

The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci

Today, no Marxist thinker after the classical epoch is so universally respected in the West as Antonio Gramsci. Nor is any term so freely or diversely invoked on the Left as that of hegemony, to which he gave currency. Gramsci's reputation, still local and marginal outside his native Italy in the early sixties, has a decade later become a world-wide fame. The homage due to his enterprise in prison is now—thirty years after the first publication of his notebooks—finally and fully being paid. Lack of knowledge, or paucity of discussion, have ceased to be obstacles to the diffusion of his thought. In principle every revolutionary socialist, not only in the West—if especially in the West—can henceforward benefit from Gramsci's patrimony. Yet at the same time, the spread of Gramsci's renown has not to date been accompanied by any corresponding depth of enquiry into his work. The very range of the appeals now made to his authority, from the most contrasted sectors of the Left, suggests the limits of close study or comprehension of his ideas. The price of so ecumenical an admiration is necessarily ambiguity: multiple and incompatible interpretations of the themes of the Prison Notebooks.

There are, of course, good reasons for this. No Marxist work is so difficult to read accurately and systematically, because of the peculiar conditions of its composition. To start with, Gramsci underwent the normal fate of original theorists, from which neither Marx nor Lenin is exempt: the necessity of working towards radically new concepts in an old vocabulary, designed for other purposes and times, which overlaid and deflected their meaning. Just as Marx had to think many of his innovations in the language of Hegel or Smith, Lenin in that of Plekhanov and Kautsky, so Gramsci often had to produce his concepts within the archaic and inadequate apparatus of Croce or Machiavelli. This familiar problem, however, is compounded by the fact that Gramsci wrote in prison, under atrocious conditions, with a fascist censor scrutinizing everything that he produced. The involuntary disguise that inherited language so often imposes on a pioneer was thus superimposed by a voluntary disguise which Gramsci assumed to evade his jailers. The result is a work censored twice over: its spaces, ellipses, contradictions, disorders, allusions, repetitions, are the result of this uniquely adverse process of composition. The reconstruction of the hidden order within these hieroglyphs remains to be done. This difficult enterprise has scarcely yet been started. A systematic work of recovery is needed to discover what Gramsci wrote in the true, obliterated text of his thought. It is necessary to say this as a warning against all facile or complacent readings of Gramsci: he is still largely an unknown author to us.

Contested Legacy

It has now become urgent, however, to look again, soberly and comparatively, at the texts that have made Gramsci most famous. For the great mass Communist Parties of Western Europe—in Italy, in France, in Spain—are now on the threshold of a historical experience without precedent for them: the commanding assumption of governmental office within the framework of bourgeois-democratic states, without the allegiance to a horizon of ‘proletarian dictatorship’ beyond them that was once the touchstone of the Third International. If one political ancestry is more widely and insistently invoked than any other for the new perspectives of ‘Eurocommunism’, it is that of Gramsci. It is not necessary to accredit any apocalyptic vision of the immediate future, to sense the solemnity of the approaching tests for the history of the working class throughout Western Europe. The present political conjuncture calls for a serious and responsible clarification of the themes in Gramsci’s work which are now commonly associated with the new design of Latin communism.

At the same time, of course, Gramsci’s influence is by no means confined to those countries where there exist major Communist Parties, poised for entry into government. The adoption of concepts from the Prison Notebooks has, in fact, been especially marked in the theoretical and historical work of the British Left in recent years, and to a lesser extent of the American Left. The sudden phenomenon of very widespread borrowing from Gramsci within Anglo-Saxon political culture provides a second, more parochial prompting to re-examine his legacy in these pages. For *New Left Review* was the first socialist journal in Britain—possibly the first anywhere outside Italy—to make deliberate and

systematic use of Gramsci's theoretical canon to analyse its own national society, and to debate a political strategy capable of transforming it. The essays that sought to realize this project were published in 1964–5.¹ At the time, Gramsci's work was unfamiliar in England: the articles in question were generally contested.² By 1973–5, Gramscian themes and notions of a similar tenor were ubiquitous. In particular, the central concept of 'hegemony', first utilized as the leitmotif of the NLR theses of the early sixties, has since enjoyed an extraordinary fortune. Historians, literary critics, philosophers, economists and political scientists have employed it with ever increasing frequency.³ Amidst the profusion of usages and allusions, however, there has been relatively little inspection of the actual texts in which Gramsci developed his theory of hegemony. A more direct and exact reflection on these is now overdue. The review that first introduced their vocabulary into England is an appropriate forum in which to reconsider them.

