

Gramsci on Civil Society

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Antonio Gramsci's analysis of civil society, much like his study of the role of intellectuals in society and his concept of hegemony, has long

In order to avoid cumbersome footnotes, I have indicated in the text the titles of Gramsci's articles from which I quote and have provided the date of publication of the newspaper in which they first appeared. These articles are easy to locate in the following volumes of the critical edition of Gramsci's pre-prison writings, where they are reproduced in chronological order: *Cronache torinesi: 1913–1917*, ed. S. Caprioglio (Turin: Einaudi, 1980); *La città futura: 1917–1918*, ed. S. Caprioglio (Turin: Einaudi, 1982); *Il nostro Marx: 1918–1919*, ed. S. Caprioglio (Turin: Einaudi, 1984); *L'Ordine Nuovo: 1919–1920*, ed. V. Gerratana and A. Santucci (Turin: Einaudi, 1987); *Socialismo e fascismo. L'Ordine Nuovo: 1912–1922* (Turin: Einaudi, 1966); and *La costruzione del Partito comunista: 1923–1926* (Turin: Einaudi, 1971). Gramsci's letters are also chronologically ordered and hence easy to locate, in either the Italian or the (more complete) English-language critical edition—see *Lettere dal carcere*, ed. E. Fubini and S. Caprioglio (Turin: Einaudi, 1965); and *Letters from Prison*, 2 vols., ed. F. Rosengarten (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). For the extracts from the *Prison Notebooks*, I have provided the pertinent notebook and section numbers that would enable the reader to locate them quickly in the Italian critical edition, *Quaderni del carcere*, 4 vols., ed. V. Gerratana (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), and, in the case of the first two notebooks, in *Prison Notebooks*, vol. 1, ed. J. A. Buttigieg (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

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been recognized as one of the most original and important features of the political theory he elaborated in his *Prison Notebooks*. Scholars have debated at great length the differences and similarities between Gramsci's concept of civil society and Hegel's, whether it represents a significant departure from traditional Marxist thought, and what place it occupies (or should be assigned) within the history of political philosophy. Outside the specialized fields of social and political theory, however, *civil society* has not always, or everywhere, been a familiar term, even among well-informed, politically sophisticated general readers. In the United States, for example, *civil society* does not appear in many basic dictionaries (such as those most widely used by university students), and it is rarely, if ever, encountered in mainstream political discourse. What brought the concept of civil society to the attention of a broader spectrum of political observers, at least in the United States, were the events that resulted in the political transformation of the Eastern European countries and the dismantling of the former Soviet bloc, or, rather, the efforts to interpret and account for the unexpected, breathtakingly rapid developments occurring during that period. The phrase *civil society* recurred frequently in the writings and speeches of Eastern European intellectuals who were participating in, when not actually stimulating and guiding, the sociopolitical recomposition of their countries. Predictably, it was quickly picked up by many journalists, commentators, and pundits who were only too anxious to find some general theory or abstract concept that would help them explain the complex phenomena they were witnessing. (One must not forget that the overwhelming majority of the political experts and Sovietologists in the West had completely failed to anticipate the events that, in the space of a year or two, were to utterly reconfigure the geopolitical order.) This is not to suggest that the increasingly frequent allusions to the concept of civil society were always—or even in most cases—accompanied by a clear understanding of its intricate genealogy and of its many different nuances, or, even less, by an awareness of Gramsci's perspicacious treatment of it. In the late 1980s and in the 1990s, the term *civil society* was employed, more often than not, somewhat like a magical explanatory formula, and its meaning remained vague, since those who invoked it rarely bothered to define it in any illuminating, systematic way or to explain convincingly why it (or the phenomenon it supposedly described) came to assume such overwhelming importance at this particular time and specifically in Eastern European countries.

Those who looked into Gramsci's works for some insight that would shed light on the events that transpired in Eastern Europe invariably zeroed

in on one brief passage: “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 immediately revealed” (Notebook 7, §16, p. 866). It was in the last month or two of 1930 that Gramsci, in a fascist jail, jotted down this observation in one of his notebooks. Almost six decades later, these remarks, plucked out of their historical context, acquired (or, rather, were endowed with) a prophetic quality; they supplied a ready-made explanation of the disintegration of the communist regimes once dominated by the Soviet Union. Thus, for example, in a *New York Times* article, “The Rise of ‘Civil Society’” (25 June 1989), Flora Lewis, the newspaper’s senior foreign affairs correspondent at the time, used this often-quoted passage from Gramsci as the basis for declaring: “The Communist ideal is destroying itself as the century ends because it could not create the ‘fortresses and earthworks’ of civil society, nor accommodate them.” This, of course, is a perfectly tenable diagnosis that could be reasonably buttressed with arguments drawn from Gramsci—although one must hasten to add that the rest of Lewis’s article offers a hopelessly garbled account of Gramsci’s views. At the same time, however, the isolation of this particular passage from the rest of Gramsci’s extensive discussions of civil society is fraught with problems. First of all, the “Oriental” state to which Gramsci refers in this instance is quite specifically czarist Russia; to apply his characterization of the Russia of 1917 to the Soviet Union of 1989 is, to say the least, ahistorical. Such a simplistic application also tends to obscure the fact that in his analyses of civil society, Gramsci focuses primarily, not to say exclusively, on the anatomy of modern Western states; the countries to which he devotes special attention, apart from Italy, are France and the United States. The main value of Gramsci’s concept of civil society, which is intertwined with his theory of hegemony, resides in its exposure of the mechanisms and modulations of power in capitalist states that purport to be democratic. When Gramsci’s insights are employed principally as an instrument for explaining what went wrong in the Soviet Union and its satellites, attention is deflected away from his forceful, demystifying critique of the liberal/capitalist state, its ethos, and its claims to universality—a critique that urgently needs to be revived and reelaborated today as a remedy to the pervasive complacency and the poverty of oppositional criticism that have followed in the wake of the short-lived euphoria triggered by the end of the cold war.

Another, more serious problem arises when Gramsci’s brief comparison between “East” and “West” is removed from its original context and

used (anachronistically) as a key for interpreting the Soviet/Russian phenomenon rather than as a stimulus for research into the anatomy of the state in its prevalent Western form: it may lend credence to the notion that the state and civil society are two separate and opposed entities. When Gramsci's remarks on "East" and "West" are treated in isolation, it is easy to overlook or conceal his most distinctive contribution to our understanding of civil society. Gramsci regarded civil society as an integral part of the state; in his view, civil society, far from being inimical to the state, is, in fact, its most resilient constitutive element, even though the most immediately visible aspect of the state is political society, with which it is all too often mistakenly identified. He was also convinced that the intricate, organic relationships between civil society and political society enable certain strata of society not only to gain dominance within the state but also, and more importantly, to maintain it, perpetuating the subalternity of other strata. To ignore or to set aside these crucial aspects of Gramsci's concept of civil society is tantamount to erasing the crucial differences that set his theory of the state apart from the classic liberal version. This is precisely what Flora Lewis does in her article, when she quotes Gramsci's remarks merely as a point of departure for reiterating the most tiresome shibboleths: the omnipotence and omnipresence of the state made communist countries despotic; the autonomy of civil society in the United States ensures freedom. Why invoke Gramsci to support these kinds of assertions? The same point would have been better reinforced by a quotation from Locke or, for that matter, from Ronald Reagan! The only reason why Lewis finds it necessary to turn to Gramsci is that she wants to explain to her readers the significance of *civil society*—a term with which most of them (including, probably, Ronald Reagan) are not acquainted. While pretending to explain Gramsci's concept of civil society, Lewis ends up misconstruing it as simply another version of what, in U.S. political parlance, is routinely called the "private sector" or "private sphere." She also has a novel explanation for the absence of *civil society* from the political vocabulary in the United States: "Americans don't talk about civil society because they take it for granted. It is *the* society." The triumphalistic, self-congratulatory tone of this assertion fails to conceal its unintended irony: if Americans need to be introduced to Gramsci's thought, it is precisely so that they would cease taking civil society for granted, develop a better critical understanding of it, and start thinking of alternatives to the current configurations of power.

Gramsci's concept of civil society, like most of his ideas and categories, is not to be found encapsulated in a single sentence or passage.

