see, barely resembles some of the portraits painted in the secondary literature. In his basic theoretical assumptions, he was neither an orthodox dialectical materialist nor a neo-idealist. In his political thinking, he was neither a crypto-Stalinist nor a quasi-revisionist. Neither was he merely adapting the Leninist schema to new conditions. The Gramsci who will emerge from these pages is a creative revolutionary Marxist, who breathed new life into the doctrine of historical materialism, and posed the possibility of an alternative, more humane and diversified form of communism.

CHAPTER 2

The Concept of Hegemony

Certainly the philosophy of praxis is realized in the concrete study of past history and in the contemporary activity of creating new history. But a theory of history and politics can be made, for even if the facts are always singular and changeable in the flux of historical movement, the concepts can (and must) be theorized...

Gramsci, MS, p. 126

The concept of hegemony needs considerable amplification and analysis before we can see at all clearly how it is to be applied or what claims it makes. In spite of the voluminous literature on Gramsci, remarkably little attention has been devoted to identifying the precise meaning (or meanings) he assigned to what is, arguably, the key concept of his mature writings. Consequently, the concept's nuances, along with its theoretical potentialities, have been obscured if not completely disregarded. Treatment and use of hegemony is generally marred by conceptual vagueness; it has become one of those fashionable political catchwords which is often invoked but seldom properly defined or submitted to close scrutiny. Whenever certain Marxist analysts come across a situation involving (what they deem to be) the ideological predominance of a particular group or class, the term 'hegemony' is immediately adopted—as if the notion of 'ideological predominance' were itself free of ambiguity.1 This lack of rigour tends to preclude a full appreciation of Gramsci's efforts to enrich Marxist theory and practice with a sophisticated analysis of mass psychology. What follows is an attempt to reveal the complexities and implications of his scattered and fragmentary exposition of hegemony. In this chapter it is my intention: (a) to elucidate the various forms and functions of the concept, (b) to specify how it
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Gramsci: 'What does Gramsci mean when he speaks of hegemony with reference to Lenin? Gramsci understands the dictatorship of the proletariat.' There is some textual justification for this interpretation. Gramsci, after all, applauds Lenin's 'realization' of hegemony and does, at one point in his notebooks, explicitly use the term as the equivalent or intellectual and moral leadership plus political domination: 'The "normal" exercise of hegemony on the now classical terrain of the parliamentary regime is characterized by the combination of force and consent which balance each other in various ways...'

Gramsci was not entirely consistent; but from this meagre evidence, Gruppi infers too much, proclaiming, in a well-known article, that: 'For Gramsci the concept of hegemony normally includes those of "leadership" and "domination" together.'

This interpretation is both unjustified and unjustifiable. When Gramsci refers to hegemony in his Quaderni, it is almost invariably clear from the context that he conceives it purely in terms of ideological leadership, and that he wishes to counterpose it to the moment of force. Even when he speaks of 'political hegemony' or 'political leadership' (direzione), he undoubtedly means the consensual aspect of political control. In his desire to portray Gramsci as a staunch Leninist, Gruppi has blurred a crucial dimension of his thought. Gramsci's usual—and decidedly unLeninist—use of hegemony is well brought out in a now famous letter he wrote to his sister-in-law from prison in 1931. Here he distinguishes between 'political society (or dictatorship, or coercive apparatus, for the purpose of assimilating the popular masses to the type of production and economy of a given period)' and 'civil society (or hegemony of a
social group over the entire national society exercised through so-called private organizations, such as the Church, the trade unions, the school, etc."

14 Gramsci's deference to Lenin, his hesitancy to admit his departure from strict Leninism, his modesty about the extent of his own contribution, betokened his profound respect for the Bolshevik's practical achievements and status as a patron saint of revolution.

II. Civil Society/Political Society

At the foundation of his analysis, Gramsci employed yet another time-honoured dichotomy in political thought—that between civil society and political society. The distinction is usually associated with Hegel's Philosophy of Right, but its origins can be found in the writings of the French and English philosophers, politicians, and economists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who first discovered and investigated 'society' as a special, independent realm of knowledge and activity. The concept of society was the fruit of a long process of intellectual elaboration. All the same, Gramsci claimed that his definition of civil society was taken from Hegel. If so, then his interpretation of the German philosopher was, at least in this respect, rather idiosyncratic; for Hegel clearly understood by civil society the complex of commercial and industrial life, the totality of economic instruments and relations, together with the public services needed to maintain order within them (e.g. civil courts, police). Gramsci, by contrast, identified civil society with the ideological superstructure, the institutions and technical instruments that create and diffuse modes of thought. He was perhaps inspired by those passages in The Philosophy of Right where Hegel included in the realm of civil society the corporations, or trade associations, which, through their educative functions, mediate between the anarchic particularism of civil society and the integrated, universal aspect of social life embodied in the state. Whatever his motive, Gramsci departed not only from Hegelian usage but also from Marx's equation of civil society with the material substructure (i.e. the structure of economic relations). What Gramsci did, then, was to use traditional terminology in order to highlight an important, though generally neglected, theoretical distinction within the Marxist conception of superstructure, a distinction whose relevance for ex-
partly because the institutions of civil society, whether or not they are directly controlled by the state, must operate within a legal framework of rules and regulations. Indeed, Gramsci takes note of the tendency towards increasing state intervention in civil society, especially in the realm of culture (libraries, theatres, museums, etc.) and education.¹⁹

Moreover, as Gramsci indicates, the functions of the two moments of the superstructure overlap to some extent. Political society in itself, he suggests in a couple of brief passages, exercises a limited hegemonic role. The elaborate structure of liberal democracy (e.g. parliaments, courts, elections, etc.), by creating a façade of freedom and popular control, and by educating men in the ways of bourgeois politics, conditions them to accept the status quo willingly.²⁰ While Gramsci only alludes to this function and hardly gives it much weight, we should not be misled by the stark simplicity of his definition of political society as the 'apparatus of state coercion which legally imposes the discipline of those groups which do not consent'.²¹ Conversely, certain hegemonic institutions of civil society, such as political parties and organized religion, are transmuted, in specific historical situations and periods, into constituent components of the state apparatus.²² And, needless to say, all organs of civil society coerce those non-conformists and rebels who come under their particular jurisdictions.

This close collaboration, this ambiguous line between civil and political society, is translated in the Quaderni into a broad definition of the state, comprehending all institutions which, whether formally public or private, enable the dominant social group to exercise power. (Confusingly, Gramsci retains the more conventional, narrow conception of the state as political society). At various points, he defines the state in the following manner:

State = political society + civil society, that is hegemony armoured by coercion.²³

State in the integral sense: dictatorship + hegemony.²⁴

[The State is] the entire complex of political and theoretical activity by which the ruling classes not only justify and maintain their domination but also succeed in obtaining the active consent of the governed.²⁵

For Gramsci, then, the critical superstructural distinction is not so much civil/political or private/public as hegemony/domination; and individual societies can be analysed in terms of the balance between, and specific manifestations of, these two types of social control.

III. Hegemony and Taylorism-Fordism

Thus far we have discussed hegemony as a superstructural phenomenon, whose essential centre of radiation is 'civil society'. But in a disjointed and somewhat inconclusive set of prison notes headed 'Americanism and Fordism', Gramsci seems to be saying something rather different. In these long overlooked pages, whose importance has recently been alleged by a number of commentators,²⁶ he explores the technocratic and corporatist tendencies at work in advanced capitalism. In particular, he is concerned to examine the significance of 'Taylorism' as a method used by American capitalists to subordinate the workers to machine specialization and the 'cult of efficiency'. Frederick Taylor, whose system is expounded in The Principles of Scientific Management (1911), constructed an integrated body of principles for the purpose of maximizing efficiency within the labour process. His whole theory, it is fair to say, was based on the conception of man as a highly specialized machine, whose internal mechanisms could be precisely adapted to the needs of modern industry. 'Taylorism' can be encapsulated in three propositions: (1) the worker must be confined to a particular and minute task within the productive process; (2) he must develop automatic and mechanical attitudes (or reactions) to his work; there is to be, as Gramsci notes, no 'active participation of intelligence, fantasy and initiative on the part of the worker';²⁷ he becomes, in effect, an appendage of the productive apparatus; and (3) there must be an emphasis on individual monetary incentives, with the aim of breaking down the spirit of solidarity in the work force—which spirit, so the argument runs, lowers the general standard of performance.²⁸ According to Gramsci, Taylor's ideas form the basis of 'Americanism' or 'Fordism', the ideology of the advanced sectors of American industry. The chief goals of this ideology, Gramsci points out, are to rationalize production and create 'a new type of man suited to the new type of work'.²⁹
America, he believed, enjoys a ‘preliminary condition’ which facilitates the implementation of ‘Fordism’.

