monetarist doctrine: the government was not responsible for what happened to the economy but only for maintaining sound money, free competition and the security of property and contract; the source of economic prosperity was individual enterprise, and government activities should be reduced to a minimum. Second, since trade unions obstructed the free working of market forces, their legal rights had to be severely curtailed in order to shift the balance of bargaining power in favour of the employers; the system of corporatism was to be ended. The democratic elements in the state were to be further weakened by a strengthening of the police and the armed forces.

The third strand of Thatcherism was a new emphasis on ideology, exploiting the popular feelings of resentment with many of the aspects of the 'welfare state': the arbitrary decisions of state bureaucracies and nationalised industries, the burden of taxation, 'welfare scroungers', the 'privileges' enjoyed by immigrants, and the disorder created by strikes and demonstrations. Thatcherism skilfully worked on traditional conservative elements of popular morality concerning the family, authority, standards, and self-reliance, elements which formed part of what Gramsci called common sense—the confused and often contradictory way in which a person perceives the world. The central theme was the posing of all questions of government policy as problems

of individual responsibility and individual choice, to be exercised within a framework of 'law and order'.<sup>15</sup> This attempt to integrate traditional conservative elements of popular morality into an ideology centred on individual self-help and private enterprise is a good illustration of the process of ideological struggle considered in the next chapter. The way in which Thatcherism succeeded in setting the agenda for politics in the 1980s is examined in the essay by Stuart Hall which concludes this book.

By the end of the 1970s British capitalism had entered a period, not only of economic crisis, but also of organic crisis in Gramsci's sense of the term. The system of political representation, which had served to ensure the hegemony of the capitalist class for the previous fifty years, began to disintegrate, and an intensive search for a new system, a new alignment of political and social forces, was pursued. This creates great opportunities for the labour movement, but unless they can be seized so as to build up a system of alliances under its leadership, acting as a magnet for new social forces and creating a national-popular collective will, the political representatives of capital may succeed in re-establishing their hegemony in a new way.

# 8

## Ideology

### The materiality of ideology

The term, ideology has often been used to mean simply a system of ideas, as for instance when people refer to liberal or conservative or socialist ideology. For Gramsci, ideology was more than a system of ideas. He distinguishes between the arbitrary systems worked out by particular intellectuals or philosophers, and historically organic ideologies, that is, those which are necessary to a given social formation: 'To the extent that ideologies are historically necessary they have a validity which is psychological; they "organise" human masses, and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.' (*SPN*). Ideologies are not individual fancies, but are embodied in collective and communal modes of living. And Gramsci refers to the affirmation made by Marx about the 'solidity of popular beliefs'.

Ideology is therefore not something which, as it were, floats in the air high above the political and other practical activities of men and women. On the contrary, it has a material existence in these practical activities. It provides people with rules of practical conduct and moral behaviour, and is equivalent to 'a religion understood in the secular sense of a unity of faith between a conception of the world and a corresponding norm of conduct' (*SPN*).

Gramsci points out that there is often a contradiction between the philosophy, or conception of the world, or religion which a person consciously believes, and one's mode of conduct, and he asks 'which therefore is one's real conception of the world—that which is logically affirmed as an intellectual choice, or that which emerges from the real activity of each person and which is implicit in his or her mode of action?' (*SPN*) The necessary transformation of political consciousness required for the advance to socialism has to be moral as well as intellectual and that is why Gramsci calls for a 'moral and intellectual' reform as an essential element of the hegemony of the working class.

In reading the *Prison Notebooks* it is helpful to bear in mind that Gramsci uses a variety of terms which for him are broadly equivalent to ideology, such as culture, philosophy, world outlook, or conception of the world, as well as the phrase 'moral and intellectual reform' when he is dealing with the transformation of consciousness required for the advance to socialism.

There is another important aspect of the material nature of ideology. Ideological practice possesses its own agents in the shape of intellectuals who specialise in the elaboration of organic ideologies and in the task of moral and intellectual reform. In his note on the Risorgimento Gramsci shows how the leaders of the Moderate Party successfully carried out this task for the Italian bourgeoisie through building an ideological bloc which exercised a powerful attraction throughout the country. They acted as the 'organic intellectuals' of the Italian bourgeoisie because they performed this vital function for it. So he argues that every fundamental class 'creates one or more strata of intellectuals who give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the political and social fields' (*SPN*). Thus the working class must also create its own organic

intellectuals if it is to succeed in becoming hegemonic. The vital role of intellectuals and of a revolutionary party as a 'collective intellectual' is further discussed in Chapters 12 and 14.

To sum up the argument so far, ideologies have a material existence in the sense that they are embodied in the social practices of individuals and in the institutions and organisations within which these social practices take place. These organisations include the political parties, trade unions and other organisations forming part of civil society; the various apparatuses of the state; and economic organisations such as industrial and commercial companies and financial institutions. All these bodies play a part in elaborating, sustaining and spreading ideologies; or in other words, they have ideological effects. It is important to recognise that this applies to state apparatuses as well as to the organisations of civil society; for example, the ideological effects of the law and the legal system are very influential; the law does not only have a coercive effect. Lastly, it must be stressed that ideologies are not to be reduced to social practices; they not only have a material existence, but they also exist in and through ideas, through the relations of concepts and propositions.

## Ideology as cement

Gramsci considers that an ideology is not to be judged by its truth or falsity but by its efficacy in binding together a bloc of diverse social elements, and in acting as cement or as an agent of social unification. A hegemonic class is one which succeeds in combining the interests of other classes, groups and movements with its own interests so as to create a national-popular collective will. In the previous chapter this was discussed in terms of the political leadership required to overcome all the narrow, corporate prejudices of a fundamental class and to make all

necessary compromises in political and economic programmes in order to build up and sustain a bloc of social forces, aspiring towards a new historic bloc. There is also a crucial ideological dimension in the building of such a bloc. A collective will can only be forged by a process of intellectual and moral reform that will create a common conception of the world. There must be 'a cultural-social unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills with heterogeneous aims, are welded together with a single aim, as the basis of an equal and common conception of the world' (*SPN*).

However, this new common conception of the world will not be a purely capitalist or a purely monopoly capitalist one in the case of the bourgeoisie; nor will it be a socialist ideology representing in a pure form the outlook of the working class. Instead, there had to be a more complex synthesis of class objectives with themes that have arisen out of the original and unique history of each country. As we saw in the previous chapter, if a class is to become hegemonic it has to succeed in combining these popular-democratic themes, which are rooted in the history of each country and which do not have a necessary class character, with its own class objectives in order to create a national-popular will. For this is the only way in which the ideas and aims of a revolutionary class can become deeply rooted among the people.

How is this to be done? It is not a matter of starting from scratch to build up a new ideological system out of entirely new elements. Gramsci sees it rather as a process of criticism of the existing ideological complex:

This criticism makes possible a process of differentiation and change in the relative weight that the elements of the old ideologies used to possess. What was previously secondary

and subordinate, or even incidental, is now taken to be primary—becomes the nucleus of a new ideological and theoretical complex. The old collective will dissolves into its contradictory elements since the subordinate ones develop socially, etc. (*SPN*).

Thus the nature of ideological struggle is not to make a completely fresh start. Rather, it is a process of transformation in which some of the elements are rearranged and combined in a different way with a new nucleus or central principle. A process of this kind is necessary because, if the old ideological system was a genuinely popular one, then the elements (or at least some of them) to which this popularity was due, need to be preserved in the new system even if their relative weight and some of their content is changed. The unity of the new ideological system will stem from its nucleus or central unifying principle.<sup>16</sup>

The task of intellectual and moral reform facing the working class is, therefore, to combine these diverse ideological elements, some of which may not have a class character, with the socialist values which express the fundamental interests of the working class. This ideological struggle is the counterpart of the political struggle to build a national-popular collective will which was discussed in Chapter 5.

One illustration of this process would be the way in which the popular feelings of national identity and patriotism are combined into an ideological system. This can be done in a great variety of ways: in an aggressive, nationalist style, as it was in German and Italian fascism; in a way which assumes a natural superiority over other nations and a right of international leadership, as it was by the British ruling class in the last century; or in a movement for national liberation linked with fundamental themes of social advance as was successfully done by the

Chinese Communist Party in the struggle against Japanese imperialism; and so on.

Another illustration from Britain is the way in which the shift to the right in the Conservative Party (referred to in Chapter 6, p. 57) was able to make use of the popular hostility to many of the activities of the state, to its bureaucracy and to the continual growth in the burden of taxation. The Tory Party posed as the champion of individual liberty against the state, proposing to cut down taxation, encourage personal initiatives, and reduce the role of government. The Tories were therefore aiming to appropriate popular sentiments of resentment against bureaucratic injustices and inefficiencies, and integrate these sentiments into an ideological system centred on the virtues of private enterprise.

Two important points arise out of the principle that a class advancing towards hegemony needs to build up an ideological system which can act as cement to bind together and unify a bloc of social forces.

First, a class does not achieve hegemony by simply imposing its own outlook on all other classes and social groups. It is necessary to reiterate this point because Gramsci's concept of hegemony has often been thought to consist precisely in the imposition of a class ideology on other classes. On the contrary, the tendency to reduce ideology to the instrument of a class amounts to the economism to which Gramsci was so strongly opposed.

Second, a new ideological system cannot be produced ready-made as a kind of intellectual construction worked out by the leaders of a political party. Rather, it has to be put together and gradually built up in the course of political and economic struggles, and its character will depend on the relation of forces existing during the period when it is being constructed. This is one aspect of the revolutionary strategy which Gramsci called a *war of position*, in the course of which the working

class builds up a bloc of social forces cemented by a common conception of the world, and thus isolates the capitalist class and deprives it of its allies and of the support which it has derived by integrating national-popular themes into its own ideological system.

## Common sense

Hitherto ideology has been discussed in its collective sense, as the expression of communal modes of living and acting. What then is the relation between an organic ideology and the individuals who are influenced by it and who contribute towards it? The starting point for Gramsci is what he calls *common sense*, the uncritical and largely unconscious way in which a person perceives the world; and he said 'all men are philosophers' for all men and women have some conception of the world, or world outlook. Their conscious conception of the world, their religion or ideology, may often be in contradiction with their political activity which can be in advance of their conscious ideas. Thus a person can be said to have two theoretical consciousnesses, 'one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed' (*SPN*).

It is through common sense that the workers, trying to live their lives under capitalism, have organised their experience. Common sense is the site on which the dominant ideology is constructed, but it is also the site of resistance and challenge to this ideology. Gramsci stresses that the consent which is secured by the hegemony of the bourgeoisie is an *active* consent, not a passive submission. It is not imposed; rather, it is 'negotiated' by unequal forces in a complex process through which the

subordination and the resistance of the workers are created and recreated.

The task for Marxist theory is to be a criticism of common sense, and to enable people to develop its positive nucleus—which Gramsci called *good sense*—into a more coherent outlook. And he emphasised that ‘it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone’s life, but of renovating and making critical an already existing activity’ (*SPN*). The passages in which Gramsci sets out these views on common sense and philosophy (*SPN*) are among the most important in the *Prison Notebooks*.

### Continuity in ideology: the search for the positive

In discussing the nature of ideological struggle we said above that a class advancing towards hegemony does not have to make a clean sweep of the opposing ideological systems; rather, it is a matter of transforming existing ideologies by preserving and rearranging some of the most durable elements in a new system. This sense of continuity with the past was deep-rooted in Gramsci, who was always conscious that revolution is both negation and fulfilment, both destruction and construction. Marxism, he said, ‘presupposes all this cultural past: Renaissance and Reformation, German philosophy and the French Revolution, Calvinism and English classical economics, secular liberalism ... Marxism is the crowning point of this entire movement of intellectual and moral reformation’ (*SPN* 395).

Gramsci was a polemical thinker. In his letter of 15 December 1930 to his sister-in-law Tatiana he said: ‘My entire intellectual formation was of a polemical nature, so that it is impossible for me to think “disinterestedly” or to study for the sake of studying. Only rarely do I lose

myself in a particular train of thought and analyse something for its inherent interest. Usually I have to engage in a dialogue, be dialectical, to arrive at some intellectual stimulation. I once told you how I hate tossing stones into the dark. I need an interlocutor, a concrete adversary; even in a family situation, I have to create a dialogue.<sup>17</sup> But in criticising the ideas of his opponents Gramsci was always engaged in a search for the positive. As Togliatti says 'there is always an awareness that the opposing position ... is part of a much more complex reality that can be revealed by arguments and words, and that one must direct oneself to the study of that reality.'<sup>18</sup> In a note on scientific discussions Gramsci writes:

In the formulation of historico-critical problems it is wrong to conceive of scientific discussion as a process at law in which there is an accused and a public prosecutor whose duty it is to demonstrate that the accused is guilty and has to be put out of circulation. In scientific discussion ... the person who shows himself most "advanced" is the one who takes up the point of view that his adversary may well be expressing a need which should be incorporated, if only as a subordinate aspect, in his own construction. To understand and to evaluate realistically one's adversary's position and his reasons ... means taking up a point of view that is 'critical', which for the purpose of scientific research is the only fertile one (*SPN*).

Gramsci applied these principles in his criticism of Benedetto Croce, the outstanding Italian liberal intellectual whose writings on philosophy, history, aesthetics and other subjects exercised a wide influence in Italy,

and indeed in Western Europe, in the early years of the century. Gramsci saw him as the leading spokesman of Italian liberalism, and two of the longest series of notes in the *Prison Notebooks* are devoted to a thorough analysis of Croce's thought and of the role he played in Italian society.<sup>19</sup>

In spite of his opposition to Croce's philosophical and political views, which were idealist and profoundly anti-Marxist, Gramsci found a number of positive elements in his thought, especially his concept of 'ethical-political' history which contributed to the development of Gramsci's own concept of hegemony.

