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# 1 Gramsci's understanding of ideology

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'Ideology' can mean so many different things that when lay people discuss it they often misunderstand one another and when scholars try to clarify things they often leave us in more of a muddle. The least-confusing and most-thorough way of examining the concept would be to begin with the history of the term, starting with its first use by Des্তু de Tracy, then looking at what Marx and Engels said, and finally tracing the reaction of various schools, both Marxist and non-Marxist, right up to the most recent structuralist and semiological interpretations.<sup>1</sup> Gramsci's thoughts on ideology would be only a small part of such a study, even though the study of ideology makes up a significant part of his life work. Because he criticized the Marxist economism prevailing at his time and held that it was necessary to reassess the importance of society's superstructure, ideology, an essential element of the superstructure, came to assume a central role in Gramsci's work. Gramsci developed an unusually clear understanding of the subject through his own historical investigation. Repeating his analysis of the scholarly debates about ideology would take us far from our purpose, but we will mention those debates as we clear the field of interpretations that Gramsci considered inadequate.

## Gramsci's critique

First of all, Gramsci denies that ideologies are mere illusions. He asserts their real existence and points to the evidence of their vitality and their influence over historical events. This represents a break with a great deal of earlier Marxist thinking. The view that ideologies are illusions is central to the only work Marx and Engels devoted to the topic, *The German Ideology*,<sup>2</sup> which lays the foundation for a materialist interpretation of history in opposition to German idealism, their target. Their analysis exemplifies the very simple materialist concept of ideology that Gramsci rejects:

Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this, their real existence, their thinking, and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.<sup>3</sup>

and again

It follows from this that all struggles within the state, the struggle between democracy, aristocracy and monarchy, the struggle for the franchise, etc., etc., are merely the illusory forms in which the real struggles of the different classes are fought out among one another.<sup>4</sup>

In his later work Marx disparaged much of the language and analysis of *The German Ideology* and he retreated from its naive materialism. But this ideology, too, had its own power. It was diffused in the official doctrine of the early Second International.

Gramsci tries to correct this narrow interpretation of Marxism by recalling, 'Another proposition of Marx is that a popular conviction often has the same energy as a material force.'<sup>5</sup> When ideas become widely-held convictions they play a prominent role in social history although they are not eternal forces of history that philosophical idealists posited and that cruder materialists, rightly, criticize. Nevertheless, as Gramsci contends, ideology cannot be relegated to an illusory, fantastic world devoid of any significance and of any real consequences.

Gramsci also opposes a common view that the force of ideology must always be a negative one: a position that has long been held both by many Marxists and by most positivists. The negative connotation of 'ideology,' as prejudice and source of error, even predates both Marxism and positivism, as Karl Mannheim documents in *Ideology and Utopia*.<sup>6</sup> Mannheim denounces what were in his time (the 1930s) the most recent, totalizing developments of this interpretation, referring in particular to the idea of 'false consciousness,' a concept implicit in the passages quoted from *The German Ideology*. Engels explained the connection this way:

Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain unknown to him; otherwise it simply would not be an ideological process. Hence he imagines false or seeming motive forces. Because it [ideology] is a process of thought he derives its form as well as its content from pure thought either his own or that of his predecessors.<sup>7</sup>

Gramsci completely rejects this purely negative conception of ideology:

The bad sense of the word has become widespread, with the effect that the theoretical analysis of the concept of ideology has been modified and denatured. The process leading up to this error [the equation of 'ideology' with 'error'] can be easily reconstructed: 1) ideology is identified as distinct from the structure, and it is asserted that it is not ideology that changes the structures but vice versa; 2) it is asserted that a given political solution is 'ideological'—i.e. that it is not sufficient to change the structure although it thinks that it can do so; [therefore] it is asserted that it [the proposed political solution] is useless, stupid, etc.; 3) one then passes to the assertion that every ideology is 'pure' appearance, useless, stupid, etc.<sup>8</sup>

Gramsci followed Lenin who had previously rejected a purely negative view

in *What Is to be Done?*, where he contrasted 'bourgeois and socialist ideology.'<sup>9</sup> For Gramsci, as much as for Lenin, 'ideologies' are, first and foremost, political and social programs and the concepts on which they are based. Errors can be found in actual, historical ideologies, but 'ideology' is in no way the special abode of error.

Gramsci never confronts the negative connotations of 'ideology' in non-Marxist thought as directly as he confronts the conflation of 'ideology' and 'error' in the Marxist tradition. Nevertheless, he does not spare the positivist and empiricist illusion of a realm of social science free from ideological influence and able to reveal eternal truths, truths not bounded by history and culture. Gramsci reduces 'bourgeois' sciences to the same level as the 'ideologies' that positivists and empiricists see as major sources of error, making bourgeois and Marxist thought subject to the same criteria of truth.