This condition could be termed ‘a rational demographic composition’ and consists in the fact that there do not exist numerous classes without an essential function in the world of production; that is, purely parasitic classes. European ‘tradition’, European ‘civilization’ is, on the contrary, characterized precisely by the existence of such classes, created by the ‘richness’ and ‘complexity’ of past history, which has left behind a heap of passive sedimentations, as evidenced by the saturation and fossilization of state officials and intellectuals, of clergy and landowners, of predatory commerce and the [professional] army.

Since America has no feudal past, she is relatively free of these ‘parasitic’ (‘idle and useless’) residues, whose presence has hindered the development of European industry and commerce. The absence of this incubus has enabled the United States to organize production on rational lines and to dispense relatively high wages—at least in certain industries. To some extent, then, America has realized the ‘Taylorist’ project: she has apparently suppressed the critical faculties of the workers, undermined their natural tendency towards collective organization, and—so to speak—‘bought them off’. It follows that in the USA, ‘hegemony is born in the factory’ and requires for its exercise only a ‘minimal quantity’ of ideological intermediaries. None the less, Gramsci did think that some ideological mediation was necessary—hence his stress on how the Puritan ethic was manipulated to legitimate the behaviour (abstinence from alcohol and ‘disorderly’ sexual activity) necessary for rationalized production techniques. (Maximum efficiency is of course impossible when workers dissipate their energies.)

Also, we must ask ourselves, how seriously did Gramsci take these new developments within capitalism? Did he, for example, actually believe, like Marx, that the rhythm of work in semi-automated factories could degrade men into stupified automatons? The answer is no. The total mechanization of labour, reasons Gramsci, ‘does not spell the spiritual “death of man”. Once the worker adapts to the new conditions, his brain, “far from being mummified, achieves a state of complete freedom”. Because of the routine nature of his task, the worker acquires greater opportunities for thinking; and “the fact that he gets no immediate satisfaction from his work and realizes that [the capitalists] want to reduce him to a trained gorilla, can lead him into a train of thought that is hardly conformist”. Neither can high wages serve as a long-run instrument of hegemony, for it is a “transitory form of remuneration”, which “will disappear along with the enormous profits” as modern techniques of production become more widely diffused. ‘Fordism’, as a mechanism of winning consent, was therefore geographically limited and historically doomed. For Gramsci, hegemony emanated primarily, if not entirely, from the organs of civil society; it could have no firm or lasting basis in the economic structure of capitalism, which—as we shall see—he regarded as a decadent, essentially inefficient mode of production.

IV. Hegemony and the Marxist Definition of Power

Disillusioned by the failure of the revolution to spread beyond Russia, Gramsci came to view hegemony as the most important face of power, the ‘normal’ form of control in any post-feudal society, and, in particular, the strength of bourgeois rule in advanced capitalist society, where material force is resorted to on a large scale only in periods of exceptional crisis. The proletariat, in other words, wear their chains willingly. Condensed to perceive reality through the conceptual spectacles of the ruling class, they are unable to recognize the nature or extent of their own servitude. Thus, he redefined the Marxist view of power in bourgeois society in more comprehensive terms. The idea that human society depends on voluntary agreement by its members to associate for the achievement of common goods, and upon the voluntary acceptance of mutual obligations and common arrangements is one of great antiquity. What was original about the concept of hegemony was its incorporation of this ancient proposition into a Marxist theory of class domination. For Marxists, dwelling on their apocalyptic vision, had invariably pictured capitalist society as little more than a battleground of irreconcilable forces and warring classes.

It is true that Gramsci’s conception harks back to the passage in *The German Ideology* where Marx and Engels declare that:
In every epoch the ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas, that is, the class that is the ruling material power of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual power. The class having the means of material production, has also control over the means of intellectual production, so that it also controls, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of intellectual production.36

This assertion, which was reiterated in the Communist Manifesto,37 is consonant with Marx's famous dictum, expressed in his essay on Hegel's Philosophy of Right, that 'religion is the opium of the people'. Marx and Engels plainly conceded the possibility that the ruling class could perpetuate its rule by controlling the means of legitimation and enshrining its definitions in the major institutional orders. Still, the founders of the 'philosophy of praxis' gravely underestimated the depth and pervasiveness of so-called 'false consciousness'. In the very same work quoted above, they inform us that, for the proletarians, 'such theoretical notions [bourgeois ideology] do not exist'. If the working class ever did adhere to these notions, they 'have now long been dissolved by circumstances'.38 These circumstances are made explicit in the Manifesto:

...modern industrial labour, modern subjection to capital, the same in England as in France, in America as in Germany, has stripped him [the proletarian] of every trace of national character. Law, morality, religion, are to him so many bourgeois prejudices behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests.39

The workers, on this argument, have come to inhabit a world where bourgeois culture—its norms and values, ideals and beliefs—is irrelevant, and where new forms have emerged in its stead. Commenting on the class structure of nineteenth-century England, Engels remarks that the proletariat has become a 'race wholly apart' from the middle classes. 'The workers speak other dialects, have other thoughts and ideas, other customs and moral principles, a different religion, and other politics than those of the bourgeoisie.'40

Attendant upon this radical cultural divergence is open hostility, manifest in a wage struggle Marx describes as 'a veritable civil war'.41 For Marx and Engels, as for all Marxists before Gramsci, conflict, not consensus, permeates the system: ‘Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie possesses this distinctive feature: it has simplified the class antagonism. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.42 Indeed, every social order based on a division of labour is, according to this view, necessarily a conflictual system: a class divided society is inevitably a society rife with turmoil. The problem of order, therefore, is typically solved by force or the threat of sanctions. The repressive function that Marxism characteristically assigns to state power arises logically out of the requirements of a set of social arrangements whose very persistence is always at stake. The state is a weapon, regularly and systematically used, because the internal threat to the system is continually manifesting itself in violent ways. Power is the key variable in this model of society: men do what is expected of them largely, if not wholly, because they are compelled to do so by those who monopolize the means of coercion. If they do not comply, they are threatened with or made to suffer some sort of punishment or deprivation.

It might be argued, with some plausibility, that Lenin did not accept the foregoing model, that all his thinking was conditioned by a fundamental despair over the proletariat's inherent tendency towards submissiveness, towards acceptance of the essentials of the existing order. To be sure, in his most memorable (and quoted) pamphlet, he puts forward the following argument:

There is much talk of spontaneity. But the spontaneous development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology; ... for the spontaneous working-class movement is trade unionism, ... and trade unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie.43

In other words, the exigencies of survival and day-to-day practicalities restrict mental (or ideological) development, and subordinate even the unwilling and rebellious to the logic and norms of the system. Revolutionary consciousness is not the natural product of the life experience of the working people. This observation is widely regarded as epitomizing Lenin's theoretical contribution to Marxism. It is not generally realized, however, that the pessimism of What is to be Done—a work produced in 1902—accords ill with certain of his earlier and
later writings, which articulate the conventional Marxist optimism about the subversive propensities of the proletariat. During the course of the revolutionary events of 1905, for example, we find him suggesting that ‘the working class is instinctively, spontaneously social-democratic’, a view he still maintained some years later when reviewing this period in retrospect.44

Of course, we must be chary about what inferences we draw from Lenin’s pamphlets and articles. His writings are always difficult to assess because of their engaged and rhetorical character, their intimate connection with concrete political activity, with specific controversies, events, and circumstances. Much more than Gramsci, Lenin was an activist first and a theoretician second. It is usually forgotten that What is to be done? was a polemic produced as part of an internal debate within the Russian Social-Democratic Party. Lenin later insisted that ‘it is false to consider the contents of the pamphlet outside of its connections with this task’.45 In addition, he was concerned, in this work, with the status of trade unions within Tsarist Russia rather than within capitalism generally.