The great importance of assimilating the cultural achievements of past generations is stressed by Gramsci in his note on the 'old primary school' entitled 'In search of the educational principle'. In explaining the advantages gained from the study of Latin and Greek, he says: 'Individual facts were not learned for an immediate practical or professional end. The end seemed disinterested, because the real interest was the interior development of personality, the formation of character by means of the absorption and assimilation of the whole cultural past of modern European civilisation' (*SPN*).

In his study of Gramsci, James Joll comments on his great range of interests, the extraordinary breadth of his reading and of his historical and philosophical culture; and on the way that he remained rooted in the Italian and European idealist cultural tradition, however much he reacted against figures like Hegel and Croce. Because of this, Joll says that 'it is easier for the non-Marxist to conduct a dialogue with Gramsci than with any other Marxist writer of the twentieth century.'<sup>20</sup>

We have now considered the three main aspects of Gramsci's theory of ideology—its materiality, its role as cement in binding together a bloc of diverse social forces, and its relation to the common sense of

individuals; and we have noted Gramsci's understanding of Marxism as the crowning point of the entire cultural movement of the past and his belief that, when criticising one's opponents in the course of ideological struggle, one should also engage in a continual search for the positive.

# 9

## Civil Society, the State and the Nature of Power

### Civil society

Previous chapters have examined the relations of classes and social forces and the nature of the political and ideological struggles in which they engage. But we have not yet discussed the state which profoundly affects, and is affected by, the relations of forces (except in the Introduction here, where Lenin's theory of the state was briefly discussed). It was suggested that his definition of the state as 'an instrument of the ruling class' and as 'a machine for the repression of one class by another' was defective and 'economistic' because it assumed a mechanical relationship between economics and politics or, to be more precise, between the relations of production and the state. We can say that it is an example of a particular form of economism which has persisted long after some of the cruder forms have passed away, and which can be termed 'class reductionism', the tendency to reduce complex political and ideological relations to class relations.

As Gramsci says, 'the historical unity of the ruling class is realised in the state'. Yet the state is also affected by class struggles and by popular-democratic struggles; so that, as Gramsci puts it in the note on

the relations of forces discussed earlier, the life of the state is 'a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria'. Thus, although a hegemonic class predominates in the state, it cannot use the state simply to impose its interests on other classes. The life of the state has a 'relative autonomy' from the ruling class, because it is the outcome of the balance of forces. Gramsci did not employ the term 'relative autonomy' which has come into use since his time, but it expresses very well his own thinking on the state.

The central problem concerning the state is the nature of the power exercised by a ruling class over other classes. For the character of the revolutionary strategy which is appropriate for a class aiming to achieve state power will depend on the understanding reached by that class on the nature of power—what it is and how it is exercised. As Gramsci said 'little understanding of the state means little class consciousness.

The main proposition advanced by Gramsci is that the state cannot be understood without a thorough understanding of *civil society*. Anyone who reads through the passages in the *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* collected by the editors under the heading 'state and civil society' is likely to find them very stimulating but also rather confusing. They were written at different times and Gramsci never had the opportunity to put them into a coherent shape. This sense of confusion is heightened by the central role Gramsci gives to *civil society* (contrasted with *political society*) which is difficult to understand because it is never clearly defined. The nearest he comes to a definition is a passage in the note on the formation of intellectuals:

What we can do, for the moment, is to fix two major superstructural 'levels': the one that can be called 'civil society', that is, the ensemble of organisms commonly called

'private', and that of 'political society' or 'the state'. These two levels correspond on the one hand to the functions of 'hegemony' which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of 'direct domination' or command exercised through the state and 'juridical' government (SPN).

And in his letter of 7 September 1931, he refers to civil society as comprising 'the so-called private' organisations like the church, the trade unions, the schools, etc., and adds 'it is precisely in civil society that intellectuals operate specially ...' (SPN).

Making use of these and other passages in the *Prison Notebooks* a definition of civil society can be constructed. It comprises all the 'so-called private' organisations such as churches, trade unions, political parties and cultural associations which are distinct from the process of production *and* from the public apparatuses of the state. All the organisations which make up civil society are the result of a complex network of social practices and social relations, including the struggle between the two fundamental classes, capital and labour. One set of institutions, the apparatuses which make up the state, are separated from the organisations of civil society in having a monopoly of coercion. Thus a capitalist society is composed of three sets of social relations: the relations of production, the basic relation between labour and capital; the coercive relations which characterise the state; and all other social relations which make up civil society.

Civil society is the sphere where capitalists, workers and others engage in political and ideological struggles and where political parties, trade unions, religious bodies and a great variety of other organisations come into existence. It is not only the sphere of class struggles; it is also

the sphere of all the popular-democratic struggles which arise out of the different ways in which people are grouped together—by sex, race, generation, local community, region, nation and so on. Thus it is in civil society that the struggle for hegemony between the two fundamental classes takes place. In several passages in the *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci says that civil society is ethical or moral society, because it is in civil society that the hegemony of the dominant class has been built up by means of political and ideological struggles.

Since civil society includes all the organisations and institutions outside production and the state, it includes the family. The family occupies a distinctive position within civil society, for it is in the family household that women are primarily employed in performing domestic labour and in reproducing, economically and biologically, the commodity labour-power. There is no space here to give adequate consideration to the nature of the very complex system of oppression of women that arises from their performance of unpaid domestic labour. Perhaps it is sufficient at this point to note that this system of oppression is quite different from the system of exploitation of labour by capital, so that women's struggles against their oppression have a different character from class struggles; the women's movement in all its variety is therefore a vital component of the bloc of social forces which has to be built up by the working class in its struggle for hegemony.

Gramsci uses the term *political society* for the coercive relations which are materialised in the various institutions of the state—the armed forces, police, law courts and prisons, together with all the administrative departments concerning taxation finance, trade, industry, social security, etc., which depend in the last resort for their effectiveness on the state's monopoly of coercion. He was of course very well aware that the activities of the state are far more than coercion, and

that the state apparatuses play a vital part in the organisation of consent; he refers to the 'educative and formative role of the state' (*SPN*). The term 'political society' is not a substitute for the term 'state', but refers only to the coercive relations embodied in the state apparatuses.

Gramsci derived the terms civil society and political society from Hegel, whom he had studied just as Marx and Engels had; and he transformed Hegel's concepts of civil and political society just as Marx and Engels transformed other Hegelian concepts. In Hegel's system, civil society was used to designate the sphere of economic relations, which was indeed the sense in which it was widely used in Britain and France in the eighteenth century. This was also the sense in which it was used by Marx in his early works, but in the later works of Marx and Engels, after they had developed the theory of historical materialism and the concepts of forces and relations of production, they abandoned the term civil society. It is therefore perfectly legitimate for Gramsci to give a new meaning to a term that has become obsolete, even though it takes a little getting used to in Britain, where the term 'civil servant' is used for officials in the service of the state.

One final point needs to be made before concluding this section on the definition of civil society. One should not think of the distinction between civil society and the state as though they are physically divided into separate areas with a clearly defined boundary between them. They are each composed basically of social relationships which are coercive in the case of the state, embodied in a great variety of organisations. Hence it is possible for an organisation to embody relations belonging both to civil society and the state. This applies especially to schools, universities and other educational institutions. Gramsci specifically mentions schools as one of the organisations of civil society, because the educational

relationship between teacher and student is mainly a non-coercive one. But there are significant elements of coercion involved in education, arising from the need to make attendance at schools compulsory, and the need to rely on taxation to provide the necessary funds. So in most countries schools are provided mainly by the state and they appear, if they are conceived simply as institutions, to form part of the state. But once it is accepted that there can be a certain interpenetration between the relations of civil society and the state, it is possible to explain the paradox that schools belong mainly to civil society even though they are mostly provided by the state.

### The integral state

Having defined civil society Gramsci makes his major theoretical proposition. He suggests that “state”. should be understood as well as government apparatus, also the private apparatuses of hegemony’ (*SPN*) and elsewhere he writes that the state is ‘the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only maintains its dominance but manages to win the consent of those over whom it rules’ (*SPN*). This view is summed up in the statement that the state is ‘political society plus civil society, in other words, hegemony protected by the armour of coercion’ (*SPN*). Gramsci calls this the *integral state* as opposed to the state in the ordinary sense, which he sometimes calls ‘the state-as-government’ (*stato-governo*) and which he also terms ‘political society’.

This approach is bound to seem confusing at first sight. What is the point of taking so much trouble to distinguish between civil society (the sphere of hegemony) and the state (sphere of coercion) and then lumping them both together in Gramsci’s peculiar terminology: he is

using the term 'state' both in its ordinary sense and in the sense of *power*. What he wants to suggest is that the social relationships of civil society are relations of power just as much (though in a different way) as are the coercive relations of the state. A hegemonic class exercises power over subordinate classes in civil society in addition to the state power which it exercises through its predominance in the state. Power is diffused through civil society as well as being embodied in the coercive apparatuses of the state. Thus Gramsci is proposing a far-reaching modification of the classical Marxist theory of the nature of power.

### The nature of power

Classical Marxism, including Leninism, takes the view that power is concentrated in the state and is under the exclusive control of the capitalist class (or of a part of that class). The aim of revolutionary strategy is the capture of power. Only *after* the capture of power by the working class can the construction of socialism begin.

This view was powerfully reinforced by the course of the Russian Revolution and was stressed by Lenin in many of his writings, of which *State and Revolution* is the most famous. This theory of power was symbolised by the storming of the Winter Palace in November 1917. The next day at the Congress of Soviets Lenin declared: 'We shall now proceed to construct the socialist order'. The conviction that state power could only be captured by means of a violent insurrection, as in 1917, was abandoned by many communist parties after the Second World War. The programme of the Communist Party of Great Britain, *The British Road to Socialism* adopted in 1951, declared that it was possible to advance to socialism in Britain, with its long parliamentary traditions, without insurrection on the Soviet model. State power in

Britain could be captured peacefully as a result of a parliamentary election which would be the crowning point of a broad mass movement led by the working class. This was a most significant development in revolutionary strategy. But the theory about the nature of power remained the same as before. It was still conceived as located in the state, even though

it could be captured by peaceful, parliamentary methods rather than violent, insurrectionary ones. The construction of socialism would only begin after a socialist government had been elected.

Gramsci's concept of integral state points in a different direction. Power is conceived as a relation. The social relations of civil society are also relations of power, which are embodied in the great variety of organisations making up civil society, as well as in the state apparatuses. This approach brings out the importance of the relations of forces examined in Chapter 3, where it was shown that civil society consists of a complex network of relations of social forces dominated by the central conflict between capital and labour. The set of apparatuses which make up the state, with its monopoly of coercion, is the principal embodiment (condensation) of these complex relations of forces. But there are other forms of oppression in civil society which are different from the exploitation of labour by capital. There are local, regional, racial, bureaucratic and other forms of domination in which a certain power is exercised and is given a material form in organisations and institutions of one kind or another. Thus the oppression of women is embodied in a complex way in the family as well as other organisations associated with it. This approach, that power is understood as a relationship, has been developed by the French writer Michel Foucault who argues that power is scattered among a great variety of relationships. His work is concerned with the relation of knowledge to

power and with the historical emergence of certain techniques or disciplines—natural science, grammar, law, medicine and psychiatry—and the way in which these are converted into relations of power. One can think, for example, of the power exercised by the medical profession within the National Health Service, and of the power wielded by the mass media, etc.<sup>21</sup>

## War of position

Wherever there is power there arises resistance to it. The social relations of civil society have therefore given rise, not only to class struggles, but also to the variety of social movements engaging in popular-democratic struggles which do not have a class character, which were the subject of Chapter 5. These struggles affect the nature and the form of the state institutions and of the organisations of civil society, with the result that these are not mere instruments of the ruling class; rather, they reflect the balance of forces within civil society. In the passage in the *Prison Notebooks* quoted in Chapter 2, Gramsci compares the organisations of civil society to a powerful system of 'fortresses and earthworks' standing behind the state. In Russia in 1917, where civil society was 'primordial and gelatinous', a frontal attack on the state, which he calls a 'war of movement', could succeed. But in advanced capitalist societies where civil society is highly developed, a different strategy is required—a war of position. The working class has to dismantle the system of fortresses and earthworks supporting the hegemony of the bourgeoisie by building alliances with all the social movements which are striving to transform the relationships within civil society. The hegemonic power exercised by the bourgeoisie through the organisations of civil society has to be increasingly undermined by the countervailing power of the social

movements based on the growing activity of the members of these movements, linked together under the leadership of the working class.

The process of revolutionary change from capitalism to socialism consists therefore in the transformation of the social relations of civil society, as the basis for the transformation of the state apparatuses and of the organisations of civil society—churches, schools, political parties, trade unions, etc., as well as the family. This war of position does not exclude the possibility of very sharp struggles, even violent ones, against the coercive organs of the state. What it means is that the decisive struggle for state power can only be won on the basis of a decisive shift in the balance of forces in civil society; and once such a shift has taken place, the opportunities for violent counter-revolutionary attacks from the right will be greatly restricted and will ultimately fail even if they do take place.

## Socialism

The contrast between civil society, with its voluntary, autonomous organisations, and the state institutions with their coercive character, enables Gramsci to give a perspective for the development of a socialist society into a communist one. He says that 'it is possible to imagine the coercive element of the state withering away by degrees, as ever more conspicuous elements of civil society make their appearance' (*SPN*). The evolution of a socialist society consists, then, in the continual extension of civil society and its relations of autonomy, self-government and self-discipline, along with the gradual disappearance of the coercive, hierarchical and bureaucratic elements of the state.