Rather, it emerges gradually, starting with some relatively straightforward observations in the earliest journalistic writings and culminating in the complex, though fragmentary, formulations recorded in the prison notebooks. Yet, even before turning to Gramsci's texts, it is important to take cognizance of certain misleading assumptions and prejudices that have become ingrained notions (or that, as Gramsci would say, have become "common sense") thanks to the pervasive influence of the liberal tradition—assumptions and prejudices that have often hindered, sometimes in obvious ways and at other times more subtly, an understanding of Gramsci's thinking on civil society. The most obvious of these assumptions is the identification of the "state" with the "government" or "government apparatus." Thus conceived, the state is the embodiment of power, which it exercises by enacting laws and enforcing them. This conception is often accompanied by the conviction that the activities of the state (i.e., government) must be held strictly in check, since its incursions into the "private" sphere almost always result in a diminution of individual freedom. From this viewpoint, then, the existence of the state poses a threat to freedom, but it cannot be eliminated entirely because, in order to avoid anarchy, it alone can be allowed to exercise coercive force against external and internal enemies of the social order. The private sphere (i.e., civil society as distinct from and opposed to the state, in the liberal scheme of things), on the other hand, is regarded as the terrain where freedom is exercised and experienced. In the reductive rhetoric of politicians, these liberal concepts are translated into diatribes against so-called big government and exhortations to transfer responsibility for the delivery of "public" services (including not only transportation, communications, and utilities, but also health care, education, and even the incarceration of criminals) to the "private sector"—in the name not only of efficiency but also of greater freedom from government "control" and greater "freedom of choice" for individuals (often referred to, in this context, as "consumers"). Within this kind of rhetoric, the term *civil society* or *private sphere* designates not so much the terrain of freedom in some general abstract sense but rather the "free-market" system, more or less specifically. Further, it is commonly assumed that *freedom* and *democracy* mean virtually the same thing, and that *democracy* entails a free-market economy or vice versa. Thus, many different terms have lost their precise meaning and are now routinely used as if they were interchangeable: *civil society* (*private sphere*), *free market*, *democracy*, *free society*, *free country*, et cetera. In fact, there exists a very large contingent of expert economists, influential policy advisers, and powerful government officials who believe,

or work hard at propagating the belief, that the creation of a free-market economy constitutes the necessary first step in the process of developing civil society and establishing a democratic system.

These assumptions constitute the basis of a widespread prejudice that has been at the root of many confused and confusing interpretations of Gramsci's writings. The prejudice, baldly stated, goes as follows: Since Marxist (or socialist) theory is categorically opposed to laissez-faire in the economic sphere, socialism favors (some would say inevitably leads to) the installation of an omnipotent state; therefore, socialism would suppress the private sphere (i.e., civil society) and hence erase the terrain of freedom. This prejudice is alimented by liberal theory, but nothing helped reinforce it more strongly than the tragic-pathetic history of the now defunct Eastern European communist states. So firmly entrenched is this prejudice that socialism and "big government" have become virtually synonymous in many people's minds. Nor is this merely a vulgar misconception; it is held on to fiercely even by prominent intellectuals, such as the Nobel Prize winner Milton Friedman, who, in his introduction to Friedrich von Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), sets up a simple binary opposition: on one side, he posits unbridled capitalism, which ensures voluntary cooperation, prosperity, and freedom; and on the other side, socialism, with the government coordinating all activities, which ensures economic failure and serfdom. How does one begin to explain that Marxist theory, far from advocating strong governmental authority, actually envisages the end of the state? Or that Gramsci's vision of a social order based on consensus and rid of coercive state power does not constitute a departure from, much less an abandonment of, the socialist ideal? In order to read Gramsci intelligently, this prejudice needs to be set aside.

The main question addressed by Gramsci has nothing to do with the desirability or otherwise of a strong state; indeed, Gramsci is even more radically committed to whittling the coercive power of the state than the most dogmatic libertarian. Gramsci, however, also recognizes that coercion and domination by force are not the only, nor necessarily the most effective, means of control and subordination in society. He, therefore, explores aspects of the state, and of civil society in particular, that liberal theory is loath to examine—namely, the relations of power and influence between political society (i.e., what the liberals call "government," or "state") and civil society (i.e., the "private sector," in liberal vocabulary), which mutually reinforce each other to the advantage of certain strata, groups, and institutions. Thus, for Gramsci, civil society is best described not as the sphere

of freedom but of hegemony. Hegemony, to be sure, depends on consent (as opposed to coercion), but consent is not the spontaneous outcome of “free choice”; consent is manufactured, albeit through extremely complex mediums, diverse institutions, and constantly changing processes. Furthermore, the power to manufacture consent is not evenly distributed in society (or, to put it in the metaphoric language of sports that permeates political oratory in the United States, civil society is not a level playing field); indeed, not everyone is in an equal position to understand how consent is manufactured, and there are even those who remain unaware of the fact that consent is manufactured and actually believe that they give their own consent “freely” and spontaneously. Far from opposing liberal demands for a minimal state and an extension of the sphere of civil society, Gramsci’s elaboration of the Marxist theory of the state exposes (just as Machiavelli had exposed the mechanisms of government in a different historical context) those apparatuses and processes of power at work in civil society, as well as in the relations between civil society and political society that liberal theory generally ignores. His purpose is not to repress civil society or to restrict its space but rather to develop a revolutionary strategy (a “war of position”) that would be employed precisely in the arena of civil society, with the aim of disabling the coercive apparatus of the state, gaining access to political power, and creating the conditions that could give rise to a consensual society wherein no individual or group is reduced to a subaltern status.

It is important to bear in mind that Gramsci’s theoretical or philosophical treatment of this subject emerges out of, and even depends on, his detailed study of the concrete political and cultural history of Western—especially Italian and French—society, that it is animated by the urgent need he felt to acquire a more thorough understanding of the sociocultural, economic, and political configuration of Italy in order to be better able to devise an effective strategy to revolutionize it, and that it is the fruit of a long process of direct political engagement, discussions, experiences, reflections, and reconsiderations that stretch back to his earliest years of socialist activism. In other words, Gramsci’s insights on the state and civil society are deeply rooted in a concrete and specific sequence of turbulent events and developments (the Russian Revolution, World War I, rapid industrial development, postwar social instability, rise of fascism), especially as they were experienced in Italy and, above all, seen from the point of view of a major participant first in the socialist workers’ movement and subsequently in the shaping of a communist party. It is also important not to lose sight

of Gramsci's specific intellectual and political formation, the early stages of which he describes succinctly in a letter (6 March 1924) to his wife Giulia:

The rebellious instinct which, when I was a child, was directed against the rich because I was unable to pursue my studies—I, who obtained a 10 in all subjects in elementary school—whereas the sons of the butcher, the pharmacist, the shopkeeper all went to school well-dressed. That rebellious instinct grew against all the rich people who oppressed the peasants of Sardinia; and at that time I thought that it was necessary to struggle for the national independence of the region: "Drive the mainlanders to the sea!" How many times did I repeat those words! Then I came to know the working class of an industrial city and I understood the real meaning of those things of Marx's that I had first read out of intellectual curiosity. Thus I became passionate about life, the struggle, the working class.

Another significant formative influence on the young Gramsci—which he mentions elsewhere in his writings but not in this particular letter to Giulia—was liberalism, or rather those elements of liberalism that he encountered (and was initially attracted to) in the "Southernist" politics of Gaetano Salvemini and in the philosophy of Benedetto Croce. Gramsci also sympathized, though not uncritically, with the radical strain of liberalism championed by his friend Piero Gobetti.