The point to be emphasized is that Lenin made no clear-cut attempt to deviate from the classical Marxist analysis of capitalist society, at least not on a theoretical level. And regardless of whether he consistently (or *really*) believed that the proletariat is spontaneously disposed to mere ‘trade unionism’, he was constant throughout his career in his interpretation of the bourgeois order as essentially coercive. Capitalist democracy was ‘the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie’, shot through with coercion and violence: ‘the more highly developed a democracy is, the more imminent are pogroms or civil war in connection with any profound political divergence which is dangerous to the bourgeoisie’.46 Conflict between oppressors and oppressed, Lenin believed, is endemic in the capitalist order; trade unionist or ‘economist’ tendencies can only divert, and possibly tempe, this ubiquitous and bitter confrontation; they cannot eliminate it, or transform a society riddled with internal contradictions into an integrated whole.

But, in this *Quoderni*, Gramsci stresses that class conflict is not just channelled by generally accepted norms: it is effectively neutralized. To his mind, the present, antagonistic social reality can be upheld only if the antagonisms contained in it are hidden from view. Prior to social life, beneath it, enveloping it, is an underlying consensus. As far back as 1919, long before he developed his concept of hegemony, he devoted considerable theoretical attention to how trade unions and socialist parties, by working within the categories of bourgeois democracy, come to accept the very presuppositions of its operation.47 Writing from prison some years later, he completely dismissed these traditional working-class institutions as mere ‘instruments of political order’, fully incorporated into the capitalist regime. Under their tutelage, class conflict becomes domesticated and degenerates into a desire for marginally higher wages. This illusory conflict is consensus in disguise, and only serves to strengthen bourgeois hegemony by obscuring its true character.48 For Lenin, trade unionism was a sign of poor strategy; for Gramsci, it was both a mechanism and symptom of cultural integration.

To conclude this section, Gramsci seized upon an idea marginal (or, at most, incipient) in earlier Marxist thought, developed its possibilities, and gave it a central place in his own thought. In so doing, he rerouted Marxist analysis to the long-neglected—and hopelessly unscientific—territory of ideas, values, and beliefs. More specifically, he uncovered what was to become a major theme of the second generation of Hegelian Marxists (i.e. the Frankfurt School): the process of internalization of bourgeois relations and the consequent diminution of revolutionary possibilities. But before we can accept hegemony as a useful tool of analysis, it must receive much further clarification.

V. Consent, Consensus, Hegemony: a Conceptual Analysis

At this point, two crucial, difficult, and closely related problems present themselves. Hegemonic rule is rule through ‘consent’ (*consenso*), but what exactly does Gramsci mean by this notoriously vague concept? That is to say, what sort of conforming behaviour does he have in mind? And if hegemony involves some measure of societal consensus, what aspects of the social order must be included in this agreement?

Consent, like many terms of political theory, is capable of a multitude of ambiguities and meanings, and it might prevent confusion to say a few words about its history and current
usage. Some notion of consent as describing the relation of subjects with their government has been present throughout virtually the whole history of political speculation. Historically the idea has functioned within a theory of political obligation: since its inception, the concept of consent has been proposed as a ground or foundation of the right to exercise political authority, and as a moral limit on the extent and nature of that authority. For example, in ancient Rome, 'the great jurists of the Digest recognized one, and only one, source of political authority in the Empire, that is, the Roman people, and the emperors themselves, as late as Justinian, acknowledged this as the true theory'.

But the individualist overtones which the concept came to acquire in seventeenth-century contract theory were not present in either classical or mediaeval thought. Pre-modern notions of consent had nothing to do with individual acceptance by each and every human being; nor did they entail express choice or deliberate authorization. They simply affirmed that the authority of the ruler somehow flows, at least in part, from the fact that his subjects—understood as a corporate community, transcending individual preferences—allow or acknowledge it. Such a view of consent was appropriate to an organic conception of society, infused with the idea that every man has his appointed status and function in a natural hierarchy, and that problems of political ethics are problems not of rights but rather of the duties a man owes to his community, his people, his lord, his king, his Church, or his God, by virtue of his role in the universal order. This model of society could not survive in the face of an advancing individualism, expressing itself theologically in protestantism, economically in mercantile capitalism, and politically and philosophically in the theory of natural rights and social contract. In this latter doctrine consent came to be understood primarily as (a) a deliberate and voluntary act on the part of individuals, and (b) the only ground of political authority. Nothing could make any man a subject of a commonwealth, wrote Locke, 'but his actually entering into it by positive Engagement, and express Promise and Compact'.

The inconvenience of this view is clear enough, and succeeding centuries witnessed a reversion back to the collectivist sense of consent among those who did not abandon the term altogether. In contemporary political thought, 'consent of the governed' has been refashioned to take account of the weaknesses of the earlier liberal definition and to express a new demand. No longer does it refer merely to the necessary ground of the general right of governments to exercise authority, but also to the continuing processes—e.g. representative government, freedom of speech and association—by which, it is thought, governments are made responsive to the demands of the governed. 'Consent' has come to indicate the manner in which individual citizens ought to be involved directly or indirectly in the activity of governing, the manner, that is, in which political society should be organized and constituted. Thus, the concept has taken on a burden of meaning absent from the minds of contract theorists and, in the process, has ceased to refer to a mental disposition of agreement. Plamenatz, for example, asserts that 'where there is an established process of election to an office, then, provided the election is free, anyone who takes part in the process consents to the authority of whoever is elected to the office'. Whether or not an individual citizen in fact consents is no longer considered relevant; 'consent' emerges as an inmanent principle of procedural 'correctness': 'the consent which is a necessary condition of political obligation ... is rather the maintenance of a method, which leaves open to every sane, non-criminal adult the opportunity to discuss, criticize, and vote for or against the government'.

'Consent', then, has come to be regarded as specifying the nature or raison d'etre of the whole system of familiar democratic institutions. In its absorption into modern liberal ideology, the concept has tended to acquire a restricted, somewhat arbitrary connotation. Used in this narrow fashion it becomes useless in throwing light on the structure and working of political societies. In any case consent would not seem to be a useful specification of a democratic regime, whose important qualities could be better (and less perversely) defined in a different manner.

When Gramsci speaks of consent, he refers to a psychological state, involving some kind of acceptance—not necessarily explicit—of the socio-political order or of certain vital aspects of that order. Gone are the moral and prescriptive connotations which traditionally have been attached to the term: his conception of consent is purely descriptive, referring to an empirical, if not directly observable, fact. Thus, a hegemonic order need not
incorporate liberal institutions and practices; indeed, it may be totalitarian in the strictest sense. To Gramsci, the contemporary liberal assumption that a people without the opportunity to express opposition or dissent cannot truly be said to consent would seem most curious. But, assuming that consent refers to a mental disposition, there are weaker and stronger, more passive and more active senses and forms of it. In order to elucidate Gramsci’s meaning, it would be useful, first, to map out what sorts of political and social conforming behaviour might plausibly be said to be connected with the idea of consent.

Needless to say, conforming behaviour which is similar in its external manifestations may be the expression of very different attitudes, which can be grouped into three broad categories. First, one may conform because of the fear of the consequences of non-conformity, which may produce punitive deprivations or inflictions, including the loss of honour or self-esteem. This is conformity through coercion, or fear of sanctions—acquiescence under duress. Second, one may conform because one habitually pursues certain goals in certain ways in response to external stimuli. Thus, a man adheres to certain patterns of behaviour not because he consciously values them but because he has seldom entered situations in which the possibility of their rejection or modification has arisen. Conformity in this sense is a matter of unreflecting participation in an established form of activity.