Gramsci recognised that where the working class achieves state power in a backward country without a well-developed civil society,

there would have to be an initial period of heavy reliance on the state. He called this a period of *statolatry*, by which he meant very much the same as the term *statism* which has come into use in recent years. This period of statolatry, he says in the note on this subject (SPN), is necessary in order to construct a complex and well-articulated civil society in which the individual can govern himself, but which it was not possible to create before the revolution. But he immediately goes on to qualify this statement: 'However, this kind of "statolatry" must not be abandoned to itself, must not, especially, become theoretical fanaticism or be conceived of as "perpetual".' It must be criticised, precisely in order to develop and produce new forms of civil society, in which the initiative of individuals and groups will flourish.

This note on statolatry is valuable for analysing the Soviet Union. The period of statolatry in that country was exceptionally prolonged and not used to develop a 'complex and well-articulated civil society'. Instead, many elements of civil society which existed in Lenin's time were eliminated under Stalin and the system of single-party domination over all spheres of life was established, and imposed on the East European countries after the Second World War. When challenged, as recent events have shown, the authority of this system can disintegrate very rapidly.

It may seem contradictory that the transition to socialism in the Soviet Union should have taken the form mainly of a revolution from above, carried out through the agency of the state; it took the form of a *passive revolution*, which Gramsci maintains is the strategy employed by the bourgeoisie, whereas the appropriate strategy for the working class is an anti-passive revolution (Chapter 6). But this is not as paradoxical as it seems. It means that the leadership of the Soviet Communist Party under Stalin adopted bourgeois political practices inherited from Tsarist

Russia. This is not the place to discuss why this happened, except to suggest that the causes have to be sought in the extreme backwardness of Tsarist society, the exceptionally difficult conditions in which the new Soviet state was born (civil war, invasion, famine, etc.) and the serious defects in the Marxist theory of politics.

Thus Gramsci's theory of civil society and its complex relations with the state provides a perspective for the transition from capitalism to democratic and participative forms of socialism, built up from below and not imposed from above. The nature of revolutionary strategy will be taken up again in the last chapter.

# 10

## The Factory Councils' Movement

### L'Ordine Nuovo and the factory councils

**A** class which is advancing towards hegemony must strive for leadership in the sphere of production: 'Though hegemony is ethical-political, it must also be economic, founded on the decisive function of the leading group in the decisive sectors of production' (*SPN*). As Gramsci had said in an article written in July 1920, a socialist revolution has to be founded on 'the patient and methodical work needed to build a new order in the relations of production' (*SPWI*).

The practical origin of the concept of hegemony was the factory councils' movement which arose in Turin during the great revolutionary upsurge in Italy in 1919-20. The weekly journal which was founded in May 1919 by Gramsci and his friends Togliatti, Tasca and Terracini, entitled *L'Ordine Nuovo* (The New Order) became the organ of the factory councils. Searching for something in Italy which could play the role which had been played by the soviets in the Russian Revolution, Gramsci and his colleagues seized on the internal commissions in the factories as potential organs of working-class power.

The internal commissions were committees elected by trade union members having limited functions for dealing with grievances, originally

very much under the control of the union officials, but towards the end of the war they were becoming a focus for the discontent of the militants with the union leadership. In June 1919 *L'Ordine Nuovo* published an article by Gramsci and Togliatti calling for the transformation of the internal commissions into 'organs of proletarian power, replacing the capitalist in all his useful functions of management and administration'; creating a new system of workers' democracy which would be a school of political and administrative experience and thus effecting a radical transformation of the workers' consciousness. This call met with an immediate response, and the internal commissions developed into factory councils which, building on the revolutionary spirit of the Turin workers, rapidly grew into a powerful movement.

Although the factory councils were inspired by the October Revolution, they were quite different from the Russian soviets. They were a creative application to Italian conditions of the experiences of the Russian workers, not a mechanical copy of the Russian model. They were factory-based organisations for exercising workers' control over production and the labour process, not territorial organisations based on towns and villages and composed of deputies of workers, peasants and soldiers. They drew also on the experiences of British shop-stewards' committees, but differed from them too; the factory councils were to be organs of the workers as producers rather than as wage earners, and all workers participated whether or not they belonged to a trade union.

In September 1920 the post-war revolutionary wave in Italy culminated in the occupation of the factories which, beginning in Milan, quickly spread throughout the country. Inspired by the example of Turin, factory councils sprang up everywhere, and in many factories production continued. Confronted by this immense movement, the leaders of the Italian Socialist Party remained passive, and allowed the reformist CGL

leaders (the Italian TUC) to reach a compromise with the government and to call off the occupation. While it had demonstrated the great potentialities of the factory councils movement and had revealed the capacity of the working class for industrial leadership, it ended in defeat. The second half of 1920 witnessed both the rise of Mussolini's fascist movement, and preparations for the foundation of the Italian Communist Party which took place in January 1921.

This is not the place to explore all the aspects of the factory councils movement, which can be studied in Gramsci's own articles in SPWI. Three themes are of particular importance for the development of the concept of hegemony: (1) the factory councils as embryos of a new state, ending the separation between economic and political struggle; (2) welding the present to the future; and (3) workers' control over the labour process.

### Embryos of the new state

For Gramsci, at this relatively early stage in his development as a Marxist, the nucleus of Lenin's thought was the dictatorship of the proletariat; that is, revolution was understood not only as destruction but also as the construction of a fundamentally new type of state. It was necessary to adopt a new kind of political practice, as developed by Lenin and the Bolshevik Party, and to break with the entire parliamentary tradition of the Second International. This tradition was characterised by the gulf which separated the parliamentary leaders from the mass of the workers, and by a style of leadership which expected the workers to remain passive while all the decisions and initiative were concentrated at the top. It was basically no different from the practice of the bourgeois political parties. For Gramsci, following Lenin, the factory

councils like the soviets were a new kind of state institution which transformed the relation between leaders and led because they enabled the workers to participate actively in the construction of the new state. The factory councils were an embryonic apparatus of power destined to replace the bourgeois parliamentary state by a system of direct democracy founded on the participation of the masses.

### Welding the present to the future

Gramsci's attitude to parliamentary democracy will be considered again in Chapter 13. The second great theme of the factory councils' movement was that the revolution consisted just as much in constructing the new order as in destroying the old one, and that the two processes could take place at the same time. The factory councils were new, socialist organs of power which were developing within the framework of the Italian capitalist state. As Gramsci said: 'How can the present be welded to the future, so that while satisfying the urgent necessities of the one we may work effectively to create and "anticipate" the other?' (SPWI). Gramsci was already beginning to formulate the principle that the socialist revolution is not simply a dramatic seizure of state power, to be followed by the construction of socialism, but is a process which begins under capitalism—the principle that was later to be elaborated in the *Prison Notebooks* into the concept of a war of position.

### Taking control of the labour process

Third, the factory councils' movement embodied the principle that the workers should take the control of the labour process out of the hands of the capitalist owners, establishing their leadership in the sphere of

production and 'replacing the capitalist in all his useful functions of management and administration'. The workers acted in their capacity as producers, not as wage earners. The factory councils movement was a 'true school for developing the reconstructive capacities of the workers':

The working masses must take adequate measures to acquire complete self-government, and the first step along this road consists in disciplining themselves, inside the work-shop, in the strictest possible, yet autonomous, spontaneous and unconstrained manner. Nor can it be denied that the discipline which will be established along with the new system will lead to an improvement in production—but this is nothing but the confirmation of one of the theses of socialism: the more the productive human forces acquire consciousness, liberate themselves and freely organize themselves by emancipating themselves from the slavery to which capitalism would have liked to condemn them forever, the better does their mode of utilization become—a man will always work better than a slave. So to those who object that by this method we are collaborating with our opponents, with the owners of the factories, we reply that on the contrary this is the only means of letting them know in concrete terms that the end of their domination is at hand, since the working class is now aware of the possibility of *doing things itself*, and doing them well. Indeed from one day to the next it is acquiring an ever clearer certainty that it alone can save the entire world from ruin and desolation (SPW I).

Thus the factory councils were the means through which the workers could acquire self-discipline, autonomy, and political consciousness—qualities which were needed for the exercise of national leadership in the sphere of production. As Gramsci put it, ‘the era of the active intervention of the labour force in the fields of technique and discipline had begun, and the working class was beginning to acquire the mentality of a ruling class’. New methods of work and new technical developments do not have to be everlastingly identified with the interests of capital. The unity between technical developments and the interests of the capitalist class should be conceived as transitory, as a historical phase of industrial development which is coming to an end. This unity can be dissolved, and technical developments can be conceived, not merely separately from the interests of the ruling class, but in relation to the interests of the working class. The rise of the factory councils’ movement was a compelling proof that such a new synthesis was historically mature; it was a demonstration of the new political consciousness which the Turin workers were in the process of acquiring (*SPN*).

In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci returned to this question in a series of notes collected under the title of ‘Americanism and Fordism’, where he considers the new forms of organisation and rationalisation of production, which were typified at that time by the ‘mass production’ and high wages system developed by Ford. Owing to the special conditions which existed in the United States, it was relatively easier than in Europe ‘to rationalise production by a skilful combination of force (destruction of trade unionism) and persuasion (high wages, various social benefits, extremely subtle ideological and political propaganda) and thus succeed in making the whole life of the nation revolve around production’. So Gramsci concluded that ‘hegemony here is born in the

factory.'

Fordism, as Gramsci understood it, was not only concerned with introducing new methods of scientific management for the control of the work process. It also aimed to develop a new type of worker suited to the new type of work. As examples of this Gramsci examines the moral coercion of the workers which was exercised by means of 'prohibition' (banning of all alcoholic drink) and by the concern shown by some American industrialists to regulate and rationalise the sexual affairs and family arrangements of their employees.

People who laugh at these initiatives (failures though they were) and see in them only a hypocritical manifestation of 'puritanism' thereby deny themselves any possibility of understanding the importance, significance and objective import of the American phenomenon, which is *also* the biggest collective effort to date to create, with unprecedented speed, and with a consciousness of purpose unmatched in history, a new type of worker and of man (SPN).

Thus 'the new methods of work are inseparable from a specific mode of living and of thinking and feeling life'.

In other words, ideology plays a crucial role in the capitalist control of the labour process, for ideology, as Gramsci conceives it, embodies rules of practical conduct and moral behaviour. For the working class to wrest control of the labour process out of the hands of the capitalists, ideological and political struggle are necessary. The conflicts in the workplace between capitalist management and the workers on issues, such as the terms on which new technology is introduced, are not to be

understood as purely economic; they also involve ideological and political struggles. Thus the social relations of civil society penetrate profoundly into the relations of production. Two observations can be made about this.

First, the classical Marxist distinction between economic structure or base, and the political and ideological superstructure, is no longer satisfactory as a way of thinking about society or as an explanation of how social changes take place. It is misleading to think in terms of a sharp separation between a sphere of economics, and a sphere of politics, once it is accepted that the political relations of civil society penetrate into the relations of production. Even more important, the metaphor of base and superstructure implies that changes in the economic structure are the primary cause of changes in politics and ideology, whereas the whole direction of Gramsci's thought, in line with Lenin's, is to attribute revolutionary change to political action; and to establish the principle of the primacy of politics. Although the *Prison Notebooks* contain many references to base and superstructure, this is in effect replaced in Gramsci's thought by his concept of *historic bloc* to indicate the way in which a hegemonic class combines the leadership of a bloc of social forces in civil society with its leadership in the sphere of production. The process of revolutionary change consists in the disintegration of the historic bloc constructed by the capitalist class and its replacement by a new historic bloc built up by the working class. The primacy of politics, conceived in this way, does not conflict with the basic principle of historical materialism as stated by Marx in the 1859 *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy*: 'The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general.'

Second, in considering the advance from capitalism to socialism it is

essential to keep in mind the two distinct elements that characterise the relation between capital and labour. On the one hand, the ownership of capital enables the capitalist to appropriate the surplus labour created by the worker; this is expressed by the relation between profits and wages. On the other hand, the worker is subordinated to the capitalist in the labour process, and it is through this control that capital constantly revolutionises the techniques of production and raises the productivity of the workers. The abolition of the private ownership of the means of production is one aspect of the advance to socialism; the ending of the subordination of the worker in the labour process is the other, in which the arbitrary control by the management in the workplace has to be replaced by the collective control of the workers.

The two elements in the capital-labour relation can be expressed by the distinction between the social and the technical division of labour. The central aspect of the *social* division of labour is the division between the capitalist owners of the means of production and the workers who have only their labour-power to sell. The *technical* division of labour concerns the division between skilled and unskilled workers, between the various skilled occupations such as electrician or engineer, and above all the division between manual and intellectual labour. The social division of labour can be abolished through the public ownership of the means of production and the creation of some kind of planning system, which can be done in a relatively short period. But the complete overcoming of the technical division of labour, and especially of the division between manual and intellectual labour, is bound to be a prolonged process stretching far into the future. This explains why socialism is a transitional form of society, gradually developing into communism when the antithesis between manual and intellectual labour will have vanished, as Marx outlined in his *Critique of the Gotha*

*Programme*. In *Capital* Marx showed how the skilled craftsman was deprived of his individual control over his own work and was reduced to an appendage of the machine. Under socialism the workers will recover their individuality in an entirely new way as they gradually gain collective control over the labour process.

The crucial point made by Gramsci is that this struggle to wrest control of the labour process away from the capitalist managers begins within capitalism and is an essential part of the struggle for hegemony. The British trade union movement has been built up in the course of struggles, not only for higher wages but also for imposing limits on the arbitrary authority of the capitalists' control of the work process. These struggles have had successes and have contributed to the strength of the trade unions and their workplace organisation. But up to the present they have been mainly defensive; they have had an economic-corporate, rather than a hegemonic, character. The factory councils' movement was the particular form in which the Turin workers were able, in the conditions prevailing in 1919-20, to mount a challenge to the hegemony of the capitalists in the 4 factory. The very different conditions in the 1990s will require quite different forms of challenge.