In his early journalism, Gramsci adopted and promoted certain positions that, in theory, at least, were advocated by liberals. Thus, for example, he argued in favor of free trade, calling for the abolition of the government's protectionist policies. These policies, designed to strengthen the country's growing modern industry, which was concentrated almost exclusively in the North, were often defended on nationalistic grounds, and therefore had a rather popular appeal. On the surface, protectionist laws appeared advantageous to the urban working class, which gained numerical strength as well as increased political leverage as northern industry continued to grow; in fact, many reformist socialists and trade union leaders supported protectionism. Gramsci strived hard to explain to his readers that, while appearing to favor the seemingly common interests of industrial capital and the industrial labor force, the government's protectionist policies were, in reality, perpetuating the misery and exploitation of an enormous segment of the population, especially the poverty-stricken peasants in the South, who remained trapped in a quasi-feudal socioeconomic system. In *Il Grido del Popolo* of 19 August 1916, Gramsci reprinted two articles by antisocialist

liberals promoting free trade—"Contro il feudalismo economico" (Against economic feudalism) and "Perchè il libero scambio non è popolare" (Why free trade is unpopular) by the economist Luigi Einaudi and the Catholic philosopher Lorenzo Michelangelo Billia, respectively. By publishing these two articles, Gramsci explains in his introductory note, he meant to stimulate serious discussion on an issue of immediate concern to the proletariat. While lamenting the failure of socialist writers to expose the underlying motivations of protectionism and its injurious effects on the working poor, Gramsci makes an assertion that, *prima facie*, at least, one would expect to find in a liberal manifesto rather than a socialist newspaper: "The struggle for the freedom to have bread, the freedom to obtain all consumer goods cannot be deferred." The antidogmatic Gramsci, however, has little patience with ideological labels; he enjoins his readers to "extract whatever is useful from the search for truth, no matter its source." Einaudi and Billia maintain that the question of free trade cannot be confined to economics; it is also a moral issue, and for that reason, in Gramsci's view, what they have to say on the subject "has universal significance, it transcends class boundaries."

What endows the liberals' position on free trade with universal significance and enables it to transcend class divisions is, of course, the fundamental principle that informs it, namely, the right of individuals and groups to operate freely as long as they do not curtail the freedom of others—a right that is protected by, simultaneously: (1) limiting to a minimum the incursions of the state's coercive apparatus into the sphere of civil society, while juridically empowering the constitutive elements of civil society to contest all such incursions; and (2) ensuring that the state possesses a coercive apparatus capable of restraining any individual or group from encroaching upon the freedom of others. Gramsci's discovery of some common ground with the liberals is not confined to their position on the question of free trade; he also espouses the fundamental principle on which their position is based. In "Diritto comune" (Common law)—*Avanti!*, 22 August 1916—for example, he fiercely condemns the police use of plain-clothes agents to keep watch on certain private buildings (such as the offices and meeting places of legally constituted workers' associations and political organizations) and to spy on and harass the law-abiding individuals who frequented them. Every citizen with a sense of human dignity, Gramsci writes, is aware of "the right to protect at all costs his freedom to live, to choose his own way of life, to select the activities he wants to pursue, and that he has the right to prohibit curious outsiders from poking their noses into his private life." Why, then, are police exempt from the punitive sanctions imposed on

whoever violates the basic right to privacy and freedom of association? Only because, Gramsci laments, “the Italians have such little awareness of what freedom really is.” Once again, Gramsci’s argument seems to be taken straight out of a textbook of liberalism. Hence the obvious question: What leads the antireformist Gramsci to espouse certain fundamental principles of liberalism and, at the same time, to embrace a Marxism that is committed to the dissolution of liberalism? The answer is to be found in Gramsci’s concept of the state, which he takes to be integral, comprising both the juridical-administrative system and civil society. He rejects the liberal notion that the state consists solely in a legal and bureaucratic order, which remains neutral and indifferent to class interests while safeguarding the autonomous development of civil society.

From Gramsci’s point of view, the liberal state represents the concrete realization in history of fundamental liberties, but only as they were gained by, and for, a particular class—the bourgeoisie. That is to say, the fundamental principles of civil rights, or the “rights of man,” normally associated with liberalism may very well be universal, but in the liberal state, these rights are secured and protected in a form that privileges the bourgeoisie and perpetuates its socioeconomic dominance. Theoretically, the proponent of liberalism will argue that the social and economic advantages enjoyed by the bourgeois (or any social group, for that matter) can be challenged, attenuated, or even erased through the initiatives and activities that everyone is free to undertake within the sphere of civil society—as long as the “rules of the game” (embodied in the system of government, which liberal doctrine equates with the state) are observed. Gramsci would counterargue that the rules of the game were established by the dominant class and are themselves an integral part of what needs to be transformed before the fundamental principles of freedom and justice can be extended to the point of eliminating all forms of subalternity. Furthermore, Gramsci would go on to argue, the very fact that there exists a coercive apparatus to ensure compliance with the rules of the game is itself indicative of the nonuniversal character of the liberal/bourgeois state, notwithstanding its appeals to universal principles.

One of Gramsci’s earliest attempts to articulate more or less systematically the relation of socialism vis-à-vis liberalism is the essay “Tre principii, tre ordini” (Three principles, three orders) in *La Città Futura*, 11 February 1917. The rights of man and the individual freedoms enshrined in liberal doctrine are the product of a long history of struggles and revolutionary movements, Gramsci explains. The outcome of these struggles was the

establishment of bourgeois civilization, and it could not be otherwise, because “the bourgeoisie was the only effective social force and the only one really at work in history.” This fact by itself does not diminish the progressive and universal character of the rights that were gained. “Was the principle that asserted itself in history through the bourgeois revolution a universal one? Certainly, yes.” But then Gramsci hastens to add:

Universal does not mean absolute. In history, there is nothing absolute and fixed. The assertions of liberalism are boundary-ideas which, once they were recognized as rationally necessary, became idea-forces; they were realized in the bourgeois state, they helped give rise to an antithesis to that state in the form of the proletariat, and then they became worn out. They are universal for the bourgeoisie, but they are not universal enough for the proletariat. For the bourgeoisie they were boundary-ideas; for the proletariat they are minimal ideas. And, in fact, the integral liberal program has become the minimal program of the socialist party. In other words, it is the program that we use in our day-to-day existence, as we wait for the arrival of the moment that is deemed most useful for [. . .]

The last few words of this paragraph were erased by the censor, but one can surmise from the context that Gramsci was referring to the opportune time for launching the revolution that would topple the bourgeois state. When Gramsci wrote this article, and for the next few years, there was reason to believe that in some countries, among them Italy, the conditions favoring a socialist revolution would soon be at hand. As it turned out, of course, quite the reverse happened; the bourgeois state proved itself much more resistant than Gramsci and his fellow revolutionaries imagined—although the fact that the fascist dictatorship prevented its total disintegration a few years later confirmed its fundamental weakness. Later, in prison, Gramsci would reflect at length not only on the failure of the revolutionary project but also, and more fruitfully, on the complex reasons why the bourgeois state, in its variable forms, is so durable, so resourceful, as to be able to withstand the fiercest onslaughts and survive the most debilitating crises.

The young Gramsci overestimated the revolutionary potential of his time, but he was by no means unaware of the difficulties involved or of the enormous amount of work that needed to be done before the subaltern classes could seriously vie for power. Already, in “*Tre principii, tre ordini*,” he was able to identify a major source of strength of bourgeois rule in the most politically developed and economically advanced states—the examples he

uses are Britain and Germany. In these countries, Gramsci explains, people have become convinced that the ideal of a state that transcends class interests can be attained through the continual perfecting of the present system. Fostering and cultivating this conviction are legislative and administrative traditions that convey a sense of fairness or reasonableness; in other words, the government, though controlled by the bourgeoisie, still protects the basic rights of the working class and allows it the social space to organize itself and compete for government power. The social policies of the liberals in Britain, for instance, assumed the form of what Gramsci describes as a “kind of bourgeois state socialism—i.e., a non-socialist socialism.” Their posture was such that “even the proletariat did not look too unkindly on the state as government; convinced, rightly or wrongly, that its interests were being looked after, it conducted its class struggle discreetly and without the kind of moral exasperation that is typical of the workers’ movement.” In Germany, as in Britain, the subaltern classes do not have to resort to desperate measures, such as taking to the streets in open rebellion, to secure their basic rights. Why? Because in those countries, “one does not see the fundamental laws of the states trampled on, or arbitrary rule hold sway.” In other words, these are states where the rules of the game are carefully observed; hence, there is a sense of order and stability. And, as Gramsci observes, common sense (which, in this article, he describes as the “terrible slave-driver of the spirit”) inhibits people from disrupting the orderly status quo and makes them scared of the uncertainties that accompany radical change. As a result, “the class struggle becomes less harsh, the revolutionary spirit loses momentum. The so-called law of least effort becomes popular—this is the law of the lazy which often means doing nothing at all. In countries like this, the revolution is less likely.” In Italy, by contrast, things are not so well ordered, in large measure because the ruling classes pursue their interests blatantly, imposing all the sacrifices necessary for economic growth on the proletariat. This leads Gramsci to believe that Italy is a prime candidate for a socialist revolution; but he is also aware that the ground for a successful revolution has yet to be prepared. There are many elements in this article that foreshadow the more thorough and incisive analyses of the prison notebooks.