Now there is no great linguistic impropriety in classifying ‘forced’ compliance or unconscious adherence as consent; Gramsci, however, did not include them in his definition of consent. As we shall see more clearly in a moment, hegemony is instead characterized by a third type of conformity: that arising from some degree of conscious attachment to, or agreement with, certain core elements of the society. This type of assenting behaviour, which may or may not relate to a perceived interest, is bound up with the concept of ‘legitimacy’, with a belief that the demands for conformity are more or less justified and proper. Gramsci does not specify exactly what kind of consensus (consensus with regard to what?) defines a situation of hegemony. His vagueness on this matter is shared by later consensus theorists, working within the Parsonian tradition in sociology and political science. Many recent critics of consensus theory have noted how its proponents experience enormous difficulty in isolating the objects of agreement they deem necessary for the maintenance of social cohesion. The now platitudinous phrase, ‘consensus over fundamentals’, comes perilously close to being a vacuous tautology. Certainly, there must always be consensus on linguistic and other norms involving symbolic communication, or else no society could possibly exist. Consensus in this sense has little explanatory value; but Gramsci meant much more than this. His concept of hegemony embodied a hypothesis that within a stable social order, there must be a substratum of agreement so powerful that it can counteract the division and disruptive forces arising from conflicting interests. And this agreement must be in relation to specific objects—persons, beliefs, values, institutions or whatever. Not included in hegemony are other types of unity or solidarity not forged around common objects, such as the intense bonds of affection and loyalty that may be present among the members of a family or kinship group, or the ‘consciousness of kind’ that some social theorists have spoken about in connection with social and national solidarities. While it is impossible to be precise about what objects of consensus Gramsci had in mind, he seemed, by contextual implication, to regard agreement on what Edward Shils has called ‘the centre’ to be the essence of hegemony—at least in modern industrial society. The ‘centre’, on Shils’s definition, includes cognitive propositions and moral standards about the societal distribution of benefits and about the worth of institutions of authority and order by which this distribution is brought about, changed, or maintained. Consensus must focus on the allocation of scarce goods, the permissible range of disagreement, and the institutions through which decisions about such allocations are made—that is, on the values, norms, perceptions and beliefs that support and define the structures of central authority. In Aristotle’s metaphor, all men either sound the same note or else different notes in the same key.

But consent through voluntary agreement can vary in intensity. On one extreme, it can flow from a profound sense of obligation, from wholesale internalization of dominant values and definitions; on the other, from their very partial assimilation, from an uneasy feeling that the status quo, while shame-
fully iniquitous, is nevertheless the only viable form of society. Yet Gramsci, as we shall see, is far from clear about which band or bands of the continuum he is talking.

There is perhaps a fourth possible type of conformity, which can be called pragmatic acceptance. Such acceptance occupies a central place in exchange theory, now enjoying currency among sociologists. One conforms, on this theory, because it is convenient, because this is the way to insure the reciprocal conduct of others, which is a necessary condition of success in achieving one's own goals, among them, the pursuit of wealth, material security, power, prestige, social acceptance, love, and so on. An individual consents, then, because he perceives no realistic alternative—i.e. no other alternative which does not run the risk of diminishing or eliminating his satisfactions. The basic assumption here is that, in a condition of scarcity and interdependence, it is simply imprudent not to behave in certain socially accepted ways; conformity arises out of the existential conditions that make social units interdependent.

This type of conformity, I would maintain, can be subsumed under one or another of our previous categories. In the first place, it is logically impossible to define a social interest independently of an ideological system. The definition of such interests must have reference to goals, and goals are not chosen randomly or 'objectively' but in terms of a hierarchy of values and beliefs. Against this, it might be argued that the desire to increase or preserve one's material benefits is indeed an objective interest, and one, moreover, which goes a long way towards explaining social conformity. But the desire to seek after the fleshpots of the consumer society is itself a value, irreducible to any timeless, absolute human needs. It is reasonable to designate as objective interests a certain class of natural needs in as much as they involve our biological preservation. Thus, if a potential non-conformist is threatened with severe deprivation, such as dire poverty or death, it is unquestionably in his interest to comply. Such an extreme situation, however, can be fitted into a coercion model. But what about situations where our biological interests are only mildly or marginally threatened, and where invocation of the coercion model would be inappropriate? For instance, in this age of the welfare state, it would be odd (though not implausible) to say that anyone in Britain is being coerced into remaining at any particular job; yet even a short spell on subsistence level unemployment insurance can threaten one's health or vitality, if it leads to significant changes in diet or living conditions. In a wide range of cases, then, to avoid unemployment is surely a biological interest. Is it not therefore an objective interest? A less complex issue, such as the problem of air pollution, might prove instructive here. Ceteris paribus, a low level of air pollution can categorically be said to be in everyone's interest; but the ceteris paribus clause is critical, for a rational man might be willing to risk breathing bad air in exchange for, say, the economic benefits of having the local factory operating at a level of maximum efficiency. In any given situation, whether or not it is in my interest to breathe pure air will depend upon the nature of my objectives. For the dangers of air pollution are not normally so severe or definite that they must be avoided at all costs in all circumstances. The same can be said for the dangers of temporary unemployment, at least in advanced societies. One might reasonably trade off some physical deprivation for extra psychic satisfactions. Speaking generally, the greater the number of realistic alternatives (and in complex, liberal societies, these are likely to be many), the more the definition of interests is determined in reference to values and beliefs, to ideological presuppositions. These premises may themselves deviate from social conventions, but it is with conforming behaviour that we are concerned. If an individual's perceived interests mesh with those of the rest of the community, then it is most likely that his perception will be based upon consensus principles. Ideological consensus, especially when it is firmly rooted, is bound to assume the guise of a collective pursuit of rational interests. But we should not forget that the very definition of what is 'rational' or 'pragmatic' itself conceals evaluative propositions as well as a particular cognitive framework. To speak of prudential consent simpliciter is not only conceptually inadequate; it also diverts attention from a vital question about social interaction, a question central to Gramsci's concept of hegemony: namely, why do men define their interests as they do.

The distinctions made here between different modes of conformity are analytic and hence easily drawn. But it is not all that easy in actual circumstances to determine, for example, where
compliance originating in voluntary agreement ends and where compliance deriving from constraint begins. On cases that fall near the margins, clear demarcation is impossible. Different types of conformity flow imperceptibly into their neighbours. In any event, it is not our purpose here to quibble over marginal possibilities, but only to distinguish Gramsci’s conception of consent from other conceivable ways of defining the term. But even if we define consent as conscious agreement over principles and practices, it is, as has been noted, a condition compounded of attitudes and motives capable of ranging over many different shades of quality and degrees of intensity. This is not merely an academic point: social stability will depend in large part on the depth of societal consensus. Gramsci’s actual words on the subject are ambiguous (though only superficially so) and merit more attention than they have hitherto received.

At times, Gramsci implies that consent in a hegemonic situation takes the form of active commitment, based on a deeply held view that the superior position of the ruling group is legitimate. For example, he characterizes hegemony as the ‘spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group, consent “historically” caused by the prestige (and therefore by the trust) accruing to the dominant group because of its position and function in the world of production’. Elsewhere he suggests that those who are consenting must somehow be truly convinced that the interests of the dominant group are those of society at large, that the hegemonic group stands for a proper social order in which all men are justly looked after: ‘The fact of hegemony undoubtedly presupposes that account be taken of the interests of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised that the leading group make sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind.’ Evidence such as this leads one widely read commentator, Giuseppe Tamburrano, to claim that consent, as understood by Gramsci, is an expression of intellectual and moral direction through which the masses feel permanently tied to the ideology and political leadership of the State as the expression of their beliefs and aspirations.