Gramsci believes that neither matter-of-fact experience nor the investigation of concepts by common sense provides any special avenue to the truth. As far as the vast majority of people are concerned, Gramsci warns, '... to refer to common sense as a confirmation of truth is a nonsense.'<sup>10</sup> Common men or women are too much taken up with practical life, with the contradictions of the society of which they are a part, and with their culture to be able to find the source of truth in their immediate experience or in the concepts they live by.

Against the claims of positivist and empiricist social research Gramsci also objects that, '... any sociology presupposes a philosophy, a conception of the world, of which it is but a subordinate part.'<sup>11</sup> He adds more specifically with regard to empiricism in the social sciences:

An enquiry into a series of facts to discover the relations between them presupposes a 'concept' that permits one to distinguish that series from other possible series of facts. How can there take place a choice of facts to be adduced as proof of the truth of one's own assumption if one does not have a pre-existing criterion of choice? But what is this criterion of choice to be, if not something superior to each single fact under enquiry? An intuition, a conception, which must be regarded as having a complex history, a process that is to be connected with the whole process of the development of culture (etc.).<sup>12</sup>

Gramsci believes that we should recognize and distinguish the inner logic and methodology we follow in social inquiry from our initial assumptions and the aims that we pursue. 'Even theology,' he says, 'is based on a certain series of assumptions and then builds on these a whole massive edifice of solidly coherent and rigorously deduced doctrine. But is theology therefore a science?'<sup>13</sup> Not, we conclude from Gramsci, if it makes claims to eternal truth and provides no method to challenge those 'truths' it does presents. Even the truths discovered by natural science using the experimental method are not static truths. They can be amplified by subsequent discoveries. And they are not eternal truths. They can be rejected after the discovery of fresh, contradictory, truths.<sup>14</sup> 'Scientific truth' is a historical, limited, category for Gramsci.

Further, Gramsci does not believe that adherence to any 'scientific' method can assure 'objectivity.' As far as he is concerned, real science always involves the viewpoint of human beings in specific cultural contexts. Without reference to real men and women, the creators of all values (the classical 'measure of all things'), 'objectivity' becomes a purely abstract and metaphysical concept. But people *do* define their aims and objectives (and, hence, the point of view from which they consider themselves, and others can consider them, 'objective') as much as they use 'science' to pursue their ends. To be 'scientific,' for Gramsci, means to gather knowledge, 'in conformity with the end.' According to Gramsci, the 'scientific method' of those whose objective is to change things (whether those people are engineers or revolutionaries) is likely to be, not surprisingly, that of experimentation and rational argument, experiment to see if proposed changes work, rational argument to encourage the cooperation of others when change can only be accomplished by acting collectively. An inquirer's real desire to change something is the guarantee of her honest search for truth, the source of her 'objectivity.' Unfortunately, the very technical success of the engineering-oriented natural sciences has helped produce an ideology of 'unlimited progress' that makes it easy for us to be lazy about conceptualizing and specifying the ends we wish to pursue. The science that influenced the engineering changes of the industrial era, Gramsci argues, has yielded to a scientific superstition that makes the older, religious, superstition, which is more conscious of the ends it pursues, look positively noble, and, in a strange way, more 'objective.'<sup>15</sup>

To summarize Gramsci's critique: ideology is not mere appearance but a dynamic, material, and on-going force. Purely negative conceptions of ideology appear to him as reductionist and misleading either because they tend to obscure the actual importance of existing convictions or because they separate 'ideology' from 'science.' Gramsci sees little basis for this absolute dichotomy.

### **Ideology as worldview and political force**

Gramsci's critique of other's views of ideology began as a search for a concept to use in his own analysis. He eventually developed two interrelated concepts: Ideologies can be treated philosophically as different worldviews; at the same time they can be treated from the point of view of a functional sociology as forces of domination or liberation.<sup>16</sup>

#### *Ideology as worldview*

As a conception of the world, ideology can appear either as lofty theory, identical to 'philosophy,' or it can appear in the most degraded form as 'folklore.' Between these two poles, ideology appears in the guise of 'common sense,' which combines elements of philosophy or 'good sense' with elements of folklore.<sup>17</sup> Gramsci writes:

Perhaps it is useful to make a 'practical' distinction between philosophy and common sense in order to indicate more clearly the passage from one moment to the other. In philosophy the features of individual elaboration of thought are the most salient; in common sense on the other hand it is the diffuse, uncoordinated features of a generic form of thought common to a particular period and a particular popular environment.<sup>18</sup>

Philosophy, says Gramsci, is an 'intellectual order,' structured and coherent. As philosophy, ideology can appear 'implicit' in the highest realms of human thought and activity, in art, religion, and ethics as much as in production or high finance. Of course, many philosophies coexist at any one time, as do many worldviews. Not all philosophies appear woven in the very fabric of a society. Gramsci distinguishes between those that are, 'historical' philosophies, and all others. 'A philosophy is "historical" insofar as it spreads, insofar as it becomes a conception of the reality of a social mass (with a conforming ethic).'<sup>19</sup> Other philosophies may be just as sophisticated, coherent, and elaborated, but they remain the products of individuals and of little historical consequence.