Even before he developed his concepts of civil society, hegemony, and so on, Gramsci could already perceive how a dominant class becomes securely entrenched not by forcefully repressing the antagonistic classes but rather by creating and disseminating what he calls a *forma mentis*, and by establishing a system of government that embodies this *forma mentis*

and translates it into an order, or, better still, makes it appear to be orderliness itself. For this to happen, of course, the dominant class or classes must accept that the government apparatus cannot always assert their corporate interests narrowly and directly; the necessary fiction that the government of the state transcends class distinctions can remain credible only if concessions are made to address the most pressing needs and to accommodate some of the aspirations of the disadvantaged strata of the population. The groups that are out of power in this kind of state are allowed to aspire for power, but the prevailing *forma mentis* will induce them to pursue their goals in a manner that does not threaten the basic order or orderliness as such; in other words, they will not aim to overthrow the state and establish a new kind of state but instead will compete for a greater share of influence and power according to the established rules of the game. (This is what trade unions, for example, have often done; in the United States today, the same function is performed by so-called lobby groups.) Consequently, the notion that the social order can be perfected through “fair and open” competition becomes entrenched as common sense—in other words, as an ingrained *forma mentis*, which seeks to remedy problems and injustices through reforms fought for and negotiated among competing groups within the existing overall structure of the social order, thus leaving the juridical-administrative apparatus of the state more or less intact, while the campaigns for change are waged within the sphere of civil society. It is a *forma mentis* that makes the revolutionary idea of eliminating competitiveness (i.e., greed) as the primary motivating force in society seem unreasonable, unrealistic, or even dangerous.

Gramsci bitterly opposed reformist strategy both in the Socialist Party and in the trade union movement, since, in his view, it served only to strengthen rather than undermine the bourgeois state. Instead of opposing the state, reformists collaborated with it; they did so not only in parliament (i.e., within the political apparatus of government), where they were effectively “domesticated” by transformism and to some extent by nationalism, but also in the institutions of organized labor (i.e., in the economic sphere located in civil society), which they tended to reduce into instruments serving the narrowly conceived corporate interests and immediate needs of the working class within the existing economic structure (and with little regard for other underprivileged strata, such as the peasantry). This does not mean that Gramsci advocated a frontal assault against the state. Quite the opposite. As is well known, he was relentless in his polemics against anarchism, including the anarchist currents in syndicalism, whose violent, direct

attacks on the state he regarded as worse than ineffectual because they were conducive to reaction. Revolutionary activity, for Gramsci, has little or nothing to do with inciting people to rebel; instead, it consists in a painstaking process of disseminating and instilling an alternative *forma mentis* by means of cultural preparation (i.e., intellectual development and education) on a mass scale, critical and theoretical elaboration, and thoroughgoing organization. These kinds of activities can only be carried out in civil society; indeed, at one and the same time, they require the creation of, and help to extend, new spaces in civil society beyond the reach of the governmental, administrative, and juridical apparatuses of the state. Whereas reformists collaborate with the state, the most urgent task of the revolutionary Socialist Party for Gramsci consists in establishing its own, different concept of the state. He sketches the broad outlines of a revolutionary strategy in both negative and positive terms in “Dopo il Congresso” (After the congress), an article he published in *Il Grido del Popolo*, 14 September 1918, soon after the 15th Congress of the Italian Socialist Party, at which the “intransigent revolutionary fraction” had outvoted the reformist bloc of the party:

The collaborationist and reformist spirit must be destroyed; we must set down exactly and precisely what we mean by “state.” . . . It is necessary to establish and to make it widely understood that the socialist state . . . is not a continuation of the bourgeois state, that it is not an evolution of the capitalist state which is made up of three powers—the executive, parliament, and the judiciary. The socialist state is, rather, a continuation and a systematic development of the workers’ organizations and the local bodies which the proletariat has already been able to bring into existence within the individualistic regime. The immediate task of the proletariat, therefore, must not favor the extension of state power and state interventions; instead, its goal should be to de-center the bourgeois state and to increase the autonomy of local and trade union bodies beyond the reach of regulatory laws.

Once again, certain elements of Gramsci’s revolutionary position, if taken in isolation, appear to have a liberal timbre: development of independent professional organizations, resisting the growth of the centralized power of the state, reinforcing the autonomy of local associations, et cetera. Interestingly, Gramsci concludes this paragraph with a reference to Britain, which he considers to be a paradigm of liberalism and advanced capitalism: “The

kind of order that the capitalist state has come to have in England is much closer to the Soviet regime than our bourgeoisie is willing to admit.”

In his characterization of Britain, Gramsci is obviously resorting to hyperbole for polemical purposes. He knows full well that, in reality, the chances of transforming Britain into a socialist country are infinitesimal—unlike Italy, where the possibility of a successful socialist revolution actually existed, even if remotely. Gramsci invokes Britain as an example because he wants to stress the importance of enlarging the sphere of civil society. His thinking seems paradoxical on this point: on the one hand, he believes that in a country such as Britain, where civil society is very developed and the coercive apparatus of the state remains, for the most part, concealed, revolutionary aspirations tend to languish; on the other hand, he is convinced that the preparation that must necessarily precede a socialist revolution can only take place in the sphere of civil society and actually requires an expansion and an intensification of the kinds of activities that would enlarge and diversify the terrain of civil society. There is a cynical explanation: Gramsci criticizes the authoritarianism of the Italian state and makes demands for the kinds of civil liberties and the freedom of association available in a liberal state only because he wants to acquire space within which to organize and mobilize the cadres of the revolution. This, however, is definitely not the case, for when Gramsci bemoans the poverty of civil society in Italy, he is as much (and perhaps even more) concerned with the miserable level of general culture, moral integrity, education, and intellectual life in his country as he is with the repressive character of its government and the intolerance of its ruling class. The road to socialism in a nonliberal bourgeois state such as Italy, Gramsci maintains, is hampered not only by the tactics of intimidation directly or indirectly employed with impunity by the dominant class and its government but also—and much more seriously—by the cultural backwardness of the masses as a whole, the political unpreparedness of even the organized sectors of the working class, the intellectual ineptitude and confused motivations of many of the socialist leaders, the overall absence of clear ideas and rigorous thinking about why the system needs to be changed, how to go about changing it, and what would replace it. Gramsci and his confreres in the *Ordine Nuovo* group sought to remedy these deficiencies through their involvement in the factory council movement, their cultural and educational initiatives, their theoretical and critical writings, and their work within the Socialist Party and later the Communist Party. At the same time, though, Gramsci remains convinced that this kind of work

alone cannot bear fruit as long as the whole nation (including the various strata of the bourgeoisie) remains mired in petty politics, moral corruption, intellectual disorder, and cultural poverty. Gramsci gives no credence to the ingenuous belief that “worse is better”—that the more repressive, corrupt, morally and culturally destitute, and so on, the bourgeois state is, the better the prospects for revolutionary transformation. Rather, he perceives a connection between the deplorable condition of Italian society and the debilitating weaknesses of the socialist movement, a connection he articulates explicitly in his article “Dopo il Congresso.” The relevant passage from this article merits quotation at some length, because it foreshadows one of the major underlying concerns that animates many of the reflections in the prison notebooks on the numerous failures of the Italian Left. The Italian Socialist Party, Gramsci writes,

has provided an arena for bizarre individuals and restless spirits; in the absence of the political and economic liberties that spur individuals to action and that continually renew the leading groups, it was the Socialist Party that furnished the lazy and somnolent bourgeoisie with new individuals. The most frequently quoted journalists, the capable and active members of the bourgeoisie are deserters from the socialist movement; the party has been the gangway to political success in Italy, it has been the most efficient sieve for Jacobin individualism.

The inability of the party to function in terms of class was related to the backward state of society in Italy. Production was still in its infancy, trade was weak; the regime was (as it still is) not parliamentary but despotic—in other words, it was not capitalist but petty bourgeois. Likewise, Italian socialism was petty bourgeois, meddlesome, opportunistic, a channel for the distribution of some state privileges to a few proletarian groups.