This interpretation, I think, captures only a part of Gramsci’s meaning. For in those passages where he is most explicit about the nature of mass consciousness in bourgeois society, his concept of hegemony takes on a richer, more penetrating character. In the chapter of the prison notebooks entitled ‘Relation Between Science, Religion, and Common Sense’, Gramsci focuses on the superficiality of consent within the capitalist system, by drawing attention to the frequent incompatibility between a man’s conscious thoughts and the unconscious values implicit in his action:

... is it not often the case that there is a contradiction between one’s intellectual affirmation and one’s mode of conduct? Which then is the real conception of the world: that logically affirmed as an intellectual act? Or that which emerges from the real activity of each man, which is implicit in his behaviour?

Gramsci goes on to answer these questions by suggesting a distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false’ consciousness:

... this contrast between thought and action ... cannot but be the expression of profounder contrasts of a social historical order. It signifies that the relevant social group (the working classes) has its own conception of the world, even if only embryonic; a conception which manifests itself in action, but occasionally, by fits and starts—when, that is, the group is acting as an organic totality. But this same group has, for reasons of submission and intellectual subordination, adopted a conception which is not its own but is borrowed from another group. ...

A few pages later he elaborates on these points:

The active man-in-the-mass has a practical activity, but has no clear theoretical consciousness of this activity. ... One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which truly unites him with all his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of reality; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically accepted. But this ‘verbal’ conception is not without consequences. It binds together a specific social group, it influences moral conduct and the direction of will, in a manner more or less powerful, but often powerful enough to produce a situation in which the contradictory character of consciousness does not permit of any action, any decision or any choice and produces a condition of moral and political passivity.
much because the masses profoundly regard the social order as an expression of their aspirations as because they lack the conceptual tools, the 'clear theoretical consciousness', which would enable them effectively to comprehend and act on their discontent—discontent manifest in the activity which unites them 'in the practical transformation of reality'. Presumably this would include all forms of collective worker action—bargaining, strikes, riots, factory takeovers. Because it is devoid of overall direction or purpose, this action is sporadic and ineffective. The 'active man-in-the-mass' lacks the means with which to formulate the radical alternative 'implicit in his activity'. On the one hand, his education has never provided him with the ability to manipulate abstract symbols, to think clearly and systematically; on the other, all the institutional mechanisms through which perception is shaped—the schools, the Church, the conventional political parties, the mass media, even the trade unions—in one way or another play into the hands of the ruling groups. The very framework for his analysis of the existing system is fixed by the dominant ideology.58 In this respect, language itself serves a hegemonic function. Gramsci displays interest in how its subtle connotations freeze perception and conception, thus facilitating the acceptance of conventional assumptions and impeding the expression of heteretical ideas. Trained in linguistics and aware of its latest discoveries, he recognized that every culture discloses and guides its system of values and its general cognitions in its language: '... every language contains the elements of a conception of the world'.61 Mental activity will depend on the character of the available vocabulary: if abstractions like 'democracy' and 'liberty' are identified with existing institutions, this will present a barrier to the diffusion of alternative images of society. So, all things considered, while the workers may be dissatisfied, while they may sense the contradiction between the positive official definition of reality and the starkness of their own subordination, they are unable even to locate the source of their discontent, still less remedy it.

The masses, Gramsci seems to be saying, are confined within the boundaries of the dominant world-view, a divergent, loosely adjusted patchwork of ideas and outlooks, which, despite its heterogeneity, unambiguously serves the interests of the powerful, by mystifying power relations, by justifying various forms of sacrifice and deprivation, by inducing fatalism and passivity, and by narrowing mental horizons. Such social conflict as exists is limited in both intensity and scope: there is general acceptance of means for adjudicating labour and other disputes, and large sectors of the established system enjoy immunity from political attention. The reigning ideology moulds desires, values and expectations in a way that stabilizes an inequitable system.

What overall picture emerges of the nature of mass consent in advanced capitalist society? It is well summarized in Gramsci's felicitous phrase, 'contradictory consciousness'. The thinking of the common man is neither coherent nor consistent over time; it is instead 'disjointed and episodic'; elements of intellectual and moral approbation coexist in unsteady equilibrium with elements of apathy, resignation, and even hostility. To be more schematic, on a general and abstract plane, the 'active-man-in-the-mass' expresses a great deal of agreement with, or at least passive acceptance of, the dominant conception of the world (if in a naive, common-sensical form); but on the situational level, he reveals not outright dissensus but nevertheless a reduced level of commitment to the 'bourgeois' ethos, because it is often inappropriate to the realities of his class position.

This account of mass consciousness is meant to be paradigmatic. Gramsci of course understood that reality is far more complex and differentiated. Clearly, the states of mind associated with different types of compliance—fear, habit, indifference, acquiescence, positive attachment—are interwoven in different ways in the social personalities of individuals. Some men are more successfully socialized than others, who may be at the margins of the dominant consensus or even outside it. In Gramsci's conception, where a man falls on the continuum between absolute commitment and total rejection is intimately related to his socio-economic conditions. Those who experience pain from the existing distribution of income, power, and status, though often sharing much of the consensual pattern of belief, also have contrary inclinations. A society which unjustly inflicts the distress of exclusion or deprivation cannot wholly succeed in assimilating into its affirmative consensus those whom it mistreats.
Gramsci's description of popular consciousness in modern bourgeois society is, in principle, empirically testable; and in later pages, we shall assess it in the light of recent survey studies. But his conceptualization of 'contradictory consciousness' also possesses a rationalist, specifically Marxist component, which is not susceptible to survey techniques. In Gramsci's eyes manifestations of lower-class discontent are not simply random, empirical data open to a wide variety of interpretation. On the contrary, these expressions of deviance fit into a pattern: they have an objective, intrinsically subversive meaning and incarnate an embryonic revolutionary ideology. What is more, Gramsci posits that the ideology the masses adhere to on a general level is 'false', not only because it is historically regressive but also because it reflects the interests and experience of the ruling classes. A man's 'real' conception of the world should not be sought in his verbal affirmations; it is implicitly revealed in his practical activity.

Beset by contradictions and sustained by deception, bourgeois hegemony is characterized by equivocal consent—at least as far as the majority is concerned. But this shallow form of hegemony does not exhaust all the possibilities, for hegemonic situations differ in intensity, and the degree of variation is rooted in the dynamics of historical development. It is rarely noticed that Gramsci speaks of three different levels, or types, of hegemony. (Hence the apparent inconsistency in his definition of consent.) In a paradigm case, which we can call integral hegemony, mass affiliation would approach unqualified commitment. The society would exhibit a substantial degree of 'moral and intellectual unity', issuing in an 'organic' (to use the Gramscian idiom) relationship between rulers and ruled, a relationship without contradictions and antagonisms on either a social or an ethical level. Such a stable situation, however, can persist only in those historical periods when well organized, widespread opposition is absent or discredited and when the ruling class performs a progressive function in the productive process, when it 'really causes the entire society to move forward, not merely satisfying its own existential requirements but continuously enlarging its social framework for the conquest of ever new spheres of economic and productive activity'.

Gramsci singles out post-revolutionary France as a close historical approximation to the ideal type and as a proper model for the proletariat to emulate in its struggle to build an ordine nuovo. By attending to the aspirations and enlisting the energies of 'the great popular masses', the Jacobins 'created the bourgeois State, turned the bourgeoisie into the leading, hegemonic class of the nation; that is, gave the new State a permanent basis, and created the compact modern French nation'.

But in modern capitalist society, Gramsci claims, bourgeois economic dominance, whether or not it faces serious challenge, has become outmoded; no longer is it capable of representing, or furthering, everyone's interest. Neither is it capable of commanding unequivocal allegiance from the non-elite: 'as soon as the dominant group has exhausted its function, the ideological bloc tends to decay'. Thus, the potential for social disintegration is ever-present: conflict lurks just beneath the surface. In spite of the numerous achievements of the system, the needs, inclinations, and mentality of the masses are not truly in harmony with the dominant ideas. Though widespread, cultural and political integration is fragile; such a situation might be called decadent hegemony.