'Common sense' lacks the organic elaboration and coherence of philosophy. Common sense, '... is the "folklore" of philosophy, and, like folklore, it takes countless different forms. Its most fundamental characteristic is that it is a conception which, even in the brain of one individual, is fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential, in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is.'<sup>20</sup> Common sense is therefore the 'philosophy of the multitude,' it is the philosophy of the non-philosophers, or in other words the conception of the world which is uncritically absorbed by the various social and cultural environments in which the moral individuality of the average man and woman are developed.<sup>21</sup> Common sense is not, therefore, an abstract philosophy produced by the mind of one or more intellectuals, but the philosophy of, '... real men, formed in specific historical relations, with specific feelings, outlooks, fragmentary conceptions of the world, etc., which were the result of 'spontaneous' combinations of a given situation of material production with the 'fortuitous' agglomeration within it of disparate social elements.'<sup>22</sup>

But even in its incoherence, with all its lack of organization, and with all its contradictory features, common sense is still, nevertheless, a conception of the world. As such it is a species of philosophy and ideology, the people's philosophy, the people's ideology. It may be regarded as 'lay religion.'<sup>23</sup> All men and women are, therefore, in some way philosophers and ideologists:

It must first be shown that all men are 'philosophers,' by defining the limits and characteristics of the 'spontaneous philosophy' which is proper to everybody. This philosophy is contained in: 1) language itself; which is a totality of determined notions and concepts and not just of words grammatically devoid of content; 2) 'common sense' and 'good sense'; 3) popular religion and, therefore, also in the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting, which are collectively bundled together under the name of 'folklore.' ... everyone is a philosopher, though in his own

way and unconsciously, since even in the slightest manifestation of any intellectual activity, in 'language,' there is contained a specific conception of the world.<sup>24</sup>

Now the positive reasons for Gramsci's denial that ideologies are mere appearance becomes clear. What indeed would people be without some conception of the world? We would be unable to reason, unable to make choices. We would be unable to speak and to communicate with one another and unable to act. Why, then, do most people deny being inspired by ideology as often as scholars say that common people lack reason? Gramsci answers that our ideologies are often unconscious, '... ways of life appear to those who live them as absolute, "as natural."'<sup>25</sup> In short, we rarely question why we think and act in a certain way, but, rather, regard our ways of thinking and acting as absolutely objective and eternal and, as such, as needing no deep study into their origins or consequences.

The positive reason for Gramsci's refusal to equate ideology with error also becomes clear: because there is no eternal, pure, 'purely scientific' criteria that we can use to choose one concept of the world over another. For Gramsci, no extra-political or extra-social rationality exists, and, therefore, if we wish to judge a worldview we can only do so relative to its social and political context and relative to the aims that define our own 'objectivity.'

#### *Ideology as an instrument of liberation*

If Gramsci's concept of ideology were limited to this notion of 'ideology as worldview' critics could easily charge that he escaped the materialist trap of economism only to fall into the pit of philosophical idealism. But, even though Gramsci may be remembered best as the theoretician of superstructures, he remains an historical materialist; the originality of his thought consists in his synthesis of the idealism of the celebrated Italian historian and philosopher, Benedetto Croce, and Marx's materialism. To correct the impression of Gramsci as a mere philosophical idealist we must turn to the second concept of ideology contained in his work, the one developed as a functional sociology of ideology's role in domination and liberation, and we must look at the relationship of ideology as worldview to ideology as political force.

Why do people produce ideologies? What makes ideologies grow and spread to become the worldview of large parts of a society, lay religions of the masses? For Gramsci, one part of the answer to these questions lies in the relations of production and in the interests expressed in a society full of contradictions by different social classes in their mutual struggle. While Gramsci did not accept *The German Ideology's* view that ideologies are merely an illusory reflection of real social struggles, he affirmed that ideologies are one expression of social struggles and one of the tools used in them. He says, 'All hitherto existing philosophies (philosophical systems) have been manifestations of the intimate contradictions by which society is lacerated,'<sup>26</sup> and adds:

... it is understood that the philosophy of praxis, despite Croce's 'surprise' and 'scandal,' studies, 'in the philosophers precisely (!) that which is not philosophical: the practical tendencies, and the social and class affections which they represent. Therefore in the materialism of the eighteenth century they glimpsed the French life of the time, wholly intent upon the immediate present, the convenient, the useful; in Hegel, the Prussian state; in Feuerbach, the ideals of modern life, to which German society had not yet raised itself; in Stirner, the soul of haberdashers; in Schopenhauer, that of the petite bourgeoisie and so forth.'<sup>27</sup>

He sets out his thoughts on the degree of distinctiveness of the functional role of ideology even more explicitly when he charges Croce and the bourgeois thinkers who follow him with making the same 'error' that they claim Marxists make:

... the error of practical origin is committed by their historian, Croce, who, after having distinguished between philosophy and ideology, ends up confusing a political ideology with a worldview, demonstrating in practice that such a distinction is impossible, that it is not a question of two categories, but of one and the same historical category, and that the distinction drawn is one of degree only; the worldview that represents intellectual and moral life (catharsis of a given practical life) of an entire social group ... is philosophy; every particular conception of the groups within a class who propose to help in resolving immediate, circumscribed problems, is ideology.<sup>28</sup>

In Gramsci's affirmation of the accuracy (but not the implications) of Croce's critique of traditional Marxist treatments of philosophy, we see Gramsci not only explicating the concept of ideology as political force, but also demonstrating the tendential coincidence between 'ideology as political force' and 'ideology as worldview.' In fact, the distinction between the two roles of ideology, between Gramsci's two concepts, can only be drawn for didactic purposes; just as, Gramsci argued, the distinction between structure and superstructure is 'merely didactic.'<sup>29</sup>

Gramsci's concept of ideology, and many of his other important concepts, can be thought of as having two sides, one more 'materialistic,' side and another, more 'idealistic' one. For example, another way that Gramsci expresses both the distinction between, and (ultimately) the unity of, his two concepts of ideology is through his parallel distinction between 'historical philosophies' and 'historically organic ideologies.' 'Historical philosophies' are those which create a world outlook that spreads. But these worldview spread only insofar as they are 'organic ideologies' in the material structure of production, that is, insofar as they correspond to existing contradictions and social struggles. Historical philosophies have to make sense to the groups that espouse them.

Nevertheless, Gramsci does not see philosophies espoused by the intellectuals of the dominant class becoming the common sense of the popular masses (the workers and peasants). That is not how ideology is 'used' in political

struggles. In fact Gramsci states that, allowing for the low cultural level and scanty realization of the critical capacity of the masses, 'philosophy can only be experienced [by them] as faith,<sup>30</sup> and that they, 'are slower to change their conceptions, or . . . never change them in the sense of accepting them [newer world outlooks] in their "pure" form, but always and only as a more or less heterogeneous and bizarre combination.'<sup>31</sup> According to Gramsci, the philosophy-common sense connection occurs across time. While the current philosophy of the dominant class is never transformed wholly into common sense, all the same, every, 'previous philosophy . . . has left stratified deposits in popular philosophy,<sup>32</sup> and, ' . . . several elements survive of an ideology that has emerged to guide the popular masses,<sup>33</sup> even after a change in the structure, a change in the economic limits on the range of possible social relations.

Common sense, to Gramsci, is therefore not only the product of the competing philosophies of the moment, but also the result of the fragmentary, incoherent sedimentation of the historical philosophies which follow each other in succession within the specific cultural environment of the social group considered. On the other hand, considering that historical philosophies have been the intellectual expression of the various economic structures that followed one another throughout history, common sense reflects a synthesis of all the prior social relationships that have bound people together. At the same time, common sense reflects a synthesis of all the prior relationships between the human species and the rest of nature. Gramsci says, ' . . . our present method of thought . . . has subsumed and absorbed all this past history, including all its follies and mistakes.'<sup>34</sup> According to Gramsci, this ideological sedimentation of common sense has grave effects on the consciousness of the general public. The clutter of common sense makes critical reflection difficult. Removing that clutter is a revolutionary political task that must involve 'intellectuals' as well as common people. It is in this relationship that ideology finds its liberating role in political struggles. Intellectuals are influenced by common sense in their philosophical or scientific elaborations, but they possess a capacity of critical analysis that can permit them to rid themselves of the influences of the past.<sup>35</sup>

Of course, given this special capacity of intellectuals, their misunderstanding of the world may be more damaging than that of the average man or woman. Even though Gramsci does not posit a concept of 'false consciousness,' within the framework of his analysis one could speak of something related: the typical intellectual's *lack of consciousness* of his or her dependence on the dominant class and a lack of consciousness of the historical and cultural factors which condition his or her work. The intellectual's lack of consciousness may be greater than that of the common person even though the intellectual has developed skills to overcome it.

In contrast, Gramsci identifies the typical problem of the common person as one of 'contradictory consciousness.' The popular masses are likely to be more dependent on the psychological leavings of the past than the intellectual

because the masses live their own ideology as 'natural' or even more as a 'faith' from which they have little critical, analytical capacity to free themselves. The contradictions in the common sense of the masses, their naturally lived ideology, together with the contradictions present in society create in the common person the 'contradictory consciousness' identified by Gramsci. He says:

Having observed that, since the ensemble of social relations is contradictory, man's consciousness cannot fail to be contradictory, the problem arises of how this contradiction manifests itself and how unification can progressively be achieved. It is manifest in the entire social corpus, with the existence of historical group consciousness (with the existence of stratifications corresponding to various phases of the historical development of civilization, and with the antitheses in the groups which correspond to one and the same historical level) and it is manifest in single individuals as a reflection of such a 'vertical and horizontal' separation.<sup>36</sup>