# 11

## Extending the Sphere of Politics

Gramsci's concept of civil society leads in another important direction which has not yet been discussed: it lays the basis for a great extension of the sphere of politics. The organisations which comprise civil society have a great variety of different purposes—political, social, artistic, sporting and so on. What they have in common is that they all embody social practices which are associated with the assumptions and values which people accept, often unconsciously. This is the material aspect of ideology which was discussed in Chapter 5. A ruling class establishes its hegemony by combining these values and assumptions with its own class interests and thus building a social base within civil society for the coercive and administrative power of the state. Thus Gramsci says that hegemony includes the spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population 'to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental class' (*SPN*). If the working class is to advance towards hegemony, it must seek for ways of challenging this spontaneous consent. This can only be done by means of political activity.

Gramsci therefore extends the concept of politics to cover any activities which are intended to change the nature of the spontaneous consent which has been built up in civil society. One of the best illustrations of this conscious extension of political activities is the rise of feminist politics since the late 1960s. All the values and assumptions

which have legitimised a subordinate position for women within the family and society have been challenged, and this has stimulated women to think anew for themselves what their role in society should be. It should be noted, however, that Gramsci does not extend these reflections into a comprehensive analysis of women's position. In his notes on Americanism and Fordism Gramsci discusses some aspects of the sexual question and in one passage he refers to the need for women to develop a new way of conceiving themselves:

The formation of a new feminine personality is the most important question of an ethical and civil order connected with the sexual question. Until women can attain not only a genuine independence in relation to men but also a new way of conceiving themselves and their role in sexual relations, the sexual question will remain full of unhealthy characteristics and caution must be exercised in proposals for new legislation (*SPN*).

This extension of the concept of politics, to cover the activity of changing human relationships (and the ideas implicit in them) in all spheres of life, is a most important consequence of the concept of civil society.

For Marx, Engels and Lenin and other Marxist writers before Gramsci, politics was identified with the struggle for state power. The struggles between classes, resulting in continual changes in the state culminating in revolutionary changes, was the substance of politics. State power and political power were interchangeable terms; and the Marxist theory of politics was (and still often is) referred to simply as the Marxist theory of the state. It can certainly be argued that a wider conception of politics is

implicit in Marx's thought, especially in his concept of praxis, but it was never made the subject of explicit analysis by him.

If politics is confined to the struggle for state power, it follows that in the transition to communism, when the coercive elements of the state wither away, politics would also wither away; in Engels's famous (though obscure) phrase it would be replaced by the 'administration of things'. For Gramsci, on the other hand (as Eric Hobsbawm has said) politics is the core not only of the strategy for winning socialism, but of socialism itself. Politics extends to embrace a much wider field of human activity than the struggle for state power. Gramsci's view is best set out in the note entitled 'What is man?' (SPN) and is akin to Aristotle's conception that human beings are fundamentally political by nature. Basing himself on Marx's sixth thesis of Feuerbach that the 'human essence' is the *ensemble* of human relations, Gramsci says that political activity consists in the activity of transforming these human relations, and in doing so one develops one's own capacities and potentialities. (Since he was writing a long time ago, he can be excused for abiding by the convention of his time in using 'man' to include 'woman'):

So one could say that each one of us changes himself, modifies himself to the extent that he changes the complex relations of which he is the hub. In this sense the real philosopher is, and cannot be other than, the politician, the active man who modifies the environment, understanding by environment the *ensemble* of relations which each of us enters to take part in. If one's own individuality is the *ensemble* of these relations, to create one's own personality means to acquire consciousness of them and to modify one's own personality means to modify the *ensemble* of these

relations (*SPN*).

Gramsci took the view that capitalist relations of production were relations which an individual had to enter into independently of his or her will, that is, they were the realm of necessity. Politics, on the other hand, is the activity through which individuals, acting collectively, liberate themselves from necessity. Politics is born on the 'permanent and organic' terrain of economic life but transcends it, bringing into play emotions and aspirations in whose incandescent atmosphere calculations involving the individual human life itself obey different laws from those of individual profit, etc.' (*SPN*). Taking part in politics means developing the capacity to think and act for oneself, developing autonomous activity which is not directed from above by external forces. It is linked with the development of one's own conception of the world. Is it better, Gramsci asks, 'to take part in a conception of the world mechanically imposed by the external environment? Or on the other hand is it better to work out consciously and critically one's own conception of the world and thus, in connection with the labours of one's own brain, choose one's sphere of activity, take an active part in the creation of the history of the world, be one's own guide, refusing to accept passively and supinely from outside the moulding of one's own personality?' (*SPN*).

Thus politics is conceived by Gramsci as a central human activity through which people develop their capacities and potentialities. The transition to socialism requires that civil society should be transformed as more and more people participate actively in this transformation.<sup>22</sup> It is not a question of the gradual disappearance of politics; rather, it has to become a sphere of activity for all, not for the few as at present:

Marxism is the expression of the subaltern classes who want to educate themselves in the art of government and have an interest in knowing all the truth, even the most unpleasant (Q 1320).

# 12

## The Intellectuals

### Definition

The role of intellectuals in capitalist society and in the transition to socialism is a subject which pervades the *Prison Notebooks*. Indeed, Gramsci attached such importance to it that his original plan for the *Notebooks* was a comprehensive history of the Italian intellectuals.<sup>23</sup> In part, this may have been a reflection of the special conditions in Italy arising from the absence of a unified national state until 1870. This had the result that the Italian language, literature and culture, and the cultural activities of intellectuals, were more important than in other countries. Gramsci took the view that their activities in the centuries before the Risorgimento tended to have a 'cosmopolitan' character on the model of the Roman Catholic Church and to hinder rather than help national unity. The *Prison Notebooks* are filled with short studies of almost every aspect of intellectual activity in Italy, ranging from popular literature and journalism to works on philosophy, history and economics. In addition to the attention he devotes to Machiavelli, the philosopher Croce and other prominent intellectuals he also examines with care the work of all kinds of minor intellectuals. However, once he had started on the *Notebooks*, the theory of politics and the state, and the concept of hegemony, became his central

preoccupation.

Two themes underlie Gramsci's views on intellectuals. First, the need to abolish the division between manual and intellectual labour which has been carried to an extreme under capitalism in the production process, in civil society, and in the state apparatus. Second, the relation between knowledge and power—the nature of the power which is derived from the near-monopoly of knowledge by the ruling class and the need for a fundamental change in the relation between the people and knowledge in the transition to socialism. However, Gramsci does not develop a comprehensive theory of intellectuals; rather, he makes a number of significant observations about their role in society and their relations to the labour movement and to a revolutionary party.

Gramsci's views on intellectuals are set out in the two notes which are placed at the beginning of the *Prison Notebooks (SPN)*. He rejects what he calls the traditional and vulgarised notion of the intellectual as consisting only of the man of letters, the philosopher and the artist (adding that journalists, who claim to be men of letters and philosophers, also regard themselves as 'true' intellectuals). Intellectuals are not characterised by the intrinsic activity of thinking which is common to all people, but by the function which they perform. 'All men are intellectuals, one could therefore say, but not all men have the function of intellectuals' (*SPN*).

Gramsci therefore extends the definition of intellectuals to all those who have the function of organisers in all spheres of society, in the sphere of production as well as in the spheres of politics and culture. He makes a double break with the habitual notion of intellectuals; they are not only thinkers, writers and artists but also organisers such as civil servants and political leaders, and they not only function in civil society and the state but also in the productive apparatus as engineers,

managers and technicians.

His next step is to make a distinction between 'organic' and 'traditional' intellectuals. Every class creates one or more strata of intellectuals 'which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields' (*SPN*). The intellectuals do not form a class but each class has its own intellectuals. Thus the capitalists create alongside themselves the industrial managers and technicians, economists, civil servants, and the organisers of a new culture and of a new legal system. Gramsci calls these *organic intellectuals* as distinct from *traditional intellectuals*. Every rising class finds categories of intellectuals already in existence; these traditional intellectuals seem to represent an historical continuity and tend to put themselves forward as autonomous and independent of the ruling class.

## Traditional intellectuals

Gramsci argues that 'one of the most important characteristics of any rising class is its struggle to assimilate and conquer "ideologically" the traditional intellectuals'. An example of traditional intellectuals is the ecclesiastics who act as the organic intellectuals of the feudal aristocracy, and were already in existence when the bourgeoisie began its ascent to power. The second example Gramsci gives is the intellectuals of a rural type, the priests, lawyers, teachers, doctors and civil servants who are traditional because they are linked to the peasantry and the small town bourgeoisie, 'not yet elaborated and set in motion by the capitalist system' (*SPN*).

One interpretation of Gramsci's definition would be that traditional intellectuals are those that were the organic intellectuals of a former

mode of production which has been superseded—the feudal mode of production—or are the organic intellectuals of a mode of production in course of being superseded—the petty bourgeois mode of production in the Italian countryside in Gramsci's time. It follows that from the point of view of the working class, all the organic intellectuals of the capitalist class are traditional intellectuals. But if this is what Gramsci meant, it seems to me that the term 'traditional' is not very suitable, and in any case it is unnecessary since it adds nothing to the category, already clearly defined, of organic intellectuals of the capitalist class.

An alternative view, taken for example by the editors of the *SPN* is to seize on Gramsci's remark that traditional intellectuals 'put themselves forward as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group' and define them as 'those whose position in the interstices of society has a certain inter-class aura about it'. But this is a subjective approach, defining a category of people by the notion of themselves that they choose to put forward. Moreover, the notion of class neutrality and autonomy is often held by intellectuals—judges for example—who are certainly performing the function of organic intellectuals of the capitalist class. It seems best, therefore, to accept that Gramsci's category of traditional intellectuals may be very relevant to his analysis of Italian society and Italian history, but is not very appropriate for understanding the role of intellectuals in an advanced capitalist society such as Britain.

## Organic intellectuals

In his note on the Risorgimento Gramsci gives the leaders of the Moderate Party as an example of organic intellectuals. The Moderates were 'intellectuals and political organisers, and at the same time company bosses, rich farmers or estate managers, commercial and

industrial entrepreneurs, etc'. They realised the identity of the represented and the representative, and formed 'a real, organic vanguard of the upper classes, to which economically they belonged' (*SPN*). Given this organic 'condensation' or concentration they exercised a powerful attraction on the whole mass of intellectuals, such as teachers, who were scattered throughout the Italian peninsula.

The crucial function exercised by the organic intellectuals of the capitalist class is to act as its 'deputies' or agents in organising its hegemony in civil society and its domination through the state apparatus. Gramsci used the word *commessi*, similar to the French *commis* meaning agent or commercial traveller, which he took from Georges Sorel, the principal theorist of French revolutionary syndicalism in the two decades before the First World War. The term *commis* expressed Sorel's anti-intellectualism. He regarded the state as a corps of privileged intellectuals and political parties as being created by politicians to fight for a share in these privileges; politics was nothing but a battle of cliques. The working-class movement should exclude intellectuals, and revolution would take the form of a revolution of trade unionists who would organise production without the need for intellectuals or capitalists. Although Gramsci did not share Sorel's anti-intellectual approach or his syndicalist ideas, he found Sorel's intuitions stimulating in developing his own ideas. This applies, not only to intellectuals as *commis* but also to Sorel's notions of 'intellectual and moral reform' and 'historic bloc'.<sup>24</sup>

Gramsci's only concrete analysis of organic intellectuals is the account of the role of the Moderates in the Risorgimento. The *Prison Notebooks* do not contain any clear account of the organic intellectuals in the Italy of his day or in a modern capitalist society. There are only a number of disconnected statements. He says that in the work of

organising hegemony and state domination there develops a whole hierarchy of qualifications and in the state apparatus there exist a series of jobs of an instrumental character. He also refers to complex gradations in the army, ranging from the general staff officers down to the NCOs. It seems likely that if he had made a list of the organic intellectuals of the capitalist class in the 20th century it would have included:

- 1) In the sphere of production: managers, engineers, technicians, etc.
- 2) In civil society: politicians, prominent writers and academics, broadcasters, journalists, etc.
- 3) In the state apparatus: civil servants, officers of the armed forces, judges and magistrates, etc.

However, Gramsci also makes the point that factory technicians do not exercise any political influence over the factory workers; the reverse is the case, and the workers are much more likely to exercise such influence over the technicians. In another passage he refers to the unprecedented expansion of bureaucracy in the modern world. It seems to me that these categories which have increased so greatly in all the advanced capitalist countries—school and university teachers, technicians, scientists and engineers, accountants and subordinate managers, journalists and others in the mass media—do not fit into Gramsci's category of organic intellectuals, and certainly cannot be traditional intellectuals. They are subject to conflicting forces. In so far as they passively carry out the orders of their superiors they are acting as agents of the leading intellectuals and may perhaps be considered to be subordinate organic intellectuals. But in so far as they join trade unions and become drawn towards the labour movement, it makes no sense to describe them as organic to the capitalist class. In addition, many of

them are subject to important influences arising from professional traditions. It is surely best to exclude them from the category of organic intellectuals of the capitalist class, and to confine this category to the leading personnel whose links with the ruling class justify the description of organic—writers and academics like the philosopher Croce who exercised a wide influence on behalf of the liberal state in Italy, senior officials in the civil service, the top layer of officers in the armed forces, the judges in the High Court, etc.