The importance that Gramsci attaches to the free development of a vibrant civil society manifests itself most clearly in his many articles dealing with: (1) the oligarchic and repressive character of the Italian government apparatus; (2) the narrow-mindedness of the dominant bourgeois culture and the failure of the intellectuals—including the self-proclaimed liberals—to provide a forceful critique of the retrograde social structures of the country and to move the nation toward the type of capitalism and democracy practiced in advanced Western countries, such as Britain; and (3) the need for the cultural and political preparation of the subaltern classes *prior to the*

transition to socialism. Even as modern capitalist production slowly gains ground in Italy, Gramsci observes in “Il passivo” (The shortfall) in *Avanti!*, 6 September 1918: “The institutions are backward . . . the police force is organized as it was under the Bourbons in Naples, or King Charles Albert in Piedmont, when all movements by the citizens were regarded as conspiratorial: it hobbles civil existence, it causes an enormous deficit in the social balance sheet.” In “La democrazia italiana” (Italian democracy)—in *Il Grido del Popolo*, 7 September 1918—he bemoans the weakness of the political organizations of the bourgeoisie, their inability to formulate, disseminate, and defend clear ideas and concrete programs in the public arena. In the confusion and absence of continuity that characterize Italian political life, the newspapers become demagogic platforms, the forums of sterile polemics. Under these conditions, opposition to the government amounts to little more than mere rebelliousness; problems are solved “in salons, in the offices of banks and industrial firms, in sacristies, or in the corridors of parliament”; without strong national political parties, the people, including the majority of the bourgeoisie, cannot participate in the formulation of a national agenda and a cogent government policy. Gramsci concludes his assessment of Italian democracy with some very harsh words: “Because of its lack of scruples, its reluctance to accept and to respect party discipline in policy matters, its love of vacuous novelty and stale ‘fashions,’ Italian bourgeois democracy is condemned to having no worthy political life. Instead, it is condemned to consuming itself in factional conflicts and always remaining the swindled and scorned victim of adventurers.” Read with the benefit of hindsight, these harsh words seem to foretell the rise to power of the adventurer par excellence, Mussolini. Gramsci, of course, was no prophet, and the Fascist seizure of power in 1922 took him by surprise, as it did virtually everyone else. Nevertheless, his diagnosis is correct: the impoverishment of civil society has catastrophic consequences.

Gramsci attributes the decrepitude of political life and culture in Italy to a number of factors, among them the retrograde influence of the Catholic Church, which, in its efforts to guard against any diminution in its authority, constantly challenged the legitimacy of the secular state, undermined the development of modern democratic structures, which, under normal circumstances, accompanies the evolution of liberalism, and thus retarded the growth of autonomous institutions in civil society. Still, Gramsci reserves his fiercest condemnations for the Italian middle classes and the intellectuals. On more than one occasion, he compares the petty bourgeoisie to monkeys, that is, creatures who can mimic the right gestures but who lack

ideas and values and are incapable of looking beyond their own most immediate needs or interests—they have no sense of history, no sense of the universal. In one such merciless attack, “La scimmia giacobina” (The Jacobin monkey)—in *Avanti!*, 22 October 1917—Gramsci describes the Italian petty bourgeoisie as follows:

They have no sense of the universality of law; hence, they are monkeys. They have no moral life. The ends they pursue are immediate and extremely narrow. In order to attain just one of their goals they sacrifice everything—truth, justice, the most deeply rooted and intangible laws of humanity. In order to destroy one of their enemies they are willing to sacrifice all the guarantees that are meant to protect every citizen; they are even willing to sacrifice the guarantees meant for their own protection.

As the last phrase makes clear, Gramsci holds the bourgeoisie responsible for failing to safeguard even its own long-term interest, for ignoring the very basic principles that provide it, as a class, with its own *raison d'être*. Because of the petty narrow-mindedness of its middle classes, Italy had yet to benefit from the legacy of the French Revolution, “which has profoundly transformed France and the world, which has been affirmed among the masses, which has shaken and brought to the surface deep layers of submerged humanity”—and this proved detrimental not just to the bourgeoisie itself but to the Italian people as a whole, including the subaltern classes. This is another way of saying that the Italian bourgeoisie, while anxious to protect its privileges and preserve its dominance over other social strata, lacked the inclination and ability to provide leadership for the country as a whole at a time when Italy was being inexorably (though most unevenly) transformed, by historical forces that were beyond anybody’s power to halt, into a modern industrial capitalist state. More than anyone, the intellectuals were to blame, especially those intellectuals who characterized themselves as liberals. In “I liberali italiani” (Italian liberals), in *Avanti!*, 12 September 1918, Gramsci writes:

They have never fought for their ideas; they have placed themselves at the service of capitalist parasitism; they have not even attempted to launch the project of educating the masses—a task which the English liberals have carried out in their country, sacrificing themselves and stimulating the healthy energies of bourgeois production to bestir themselves and to spend money in order to ensure the success

of a societal drive that has revolutionary value insofar as it destroys old institutions and decrepit forms of production.

In Italy, Gramsci concludes, it is left to the socialists and their organizations to assume the responsibilities that properly belong to, but are shirked by, the liberal intellectuals.

Gramsci's idea of the political party as a collective intellectual that carries out its primary and most important functions in civil society animates his writings and activities from beginning to end. It is this idea that lies at the root of Gramsci's almost obsessive concern with questions of culture and of organization (which is often, for him, a corollary of intellectual discipline), about which so much has been written. What needs to be stressed over and over again is this: Gramsci insisted adamantly that the revolutionary transformation of society starts in civil society, and, ideally or theoretically at least, it is not fully accomplished until the extension of civil society is so complete that it no longer needs a coercive apparatus to protect it. For this reason, Gramsci forcefully and repeatedly rejected all arguments that gave priority to the revolutionary seizure of the state over the formation and the cultivation of a broad-based revolutionary culture (or "conception of the world," to use one of his favorite phrases). Long before he refined his concept of hegemony, Gramsci was convinced that the revolutionary party had to exercise its leadership role first and foremost in civil society by, among other things, fostering the development of an independent sociocultural and political consciousness among the subaltern classes and by promoting the formation of self-regulated autonomous organizations among workers and peasants; moreover, this needed to be done *before* any attempts to assume governmental power. In "Prima liberi" (Freedom first), in *Il Grido del Popolo*, 31 August 1918, Gramsci polemicized against the young socialist Alfonso Leonetti, who maintained that the socialist transformation of mass consciousness could take place only after the Socialist Party acquired state power and, through the dictatorship of the proletariat, secured the freedom of the oppressed classes. The basic error underlying Leonetti's argument, Gramsci explains, is the conception of the political party as something separate from "the people":

Thus, Leonetti speaks of "us" and the "people" as if they were two separate entities: we (who?), the party of action; the people, a blind and ignorant herd. He conceives of the party of action in the same way as the *carbonari* 1848 did; as a ridiculous clash between a handful of conspirators and a handful of policemen. He does not think of

it in its present form, as it is shaped by the modern political struggle with the participation of countless multitudes.

Years later, in his prison notebooks, Gramsci went on to explain that the inability of the old Action Party to bring to fruition the revolutionary potential of the Risorgimento was due, in large measure, to its failure to establish broad-based and close relationships with the masses. In the polemic against Leonetti, however, Gramsci's focus is on the contemporary situation: the struggle for political power, in modern society, is carried out in public with the participation of the "countless multitudes." And this participation takes place, concretely, in civil society. Therefore, Gramsci asserts, it is through their activities and autonomous organizations in civil society that the subaltern masses must first acquire their freedom or independence from the ruling classes and the allied intellectuals, that they must first learn to become themselves a leading force:

Education, culture, the widespread organization of knowledge and experience constitute the independence of the masses from the intellectuals. The most intelligent phase of the struggle against the despotism of career intellectuals and against those who exercise authority by divine right consists in the effort to enrich culture and heighten consciousness. And this effort cannot be postponed until tomorrow or until such time as when we are politically free. It is itself freedom, it is itself the stimulus and the condition for action.