It is above all relative to this problem of contradictory consciousness that the 'philosophy of praxis,' i.e. Marxism, is, in Gramsci's view, superior to all other ideologies; this is what makes Marxism liberating. To Gramsci, liberation is not merely eliminating the economic exploitation of the working class and making it politically dominant. Liberation involves freeing common sense from contradictory consciousness and developing and extending its sound core of 'good sense.' The philosophy of praxis must therefore, according to Gramsci, criticize all past philosophies so as to remove the incrustations they have left, and demonstrate that ideologies are always instruments of power, because it is only with a merging of thought and action that the historical role of humanity (our species being) can be regained. In this sense, for Gramsci, the philosophy of praxis is the ideology *par excellence*, the one that best exemplifies his functional concept of ideology:

To the extent that ideologies are historically necessary they have a validity which is 'psychological'; they 'organize' human masses, and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.<sup>37</sup>

According to Gramsci, it is only by raising the cultural level of a population, which must be achieved by means of a constant dialogue between intellectuals and masses, that the process of unifying ideology and philosophy and philosophy and history can be accomplished. The two concepts of ideology we have described here will then no longer differ because common sense will have been raised to the level of philosophy at the same time that ideology will lose its characteristic of being an instrument of domination, becoming, instead, the philosophy and worldview of society. Gramsci saw his revolutionary struggle as one of creating social consensus around coherent 'good sense,' creating a world very different from the world of contradictory consciousness in which we actually live.

*Ideology as an instrument of domination*

Here we are less concerned with Gramsci's revolutionary aims than with how his concepts can help us understand the imperfect world as it is. Gramsci's ideas concerning the functional role of ideology for the class in power and the tasks of intellectuals in this context are already familiar to many students of international relations. But one aspect of his thoughts on this subject needs to be addressed because it has frequently been misrepresented. This is the problem of the relationship between the ideology of the classes in power and common sense. In fact, it is precisely within this relationship that Gramsci locates much of the problem of domination. As we have said, the dominant class does not gain 'ideological hegemony' by spreading its ideology throughout society until it permeates even the most remote places. For Gramsci, the degree of ideological hegemony of the dominant class is not equivalent to the capacity of its philosophy to transform common sense and to be transformed into common sense.<sup>38</sup> His analysis is much more subtle.

Rather than becoming the ideology of the masses, the philosophy articulated by the dominant class's intellectuals operates by helping to thwart the development of common sense into good sense. Ideologists allied with the dominant class help assure that potential taproots of critical reason do not develop in the consciousness of the masses, even though those ideologists are unable to, or uninterested in, shaping common sense to conform with the views of the dominant class. Gramsci expresses this concept clearly in one passage in which he criticizes Bukharin's 'Popular Manual of Marxist Sociology'. Gramsci says:

These systems influence the popular masses as an external political force, an element of cohesive force of the ruling classes and therefore an element of subordination to an external hegemony. This limits the original thought of the popular masses in a negative direction, without having the positive effect of a vital ferment of interior transformation of what the masses think in an embryonic and chaotic form about the world and life. The principal elements of common sense are provided by religion, and consequently the relationship between common sense and religion is much more intimate than that between common sense and the philosophical systems of the intellectuals.<sup>39</sup>

Gramsci neither believes that the whole population of any country shares the same culture nor that it shares the same values. He often writes about the wide cultural differences between upper and lower classes and between different regions. Moreover, what he calls 'passive consensus,' or, 'passive consent,' is not the social consensus identified by structural-functionalist sociology. It comes from Machiavelli's dual model of 'force' and 'consensus' as the two fundamental modes of developing political order.<sup>40</sup> Gramsci uses the term 'passive consent' to cover a wide range from 'tacit agreement,' to 'passive acceptance,' to 'indifference,' and perhaps even, 'unexpressed dissent.'

Gramsci wanted to understand the passivity of the working class and, even

more, the peasantry. He wanted to know why they did not rebel despite their marginalization. He realized that the cultural past (sedimentations of archaic historical philosophies) prevent not only popular rebellion but even, in certain circumstances, class struggle. The contradictory consciousness of working class and peasant activists can explain such passivity:

His theoretical consciousness can indeed be historically in opposition to his activity. One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): 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. But this verbal conception is not without consequences. It holds together a specific social group, it influences moral conduct and the direction of will, with varying efficacy but often powerfully enough to produce a situation in which the contradictory state of consciousness does not permit of any action, any decision or any choice, and produces a condition of moral and political passivity.<sup>41</sup>

Gramsci believed that the passivity of the masses could be overcome by the catalytic role of intellectuals helping the popular masses acquire consciousness of their position in society and by offering workers and peasants alternatives to the present state of affairs that they would not be able to elaborate on their own.