If this is right, then we have to accept that Gramsci does not provide a comprehensive theory of intellectuals. The category of organic intellectuals, organisers of hegemony for the two fundamental classes, does not cover the great majority. On the other hand, his claim that all men are intellectuals is too all-embracing. While it may be important from some points of view to stress that all men and women engage in the activity of thinking, the fact is that some have received special training in colleges and other institutions which enables them to acquire special skills related to their function in society. It is this which separates them from the great majority of workers, and gives them professional and corporate interests and traditions. They have been constituted into a variety of 'middle strata' capable of playing a distinctive part in politics which can be very significant indeed. They are therefore a vital component of the broad alliance which has to be built up by the working class if it is to achieve a hegemonic role in society.<sup>25</sup>

Turning now to Gramsci's organic intellectuals, he argues that if the working class is to raise itself from a subaltern class to take over the leadership of the nation, and to acquire the necessary political consciousness through a profound moral and intellectual reform, it must create its own organic intellectuals. Gramsci does not hesitate to use the strong term 'élite' to make clear that people who are specialised in the

task of leadership are required:

Critical self-consciousness means, historically and politically, the creation of an élite of intellectuals. A human mass does not 'distinguish' itself, does not become independent in its own right without, in the widest sense, organising itself; and there is no organisation without intellectuals, that is without organisers and leaders ... But the process of creating intellectuals is long, difficult, full of contradictions, advances and retreats, dispersals and regroupings, in which the loyalty of the masses is often sorely tried (SPN).

The new intellectuals required by the working class differ profoundly from the bourgeois intellectuals:

The mode of being of a new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organiser, 'permanent persuader' and not just a simple orator (but superior at the same time to the abstract mathematical spirit) (SPN).

Above all, the relationship between a class and its organic intellectuals is different for the capitalist and the working class. Gramsci holds that a revolutionary party must play a key role as an organic intellectual of the working class. Thus every member of the party should be regarded as an intellectual. 'A party might have a greater or lesser proportion of members in the higher grades or the lower, but this is not the point. What matters is the function, which is leading (*direttivo*) and

organisational, i.e. educational, i.e. intellectual' (*SPN*). As Togliatti put it in his lecture on Gramsci in 1958, the party should be a 'collective intellectual' <sup>26</sup>

This does not of course mean that the revolutionary party should be the only organic intellectual of the working class. Gramsci proposes that every member of the party should be regarded as an organic intellectual, not that every organic intellectual of the working class should be a member of the party. There is clearly a very significant role for intellectuals who adopt a Marxist viewpoint—and there are many varieties of Marxism nowadays—without becoming a member of a revolutionary party. What is important is the nature of their relationship with the people. If they remain in a separate compartment of their own—as armchair Marxists—they are not likely to contribute much to the democratic and labour movement:

The intellectual's error consists in believing that it is possible to *know* without understanding and especially without feeling and passion ... that the intellectual can be an intellectual ... if he is distinct and detached from the people-nation (*popolo-nazione*) without feeling the elemental passions of the people, understanding them and thus explaining and justifying them in a particular historical situation, connecting them dialectically to the laws of history, to a superior conception of the world ... History and politics cannot be made without passion, without this emotional bond between intellectuals and the people-nation. In the absence of such a bond the relations between intellectuals and people-nation are reduced to contacts of a purely bureaucratic, formal kind; the intellectuals become a

caste or a priesthood

Although this passage begins by referring to intellectuals as individuals, the mention of bureaucracy indicates that Gramsci is not only thinking of the importance of popular beliefs and of common sense in the work of the intellectuals; he is also thinking of the relations between a revolutionary party (collective intellectual) and the people, and of the danger that the party may lose touch with the masses and become bureaucratic or, as he says elsewhere, 'mummified and anachronistic'. The passage continues:

If the relations between intellectuals and the people-nation, between leaders and led, is the result of an organic participation in which feelings and passion become understanding and thence knowledge ... then and then only is the relation one of representation. Only then can there take place an exchange of individual elements between rulers and ruled, leaders and led, that is to say the realisation of a life in common which alone is a social force, only then is the 'historic bloc' created (SPN)<sup>27</sup>

Gramsci is here using the term 'historic bloc' in a different sense from his principal meaning (see Chapter 10) where it concerns the relation between politics and production. His discussion of the proper relation between a revolutionary party and the people and of the dangers of bureaucracy opens up the whole question of the nature and role of a revolutionary party.

# 13

## The Revolutionary Party

### Differences with Bordiga

Gramsci's views on a revolutionary party were developed in the course of the prolonged struggle which he led from 1923-26 to overcome the leftist influence of Amadeo Bordiga, the founder and the first leader of the Italian Communist Party, who dominated the party in the early years of its existence. The party came into existence despite the extraordinary difficulties created by the conditions of police persecution and semi-legality in which the members had to work. Gramsci's views on the party are set out in his writings in this period and in particular in the 'Lyons Theses' which were drafted by him and Togliatti and adopted by an overwhelming majority at the third congress of the party held at Lyons in France in January 1926 (*SPW II*).

In the Theses the Italian Communist Party is seen as the political organisation of revolutionaries, in other words it is the 'vanguard of the proletariat'. Its task is to organise and unify all the forces necessary for the revolution and to lead an 'insurrection' against the bourgeois state and for the foundation of a workers' state. With its strategy and tactics, the party 'leads the working class' in major historical movements and in day-to-day struggles alike. Its members participate in all the organisations in which the working people are assembled, with the aim

of winning a majority for Communist leadership.

While the leading bodies of the party were elected, the organisation of the party should be centralised under the leadership of the central committee. The centralisation and cohesion of the party 'require that there should not exist organised groups within it which take on the character of factions'. Gramsci contrasted the Communist Party with the Italian Socialist Party and other social-democratic parties in which 'factional struggle is the normal method of working out a political orientation and selecting a leading group', and in which much was discussed but little resolved. Instead, the Communist parties chose as the norm of their internal life 'the organic collaboration of all tendencies through participation in all leading bodies'. The organisation of the party is determined by the task confronting it, that of leading an insurrection for the overthrow of the fascist state.

The differences with Bordiga centred around the relations of the party with other organisations of the workers and peasants, and the relation of the party leadership to the rank and file. Bordiga took the view that the Communist Party lived in perpetual danger of being infiltrated by reformist and petty-bourgeois ideas; in order to remain immune from these influences it had to hold itself strictly apart from other political parties and movements, and concentrate on perfecting its organisation and discipline. Then, when the conditions for revolutionary action had matured, it would be able to lead the working class in a successful assault on the capitalist state.

Gramsci argued that this approach was the result of the economism that was deeply rooted in the Italian labour movement, and had influenced the leaders of the Italian Socialist Party as well as Bordiga. The form taken by this economism was a 'mechanical determinism' which considered that capitalism was developing inexorably towards

economic collapse as its central contradictions became greater. (Economism was discussed in Chapter 1.) This kind of mechanical determinism tended to promote a passive attitude of waiting for the inevitable economic collapse, and prevented the party from taking political initiatives and developing close links with the workers and peasants and their organisations.

Gramsci also considered that Bordiga had been wrong in according priority in an abstract fashion to party organisation, 'which in practice had simply meant creating an apparatus of functionaries who could be depended on for their orthodoxy towards the official view. It was believed ... that the revolution depended only on the existence of such an apparatus' (*SPWII*). This approach resulted in the withering of all individual activity and in the passivity of the mass of the members, who tended to develop 'the stupid confidence that there is always somebody else who is thinking of everything and taking care of everything'.

In the *Prison Notebooks* the theme of individual activity of the members is pursued. In one passage he says that the active participation of the members is vital 'even if this provokes an appearance of break-up and tumult.'

A collective consciousness, in other words a living organism, is not formed except after multiplicity has been unified through the friction of the individual members. Nor can it be said that 'silence' is not multiplicity. An orchestra in rehearsal, each instrument playing for itself, gives the impression 'of the most dreadful cacophony. And yet these rehearsals are necessary for the orchestra to live as a single instrument (Q 1771).

He also stresses the need for self-discipline. One of his favourite themes, explored in many different contexts, is the moral argument about discipline as a means towards self-advancement and collective liberation. In one of his earliest articles published in 1917, he contrasts bourgeois discipline which is mechanical and authoritarian, with socialist discipline which is 'autonomous and spontaneous'. In a passage in the *Prison Notebooks* he says:

The collectivity must be understood as the product of a development of will and of collective thought attained through concrete individual effort and not through a process of destiny extraneous to individual people; hence the need for an inner discipline and not just an external and mechanical one. If there have to be polemics and splits, there is no need to be afraid of confronting them and getting beyond them; they are inevitable in these processes of development, and to avoid them only means putting them off until they become dangerous and even catastrophic, etc (Q 751).

Gramsci insists that in a political party organised on the principle of democratic centralism there must be a continual interaction between the leadership and the members. In one of the notes forming part of the series entitled 'The Modern Prince' he contrasts bureaucratic and democratic centralism. He says that democratic centralism is

a centralism in movement—ie. a continual adaptation of the organisation to the real movement, a matching of thrusts from below with orders from above, a continual insertion of

elements thrown up from the rank and file into the solid framework of the leadership apparatus which ensures continuity and the regular accumulation of experience.

And later in the same note he says that 'democratic centralism offers an elastic formula, which can be embodied in many diverse forms; it comes alive in so far as it is interpreted and continually adapted to necessity' (*SPN*). In this note, Gramsci is discussing democratic centralism as a form of organisation of a state, for he refers to the French Revolution and to the unification of Italy. His remarks do not therefore directly refer to the organisation of a revolutionary party. Even so, they clearly do express his views on the way in which a revolutionary party should function.

In the *Prison Notebooks* there are two further themes concerning the revolutionary party with which Gramsci is particularly concerned: the formation of a national-popular collective will and the question of intellectual and moral reform.

## National-popular collective will

Gramsci assembled some of his principal notes on politics under the title 'The Modern Prince'. The first note begins with an analysis of *The Prince*, the book which Machiavelli addressed to Lorenzo de Medici, the ruler of Tuscany, in 1515. In it the author discusses what the prince must be like if he is to found a new state. But the real purpose of the book, according to Gramsci, was not to convince the prince, but to convince the Italian people, and to show how they could develop a 'collective will' as the foundation for a nation-state of the type which already existed in France and Britain. In order to represent the process

whereby a collective will, directed towards a given political objective, is formed, Machiavelli embodied his conception in the person of a prince and represented the process in terms of the qualities and characteristics of a concrete individual. Such a procedure, Gramsci says, stimulated the artistic imagination of those who had to be convinced. The prince was a symbol of an ideal leader, a purely theoretical abstraction. However, in a dramatic moment of great effect in the famous last chapter of the book 'the elements of passion and myth which occur throughout the book are drawn together and brought to life':

In the conclusion, Machiavelli merges with the people, becomes the people; not, however, some 'generic' people, but the people whom he, Machiavelli, has convinced by the preceding argument—the people whose consciousness and whose expression he becomes and feels himself to be, with whom he feels identified.

The entire 'logical' argument now appears as nothing other than auto-reflection on the part of the people—an inner reasoning worked out in the popular consciousness, whose conclusion is a cry of passionate urgency. The passion, from discussion of itself, becomes once again 'emotion', fever, fanatical desire for action (*SPN*).

This eloquent passage expresses Gramsci's view of politics as an art as well as a science; political and ideological struggle does not only require a cool and scientific analysis of the existing balance of forces; it should also stimulate the imagination, drawing on the cultural heritage of the nation. In the conditions of modern capitalism, the organiser of the national-popular collective will cannot be an individual like

Machiavelli's prince; it can only be a political party—and Gramsci gives the title 'The Modern Prince' to his longest series of notes on politics to emphasise the crucial importance of the revolutionary party, which he calls 'the first cell in which there come together the germs of a collective will tending to become universal' (*SPN*).

## Intellectual and moral reform

Perhaps the most significant and often-quoted passages in the *Prison Notebooks* on the party are those on intellectuals, where Gramsci says that the organic intellectuals are the organisers of the hegemony of a class, and that for the working class, every member of the revolutionary party should be regarded as an intellectual. Hence as Togliatti said, the party should be regarded as a 'collective intellectual'. This follows from Gramsci's extension of the definition of intellectuals to include those who have the function of organisers in all spheres of civil society as well as writers, thinkers and artists. In effect Gramsci is saying that the party has the function of leading the struggles for political, moral and intellectual reform needed for the achievement of the hegemony of the working class and for the transition to socialism.

We have seen that the Gramscian strategy of a war of position involves the making of profound changes in civil society (Chapter 9). This process requires not only the waging of political and economic struggles to create a network of alliances, but also the waging of ideological struggles for a transformation in popular consciousness, aiming to found a new common sense comprising socialist values.

Gramsci compared the task of intellectual and moral reform needed for building socialist hegemony to the Lutheran Reformation and Calvinism, which 'created a vast national-popular movement', and to the

great popular reformation of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century which preceded the French Revolution. The fundamental task where political conflict takes place is the struggle over key concepts that shape the way people think. Thus in the 1980s Thatcherism had considerable success in popularising its concept of the 'market' as the key instrument for organising the economy and welfare services—an achievement which was not matched by any comparable success on the part of the Left. Gramsci insisted on the vital innovatory task which a revolutionary party had to perform:

One should stress the importance and significance which, in the modern world, political parties have in the elaboration and diffusion of conceptions of the world, because essentially what they do is to work out the ethics and the politics corresponding to these conceptions and act as it were as their historical 'laboratory' ... The relation between theory and practice becomes even closer the more the conception is vitally and radically innovatory and opposed to old ways of thinking. For this reason one can say that parties ... are the crucibles where the unification of theory and practice, understood as a real historical process, takes place (*SPW* ).

Gramsci's approach is in line with his views on the nature of Marxism, which he envisages as the unity of theory and practice. In the *Prison Notebooks* he often uses the term 'philosophy of praxis' for Marxism and, as David Forgacs points out, this was more than a device to bypass the censor.