Underlying the main argument that Gramsci employs against Leonetti in "Prima liberi" is an insight he gradually develops into something resembling a general principle or basic thesis—namely, that the success of a social group in acquiring and maintaining stable governmental control in a modern state depends as much upon the work it carries out in civil society *prior* to acceding to power as on its subsequent ability to extend its influence over (and/or absorb within it) increasingly larger segments of civil society. It is noteworthy that this principle serves as the point of departure for the note in which Gramsci broaches, for the first time in the prison notebooks, the question of hegemony and the corollary distinction between domination (*dominazione*) and leadership (*direzione*). The note, entitled "Political class leadership before and after assuming government power" (Notebook 1, §44), deals primarily with the contrasting fortunes of the Action Party and the Moderates during the Risorgimento and its aftermath, but it also touches upon a wide range of larger issues. Immediately

after introducing the specific topic of the note, Gramsci articulates the principle that will guide his historical analysis, and this guiding principle, as it turns out, is nothing other than the concept of hegemony, albeit still in its embryonic form:

The politico-historical criterion on which our own inquiries must be grounded is this: that a class is dominant in two ways, namely it is “leading” and “dominant.” It leads the allied classes, it dominates the opposing classes. Therefore, a class can (and must) “lead” even before assuming power; when it is in power it becomes dominant, but it also continues to “lead.” . . . Political leadership becomes an aspect of domination, in that the absorption of the elites of the enemy classes results in their decapitation and renders them impotent. There can and there must be a “political hegemony” even before assuming government power, and in order to exercise political leadership or hegemony one must not rely solely on the power and material force provided by government.

Gramsci then proceeds to explain that the success of the Moderates in establishing their leadership role did not ensue from a direct struggle for power but rather from their place and function within civil society. The Moderates “succeeded in establishing the apparatus of their political leadership . . . in forms that can be called ‘liberal,’ that is through individual, ‘private’ initiative.” Even though they had no “official” party program, organizational plans, or a preestablished strategy, the Moderates were perfectly positioned in civil society to lead Italy’s relatively homogenous upper classes and to extend their influence among the potential organizers and leaders (i.e., the intellectuals) of the subordinate social strata. First of all, the Moderates themselves actually belonged to the social groups whose interests and aspirations they represented and expressed (in Gramsci’s terms, they were organic intellectuals); in other words, they were themselves a prominent presence in virtually every major sector of the “private” sphere: “they were intellectuals and political organizers and, at the same time, heads of business, great landowners-administrators, commercial and industrial entrepreneurs, etc.” Secondly, they constituted the only compact and historically progressive intellectual group (which means, in Gramsci’s terms, a group in a position of leadership) in the country; hence, “the Moderates exercised a powerful attraction, in a ‘spontaneous’ way, over the whole mass of intellectuals who existed in the country in a ‘diffuse’ and ‘molecular’ state to fulfill, albeit minimally, the needs of public education and administration.” Thus,

the Moderates, in effect, created an alliance between the ruling classes and the intellectuals from all of the other social strata, including those that were potentially adversarial. By so doing, of course, they virtually paralyzed the opposition; but most noteworthy of all is the fact that they were able to achieve this, thanks primarily to the favorable position they occupied in civil society.

At this point in his analysis, Gramsci makes another quasi-axiomatic statement:

Herein is revealed the truth of a criterion of historico-political research: there does not exist an independent class of intellectuals, but every class has its intellectuals; however, the intellectuals of the historically progressive class exercise such a power of attraction that, in the final analysis, they end up by subordinating the intellectuals of the other classes and creating an environment of solidarity among all the intellectuals, with ties of a psychological (vanity, etc.) and often of a caste (technico-judicial, corporate) character.

Once again, the point that needs to be stressed in this instance is that the phenomenon of “subordination” described here by Gramsci occurs without coercion; it is an instance of power that is exercised and extended in civil society, resulting in the hegemony of one class over others who, for their part, acquiesce to it willingly or, as Gramsci puts it, “spontaneously.” In fact, in the very first sentence of the next paragraph, Gramsci stresses that “this phenomenon occurs spontaneously.” However, he hastens to add that this “spontaneity” lasts *only* as long as the ruling class remains progressive—that is, only as long as it looks beyond its narrow corporate class interests, seeks to advance the whole of society, and continues to expand its presence in the “private” sphere, or, as Gramsci puts it, “continuously enlarg[es] its compass through the continual appropriation of new spheres of industrial-productive activity.” If, or when, the ruling class loses its position of leadership in civil society—when, among other things, it ceases to satisfactorily address at least the most pressing needs of the other classes, and its own constituent groups seek to protect only their own immediate and competing (e.g., industrialists versus landowners) corporate interests—its power of attraction disappears, the ideological bloc that held it together disintegrates, and “spontaneity” gives way to “‘constraint’ in forms which are less and less disguised and indirect, ending up in downright police measures and coups d’état.”

The success of the Moderates was extremely limited, and whatever

progressive function they served was short-lived. To be sure, they were able to attract around them the majority of intellectuals, but this was advantageous to them only in negative terms: it preempted, or greatly retarded, the organization of powerful and effective oppositional groups. Yet, neither the Moderates themselves, as the “organic” intellectuals of the upper echelons of society, nor the intellectuals they attracted from the other social strata proved capable or willing to pursue a progressive agenda for the country as a whole. The welfare of the South was ignored in order not to alienate the old nonproductive class of big landowners, whose wealth and power depended on a parasitic, quasi-feudal system that should have been rendered obsolete by the emergence of the modern bourgeois state. Also, the powerful industrial bourgeoisie of the North cared little that the economic and trade policies they adopted were ruinous to the nation’s agricultural base. The Moderates and their political heirs never really achieved hegemony in the full sense of the term. (In fact, when Gramsci, in this note, sets out to illustrate how a class becomes hegemonic, he offers the history of the Jacobin movement in France as an example, not the Moderates in Italy.) Proof of this is to be found in the measures used by the Italian ruling class to repress dissent, in the failure of the bourgeoisie to significantly expand the terrain of civil society, and finally in the Fascist coup d’état and subsequent dictatorship, which, more than anything else, made manifest the absence of a democratic culture in Italy. The culprits, in Gramsci’s view, were the cultural, economic, and political leaders of the bourgeoisie and those who allied themselves with them—in short, the intellectuals. That is why, as far back as 1918, in “Prima liberi,” Gramsci was underlining the importance of obtaining “the independence of the masses from the intellectuals.” In order to acquire this independence, the workers and peasants had to do more than simply join organizations, such as trade unions, that represented their interests; they needed to educate themselves, to learn to look at the structure of the state from their own perspective, and to develop the capacity to imagine a different kind of society and the collective will to struggle for it. Gramsci’s many contributions to this educative process included—in addition to his close involvement with the factory council movement, the *Ordine Nuovo* group, and the organizational work of the Communist Party—not only severe critiques of the bourgeoisie but also numerous articles offering alternative oppositional descriptions and interpretations of Italian history, the structure of the state, and the anatomy of Italian society. Gramsci was offering his readers the ingredients for developing a different representation of reality, a different *forma mentis*, a different understanding of history, in

short a different culture from the one handed down to them. Repeatedly, he would raise and invite reflection on the most basic questions, as for example in his article of 7 February 1920, "Lo stato italiano" (The Italian state):

What is the Italian state? And why is it what it is? What economic forces and what political forces are at its base? Has it undergone a process of development? Has the system of forces that brought it into existence remained intact? What internal ferments have been responsible for the process of development? What exactly is the position of Italy in the capitalist world, and how have outside forces influenced the internal process of development? What new forces has the imperialist war revealed and stimulated? What direction are the current lines of force in Italian society most likely to move in?

