

The theoretical issue of the nature of democracy, and the relation between socialism and democracy, was unresolved. Gramsci's concept of hegemony provided the solution, based on the recognition that popular democratic struggles, and the parliamentary institutions which they have helped to shape, do not have a necessary class character. Rather, they are a terrain for political struggle between the two major classes – the working class and the capitalist class. In order to advance to socialism, the labour movement has to find the way to link these popular democratic struggles with its socialist objectives, building an alliance which will enable it to achieve a position of national leadership (hegemony). The great achievement of Gramsci was to elaborate this conception of hegemony which had been pioneered by Lenin. The struggle for a broad democratic alliance forms the central theme of the revised version of the Communist Party's programme, *The British Road to Socialism*, adopted at its 1977 congress. But to overcome the limitations of economism in the British labour movement, far more than the adoption of a programme is necessary. What is required is the transformation of the way of conducting politics – of the political practices – of the labour movement.

The theme of this book is that a widespread understanding of Gramsci's concept of hegemony is an essential part of this process of transformation.

The Prison Notebooks

The story of Gramsci's life, from his birth in 1891 in the Sardinian town of Ales until his death in 1937 after ten years in Mussolini's prisons, has been movingly told by Giuseppe Fiori¹; and the principal events in his life are set out at the end of this book. His first experience of the leadership of a mass movement was gained when he edited the weekly journal *L'Ordine Nuovo* ('The New Order') which helped to inspire the great factory councils' movement in Turin in 1919-20. His ten years of intense political activity culminated in 1924-26 when he was general secretary of the Italian Communist Party. During these two years the influence of the ultra-left in the

party, mainly due to its first general secretary Bordiga, was largely overcome and the great majority of the party was won over to Leninist principles as Gramsci understood them. His active political life was ended by his arrest in November 1926. The *Prison Notebooks* were written between 1929 and 1935. In spite of the extraordinarily difficult conditions, the lack of any Marxist classics which he had to quote from memory, and his bad health which became steadily worse under the harsh prison regime and the lack of medical attention, he succeeded in filling 2,848 closely packed pages in 33 notebooks. In 1935 illness prevented him from writing any more, and he died on 27 April 1937, three days after his release from prison.

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

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

only a 'first approximation', and some of them might be abandoned as a result of further research, and even the opposite might turn out to be more correct. (Q438 and 935).

This tentative, undogmatic approach is one of Gramsci's most attractive characteristics. But it has the consequence that, in spite of the coherence of his thought, it is not at all easy, in reading through the Notebooks, to grasp the full significance of his contribution to Marxism. The aim of this little book is to provide an introduction to Gramsci's political thought as set down in his Prison Notebooks and earlier writings. Any attempt at a simplified presentation of his ideas is bound to lose a great deal of the flavour and richness of his writing; there can be no substitute for reading the Prison Notebooks. At the same time any introduction, however simple, is bound to involve interpretation of his thought. This is necessary because of its tentative and provisional character; and also because there have been great political, economic and social developments in Italy, Britain and other capitalist countries since Gramsci was writing. There were inevitably limitations in Gramsci's thought, just as there were in Lenin's, and some of these are examined in this book. A very important contribution to the development of Gramsci's ideas has been made by the Italian Communist Party, especially by Togliatti but also by many other Marxist thinkers. An immense literature has grown up around Gramsci in Italy, and a small selection of this has now become available in English translation. Some valuable contributions have been made by Marxist writers in Britain to the development of his ideas and their application to our own history and recent political developments. I have tried to take into account everything which is available in English. This element of interpretation must therefore be born in mind by the reader. The next chapter gives a preliminary outline of Gramsci's concept of hegemony and of the other concepts which are related to it.

2 Gramsci's Concept of Hegemony: an outline

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

2. *The Leninist foundation.* The foundations of the concept of hegemony were laid by Lenin who built on the work which had been done by the pioneers of the Russian Labour movement. As Perry Anderson has shown, the term hegemony was first used by Plekhanov and other Russian Marxists in the 1880s to denote the need for the working class to lead an alliance with the peasantry for the overthrow of Tsarism.⁶ The working class should develop a national approach, fighting for

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

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

A social group can, indeed must, already exercise 'leadership' before winning governmental power (this is indeed one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power); it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to 'lead' as well (SPN 57-68).⁷

Thus Gramsci transforms hegemony from a strategy (as in Lenin) into a concept which, like the Marxist concepts of forces and relations of production, of classes and of the state, is a tool for understanding society in order to change it. He developed the idea of leadership and its exercise as a condition for achieving state power into his concept of hegemony. Hegemony is a relation between classes and other social forces. A hegemonic class, or part of a class, is one which gains the consent of other classes and social forces through creating and maintaining a system of alliances by means of political

and ideological struggle. The concept of hegemony is constructed with the aid of a number of other concepts which are related to it. That is why any short definition of hegemony is inadequate. I will now give a brief outline of these concepts, which will be discussed in more detail in later chapters.

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

The proletariat can become the leading and the dominant class to the extent that it succeeds in creating a system of alliances which allows it to mobilise the majority of the population against capitalism and the bourgeois state (SPW II 443).