For Gramsci, the philosophy of praxis is both the theory of the contradictions in society and at the same time people's practical awareness of those contradictions ... Gramsci ... sees the philosophy of praxis not only as a system of philosophical ideas but also as forming the basis of a mass 'conception of the world': 'the character of the philosophy of praxis is especially that of being a mass conception, a mass culture, that of a mass which operates as a unit, in other words one which has norms of conduct which are not only universal at the level of ideas, but "generalised" in social reality'.<sup>28</sup>

Thus in so far as the party may be described as a 'vanguard', it is not envisaged as the possessor of a scientific truth which is to be communicated to the people. Marxist doctrine has to be fused with the ideas and aspirations of the people in order to forge a new common sense, created as the result of a 'reciprocal relationship' in which 'every teacher is always a pupil and every pupil is a teacher'. Everything that Gramsci says about the relations that should exist between intellectuals and people (discussed in the previous chapter) apply to the relations between a revolutionary party and the people.

# Notes

References to Gramsci's works in the text are abbreviated as follows:

*SPN: Selections from Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1971.

*SPWI: Selections from Political Writings, 1910-20*, selected and edited by Quintin Hoare, translated by John Mathews, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1977.

*SPWII: Selections from Political Writings, 1921-26*, translated and edited by Quintin Hoare, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1978.

*SCW: Selections from Cultural Writings*, edited by David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell Smith and translated by William Boelhower, Lawrence and Wishart, 1985.

*Q: Quaderni del Carcere*, edited by Valentino Gerratana, Einaudi, Torino, 1975. The complete critical edition of the *Prison Notebooks*, prepared by the Gramsci Institute in Rome, in three volumes with a fourth volume containing notes, index, etc., edited and with a preface by V.Gerratana.

## Chapter 1

1. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 17, Lawrence and Wishart, 1963, pp.57-8.
2. *Antonio Gramsci. Life of a Revolutionary* translated by Tom Nairn, NLB/Verso, London, 1970, new edition 1990.

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## Chapter 2

3. *New Left Review*, 100, November 1976-January 1977, pp. 15-17 in an article entitled 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci'.
4. This is the revised version of this passage. When Gramsci was rewriting some of his notes after 1931 he tended to replace the term 'class' by 'social group' presumably to avoid arousing the suspicions of the prison censor. However the term social group has a certain advantage for it can be understood to refer, not only to a class, but to part of a class or a particular category of the population. When Gramsci wishes to refer to one of the major social classes (bourgeoisie or proletariat) he uses the phrase 'fundamental social group'.

## Chapter 3.

5. Lenin's Political Thought, Vol I. Theory and Practice in the Democratic Revolution, Macmillan, 1977, p.107.
6. Gramsci derived this motto from the French writer Romain Rolland.

## Chapter 4

7. Earlier analyses were made in the theses presented by Gramsci and Togliatti to the Third Congress of the Italian Communist Party held at Lyons in January 1926 (*SPWII*) and in the unfinished article 'Some aspects of the Southern Question' (*SPWII*) which Gramsci was writing at the time of his arrest.

## Chapter 5

8. See, for example, the essays by Bob Jessop and Stuart Hall in *Marxism and Democracy*, edited by Alan Hunt (Lawrence and Wishart, 1980), and *Silver Linings*, edited by George Bridges and Rosalind Brunt (Lawrence and Wishart, 1981), especially 'Popular Politics and Marxist Theory in Britain' by Bill Schwarz and Colin Mercer.
9. This suggestion is made by Robert Gray in his article 'Political Ideology and Class Struggle Under Early Industrial Capitalism' in *Marxism Today*,

December 1977, p.370.

10. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe 'Socialist Strategy Where Next?', in *Marxism Today*, January 1981, p.21.
11. *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, NLB, 1977.
12. Gramsci also uses the term 'national-popular' when he compares Italian with French literature and contends that the Italians had no national-popular literature comparable with the popular French novels written in the nineteenth century (Q 2113-20). He also says that French culture had a more strictly national-popular character in that the intellectuals, because of certain specific traditions, tended more than elsewhere to approach the people in order to guide them ideologically and keep them linked with the ruling group (*SPN*). At this point the editors of the *SPN* insert a note, to the effect that the notion of national-popular is perhaps best taken as describing a sort of 'historic bloc' between national and popular aspirations in the formation of which the intellectuals play an essential mediating role, and that it is a 'cultural concept'. But it is also a political concept.

## Chapter 6

13. Gramsci also uses the term 'passive revolution' in a different, though related sense, to denote the way in which the capitalist class rose to ascendancy in Italy, Germany and other countries through a process of gradual, molecular change in the course of which the old feudal classes were transformed, in contrast to the French Revolution when they were overthrown: 'the demands which in France found a Jacobin-Napoleonic expression were satisfied by small doses, legally, in a reformist manner—in such a way that it was possible to preserve the political and economic position of the old feudal classes, to avoid agrarian reform and, especially, to avoid the popular masses going through a period of political experience such as occurred in France in the years of Jacobinism' (*SPN*) and see Anne Showstack Sassoon, *Gramsci's Politics*, Croom Helm, 1980, pp.204-10.

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## Chapter 7

14. *Marxism Today*, October 1978, p.314. This brief analysis of mid-Victorian society has also drawn on Robert Gray's article 'Politics, Ideology and Class Struggle Under Early Industrial Capitalism' in *Marxism Today*, December 1977.
15. Thatcherism is examined by Stuart Hall in this essay 'Popular-democratic vs authoritarian populism' in *Marxism and Democracy*, edited by Alan Hunt, Lawrence and Wishart (1980) and by Andrew Gamble in his essay 'The free economy and the strong state' in *Socialist Register*, 1979 and his article 'The decline of the Conservative Party' in *Marxism Today*, November 1979.

## Chapter 8

16. This chapter leans to a great extent on Chantal Mouffe's essay 'Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci' in the volume of essays edited by her, *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, RKP, 1979. In this essay, which makes a most valuable interpretation of Gramsci's concept of ideology, she also considered the relation between Gramsci's approach and Althusser's theory of ideology as a 'lived relation' between people and their world.
17. *Letters from Prison* by Antonio Gramsci, selected, translated and edited by Lynne Lawner, Jonathan Cape, 1975, p.193.
18. Palmiro Togliatti, *On Gramsci and Other Writings* edited and introduced by Donald Sassoon, Lawrence and Wishart, 1979, p.145.
19. Regrettably, these notes are not yet available in English, though a few of the most important passages are quoted in footnotes in the *SPN*. They are included in the second volume of selections from the *Prison Notebooks* to be published by Lawrence and Wishart.
20. James Joll, *Gramsci*, Fontana and Modern Masters, Collins, 1977, p.112.

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### Chapter 9

21. For a useful discussion of Foucault, see Colin Mercer's essay 'Revolutions, reforms or reformulations? Marxist discourse on democracy' in *Marxism and Democracy*, edited by Alan Hunt, Lawrence and Wishart, 1980, pp.122-3.

### Chapter 11

22. In his essay 'Power and Participation' Richard Gunn examines the work of Habermas and other writers of the Frankfurt School in developing the concept of a 'political public sphere', which is restricted and distorted under capitalism. From this, Gunn draws a distinction between politics as power and politics as participation; in the transition to communism politics as power dies away while politics as participation grows with the continual expansion of the political public sphere. This corresponds with Gramsci's perspective of the transformation and extension of civil society. The relation between Habermas's political public sphere and Gramsci's civil society deserves to be further explored. Gunn also argues that Marx's concept of *praxis* contains the germ of this approach. The essay is in *Class, Hegemony and Party*, edited by Jon Bloomfield, Lawrence and Wishart, 1977. It is relevant to note that Gramsci used the term 'philosophy of praxis' for Marxism in his *Prison Notebooks*.

### Chapter 12

23. Letter to Tatiana of 19 March 1927. *Letters from Prison* by Antonio Gramsci, selected, translated and edited by Lynne Lawner, Jonathan Cape, 1975, p.79.
24. This account of Sorel's views and of Gramsci's relations with Sorel is taken from Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1980 pp.66-8.
25. The relation between intellectuals and the labour movement is considered by Eric Hobsbawm in *Marxism Today*, July 1979; his account begins with some comments on Gramsci's views.

26. Palmiro Togliatti *On Gramsci and Other Writings*, edited and introduced by Donald Sassoon, Lawrence and Wishart, 1979, pp.155 and 177.
27. The English translation of this and the above passage is taken from *Gramsci* by James Joll, Fontana, 1977, p.101.

### *Chapter 13*

28. David Forgacs, *A Gramsci Reader*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1988, p.429.

# Postscript: Gramsci and Us Stuart Hall\*

This is not a comprehensive exposition of the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, nor a systematic account of the political situation in Britain today. It is an attempt to ‘think aloud’ about some of the perplexing dilemmas facing the Left, in the light of—from the perspective of—Gramsci’s work. I do not claim that, in any simple way, Gramsci ‘has the answers or ‘holds the key’ to our present troubles. I do believe that we must ‘think’ our problems in a Gramscian way—which is different. We mustn’t *use* Gramsci (as we have for so long abused Marx) like an Old Testament prophet who, at the correct moment, will offer us the consoling and appropriate quotation. We can’t pluck up this ‘Sardinian’ from his specific and unique political formation, beam him down at the end of the 20th century, and ask him to solve our problems for us: especially since the whole thrust of his thinking was to refuse this easy transfer of generalisations from one conjuncture, nation or epoch to another.

The thing about Gramsci that really transformed my own way of thinking about politics is the question which arises from his *Prison Notebooks*. If you look at the classic texts of Marx and Lenin, you are led to expect a revolutionary epochal historical development emerging from the end of the First World War onwards. And indeed events did give considerable evidence that such a development was occurring. Gramsci belongs to this ‘proletarian moment’. It occurred in Turin in the 1920s,

and other places where people like Gramsci, in touch with the advance guard of the industrial working class—then at the very forefront of modern production—thought that, if only the managers and politicians would get out of the way, this class of proletarians could run the world, take over the factories, seize the whole machinery of society, materially transform it and manage it, economically, socially, culturally, technically. The truth about the 1920s is that the ‘proletarian moment’ very nearly came off. Just before and after the First World War, it really was touch and go as to whether, under the leadership of such a class, the world might not have been transformed—as Russia was in 1917 by the Soviet revolution. This was the moment of the proletarian perspective on history. What I have called ‘Gramsci’s question’ in the *Notebooks* emerges in the aftermath of that moment, with the recognition that history was not going to go that way, especially in the advanced industrial capitalist societies of Western Europe. Gramsci had to confront the turning back, the failure, of that moment: the fact that such a moment, having passed, would never return in its old form. Gramsci, here, came face to face with the revolutionary character of history itself. When a conjuncture unrolls, there is no ‘going back’. History shifts gears. The terrain changes. You are in a new moment. You have to attend, ‘violently’, with all the ‘pessimism of the intellect’ at your command, to the ‘discipline of the conjuncture.’

In addition (and this is one of the main reasons why his thought is so pertinent to us today) he had to face the capacity of the Right—specifically, of European fascism—to hegemonise that defeat.

So here was a historic reversal of the revolutionary project, a new historical conjuncture, and a moment which the Right, rather than the Left, was able to dominate. This looks like a moment of total crisis for the Left, when all the reference points, the predictions, have been shot

to bits. The political universe, as you have come to inhabit it, collapses.

I don't want to say that the Left in Britain is in exactly the same moment; but I do hope you recognise certain strikingly similar features, because it is the similarity between those two situations, that makes the question of the *Prison Notebooks* so seminal in helping us to understand what our condition is today. Gramsci gives us, not the tools with which to solve the puzzle, but the means with which to ask the right kinds of questions about the politics of the 1980s and 1990s. He does so by directing our attention unswervingly to what is *specific* and *different* about this moment. He always insists on this attention to difference. It's a lesson which the Left in Britain has yet to learn. We do tend to think that the Right is not only always with us, but is always exactly the same: the same people, with the same interests, thinking the same thoughts. We are living through the transformation of British Conservatism—its partial adaptation to the modern world, via the neo-liberal and monetarist 'revolutions'. Thatcherism has reconstructed Conservatism and the Conservative Party. The hard-faced, utilitarian, petty-bourgeois businessmen are now in charge, not the grouse-shooting, hunting and fishing classes. And yet, though those transformations are changing the political terrain of struggle before our very eyes, we think the differences don't have any *real* effect on anything. It still feels more 'left-wing' to say the old ruling-class politics goes on in the same old way.

Gramsci, on the other hand, knew that difference and specificity mattered. So, instead of asking 'what would Gramsci say about Thatcherism?' we should simply attend to this rivetting of Gramsci to the notion of difference, to the specificity of a historical conjuncture: how different forces come together, conjuncturally, to create the new terrain, on which a different politics must form up. That is the intuition that Gramsci offers us about the nature of political life, from which we can

take a lead.

I want to say what I think 'the lessons of Gramsci' are, in relation, first of all, to Thatcherism and the project of the New Right; and, second, in terms of the crisis of the Left.

Here, I'm foregrounding only the sharp edge of what I understand by Thatcherism. I'm trying to address the opening, from the mid-1970s onwards, of a new political project on the Right. By a project, I don't mean (as Gramsci warned) a conspiracy. I mean the construction of a new agenda in British politics. Mrs Thatcher always aimed, not for a short electoral reversal, but for a long historical occupancy of power. That occupancy of power was not simply about commanding the apparatuses of the state. Indeed, the project was organised, in the early stages, in opposition to the state, which in the Thatcherite view had been deeply corrupted by the welfare state and by Keynesianism and had thus helped to 'corrupt' the British people. Thatcherism came into existence in contestation with the old Keynesian welfare state, with social democratic 'statism', which, in its view, had dominated the 1960s. Thatcherism's project was to transform the state in order to restructure *society*: to decentre, to displace, the whole post-war formation; to reverse the political culture which had formed the basis of the political settlement—the historic compromise between labour and capital—which had been in place from 1945 onwards.