These were by no means rhetorical questions for Gramsci; he was profoundly preoccupied by them, as can be seen not only in his journalistic writings but in the documents he prepared for party discussions, meetings, and congresses. In the last essay he wrote before his arrest, the unfinished "Alcuni temi della quistione meridionale" (Some aspects of the Southern Question), he was trying to answer the question, "And why is it what it is?" with specific reference to the Italian South. The manner in which he addresses that question reveals, more than anything else, the overwhelming importance he attached to civil society. His analysis focuses on the social structure and class relations in the South and, above all, on the regional *and* national effects of the role played by the Southern intellectuals. When, after his arrest, he conceived of the program of study that would eventually result in the composition of the prison notebooks, he thought of it as a continuation and an elaboration of the ideas he had sketched in "Alcuni temi della quistione meridionale," only this time he would expand the scope of his inquiry to embrace practically all aspects of Italian civil society and its history. In his letter of 19 March 1927 to Tatiana Schucht, he describes one aspect of his project as a study of "the formation of the public spirit in Italy during the last century; that is, research on Italian intellectuals, their origins, their groupings in relation to cultural currents, their various modes of thinking, etc." The underlying motif of his studies, he explains, will be "the creative spirit of the people in its various phases and stages of development." In his list of topics for study on the opening page of the first notebook, Gramsci's main focus is still on the history of civil society in Italy; this is especially obvious in the first three items of his list: "1) Theory of history and historiography. 2) Development of the Italian bourgeoisie up to

1870. 3) Formation of Italian intellectual groups.” Many of the other items in the list are often characterized as “cultural” topics, but for the most part, they, too, are inspired by Gramsci’s desire to examine and assess the condition of civil society in Italy in its various aspects. The prison notebooks, in fact, can be fruitfully read as a complex response to the questions, “What is the Italian state? And why is it what it is?”—a response, moreover, that is guided and conditioned by Gramsci’s conviction that an inquiry of this kind necessitates thorough and detailed study of civil society, including its most recondite, or less exalted, elements. From this perspective, for example, the importance of Gramsci’s notes on second-rate “Brescianist” literature and on the almost comical intellectual ineptitude of “Lorianist” social scientists becomes evident: they are not critical cannonades against easy targets but rather a crucial part of Gramsci’s investigation into the reasons why Italian civil society had become so sick, so culturally impoverished, so politically impotent that it lacked the critical and moral fiber to resist the demagogic onslaught of a movement as intellectually destitute and repugnant as fascism. Similarly, the extensive critique of Croce’s philosophy is much more than a polemical incursion into the history of ideas; it is an integral component of the larger inquiry into the social irresponsibility of the intellectuals whose alliance with the ruling classes and detachment from the masses hindered the development in Italy of a civil society robust enough to withstand the violent wave of reactionary extremism. Many other major elements of the notebooks acquire great resonance when read from this perspective, including the sections on the Risorgimento, Machiavelli, religion, popular culture, subaltern history, journalism, and the language question.

This is *not* to suggest that the concept of civil society is *the* key to the interpretation of the prison notebooks: there is no single avenue into the labyrinth of Gramsci’s text. Besides, the concept of civil society is itself elucidated, elaborated, and theorized in the course of the writing of the notebooks. The point, rather, is this: Gramsci’s most insightful observations on civil society are, more often than not, intertwined with his particular and concrete analyses of a wide diversity of specific phenomena. One must resist the temptation to concentrate exclusively on those few passages where Gramsci attempts to articulate the concept (or facets of it) formally and systematically. There are numerous sections in the prison notebooks that make no explicit mention of the term *civil society* and yet are of fundamental importance to Gramsci’s development of the concept. Most important among these are the passages that deal with some aspect or another of hegemony; indeed, in the prison notebooks, hegemony and

civil society are interdependent concepts. Gramsci arrives at the concept of hegemony through the detailed study of civil society, and, moreover, his descriptions of the complex interactions among individuals and institutions in civil society constitute a concrete, material exposition of the apparatuses and operations of hegemony. At the same time, his development of the concept of hegemony enables him to elaborate the sketchy views he initially expressed in his journalistic writings and to develop a more comprehensive understanding of it both materially and theoretically.

The site of hegemony is civil society; in other words, civil society is the arena wherein the ruling class extends and reinforces its power by non-violent means. Hence, in the prison notebooks, the close scrutiny of civil society and the study of hegemony are virtually one and the same thing, and the former serves to reaffirm the concrete reality of the latter. From a note that, interestingly enough, does not explicitly employ the terms *hegemony* and *civil society*, one can see how, for Gramsci, the study of one goes hand in hand with the other. The note, entitled "Cultural topics. Ideological material" (Notebook 3, §49), opens with what, in effect, is a description of the overarching research project that englobes most of the fragmentary contents of the notebooks: "A study of how the ideological structure of a ruling class is actually organized: that is, the material organization meant to preserve, defend, and develop the theoretical or ideological 'front.'" What Gramsci is proposing here is nothing less than a study of hegemony; he then proceeds immediately to list the components of the material organization of the ideological structure that need to be studied. The list is remarkable for its detail and testifies to Gramsci's unwavering attention to the material particularity, the importance he attaches to the molecular aspects, so to speak, of civil society. On the top of the list, he places "the most dynamic part of the ideological structure," by which he means the press, or, more accurately, the entire publishing industry and every form of publication, including the most humble: "publishing houses (which have an implicit and explicit program and which support a particular current), political newspapers, reviews of every kind, scientific, literary, philological, popular, etc., various periodicals including even parish bulletins." The other things he lists range from the obvious, such as libraries, schools, associations and clubs of all kinds, and the pervasive activities of the Catholic Church, to the seemingly innocuous, such as architecture, the layout of streets and their names. All of these things constitute the "formidable complex of trenches and fortifications of the ruling class." The serious study of this "material structure of ideology" would entail a task of colossal proportions, and, yet, it is impor-

tant for Gramsci because “in addition to providing a living historical model of such a structure, it would inculcate the habit of assessing the forces of agency in society with greater caution and precision.”

By reading the prison notebooks selectively, many commentators have wittingly or unwittingly concealed the full implications of the ineluctable relations that Gramsci establishes between hegemony and civil society. There has been a tendency to stress the nonviolent, noncoercive character of the hegemonic relations that obtain in civil society, and thus to underemphasize the extent to which these are *uneven relations of power* that strengthen and help perpetuate the grip of the dominant classes over the state as a whole. It is a tendency often inspired by the desire to portray Gramsci as “democratic” and, therefore, acceptable and relevant to contemporary political culture that justifiably abhors totalitarian rule and that unjustifiably associates Marxist thought automatically with totalitarianism; but it is a misguided tendency, not because Gramsci was an undemocratic or antidemocratic thinker but because his work reveals the limits, insufficiencies, and exclusionary character of the democratic systems we inhabit, exposing, as it does, how and why subaltern groups are denied access to power. Hegemony is noncoercive power, but it is power nonetheless; indeed, the flexible, and often camouflaged, apparatuses of hegemony provide the dominant groups in society with the most effective protection against a successful frontal attack from the subaltern classes. Once a particular social group or grouping becomes hegemonic, it means that it has not only acquired control of the politico-judicial apparatus of the state but also permeated the institutions of civil society—in Gramsci’s sense of the terms, it has assumed leadership (*direzione*) in the cultural sphere.

Civil society is not some kind of benign or neutral zone where different elements of society operate and compete freely and on equal terms, regardless of who holds a predominance of power in government. That would be the liberal view, which misleadingly portrays the formal restraints imposed upon the use of force held in reserve by the governmental apparatus of the state as a boundary line that demarcates the separation between the state and civil society. The pervasiveness of this liberal view is such that it has often skewed discussions of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and of his concept of civil society—specifically, those discussions that highlight the distinction between coercion and consent, between political society and civil society. In reality, Gramsci’s writings aim to expose how domination of political society and leadership of civil society actually reinforce each other, how the power of coercion and the power to produce consent are inter-

twined. To be sure, Gramsci does distinguish between political society and civil society, but he does so primarily for the purposes of analysis, since the apparatuses of one are quite different from the apparatuses of the other. What Gramsci does *not* do is separate political society and civil society into state and nonstate; on the contrary, he regards them as the constitutive elements of a single, integral entity—the modern bourgeois-liberal state. The distinction between political society and civil society, Gramsci explicitly asserts in a note entitled “Relations between structure and superstructures” (Notebook 4, §38), is “purely methodological and not organic; in concrete historical life, political society and civil society are a single entity.” The source of the false distinction is liberal theory, which assigns economic activity to the sphere of civil society in order to place it beyond the reach of government regulation. Gramsci identifies two major flaws with liberal theory, whose main thrust is to legitimize and justify a “free-market” system: (1) it is based on an economistic concept of the state and civil society; and (2) it contradicts reality, since “*laissez-faire* liberalism, too, must be introduced by law, through the intervention of political power: it is an act of will, not the spontaneous, automatic expression of economic facts.”