Of course, it is of at least minor importance that ideology can legitimate ('justify') the interests of the dominant class to allied groups; those interests would appear in all their crude brutality without the philosophical garb that gives them moral dignity. From this standpoint ideology, expressed in philosophical form, has the function of increasing the prestige of the dominant class, even though this position is already implicit in the relations of production. At the same time the dominant ideology affirms the rules of the game which the state must see are respected, even if this requires the use of force. Still, the greatest power of ideology come from the way the development of the critical consciousness of the oppressed can be thwarted when the intellectuals who would normally be allied with them are wooed away by the intellectuals of the dominant classes. This, and not the production of some unlikely society-wide consensus, is the essence of Gramsci's notion of domination through ideology.

Gramsci provides a concrete example of this negative function in his systematic criticism of Croce's role in Italian society. Gramsci reproaches Croce for having linked southern intellectuals with the bourgeoisie.<sup>42</sup> The negative role that Gramsci attributes to Croce in this context did not consist in his getting the peasant masses to accept his idealist philosophy. If that had happened Gramsci would have been less critical because then, at least, Croce would have raised the intellectual level of the southern peasantry. Gramsci criticizes Croce for having co-opted the intellectuals produced by the peasantry, thus preventing them from elaborating a philosophy in keeping with

the peasants' interests that would help them increase their own moral dignity and cultural prestige. 'Ideological hegemony' as 'consensus on the ideology of the ruling classes' may be a force that affects intellectuals, according to Gramsci, but it is unlikely to affect whole societies.

Gramsci draws attention to a final way in which the ideology of the dominant class diminishes the powers of the dominated. The ideologists of the dominant class help divide dominated groups with fundamentally similar interests by providing new justifications for old antagonisms. For example, Gramsci denounces the role of the Italian bourgeoisie in helping divide the northern working class from southern peasants by promulgating 'scientific' racism.<sup>43</sup>

In addition, the ideology of the class in power can seep into common sense just enough to help block the taproots of critical reason. In this context Gramsci explicitly mentions the 'material structure of ideology,' that is, that complex of institutions and organizations whose task it is to influence common sense. Such action takes place through forms of popularization which hide the conceptual debate over the fundamental principles of the dominant class's ideology. That is to say: the schools, the private media, the press offices of government, and other institutions spread simplified versions of the dominant class's ideology which obscure the critical philosophical debates in which that ideology originated, making the ideology appear to be just 'the way it is.' The material structure of ideology disseminates prejudices instead of the material of critical thinking. This not only prevents the cultural enhancement of the popular masses (who might, for example, be empowered by the same institutions if they exposed the critical differences between the ideology of the dominant class and the common sense and by challenging people to confront, understand, and choose between alternative premises), it also helps prevent common people from acquiring a capacity of critical analysis that would enable them to distinguish between ideologies in keeping with their interests and those that are not. Gramsci considered the role of the Catholic Church in Italy to be a perfect example: Priests endlessly repeating simplified concepts until they become part of a common understanding that no one will analyze or question. Thus, while, according to Gramsci, the primary link between historical philosophies and common sense is found in the past, in the history of attempts by the dominant classes to have their ideologies influence common sense and the resulting residue of historical philosophies in the lived ideology of common people, a social and functional relationship between philosophy and common sense occurs in the immediate present, in today's activities of the ruling class.

Gramsci sums up what we have said so far in a unitary concept when he says: 'The relation between common sense and the upper level of philosophy is assured by "politics," just as it is politics that assures the relationship between the Catholicism of the intellectuals and that of the simple.'<sup>44</sup> It is therefore within the framework of concrete political activity that ideology constitutes, according to Gramsci, an instrument of domination. This domination, as we

have seen, manifests itself in preventing the development of existing cultural potentialities and creating disarray in the ranks of the adversaries to the *status quo* and in strengthening a contradictory consciousness in the common sense which prevents common people from defending their most immediate interests, let alone undertaking coherent, collective action aimed at transforming the world as it is.

While what we have said so far should be enough to explain why 'social harmony' can exist in societies wracked by inherent conflicts of interest, Gramsci goes further to explain how concepts of social identity, popular views of race and territory, of 'us' and 'them,' preserve domination. In reality:

... in history and in the production of history, the 'individualized' representation of States and Nations is a mere metaphor, ... they exist as 'vertical' group distinctions and as 'horizontal' stratifications, i.e. as the coexistence and juxtaposition of different civilizations and cultures, linked by State coercion and organized culturally into a 'moral conscience' that is both contradictory and at the same time 'syncretistic.'<sup>45</sup>

Gramsci explains a 'moral conscience, contradictory but syncretistic' by showing that in European history there has been an 'ethical principle' which has bound together ruler and ruled. In the nineteenth century this was that of 'imperial authority,' which explains why peasants of Croatia or Venice fought, respectively, against the Milanese and Viennese liberals who wanted to liberate them from the oppressive political systems to which they were subject. Gramsci says that in his own time this ethico-political principle has become identified with nationalism:

The combination in which the hegemonic ethical-political element presents itself in State and national life is 'patriotism' and 'nationalism,' which is the 'people's religion,' i.e., the nexus through which the unity of the rulers and of the ruled takes place.<sup>46</sup>

Reading Gramsci's writings today we could think that he simply alludes to the nationalist outburst which provoked the first world war. But his analysis shows that nationalism became a more lasting principle in many countries by fusing in itself the core elements of religion and liberalism. Patriotism became a 'civil religion' of the masses, justifying persecution in the name of 'liberty' and 'country' to match that conducted by the Inquisition in the name of God.<sup>47</sup>

### **Liberalism as ideology**

To further clarify Gramsci's views it is useful to apply the conceptual tools he elaborated to the analysis of a specific ideology. The power of liberalism as a part of America's civil religion, the importance of liberalism to those who dominate the United States and other industrialized, capitalist nations, and the unusual faith in liberalism demonstrated by many American intellectuals make it the logical choice. We will limit our analysis to the political philosophy

of liberalism, placing special emphasis on the liberal theory of human motivation, but leaving most of liberal economic theory aside.

The significance of liberal political theory in the dominant social order before Fascism made it a major topic for Gramsci; his own analysis included both observations on liberalism in general and a more specific critique of Croce's liberal philosophy. Although Gramsci understood liberalism as an instrument of power as much as a conception of the world he considered it historically more advanced than the common sense of the Italian public of his day; in common sense archaic religious notions, including ideas of 'community,' made obsolete by socio-economic development, still survived.

In contrast, since Hobbes and Locke, liberal theorists, have conceived of society as a sum of atomic individuals who establish relations with each other of their own free will on the basis of considerations of individual utility. Individuals making up the whole pursue their own personal 'interests.' Liberal theorists posit free will in the choice of interests, but they single-out the pursuit of wealth and power as recurrent motives for human action. Often liberals will say that actions that cannot be related to these two objectives are the result of 'passions,' which is to say that what motivates them is something irrational or insufficiently specific as compared to the human interests in wealth and power.<sup>48</sup>

Gramsci criticizes the concept of an atomized society. He sees individuals as born in specific historical and cultural contexts which initially form their common sense, instilling values and norms of behavior<sup>49</sup> and making them internalize rules by applying social pressure.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, Gramsci does not accept this state of affairs as eternal. He notes that, 'the environment . . . does not justify but only "explains" the behavior of individuals.' Clearly, it is:

... 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 personality.<sup>51</sup>

Liberal political theory does not recognize the importance of such critical self-understanding in developing truly 'individual' motivations. It portrays an abstracted individual, in isolation from his social context and presupposes a generalized individual ability to exercise free will which, on the contrary, Gramsci argues, can only be the result of the personal attainment of consciousness, or the outcome of the movement of society as a whole from the domain of 'necessity' to that of 'freedom,' taken in its Hegelian sense as 'consciousness of necessity.'

Unlike the liberals, Gramsci believed, 'each individual is the synthesis not only of existing [social] relations, but of the history of these relations. He is a *précis* of all the past.'<sup>52</sup> Our goals and characteristic actions are shaped by our

common sense which, in turn, accumulates the historical experience of our society. It is only in this context that the motivations and norms which define individual interests can be determined. To claim that 'wealth' and 'power' are the main goals to which humans tend can, at best, be an adequate representation of those societies which have long-supported these objectives. More likely, the claim will be part of a particular political-ideological project aimed at disseminating these motivations, a project aimed at convincing people to pursue only wealth and power, or, even more likely, to justify the actions of those who pursue only those goals.

The other type of motivation posited by liberalism, 'passion,' demands separate analysis. Gramsci does not exclude passions from his political theory. He emphasizes the need to, 'overcome bestial and elemental passions,' by developing the, 'healthy nucleus, that exists in "common sense," the part of it which can be called "good sense,"' and Gramsci highlights how the search for more efficient forms of production and of economic development, 'industrialism,' was, '... a continuing struggle . . . against the element of "animality" in man.'<sup>54</sup> Like the liberal political theorists, Gramsci is not fond of 'passions.'

But what Gramsci identifies as 'passions' and the actions motivated by them and what liberal theorists identify as such are often quite different. Gramsci explicitly criticizes Croce's attempt to reduce political activity to the domain of passion. Croce's concept, Gramsci notes, does not explain how 'organized and permanent passions,' such as those of political parties, or armies, or nation states, can exist.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, referring to the worldview contained in common sense he states, 'It is necessary therefore to explain how passion can become moral "duty"—duty in terms not of political morality but of ethics.'<sup>56</sup> One could add, taking examples used by Gramsci, that moral duty can drive individuals to kill other people without hating them in the course of war or make a ship's captain go down with his ship against the most basic interest in survival; duty can be 'dispassionate,' yet lead to actions that contradict individual or collective interests. Gramsci fears that the liberal understanding of 'passions' blurs important distinctions. By equating all 'archaic' common sense motivations with 'passions,' liberal theorists devalue all motivations except the ones their theory highlights, the 'interests' in wealth and power. The failure of liberalism is analogous to that of dogmatic Marxism: it attempts to account for human actions solely in terms of economic or utilitarian motivation, implicitly claiming that humans act rationally only when pursuing base, selfish interests. To Gramsci, humans cannot be reduced to the simplistic categories of interest and passion: people are historical realities, the synthesis of their past and present social relations with which their consciousness interacts.