The depth of the reversal aimed for was profound: a reversal of the ground-rules of that settlement, of the social alliances which underpinned it and the values which made it popular. I don't mean the attitudes and values of the people who write books. I mean the ideas of the people who simply, in ordinary everyday life, have to calculate how to survive, how to look after those who are closest to them.

That is what is meant by saying that Thatcherism aimed for a reversal in ordinary common sense. The 'common sense' of the English people had been constructed around the notion that the last war had erected a barrier between the bad old days of the 1930s and now: the welfare state had come to stay; we'd never go back to using the criterion of the market as a measure of people's needs, the needs of society. There would always have to be some additional, incremental, institutional force—the state, representing the general interest of society—to bring to bear against, to modify, the market. I'm perfectly well aware that socialism was not inaugurated in 1945. I'm talking about the taken-for-granted, popular base of welfare social democracy, which formed the real, concrete ground on which any socialism worth the name has to be built. Thatcherism was a project to engage, to contest, *that* project, and, wherever possible, to dismantle it, and to put something *new* in place. It entered the political field in an historic contest, not just for power, but for popular authority, for hegemony.

It is a project—this confuses the Left no end—which is, simultaneously, regressive and progressive. Regressive because, in certain crucial respects, it takes us backwards. You couldn't be going anywhere else but backwards to hold up before the British people, at the end of the 20th century, the idea that the best the future holds is for them to become, for a second time, 'Eminent Victorians'. It's deeply regressive, ancient and archaic.

But don't misunderstand it. It's also a project of 'modernisation'. It's a form of *regressive modernisation*. Because, at the same time, Thatcherism had its beady eye fixed on one of the most profound historical facts about the British social formation: that it never ever properly entered the era of modern bourgeois civilisation. It never made that transfer to modernity. It never institutionalised, in a proper sense,

the civilisation and structures of advanced capitalism—what Gramsci called ‘Fordism’. It never transformed its old industrial and political structures. It never became a second capitalist-industrial-revolution power, in the way that the US did, and, by another route, (the ‘Prussian route’), Germany and Japan did. Britain never undertook that deep transformation which, at the end of the 19th century, *remade* both capitalism *and* the working classes. Consequently, Mrs Thatcher knows that there is no serious political project in Britain today which is not also about constructing a politics and an image of what *modernity* would like for our people. And Thatcherism, in its regressive way, drawing on the past, looking backwards to former glories rather than forwards to a new epoch, has inaugurated the project of reactionary modernisation.

There is nothing more crucial, in this respect, than Gramsci's recognition that every crisis is also a moment of reconstruction; that there is no destruction which is not, also, reconstruction; that, historically nothing is dismantled without also attempting to put something new in its place; that every form of power not only excludes but produces something.

That is an entirely new conception of crisis—and of power. When the Left talks about crisis, all we see is capitalism disintegrating, and us marching in and taking over. We don't understand that the disruption of the normal functioning of the old economic, social, cultural order, provides the opportunity to reorganise it in new ways, to restructure and refashion, to modernise and move ahead. If necessary, of course, at the cost of allowing vast numbers of people—in the North East, the North West, in Wales and Scotland, in the mining communities and the devastated industrial heartlands, in the inner cities and elsewhere—to be consigned to the historical dustbin. That is the ‘law’ of capitalist

modernisation: uneven development, organised disorganisation.

Face to face with this dangerous new political formation, the temptation is always, ideologically, to dismantle it, to force it to stand still, by asking *the* classic Marxist question: who does it really represent? Now, usually when the Left asks that old classic Marxist question in the old way, we are not really asking a question, we are making a statement. We already know the answer. *Of course*, the Right represents the occupancy, by capital, of the state, which is nothing but its instrument. Bourgeois writers produce bourgeois novels. The Conservative Party is the ruling class at prayer. Etc. etc ... This is Marxism as a theory of the obvious. The question delivers no new knowledge, only the answer we already knew. It's a kind of game—political theory as a Trivial Pursuit. In fact, the reason we need to ask the question is because *we really don't know*.

It really is puzzling to say, in any simple way, whom Thatcherism represents. Here is the perplexing phenomenon of a petty-bourgeois ideology which 'represents', and is helping to reconstruct, both national and international capital. In the course of 'representing' corporate capital, however, it wins the consent of very substantial sections of the subordinate and dominated classes. What is the nature of this ideology which can inscribe such a vast range of different positions and interests in it, and which seems to represent a little bit of everybody—including most of the readers of this essay! For, make no mistake, a tiny bit of all of us is also somewhere inside the Thatcherite project. Of course, we're all one hundred per-cent committed. But every now and then—Saturday mornings, perhaps, just before the demonstration—we go to Sainsbury's and we're just a tiny bit of a Thatcherite subject ...

How do we make sense of an ideology which is not coherent, which speaks now, in one ear, with the voice of free-wheeling, utilitarian,

market-man, and in the other ear, with the voice of respectable, bourgeois, patriarchal man? How do these two repertoires operate together? We are all perplexed by the *contradictory* nature of Thatcherism. In our intellectual way, we think that the world will collapse as the result of a logical contradiction: this is the illusion of the intellectual—that ideology must be coherent, every bit of it fitting together, like a philosophical investigation. When, in fact, the whole purpose of what Gramsci called an organic (i.e. historically effective) ideology is that it articulates into a configuration different subjects, different identities, different projects, different aspirations. It does not reflect, it *constructs* a 'unity' out of difference.

We've been in the grasp of the Thatcherite project, not since 1983 or 1979, as official doctrine has it, but since 1975. 1975 is the climactic in British politics. First of all, the oil hike. Secondly, the onset of the capitalist crisis. Thirdly, the transformation of modern Conservatism by the accession of the Thatcherite leadership. That is the moment of reversal when, as Gramsci argued, national and international factors came together. It doesn't begin with Mrs Thatcher's electoral victory, as politics is not a matter of elections alone. It lands in 1975, right in the middle of Mr Callaghan's political solar plexus. It breaks Mr Callaghan—already a broken reed—in two. One half remains avuncular, paternalist, socially-conservative. The other half dances to a new tune.

One of the siren voices, singing the new song in his ear, is his son-in-law, Peter Jay, one of the architects of monetarism, in his missionary role as economic editor at *The Times*. He first saw the new market forces, the new sovereign consumer, coming over the hill like the marines. And, harkening to these intimations of the future, the old man opens his mouth; and what does he say? The kissing has to stop. The game is over. Social democracy is finished. The welfare state is gone

forever. We can't afford it. We've been paying ourselves too much, giving ourselves a lot of phoney jobs, having too much of a swinging time.

You can just see the English psyche collapsing under the weight of the illicit pleasures it has been enjoying—the permissiveness, the consumption, the goodies. It's all false—tinsel and froth. The Arabs have blown it all away. And now we have got to advance in a different way. Mrs Thatcher speaks to this 'new course'. She speaks to something else, deep in the English psyche: its masochism. The need which the English seem to have to be ticked off by Nanny and sent to bed without a pudding. The calculus by which every good summer has to be paid for by twenty bad winters. The Dunkirk Spirit—the worse off we are, the better we behave. She didn't promise us the give-away society. She said, iron times; back to the wall; stiff upper lip; get moving; get to work; dig in. Stick by the old, tried verities, the wisdom of 'Old England'. The family has kept society together; live by it. Send the women back to the hearth. Get the men out on to the Northwest Frontier. Hard times—followed, much later, by a return to the Good Old Days. She asked you for a long leash—not one, but two and three terms. By the end, she said, I will be able to redefine the nation in such a way that you will all, once again, for the first time, since the Empire started to go down the tube, feel what it is like to be part of Great Britain Unlimited. You will be able, once again, to send our boys 'over there', to fly the flag, to welcome back the fleet. Britain will be Great again.

People don't vote for Thatcherism, in my view, because they believe the small print. People in their right minds do not think that Britain is now a wonderfully booming, successful economy. But Thatcherism, as an ideology, addresses the fears, the anxieties, the lost identities, of a people. It invites us to think about politics in images. It is addressed to our collective fantasies, to Britain as an imagined community, to the

social imaginary. Mrs Thatcher has totally dominated that idiom, while the Left forlornly tries to drag the conversation round to 'our policies'.

This is a momentous historical project, the regressive modernisation of Britain. To win over ordinary people to that, not because they're dupes, or stupid, or because they are blinded by false consciousness. Since, in fact, the political character of our ideas cannot be guaranteed by our class position or by the 'mode of production', it is possible for the Right to construct a politics which does speak to people's experience, which does insert itself into what Gramsci called the necessarily fragmentary contradictory nature of common sense, which does resonate with some of their ordinary aspirations, and which, in certain circumstances, can recoup them as subordinate subjects, into a historical project which 'hegemonises' what we used—erroneously—to think of as their 'necessary class interests'. Gramsci is one of the first modern Marxists to recognise that interests are not given but have to be politically and ideologically constructed.

Gramsci warns us in the *Notebooks* that a crisis is not an immediate event but a process: it can last for a long time, and can be very differently resolved: by restoration, by reconstruction or by passive transformism. Sometimes more stable, sometimes more unstable; but in a profound sense, British institutions, the British economy, British society and culture have been in a deep social crisis for most of the 20th century.

Gramsci warns us that organic crises of this order erupt, not only in the political domain and the traditional areas of industrial and economic life, not simply in the class struggle, in the old sense; but in a wide series of polemics, debates about fundamental sexual, moral and intellectual questions, in a crisis in the relations of political

representation and the parties—on a whole range of issues which do not necessarily, in the first instance, appear to be articulated with politics, in the narrow sense, at all. That is what Gramsci calls the crisis of authority, which is nothing but ‘the crisis of hegemony or general crisis of the state’.

We are exactly in that moment. We have been shaping up to such a ‘crisis of authority’ in English social life and culture since the mid 1960s. In the 1960s, the crisis of English society was signalled in a number of debates and struggles around new points of antagonism, which appeared at first to be far removed from the traditional heartland of British politics. The Left often waited patiently for the old rhythms of ‘the class struggle’ to be resumed, when in fact it was the forms of ‘the class struggle’ itself which were being transformed. We can only understand this diversification of social struggles in the light of Gramsci’s insistence that, in modern societies, hegemony must be constructed, contested and won on many different sites, as the structures of the modern state and society complexify and the points of social antagonism proliferate.

So one of the most important things that Gramsci has done for us is to give us a *profoundly expanded conception* of what politics itself is like, and thus also of power and authority. We cannot, after Gramsci, go back to the notion of mistaking electoral politics, or party politics in a narrow sense, or even the occupancy of state power, as constituting the ground of modern politics itself. Gramsci understands that politics is a much expanded field; that, especially in societies of our kind, the sites on which power is constituted will be enormously varied. We are living through the proliferation of the sites of power and antagonism in modern society. The transition to this new phase is decisive for Gramsci. It puts directly on the political agenda the questions of moral and intellectual

leadership, the educative and formative role of the state, the 'trenches and fortifications' of civil society, the crucial issue of the consent of the masses and the creation of a new type or level of 'civilisation', a new culture. It draws the decisive line between the formula of 'Permanent Revolution' and the formula of 'civil hegemony'. It is the cutting-edge between the 'war of movement' and the 'war of position': the point where Gramsci's world meets ours.

That does not mean, as some people read Gramsci, that therefore the state doesn't matter any more. The state is clearly absolutely central in articulating the different areas of contestation, the different points of antagonism, into a regime of rule. The moment when you can get sufficient power in the state to organise a central political project is decisive, for then you can use the state to plan, urge, incite, solicit and punish, to *conform* the different sites of power and consent into a single regime. That is the moment of 'authoritarian populism'—Thatcherism simultaneously 'above' (in the state) and 'below' (out there with the people).

Even then, Mrs Thatcher does not make the mistake of thinking that the capitalist state has a single and unified political character. She is perfectly well aware that, though the capitalist state is articulated to securing the long-term, historical conditions for capital accumulation and profitability, though it is the guardian of a certain kind of bourgeois, patriarchal civilisation and culture, it is, and continues to be, an arena of contestation.

Does this mean that Thatcherism is, after all, simply the 'expression' of the ruling class? Of course Gramsci always gives a central place to the questions of class, class alliances, class struggle. Where Gramsci departs from classical versions of Marxism is that he does not think that politics is an arena which simply *reflects* already unified collective

political identities, already constituted forms of struggle. Politics for him is not a dependent sphere. It is where forces and relations, in the economy, in society, in culture, have to be actively *worked* on to produce particular forms of power, forms of domination. This is the production of politics—politics as a production. This conception of politics is fundamentally contingent, fundamentally open-ended. There is no law of history which can predict what must inevitably be the outcome of a political struggle. Politics depends on the relations of forces at any particular moment. History is not waiting in the wings to catch up your mistakes into another ‘inevitable success’. You lose because you lose because you lose.

The ‘good sense’ of the people exists, but it is just the beginning, not the end, of politics. It doesn’t *guarantee* anything. Actually, he said, ‘new conceptions have an extremely unstable position among the popular masses’. There is no unitary subject of history. The subject is necessarily divided—an ensemble: one half Stone Age, the other containing ‘principles of advanced science, prejudices from all past phases of history, intuitions of a future philosophy’. Both of those things struggle inside the heads and hearts of ‘the people’ to find a way of articulating themselves politically. Of course, it is possible to recruit them to very different political projects.

Especially today, we live in an era when the old political identities are collapsing. We cannot imagine socialism coming about any longer through the image of that single, singular subject we used to call Socialist Man. Socialist Man, with one mind, one set of interests, one project, is dead. And good riddance. Who needs ‘him’ now, with his investment in a particular historical period, with ‘his’ particular sense of masculinity, shoring ‘his’ identity up in a particular set of familial

relations, a particular kind of sexual identity? Who needs 'him' as the singular identity through which the great diversity of human beings and ethnic cultures in our world *must* enter the 21st century? This 'he' is dead: finished.