The third and lowest form of hegemony—let us label it minimal hegemony—prevailed in Italy from the period of unification until (roughly) the turn of the century. This type of hegemony rests on the ideological unity of the economic, political and intellectual élites along with 'aversion to any intervention of the popular masses in State life'. The dominant economic groups do not 'accord their interests and aspirations with the interests and aspirations of other classes'. Rather, they maintain their rule through trasformismo, the practice of incorporating the leaders—cultural, political, social, economic—of potentially hostile groups into the elite network, the result being 'the formation of an ever broader ruling class'. The inducements used may range from mere flattery to offers of employment in administration to the granting of substantial power in decision-making. Because of trasformismo, 'the popular masses' of the Italian nation 'were decapitated, not absorbed into the ambit of the new State'. For them the institutions of the liberal state were either nothing but names, distant and irrelevant, or else alien and coercive forces. The seeds of this disaffection were sown during the Risorgimento, when the dominant Moderate
Party (which represented the company bosses, rich farmers, estate managers and entrepreneurs) succeeded in unifying the country politically but failed to establish an ideological bond between itself and the common people, over whom it (or the groups it spoke for) exercised the function of “domination” and not “leadership”: dictatorship without hegemony. 70  Strictly speaking, the hegemony of the Moderates extended only to other sections of their own bourgeois class, in particular to the forces associated with the Republican Partito d’Azione, the Party of Mazzini and Garibaldi, whose deference to the premises of the liberal order impoverished and ultimately neutralized its radicalism. 71  Whatever its pretensions, the Risorgimento never managed to reach down to the masses and construct a truly national community. To quote Gramsci’s bitter condemnation: “They said that they were aiming at the creation of a modern State in Italy, and they in fact produced a bastard.” 72  The illegitimate offspring was most unhealthy, an unbalanced and corrupt—if economically progressive—society, founded on widespread passivity and the spectre of violent repression. “Hegemonic activity” (Gramsci’s own words) did exist, but it was confined to the upper and middle classes, and as such “became merely an aspect of the function of domination.” 73  What the Risorgimento and its aftermath amounted to was a “passive revolution”, a process of modernization presided over by the established elites, who used the ‘revolutionary’ changes to maintain their supremacy and consolidate the extant order. 74  This supremacy, as we have seen, rested upon a narrow consensual foundation. Yet, because popular leaders were assimilated into the system, and because the masses themselves did not possess the cultural sophistication to fit their grievances into anything resembling a coherent framework, social discontent, while prevalent, lacked any direction whatsoever. Alternating with lengthy periods of sullen acquiescence, disruption did not move beyond what Hobson has called ‘primitive rebellion’. 75  pre-political and chaotic, contained by existing categories of thought and behaviour, incapable of being directed into reformist or revolutionary channels, and doomed to total failure. Such rebellion was based on “generic” hatred, which was “semi-feudal” rather than modern in character. 76  Thus, in a very negative sense, the people were subject to the ‘intellectual and moral hegemony’ of the ruling groups; but it was an exceedingly weak hegemony, marked by a low level of integration. 77  This concept of integration lies at the heart of hegemony, and, for Gramsci, serves to distinguish the ancient and mediaeval from the modern state. The following passage furnishes much insight into what a hegemonic order is not:

In the ancient and mediaeval State alike, centralization, both political-territorial and social (and one is a function of the other), was minimal. The State was, in a certain sense, a mechanical bloc of social groups, often of different races; within the sphere of political-military compression, exercised in acute forms only occasionally, the subaltern groups had a life of their own, their own institutions, etc., and sometimes these institutions took on State functions, which made the State a federation of social groups with separate functions not organized for a common purpose. 78  Thus Gramsci wished to dispense with the organic metaphor so commonly applied to ancient and mediaeval societies. It is far more fruitful, he believed, to view them as mechanical assemblages of distinct units, characterized by an absence of interdependence in the critical sphere of economic activity. What such societies represent is a primitive form of state, where the links between what people actually experience and the larger social, economic, and political framework are remote and indirect. 79  (On this conception, post-Risorgimento Italy was semi-mediaeval.) Social order stems mainly from inertia, from habit and indifference, not from consensus. The system is rigid; there is little or no contact and mobility between the dominant and subordinate groups.

But the bourgeois class, as the first modern state, ‘substitutes for the mechanical bloc of social groups their subordination to the active hegemony of the directive and dominant group, thus abolishing certain outmoded autonomies, which are, however, reborn in other forms, as parties, trade unions, cultural associations’. 80  These allegedly autonomous institutions incorporate the masses into the structure of bourgeois rule, which, for all its subtleties and apparent pluralism, is more or less total:

The revolution which the bourgeois class has brought into the conception of law, and therefore into the function of the State, consists especially in the will to conform. . . . The previous dominant classes
were essentially conservative in the sense that they did not tend to allow an organic passage from the other classes into their own; i.e., to enlarge their class sphere 'technically' and ideologically; their conception was that of a closed caste. The bourgeois class poses itself as an organism in continuous movement, capable of absorbing the entire society, assimilating it to its own cultural and economic level. The entire function of the State has been transformed; the State has become an 'educator'...  

In place of the vulgar caricature of liberalism—offered by both romantic conservatives and socialists—as an atomistic doctrine, seeking to dissolve the solidarities of social relationships and to replace them by the unfettered individual, the masterless man, Gramsci presents a view of the doctrine, and its bearers, as deeply informed by a spirit of common life and social union. Thus, the modern state (assuming that it is functioning properly) transcends the particularism of the 'economic-corporate phase'; it is a state in the real sense, enjoying the 'consent of the governed', however superficial this consent may be. 82

VI. War of Manoeuvre/ War of Position

Hegemony, as Gramsci understood it, was not just a tool of historical and social analysis; it was also a guiding concept for political practice. His ideas on integration enabled him to add a new dimension to the Marxist theory of revolution, thus superseding its aridities but, at the same time, introducing a whole new set of problems.

The United Front policy of 1922 pointed to the need to formulate new approaches to the socialist revolution, owing to the notable difference in development between pre-1917 Russia and Western European countries. No one spoke of deviating from the Russian model (which remained the unquestioned paradigm of revolutionary practice), only of adhering to it in more resolute and imaginative ways. Gramsci first deals with the problem theoretically in a letter of 1924, where he discusses the strength of superstructural forms 'created by the greater development of capitalism', which 'render the action of the masses slower and more prudent and therefore demand of the revolutionary party a strategy and tactics much more complex and vigorous than those used by the Bolsheviks in the period between March and November of 1917'. Refurbishing one feature of the old L'Ordine Nuovo theory of 1919–20, he focuses on how the development of capitalism has created 'a worker aristocracy with its adjuncts of trade union bureaucracy and social-democratic groupings'. 83

In directives to the central committee of the PCI in July of 1925 and August of 1926, he pressed these themes yet again. 84 A few years later, in his Quaderni, he wove the pessimistic strands of these communications into a full-blown revision of the sacred texts.

To clarify his argument, Gramsci compares political struggle to military conflict, prudently warning, however, that the comparison must be taken with a 'pinch of salt', as a mere 'stimulus to thought', since confrontation in the political sphere is 'enormously more complex' than war between nations. 85 Yet parallels are evident. In their reflections on armed hostilities among 'the more industrially and socially advanced States', modern military experts have proclaimed the centrality of the 'war of position' (protracted trench warfare) and relegated the 'war of movement', or 'war of manoeuvre' (rapid frontal assault on the adversary's base) to a subsidiary role. The latter has been 'reduced to more of a tactical than a strategic function', 'the same reduction'. Gramsci counsels, 'must take place in the art and science of politics'. The reasons for this 'reduction' are then elaborated:

In the most advanced States... civil society has become a very complex structure, one which is resistant to the catastrophic interruptions caused by immediate economic factors (crises, depressions, etc.). The superstructures of civil society are like the trench-systems of modern warfare. In war it would sometimes happen that a dogged artillery attack seemed to have destroyed the enemy's whole defensive system, whereas in fact it had only destroyed the outer perimeter; and at the moment of their advance and attack the assailants would find themselves confronted by a line of defence which was still effective. This is what happens in politics during the great economic crises. 86