Gramsci's critique of the economistic basis of liberal theory is accompanied by a critique of the economism that lies at the root of syndicalist theory. There is, however, a fundamental difference between the liberals and the syndicalists: the liberals speak for the dominant groups in society, whereas the syndicalists represent a subaltern stratum. Syndicalist theory, according to Gramsci, “is an aspect of *laissez-faire* liberalism” and debilitates the working class because it sacrifices “the independence and autonomy of the subaltern group . . . to the intellectual hegemony of the dominant group.” Economism entraps the working class in an economic-corporate phase and hence perpetuates its subaltern status. No group can escape from subalternity unless, and until, it is capable of “leaving behind the economic-corporate phase in order to advance to the phase of politico-intellectual hegemony in civil society and become dominant in political society.” In his second version of this passage (Notebook 13, §18), which appears under the title “Some theoretical and practical aspects of economism” in the special notebook devoted to his reflections on Machiavelli, the phrase “politico-intellectual hegemony” is changed to “ethico-political hegemony,” which further reinforces the noneconomistic character of hegemony. But what this passage (both in its earlier and later versions) illustrates most clearly is that (1) hegemony in civil society and domination of political society go hand in hand; and that (2) when a group satisfies itself

with simply obtaining some measure of corporate autonomy in civil society while remaining subject to the ethico-political and intellectual leadership of those who dominate political society, it dooms itself to subalternity. Gramsci makes the same point in a different way in a note he first drafted in Notebook 3, §90, under the title "History of the subaltern classes," and later included with some modifications and a new title, "Methodological criteria," in Notebook 25, §5, his special notebook on the history of subaltern social groups. The observations with which Gramsci opens the note are especially illuminating:

The historical unity of the ruling classes occurs in the state, and their history is essentially the history of states and of groups of states. But one must not think that this unity is purely juridical and political, although that form of unity has its own importance which is not merely formal. The basic historical unity, in its concreteness, is the outcome of the organic relations between the state or political society and "civil society." The subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and they cannot become unified until they are able to become a "state": their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, it is a "disjointed" and discontinuous part of the history of civil society and hence of the history of states or groups of states.

The rest of the note traces the various phases subaltern groups go through on the way toward realizing the need to learn to speak for themselves, to create their own autonomous organizations, and, through them, to acquire the ability to move beyond corporate self-consciousness and grow to the point of becoming, at least potentially, the "State." There are complex issues involved here that, if they were to be fully expounded, would require inter alia a close study of Gramsci's concept of the role of the political party. This cannot be done here, although it is important to point out, even if only in passing, that the political party as Gramsci conceives it must always seek to carry out its function in civil society, even if, or when, it accedes to government power. In this context, however, a different point needs to be stressed in order to counter the prevailing thinking of our time that equates civil society with freedom and democracy, and that all too readily confuses calls for party organizational rigor and unity of purpose with latent totalitarianism. What Gramsci has shown is that although the history of civil society may be the history of the acquisition of certain basic individual rights and of the growth of free enterprise economies, it is not the history of freedom *tout court*, for until now the history of civil society has also been the history

of the dominance of one social group over others, the history of groups that remain fragmented, subordinated, and excluded from power. Civil society can only be the site of universal freedom when it extends to the point of becoming *the* state, that is, when the need for political society is obviated.

The position of a ruling class, then, is more secure when it couples dominance of political society with hegemony in civil society. In order to achieve this, Gramsci explains in Notebook 4, §38, the ruling class must sacrifice its narrow corporate self-interest; it has to move beyond economic and political control and seek to establish “intellectual and moral unity, not on a corporate but on a universal level—the hegemony of a fundamental social group over the subordinate groups.” For this to happen, the governmental apparatus must, to some extent, rise above (or be seen to rise above) immediate class interests:

The state-government is seen as a group’s own organism for creating the favorable terrain for the maximum expansion of the group itself. But this development and this expansion are also viewed concretely as universal; that is, they are viewed as being tied to the interests of the subordinate groups, as a development of unstable equilibriums between the interests of fundamental groups and the interests of the subordinate groups in which the interests of the fundamental group prevail—but only up to a certain point; that is without going quite as far as corporate economic selfishness.

There are two ways to read this passage. One reading would emphasize how the expansion of civil society serves to curb economic-corporate egotism and accommodate some of the needs and interests of the subordinate classes. The other reading would point out that by exercising restraint, the government apparatus actually reinforces and extends the hold on power of the ruling groups over the whole of society. Both readings are correct, of course, but only the latter reading brings into relief the fact that civil society is not just a zone of freedom from coercion or sanctioned violence but also, and at the same time, the sphere of hegemony, the terrain of power exercised by one group or grouping over others.

The acquisition of a hegemonic position in civil society is ultimately more important to the ruling classes than the acquisition of control over the juridico-political apparatus of government. The latter, it is true, allows the dominant interest groups in a society to impose their will by force should it prove necessary, but if it were their only source of power, they would be rendered defenseless by a coup d’état. Hegemony, by contrast, insures the

dominant groups against the consequences of a coup d'état and, in all likelihood, even prevents a successful coup d'état from occurring in the first place. Yet, none of this should be construed to mean that Gramsci, in any way, suggests that the growth of civil society, which normally accompanies the extension and expansion of power of a dominant group from the economic and political spheres to society as a whole, is catastrophic to the subaltern social groups. The struggle against the domination of the few over the many, if it is to be successful, must be rooted in a careful formulation of a counterhegemonic conception of the social order, in the dissemination of such a conception, and in the formation of counterhegemonic institutions—which can only take place in civil society and actually require an expansion of civil society. This is why Gramsci regarded the corruption of civil society in Italy as tremendously disadvantageous to the interests of subaltern groups. He identified many aspects of this corruption of civil society: among them, the weakness of the political parties who exercised poor leadership in civil society, the failure of successive governments to rise above immediate class interests and their readiness to function dictatorially, the lack of integrity of political and intellectual leaders. The poor condition of civil society in Italy, for Gramsci, was most evident in its cultural decay:

Hence, impoverishment of cultural life and the petty narrow-mindedness of high culture: sterile erudition in place of political history, superstition in place of religion, the daily newspaper and the scandal sheet instead of books and great periodicals. Ordinary everyday fractiousness and personal conflicts instead of serious politics. The universities and all the institutions that developed intellectual and technical skills were impervious to the life of the parties and the living reality of national life, and they created apolitical national cadres with a purely rhetorical and non-national mental formation. (Notebook 3, §119)

This is the kind of passage from the prison notebooks that many readers pass over because it seems to portray a particular historical phenomenon—Italy in the 1930s—that is long past and has no bearing on our time. It is from passages such as this, however, that one learns to appreciate why Gramsci was so deeply concerned with civil society, why he examined its many aspects in such minute detail. Passages such as this should also inspire the readers of the prison notebooks to study civil society critically, as Gramsci studied it. For what Gramsci noticed is as true today as it was in his time, even if the actual circumstances have changed—namely, that

modern civilization is very fragile and so are the forms of freedom that come with it. In Gramsci's time, the impoverishment of civil society prepared the ground for fascism. In our time, civil society in the developed countries appears to be relatively safe, and it would be demagogic (and ahistorical) to suggest that fascism of the same kind that flourished in the 1930s might return. Yet, what kind of conclusions would we arrive at if we were to examine the condition of civil society today, in the way Gramsci examined it, critically, in detail, and from a subaltern point of view? What are we to make of the "petty narrow-mindedness of high culture"—not the "high culture" of Gramsci's time but of our own? And what about present-day political rhetoric? What about the apolitical mentality of many of today's intellectuals and technical experts? Could one confidently attest that the 1980s and 1990s have not produced their own form of intellectual charlatanism, a new brand of what Gramsci called "Lorianism"? What about the fragmentation and lack of leadership among the increasing numbers of destitute, powerless people—bereft of hope—in the mist of affluent societies? These are the questions that Gramsci's writings on civil society should compel the reader of today to reflect on.

Gramsci's concept of civil society may indeed be of some use when it comes to explaining the reasons underlying the collapse of the totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe. Much more valuable, however, is Gramsci's distinctive approach to the analysis of civil society—an approach, a critical method, that should animate a new series of inquiries into the present condition of civil society in different parts of the globe. The results of such inquiries are likely to be disconcerting; this should come as no surprise, for the prison notebooks remain a poignant document not because they provide ready-made explanations but because they raise difficult and unsettling questions and are an antidote to complacency—the sort of political and intellectual complacency that has taken hold of civil society since 1989.