Gramsci looked at a world which was complexifying in front of his eyes. He saw the pluralisation of modern cultural identities, emerging between the lines of uneven historical development, and asked the question: what are the political forms through which a new cultural order could be constructed, out of this 'multiplicity of dispersed wills, these heterogeneous aims'. Given that that is what people are really like, given that there is no law that will make socialism come true, can we find forms of organisation, forms of identity, forms of allegiance, social conceptions, which can both connect with popular life and, in the same moment, transform and renovate it? Socialism will not be delivered to us through the trapdoor of history by some *deus ex machina*.

Gramsci always insisted that hegemony is *not* exclusively an ideological phenomenon. There can be no hegemony without 'the decisive nucleus of the economic'. On the other hand, do not fall into the trap of the old mechanical economism and believe that, if you can only get hold of the economy, you can move the rest of life. The nature of power in the modern world is that it is *also* constructed in relation to political, moral, intellectual, cultural, ideological, sexual questions. The question of hegemony is always the question of a new cultural order. The question which faced Gramsci in relation to Italy faces us now in relation to Britain: what *is* the nature of this new civilisation? Hegemony is not a state of grace which is installed forever. It's not a formation which incorporates everybody. The notion of a 'historical bloc' is *precisely different* from that of a pacified, homogeneous, ruling class.

It entails a quite different conception of how social forces and

movements, in their diversity, can be articulated into a set of strategic alliances. To construct a new cultural order, you need not to reflect an already-formed collective will, but to fashion a new one, to inaugurate a new historic project.

I've been talking about Gramsci in the light of, in the aftermath of, Thatcherism: using Gramsci to comprehend the nature and depth of the challenge to the Left which Thatcherism and the new Right represent in English life and politics. But I have, at the same moment, inevitably also been talking about the Left. Or rather, I've *not* been talking about the Left, because the Left, in its organised, labourist form, does not seem to have the slightest conception of what putting together a new historical project entails. It does not understand the necessarily contradictory nature of human subjects, of social identities. It does not understand politics as a production. It does not see that it is possible to connect with the ordinary feelings and experience which people have in their everyday lives, and yet to articulate them progressively to a more advanced, modern form of social consciousness. It is not actively looking for and working upon the enormous diversity of social forces in our society. It doesn't see that it is in the very nature of modern capitalist civilisation to proliferate the centres of power, and thus to draw more and more areas of life into social antagonism. It does not recognise that the identities which people carry in their heads—their subjectivities, their cultural life, their sexual life, their family life, their ethnic identities, their health—have become massively *politicised*.

I simply don't think, for example, that the current Labour leadership understands that its political fate depends on whether or not it can construct a politics, in the next 20 years, which is able to address itself, not to one, but to a diversity of different points of antagonism in society; unifying them, in their differences, within a common project. I don't

think they have grasped that Labour's capacity to grow as a political force depends absolutely on its capacity to draw from the popular energies of very different movements; movements *outside* the party which it did not—could not—set in play, and which it cannot therefore 'administer'. It retains an entirely bureaucratic conception of politics. If the word doesn't proceed out of the mouths of the Labour leadership, there must be something subversive about it. If politics energises people to develop new demands, that is a sure sign that the natives are getting restless. You must expel or depose a few. You must get back to that fiction, the 'traditional Labour voter': to that pacified, Fabian notion of politics, where the masses hijack the experts into power, and then the experts do something for the masses: later ... much later. The hydraulic conception of politics.

That bureaucratic conception of politics has nothing to do with the mobilisation of a variety of popular forces. It doesn't have any conception of how people become empowered by doing something: first of all about their immediate troubles; then, the power expands their political capacities and ambitions, so that they begin to think again about what it might be like to rule the world ... Their politics has ceased to have a connection with this most modern of all resolutions—the deepening of democratic life.

Without the deepening of popular participation in national-cultural life, ordinary people don't have any experience of actually running anything. We need to re-acquire the notion that politics is about expanding popular capacities, the capacities of ordinary people. And in order to do so, socialism itself has to speak to the people whom it wants to empower, in words that belong to them as late 20th century ordinary folks.

You'll have noticed that I'm not talking about whether the Labour

Party has got its policy on this or that issue right. I'm talking about a whole conception of politics: the capacity to grasp in our political imagination the huge historical choices in front of the British people, today. I'm talking about new conceptions of the nation itself: whether you believe Britain can advance into the next century with a conception of what it is like to be 'English' which has been entirely constituted out of Britain's long, disastrous imperialist march across the earth. If you really think that, you haven't grasped the profound cultural transformation required to *remake* the English. That kind of cultural transformation is precisely what socialism is about today.

Now a political party of the Left, however much it is centred on government, on winning elections, has, in my view, exactly this kind of decision before it. The reason why I'm not optimistic about the 'mass party of the working class' ever understanding the nature of the historical choice confronting it is precisely because I suspect Labour does secretly still believe that there's a little bit of lee-way left in the old, economic-corporate, incremental, Keynesian game. It does think it could go back to a little smidgeon of Keynesianism here, a little bit more of the welfare state there, a little bit of the old Fabian thing ... Actually, though I don't have a cataclysmic vision of the future, I honestly believe that that option is now closed. It's exhausted. Nobody believes in it any more. Its material conditions have disappeared. The ordinary British people won't vote for it because they know in their bones life is not like that any more.

What Thatcherism, in its radical way, poses is not what we can get back to but along which route are we to go forward? In front of us is the historic choice: capitulate to the Thatcherite future, or find another way of imagining.

Don't worry about Mrs Thatcher herself, she will retire to Dulwich. But there are lots more third, fourth and fifth generation Thatcherites,

dry as dust, sound to a man, waiting to take her place. They are convinced that socialism is about to be obliterated forever. They think we are dinosaurs. They think we belong to another era. As socialism slowly declines, a new era will dawn and these new kinds of possessive men will be in charge of it. They dream about real cultural power. And Labour, in its softly-softly, don't-rock-the-boat, hoping-the-election-polls-will-go-up way, actually has in front of it only the choice between becoming historically irrelevant or beginning to sketch out an entirely new form of civilisation.

I don't say socialism, lest the word is so familiar to you that you think I mean just putting the same old programme we all know about back on the rails. I am talking about a renewal of the whole socialist project in the context of modern social and cultural life. I mean shifting the relations of forces—not so that Utopia comes the day after the next general election, but so that the *tendencies* begin to run another way. Who needs a socialist Heaven where everybody agrees with everybody else, where everybody's exactly the same? God forbid. I mean a place where we can begin the historic quarrel about what a new kind of civilisation must be. Is it possible that the immense new material, cultural and technological capacities, which far outstrip Marx's wildest dreams, which are now actually in our hands, are going to be politically hegemonised for the reactionary modernisation of Thatcherism? Or can we seize on those means of history-making, of making new human subjects, and shove it in the direction of a new culture? That's the choice before the Left.

'One should stress', Gramsci wrote, 'the significance which, in the modern world, political parties have in the elaboration and diffusion of conceptions of the world, because essentially what they do is to work out the ethics and the politics corresponding to these conceptions and

act as it were as their historical “laboratory”.’

\* This article was first published in *Marxism Today*, June 1987 and was based on a talk given at *Marxism Today's* conference on Gramsci.

# Chronology of Gramsci's Life

- 1891 *January 22.* Born at Ales in the province of Cagliari, Sardinia. Fourth son of Francesco Gramsci, a clerk in the local registrar's office at Ghilarza, and Giuseppina Marcias.
- 1897-98 His father is sentenced to five years' imprisonment on charges of maladministration. On his release he has no job, so Antonio Gramsci and his six brothers and sisters grow up in difficult circumstances and deep financial insecurity. Gramsci suffered ill health throughout his life, and from a deformity which left him a hunchback.
- 1903 On completing his elementary education, has to leave school and work for two years in the local registry office in Ghilarza where the family moved after his father's imprisonment.
- 1905 Education resumed at Santa Lussurgiu and then at Cagliari.
- 1911 Wins a scholarship to Turin University and begins his studies there; another successful candidate was Palmiro Togliatti. In his first year studies linguistics, Italian literature, geography, Latin and Greek grammar; in later years, moral philosophy, modern history and Greek literature.
- 1913 Participates in the first elections held on the basis of universal suffrage, and makes his first contacts

- with the socialist movement in Turin.
- 1914 Writes his first article for the Socialist paper *Il Grido del Popolo*.
- 1916 Begins work as a journalist for the Socialist Party paper *Avanti!*, writing theatrical reviews and contributing a polemical column. Writes also for *Il Grido del Popolo*.
- 1917 Takes part in the preparations to welcome delegates from the Russian soviets. After the four-day spontaneous insurrection of the Turin workers in August and the arrest of most of the Socialist leaders, Gramsci is elected to the Provisional Committee of the Socialist Party. On 24 December celebrates the Russian Revolution with the article 'The Revolution against *Capital*' in *Avanti!*
- 1919 *May*. Founds the weekly journal *L'Ordine Nuovo* with his article 'Workers' Democracy' proposing that the 'Internal Commissions' should be transformed into factory councils as organs of proletarian power'. *L'Ordine Nuovo* becomes the organ of the factory councils in Turin.
- 1920 *April*. General strike in Turin and Piedmont in defence of the factory councils ends in a partial victory for the employers, owing to the refusal of the leadership of the Socialist Party and the trade unions to extend it beyond Piedmont.
- September*. Participates in the month-long occupation of the factories which spreads from Milan throughout Italy.

- 1921 January. Attends the Leghorn congress of the Italian Socialist Party at which the party splits and the Italian Communist Party is founded. Gramsci is elected to the central committee. However the principal influence in the party is not that of the *L'Ordine Nuovo* group with its concern for the factory councils and the relations between the party and the masses, but that of its general secretary Amadeo Bordiga with his stress on discipline and centralism, and purity of principles. Gramsci remains in Turin as editor of *L'Ordine Nuovo*, now a daily paper.
- 1922 May. Arrives in Moscow as member of the Executive of the Communist International (Comintern). Spends some months in a clinic near Moscow where he meets his future wife Giulia Schucht.
- October 28. The 'March on Rome'; Mussolini's fascists seize power in Italy.
- November-December. Takes part in the Fourth Congress of the Comintern.
- 1923 While Gramsci is still in Moscow, the police arrest many leading members of the Italian Communist Party, including Bordiga.
- November. Moves to Vienna, where he engages in a correspondence with Togliatti, Terracini and others discussing the new strategy he proposes for the party.
- 1924 April. Elected deputy in the Veneto constituency.

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- May.* Returns to Italy as leader of Communist Party.
- June.* Assassination of the Socialist deputy Matteotti. Participates in the secession of the parliamentary opposition to the Aventine while campaigning against its passivity and legalism. In November the Communist deputies return to the Chamber.
- 1925 May.* Makes a speech in the Chamber of Deputies against Mussolini's proposal for a law banning all secret associations including the Freemasons.
- 1926 January.* Takes part in the Third Congress of the Italian Communist Party at Lyons in France. The congress approves the 'Lyons Theses' drafted by Gramsci and Togliatti by an overwhelming majority, confirming that the leftist influence previously exerted by Bordiga has been largely overcome.
- October.* Writes to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union expressing the Italian Party's fears that the fierceness of the struggle between Stalin and Trotsky could end by destroying the leading function which the CPSU had won through Lenin's contribution.
- November 8.* Arrested in Rome. Sent to a camp for political prisoners on the island of Ustica. His friend Piero Sraffa (living in England) arranges for him to receive books.
- 1927 January.* Transferred to prison in Milan.
- March.* In a letter to his sister-in-law Tatiana says he is plagued by the idea of accomplishing something *fur ewig* (for ever). Sets out systematic plan of

study. He had thought of four subjects: the history of Italian intellectuals, comparative linguistics, the drama of Pirandello, and popular literature. However, his request for permission to write is refused.

1928 May.

Transferred to prison in Rome.

June.

Condemned to 20 years' imprisonment. Sent to the Special Penal Prison at Turi, near Bari.

1929

*January.* Receives permission to write.

February 8.

Date of the first 'Prison Notebook'.

March.

Tells Tatiana in a letter he has decided on three main subjects: the history of Italy in the nineteenth century with special regard to the formation and development of groups of intellectuals; the theory of history and of historiography; Americanism and Fordism.

1930 November-

Begins a series of discussions with other communists in the prison on various themes including a constituent assembly. In 1928-29 the Comintern had abandoned its strategy of the united front, describing social democrats as 'social fascists', and envisaging the overthrow of fascism by a socialist revolution. Gramsci, on the other hand, foresaw an intermediate democratic phase and put forward the slogan of a 'constituent assembly'. The Italian Communist Party had adopted the Comintern view. Gramsci's approach aroused sharp differences among the prisoners, and he suspended the discussions.

December.

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- 1931 August. Suffers a serious haemorrhage.
- 1933 March. Further serious illness. After medical examination and an international campaign organised by Piero Sraffa and supported by, among others, Romain Rolland and Henri Barbusse, is transferred to December to a clinic at Formia.
- 1935 August. Transferred to the Cusumano Clinic in Rome. His mind remains lucid, but he is too ill to continue working on his notebooks.
- 1937 April 27. Dies after a cerebral haemorrhage. Tatiana manages to smuggle the thirty-three notebooks out of Gramsci's room and via the diplomatic bag to Moscow.
- 1947 A first collection of Gramsci's letters from prison (with many cuts) published.
- 1948-51 Publication of the *Prison Notebooks* in six volumes.
- 1965 Complete edition of Gramsci's letters published, edited by Sergio Caprioglio and Elsa Fubini.
- 1971 Publication in Britain of *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*.
- 1975 Publication of the complete edition of the *Prison Notebooks* in four volumes, edited by Valentino Gerratana.

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