To put it less picturesquely, the dominant ideology in modern capitalist societies is highly institutionalized and widely internalized. It follows that a concentration on frontal attack, on direct assault against the bourgeois state ('war of movement' or 'war of manoeuvre') can result only in disappointment and defeat. Gramsci associates this futile strategy with Trotsky's formula of 'permanent revolution', and consigns it to:
an historical period in which the great mass political parties and the great economic trade unions did not yet exist, and society was still, so to speak, in a state of fluidity in many aspects: greater backwardness of the countryside, and almost complete monopoly of political-state power [efficizinc] by a few cities or even by a single one (Paris in the case of France); a relatively simple state apparatus, and greater autonomy of civil society from state activity; . . . greater autonomy of the national economies from the economic relations of the world market, etc.87

From this catalogue we can infer three historical trends which, for Gramsci, complicate rather than further the revolutionary process: rapid economic development, increased centralization, and the growth of popular participation. So the optimism of Marxist thinking had been misplaced. The march of industry, according to him, leads not to certain revolution but to the integration of the masses into the capitalist system, as the agencies of socialization become more and more sophisticated and ubiquitous. What is needed in such circumstances is a 'war of position' on the cultural front. This strategy requires steady penetration and subversion of the complex and multiple mechanisms of ideological diffusion. The point of the struggle is to conquer one after another all the agencies of civil society (e.g. the schools, the universities, the publishing houses, the mass media, the trade unions). In the absence of a prior 'revolution of the spirit', a seizure of state power would prove transitory if not disastrous. It would be a matter of destroying only the 'outer perimeter' of the capitalist system of defence. The momentarily triumphant revolutionary forces would find themselves facing a largely hostile population, still confined within the mental universe of the bourgeoisie. Attention must therefore be directed to the inner redoubt of civil society, to the dissemination of radical ideas about man and society—in short, to the creation of a proletarian counter-hegemony. Before revolutionizing class and political relations Communists must revolutionize man himself, his way of thinking and feeling. Gramsci expresses some doubt as to whether this mental transformation can be fully achieved before the demolition of the capitalist state apparatus; in two passages he admits that the new Marxist regime will need to employ legal punishments (and rewards) in order 'to eradicate certain customs and attitudes and encourage others'.88 Despite this qualification his message emerges with clarity: in modern capitalist society a 'reversal of hegemony' is a precondition of successful revolution. But it is not simply a matter of substituting one hegemony for another. The principle of hegemony must itself be transformed—from a principle that mystifies the social situation to one that exposes exploitation and supersedes it.

What Gramsci's proposals amounted to, in effect, was the abandonment of the hallowed Bolshevik model. He placed much emphasis on a distinction between the 'organic' and 'conjunctural' dimensions of revolutionary change.89 The former refers to a gradual shift in the balance of social and cultural forces, and corresponds to the 'war of movement'. The latter refers to the realm of contingency, to the momentary period of crisis in which political forces contend for state power; it is the arena of political combat, of military confrontation, roughly equivalent to the 'war of movement'. Imprisoned by their scientific categories, Marxist revolutionaries had taken the 'organic' component for granted and focused their energies on the 'conjunctural', thus abandoning themselves to the momentary practicalities of economic and political struggle. They saw no need for a genuine cultural confrontation with the bourgeoisie. Gramsci was advocating a reversal of emphasis. Value conflicts could no longer be dismissed as illusory or unimportant. On the contrary, one of the movement's first tasks, according to the Sardinian, was to discredit or refute the 'cornerstones' of the dominant value-system—i.e. its 'great philosophical syntheses'. 'It is necessary', he wrote:

to strike against the most eminent of one's adversaries . . . A new science [in this case, Marxism] proves its efficacy and vitality when it shows that it is capable of confronting the great champions of the tendencies opposed to it, when it either resolves, in its own way, the vital questions they have posed or demonstrates, peremptorily, that such questions are false.90

The 'battle of ideas' was to be waged at all levels—including the highest. Marxists could no longer afford to remain encased in their 'economist' shells.

In light of all this, we can attempt to make sense of his vaguely formulated (though often cited) thesis, propounded in
his discussion of the Risorgimento, that 'a social group can, and
indeed must, already exercise leadership [i.e. be hegemonic]
before winning governmental power (this is one of the principal
conditions for the very conquest of such power'). In
the passage in question, Gramsci makes no attempt to qualify or
restrict the application of this 'methodological criterion'. But
understood as a universal hypothesis, it would seem, on its face,
to be contradicted by the Russian revolution, prior to which, as
he himself noted, the 'war of position', the struggle for cultural
supremacy, received scant attention. He does not seem to
recognize a problem here and, in a famous passage, justifies
Lenin's strategy by underlying the significant differences be-
tween East and West:

In Russia the State was everything and civil society was primitive
and amorphous; in the West there was a proper relation between the State
and civil society, and when the State trembled a robust structure of
civil society was at once revealed. The State was merely an outer
trunc, behind which there stood a powerful chain of fortresses and
casemates, more or less numerous from one State to the next.

The Bolsheviks, it appears, did not need to exercise intellectual
and moral leadership in pre-revolutionary Russia because they
were operating in an ideological vacuum. The various peoples
within the Empire clung to beliefs of autochthonous origins and
were in no way integrated into the regime's scale of values. But
where does this leave Gramsci's thesis about the universal
necessity of hegemonic activity as a preliminary to the conquest
of power? Given the nature of the Quaderni, we would be foolish
to expect absolute consistency. If we come across apparent
contradictions, perhaps we should resist the temptation to
collect debating points and instead attempt to sort out the
origins of these contradictions or to trace them back to a more
fundamental unity. In any case, Gramsci's overall position is, I
think, clear enough: that in post-feudal orders, in societies on the
road to social integration, 'there can and must be hegemonic
activity even before the rise to power, and that one should not
count only on the material force which power gives in order to
exercise an effective supremacy'. Just how much hegemony is
needed will vary in accordance with the degree of social integra-
tion, with the sturdiness of civil society. In the conditions of
advanced capitalist society, for instance, the hegemony of the
proletariat would have to be self-conscious, widespread, and
depth-rooted. But all this is very general and leaves open the
thorny questions of concrete analysis and application. As
Gramsci says, "an accurate reconnaissance of each individual
country" is required. Identifying the fact and levels of strength
of the various hegemonic orders, and specifying suitable lines of
attack, are problems for empirical study. Implicit here is the
need for a complex, differentiated analysis of the revolutionary
process and of the strategies appropriate to it. Gramsci does not
himself cast this insight in the form of a testable hypothesis, but
he does mark out the necessary analytic path for students (and
advocates) of social change and revolution, by suggesting
models and areas for future research.

Thus, there are not simply two grand strategies: one, the 'war
of movement', appropriate to a non-organic, neo-feudal society;
the other, the 'war of position', appropriate to a situation of
advanced social development. The gradations of social integra-
tion, Gramsci seems to believe, can be arranged, like consent,
along a continuum; an infinite range of strategies is therefore
possible. Yet, for purposes of simplicity, we can focus on the
areas near the two poles of the continuum. On one extreme,
where civil society is 'primitive and amorphous', revolution can
be viewed as a technical-military operation, depending less on
the empirical consciousness of the masses than on the deploy-
ment and structural relations of forces. This would be, in
Stanley Moore's classification, a 'minority revolution'. On the
other extreme, where civil society is healthy, a prolonged ideo-
logical struggle is a necessary precondition. On this conception
of revolution (what Moore labels a 'majority revolution'), the
state apparatus is finally left isolated and helpless, its ideo-
logical and institutional supports eroded. Revolution takes the
form not of sudden destruction but of gradual dissolution.

The major premise of Gramsci's theory of revolution is that
objective material interests are not automatically or inevitably
translated into class consciousness. In contrast to the main-
stream of Marxist analysis, Gramsci understood that responses
are invariably culturally conditioned, that political action—
even in the long run—cannot be conceived as an 'objective'
calculation of costs and benefits, for the very definition of what
constitutes costs and benefits necessarily presupposes some framework of values and categories which does not itself merely reflect 'external reality'. That is to say, political and social preferences do not simply arise from the facts of economic struggle; they reflect a man's assumptions about how society is and should be run, and in capitalist society, Gramsci claimed, these mediating assumptions are largely set by the ruling classes through their highly developed mechanisms of political socialization.