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

5. *National-popular.* For Lenin, hegemony was conceived mainly in terms of an alliance of classes or parts of classes. Gramsci adds a very important new dimension with his concept of *national-popular*: a class cannot achieve national leadership, and become hegemonic, if it confines itself only to class interests; it must take into account the popular and democratic demands and struggles of the people which do not have a purely class character, that is, which do not arise directly out of the relations of production. Examples are the

radical and popular struggles for civil liberties, movements for national liberation, the women's movement, the peace movement, and movements expressing the demands of ethnic minorities, of young people or of students. They all have their own specific qualities and cannot be reduced to class struggles even though they are related to them. Thus hegemony has a national-popular dimension as well as a class dimension. It requires the unification of a variety of different social forces into a broad democratic alliance expressing a national-popular collective will, such that each of these forces preserves its own autonomy and makes its own contribution in the advance towards socialism. It is this strategy of building up a broad bloc of varied social forces, unified by a common conception of the world, that Gramsci called a *war of position*.

6. *Passive revolution* In analysing the war of position carried on by the two fundamental classes for hegemony, Gramsci draws a basic distinction between the strategy employed by the capitalist class and that which is appropriate for the working class. The strategy of the bourgeoisie has a special quality which he called *passive revolution*. He developed this concept out of his analysis of the Risorgimento, the movement for the unification of Italy in the mid-nineteenth century. Although there were a number of popular uprisings in the course of the Risorgimento, the national unification of Italy (involving the expulsion of the Austrians) and the accompanying rise to power of the capitalists in Northern Italy, was achieved mainly through the agency of the state of Piedmont, its army and monarchy, instead of mobilising the majority of the population by supporting the demands of the peasants for agrarian reform. Thus the Risorgimento was a 'revolution from above', made in the main through the agency of the Piedmontese state: a passive revolution.

Gramsci suggests that a strategy of passive revolution is the characteristic response of the bourgeoisie whenever its hegemony is seriously threatened and a process of extensive reorganisation is needed in order to re-establish its hegemony. A passive revolution is involved whenever relatively far-reaching modifications are made to a country's social and

economic structure from above, through the agency of the state, and without relying on the active participation of the people. Social reforms which have been demanded by the opposing forces may be carried out, but in such a way as to disorganise these forces and damp down any popular struggles. It follows that the appropriate strategy for the working class is an *anti-passive revolution* founded on the continual extension of class and popular-democratic struggles (see paragraph 11 below on the *war of position*).

7. *Intellectual and moral reform*. For the working class, the task of passing from the economic-corporate phase to the hegemonic phase requires a transformation in the political consciousness of the working class and also of the members of other classes and groups whose support is needed for the broad alliance. Ideology acts as the cement or cohesive force which binds together a bloc of diverse classes and social forces. The cementing ideology cannot therefore be a pure class ideology, expressing only the class interests of the capitalist or working class. It has to be a synthesis, taking into account the unique historical traditions of any country and the contributions made by the diverse social movements which make up the hegemonic bloc. This process of ideological struggle was called by Gramsci *intellectual and moral reform*.

This requires an understanding of the nature of ideology and of the way in which peoples' ideas are related to their practical activities. Gramsci insists on the materiality of ideology, namely, that it has a material existence in the social practices of individuals. Ideologies are not individual fancies, rather, they are embodied in communal modes of living and acting. In order to understand the relation between an ideology and the individuals who are influenced by it Gramsci starts with what he calls *common sense*, the uncritical and largely unconscious way in which a person perceives the world, often confused and contradictory, and compounded of folklore, myths and popular experience. (He is of course giving the term a special meaning, quite different from the usual one, somewhat akin to the English terms 'conventional wisdom' or 'received opinion'.) The task for Marxism is to be a criticism

of common sense, and to enable people to develop its positive nucleus – which he called good sense – into a more coherent outlook.

8. *Civil society*. We have been analysing different aspects of the relations of forces – the contrast between economic-corporate and hegemonic, the importance of national-popular struggles and the nature of ideological struggle. Capitalist society is understood as a complex network of relations between classes and other social forces, dominated by the struggle between the two fundamental classes, capital and labour. These social relations are embodied in a great variety of organisations and institutions including churches, political parties, trade unions, the mass media, cultural and voluntary associations. One set of institutions, the apparatuses which make up the state, are separated from all the rest in having a monopoly of coercion. All these social relations and the organisations which embody them (other than the state with its coercion) are called by Gramsci *civil society*. The social relations which make up civil society are distinct from the relations of production, and the organisations within civil society are distinct from the apparatuses which make up the state. (The nature of this distinction is explored in chapter 9.) Civil society is the sphere of class struggles and of popular democratic struggles. Thus it is the sphere where hegemony is exercised.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3 The Relations of Forces

Transcending the corporate phase

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

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

So far Gramsci is simply giving the classical Marxist definition of the emergence of a class. His distinctive contribution comes with his analysis of the relation of political forces. He takes the rise of the capitalist class as his example, and distinguishes between three phases in the development of collective political consciousness and organisation. The first two of these are *economic-corporate* (often shortened to *corporate*) while the third is *hegemonic*.

1. The first and most elementary phase is when a tradesman feels obliged to stand by another tradesman, a manufacturer by another manufacturer, etc., but the