The discrepancies between the political philosophy of liberalism and social reality would not have worried Gramsci had he not detected in them the consequences of the other aspect of ideology, its functional role in maintaining social domination. Analyzing the situation in the Italy of his time, he states:

But a current and a party, specifically calling itself liberal, became established which has transformed the speculative and contemplative position of Hegelian philosophy into an immediate political ideology, a practical instrument of domination and social hegemony.<sup>57</sup>

To understand why Gramsci considered this a cause for concern we must say a bit about his analysis of the process of aggregation of interests and the political dynamics of social change. He writes:

The first and most elementary of these [moments] is the economic-corporate level: 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; in other words, the members of the professional group are conscious of its unity and homogeneity, and of the need to organize it, but in the case of the wider social group this is not yet so. A second moment is that in which consciousness is reached of the solidarity of interests among all the members of a social class—but still in the purely economic field. . . . A third moment is that 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.<sup>58</sup>

The aggregation of interests and the growth of social groups initially may be spontaneous; people easily share the concerns with those with whom they work and with others in similar social roles. Yet, even in the initial stages this process of building social solidarity may be impeded by common sense. It is in this political context that the role of the intellectuals and the ideologies that they produce becomes significant. The processes of aggregating interests may be promoted or hindered by intellectuals whose ideas can help people see common interests and find new ways to pursue them. The fact that social groups create their own ideologies by supporting intellectuals allied to them is thus not coincidental. Gramsci writes:

Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, 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. The capitalist entrepreneur creates alongside himself the industrial technician, the specialist in political economy, the organizers of a new culture, of a new legal system, etc.<sup>59</sup>

Each social group will not only try to energize its own intellectuals, it also can try to co-opt the intellectuals of other classes as well as the 'traditional intellectuals'; the intellectuals who are the expression of archaic social relations. Traditional intellectuals tend to believe that they are an independent social force, unbound to any other class, and, as a result, they (along with other intellectuals) may be relatively unaware of their own assimilation. In reality, they generally put

themselves at the service of the class in power and become, 'the clerks of the dominant group' and, 'the officials of the [existing] superstructures.'<sup>60</sup>

This is exactly what happened in industrial societies when liberalism became the ubiquitous ideology of traditional intellectual centers as well as the doctrine of organized political parties. Schools and parties began to disseminate an atomistic conception of society and glorify the individual pursuit of wealth and power. These liberal ideas, which Gramsci considers progressive compared to the more archaic elements of common sense, start to leave their residue in the minds of women and men. Yet, liberalism does not encourage critical reflection or lead to the identification of new common interests or to new forms of collective action. Its atomism proscribes most collective action, and, in its most pernicious forms, liberalism treats the archaic bases for collective action (of which we have a common sense knowledge) as passions, as negative motivations that we should repress. Liberalism actually helps make the people who accept it social atoms incapable of most collective action.

If, as Gramsci maintains, 'in modern history the historical-political "individual" is not the "biological" individual, but the social group,'<sup>61</sup> isolated individuals are not in a position to defend their economic interests or see their vision of the world realized, as far more powerful and determining organized forces are within society.<sup>62</sup> Liberalism falsifies perceptions of social relations, exalting individual autonomy while obfuscating the fact that in society wealth and power objectives are pursued by organized groups. Liberalism, therefore, impedes the aggregation of the dominated groups, whose members will continue to be bound by the rules of the game and to the objectives set by the dominant group. In this way liberalism is one of the instruments of the dominant classes and proof that ideologies are more than just expressions of social struggle; they are tools used in such struggles.

### Toward applying Gramsci's concepts

At the beginning of this section we stated our intention to explore Gramsci's concept of ideology in order to stress those aspects that are the most useful for interpreting contemporary American politics and foreign policy. Although we have attempted to give a synthetic picture of Gramsci's views, we have not extended our analysis to all of Gramsci's ideas that relate to the common sense notion of 'ideology.' Nevertheless, we believe that a number of critically useful distinctions can be clarified by even this brief account. We believe that the concept of 'contradictory consciousness' helps us understand contemporary society in the United States, or any other modern nation.<sup>63</sup> In order to understand American politics, in particular the relationships of domination, it is important to understand the contradictory consciousness of common people, what the common sense of most Americans is, and how what is common sense relates to the ideology of the governing classes.