Left to their own devices, then, the masses in western countries are powerless to overcome their intellectual and moral subordination. The long and arduous process of demystification requires an external agency:

Critical self-consciousness means, historically and politically, the creation of an intellectual elite. A human mass does not 'distinguish' itself, does not become independent, 'for itself', without, in a broad sense, organizing itself; and there is no organization without . . . organizers and leaders.97

Thus, Gramsci's concept of hegemony provides the basis for a theory of the revolutionary party. For it falls upon an organized elite of professional revolutionaries and communist intellectuals to instil in the masses the 'critical self-consciousness' which will enable them to overthrow the existing order and develop a morally integrated society based on proletarian, collective principles.

The nature of this task will be discussed in later chapters. What interests us here is Gramsci's belief that the proletarian revolution is not inherent in the historical process, but just one conceivable outcome among others, dependent on the existence of sufficient organization, energy, and imagination to overcome the integrative tendencies of modern society. Before Gramsci, Marxists from Marx onwards approached each crisis in capitalism with the certainty that this time the proletariat would become class conscious, that is, come to view its social being as embedded in the necessary structural antagonisms of capitalist society. Revolutionary consciousness was regarded as unproblematical, a natural outgrowth of tensions and disruptions occurring during a period of systemic collapse. Even Lenin retained the theoretical baggage of inevitability, though his practice and strategic injunctions belied it.

It is, I believe, reasonable to affirm that, before Gramsci, no Marxist thinker had been sufficiently sensitive to the historical impact of ideologies and consciousness; none saw any point in delving into the intricacies of mass psychology. It has become fashionable in some circles to play down the fatalistic element in Marx's own thought and instead stress the rather tentative role he assigned to superstructural factors. Some commentators deny that Marx was putting forward an inexorable law of history or that he viewed the communist future as the necessary culmination of historical development. To quote Lichtheim, the 'relentless onward march of civilization' is a Comtean, not a Marxist, postulate. If the second generation of his followers understood Marx to have expounded a kind of universal optimism, they thoroughly misunderstood the meaning and temper of his message . . . Like every commitment [Marxism] carries with it the implied possibility of failure. Were it otherwise there would be no sense in speaking of 'tasks' confronting the movement.98

No doubt, in Marx's theory, neither institutions nor men function as inert, passive victims of history's inner logic. But the fact that consciousness is active is not to be equated to a contention that it can counteract the dynamics of production or the predestined course of history. The distinguishing question, of course, is whether the action is in harmony with the system of production and its immanent tendencies or is able to obstruct or recast them. Marx's 'true' position on this is not easily recoverable. Like most interesting thinkers, he took insufficient pains to make himself understood, thus leaving room for considerable controversy over the meaning of the concepts and laws he enunciated. Pareto once likened Marx's statements to bats: you can see in them something that looks like a mouse and something that appears like a bird. But mouse-like interpretations of Marx, which attempt to defend him by minimizing his now embarrassing 'scientific' image, cannot bear the full weight of the textual evidence; nor, if taken far enough, do they do justice to his originality. He was of course willing to qualify his views in the light of political events or new data, but such changes never led to changes in his overall perspective.
Marx stated quite plainly—and often enough—that the working class would, through its own efforts and perceptions, attain a fully developed consciousness of its situation and aims, that the everyday struggle for survival in class society was the school for revolution. In other words, the proletariat is a class whose conditions of life, whose experience at work and elsewhere, whose common struggles and discussions, will sooner or later bring them to an understanding of their state and what must be done to transform it. Some major features of Marx's view of class consciousness are summarized in the following passage from The Holy Family:

... because the conditions of life of the proletariat bring all the conditions of present society into a most inhuman focus, because man is lost in the proletariat but at the same time has won a theoretical awareness of that loss and is driven to revolt against this inhumanity by urgent, patent, and absolutely compelling need (the practical expression of necessity)—therefore the proletariat can and must emancipate itself. ... Its aim and historical action is prescribed, irrevocably and obviously, in its own situation in life as well as in the entire organization of contemporary civil society.99

In the Communist Manifesto, Marx casts this process in a more sociological mould:

The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of modern industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.100

To be more specific, the evolution of industrial capitalism both furnishes the preconditions of collective organization, by herding workers together in large numbers, and creates the deprivation which spur them to combination. This unity develops consciousness of conflicting interests and trains workers in methods of struggle. The limited economic achievements of their unions lead workers to adopt political forms of action, and ultimately to challenge directly the whole structure of class domination. And so, 'The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated ... capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a law of Nature, its own negation.'101

For Marx, then, the growth of revolutionary consciousness is an inevitable concomitant of the very economic contradictions that generate the downfall of capitalism. The philosophical basis of this argument is given blunt expression in The German Ideology, where he and his partner observe that:

The phantoms formed in the human brain, too, are necessary sublimations of man's material life-process which is empirically verifiable and connected with material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, and all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness no longer seem to be independent. They have no history or development. Rather, men who develop their material production and their material relationships alter their thinking and the products of their thinking along with their real existence. Consciousness does not determine life, but life determines consciousness.102

Thus, conscious activity is an ideological reflex of the primary process whereby men organize their relationship to nature and to each other. Yet, as is well known, Marx anticipated Lenin (who never reconciled his mechanistic materialism with his theory of the party) in speaking of the need for an enlightened vanguard to systematize and promulgate the revolutionary theory at first only implicit in mass consciousness. On the one hand, then, Marx felt quite certain that the contradictions engendered by capitalism would inevitably lead to class consciousness; on the other hand, he attributed to political action and to his own scientific theory of history a major role in bringing about the result. In his own eyes this difficulty was resolved because such subjective elements as revolutionary science and political activism were themselves necessary by-products of the structural deficiencies inherent in capitalism. While Marx obviously realizes that no revolution can be made without some sort of prior change in proletarian consciousness, he consistently denies that this change has any independent causal significance. But, in the final analysis, he (and his later disciples) failed to supply a convincing account of the theoretical link between determining conditions and determined response: he (and they) did not correctly estimate the real gap between 'objective' and subjective interests.
The Concept of Hegemony

Here again, as with the analysis of bourgeois rule, the concept of hegemony advances us beyond the categories of classical Marxism. But Gramsci's theory of class consciousness cannot be fully understood in isolation from his theory of social causation. What, if any, are the underlying conditions for the emergence of a new culture, a new mode of thought and being? To what extent was Gramsci a voluntarist? What role did he assign to the economic infrastructure? To these (and related) questions, we now turn.

CHAPTER 3

Base and Superstructure: the Role of Consciousness

The canons of historical materialism are valid only post-factum, to study and comprehend the events of the past; they ought not to become a mortgage on the present and future.

(Gramsci, 'La critica critica', Il Grido del Popolo, 12 January 1918)

I. The Neo-Idealist Interpretation

Much Italian discussion of Gramsci has centred on the fundamental question of his status as a Marxist writer. Prima facie, his preoccupation with hegemony, with intellectual and spiritual supremacy, does seem to situate him in the idealist camp. For was he not, after all, speaking in terms of the autonomy of ideas? Was it not a common idealist tendency to interpret all cultures and epochs as expressions of a distinctive Geist, or ethos, that gradually penetrates institutions and belief systems until its various forms are exhausted and a new Geist replaces it? The idea that revolution can be conducted in the realm of thought, that liberation can be attained through philosophy, was always considered a Young Hegelian heresy. If, according to Marxism, the course of history is shaped by the determined action of material conditions operating in conformity to immutable laws independent of human will, then how could Gramsci, with his denial of historical inevitability and stress on the subjective dimension of human experience, possibly be a Marxist? Not surprisingly, it has been the view of many that, in the Sardinian's writings, a quasi-idealist voluntarism replaces historical and economic determinism. On this interpretation, Gramsci does not, like Marx, stand speculative idealism on its feet; he merely injects into the doctrine some