The purpose of this article, then, will be to analyse the precise forms and functions of Gramsci's concept of hegemony in his Prison Notebooks, and to assess their internal coherence as a unified discourse; to consider their validity as an account of the typical structures of class power in the bourgeois democracies of the West; and finally to weigh their strategic consequences for the struggle of the working class to achieve emancipation and socialism. Its procedure will of necessity be primarily philological: an attempt to fix with greater precision what Gramsci said and meant in his captivity; to locate the sources from which he derived the terms of his discourse; and to reconstruct the network of oppositions and correspondences in the thought of his contemporaries into which his writing was inserted—in other words, the true theoretical context of his work. These formal enquiries are the indispensable condition, it will be argued, of any substantive judgment of Gramsci's theory of hegemony.

I. The Metamorphoses of Hegemony

Let us start by recalling the most celebrated passages of all in the Prison Notebooks—the legendary fragments in which Gramsci contrasted the political structures of 'East' and 'West', and the revolutionary strategies pertinent to each of them. These texts represent the most cogent synthesis of the essential terms of Gramsci's theoretical universe, which elsewhere

¹ See Tom Nairn, 'The British Political Elite', NLR 23, January-February 1964; Perry Anderson, 'Origins of the Present Crisis', *ibid.*; Nairn, 'The English Working Class', NLR 24, March-April 1964; Nairn, 'The Nature of the Labour Party', NLR 27 and 28, September-October and November-December 1964; Anderson, 'The Left in the Fifties', NLR 29, January-February 1965; Nairn, 'Labour Imperialism', NLR 32, July-August 1965. Further developments of the theses on English history and society contained in these initial essays included: Anderson, 'Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism', NLR 35, January-February 1966; Anderson, 'Components of the National Culture', NLR 50, July-August 1968; Nairn, 'The Fateful Meridian', NLR 60, March-April 1970.

² The major response was the famous essay by Edward Thompson, 'The Peculiarities of the English', *The Socialist Register* 1965. Its criticisms probably won general assent on the British Left.

³ Among the most notable examples of creative use of Gramsci's concept in recent works are: Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital*, London 1975, pp. 249–50; Edward Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters*, London 1975, pp. 262, 269; Raymond Williams, 'Base and Superstructure', NLR 82, November-December 1973—reworked in *Marxism and Literature*, London, 1977 (forthcoming); Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan Roll*, New York 1974, pp. 25–8.

are dispersed and scattered throughout the Notebooks. They do not immediately broach the problem of hegemony. However, they assemble all the necessary elements for its emergence into a controlling position in his discourse. The two central notes focus on the relationship between State and civil society, in Russia and in Western Europe respectively.⁴ In each case, they do so by way of the same military analogy.

Position and Manoeuvre

In the first, Gramsci discusses the rival strategies of the high commands in the First World War, and concludes that they suggest a supreme lesson for class politics after the war. 'General Krasnow has asserted (in his novel) that the Entente did not wish for the victory of Imperial Russia for fear that the Eastern Question would definitively be resolved in favour of Tsarism, and therefore obliged the Russian General Staff to adopt trench warfare (absurd, in view of the enormous length of the front from the Baltic to the Black Sea, with vast marshy and forest zones), whereas the only possible strategy was a war of manoeuvre. This assertion is merely silly. In actual fact, the Russian Army did attempt a war of manoeuvre and sudden incursion, especially in the Austrian sector (but also in East Prussia), and won successes as brilliant as they were ephemeral. The truth is that one cannot choose the form of war one wants, unless from the start one has a crushing superiority over the enemy. It is well-known what losses were incurred by the stubborn refusal of the General Staffs to acknowledge that a war of position was 'imposed' by the overall relation of forces in conflict. A war of position is not, in reality, constituted simply by actual trenches, but by the whole organizational and industrial system of the territory which lies to the back of the army in the field. It is imposed notably by the rapid fire-power of cannons, machine-guns and rifles, by the armed strength that can be concentrated at a particular spot, as well as by the abundance of supplies that make possible the swift replacement of material lost after an enemy breakthrough or retreat. A further factor is the great mass of men under arms; they are of a very unequal calibre, and are precisely only able to operate as a mass force. It can be seen how on the Eastern Front it was one thing to make an incursion into the Austrian sector, and another into the German sector; and how even in the Austrian sector, reinforced by picked German troops and commanded by Germans, incursion tactics ended in disaster. The same thing happened in the Polish Campaign of 1920; the seemingly irresistible advance was halted before Warsaw by General Weygand, on the line commanded by French officers. The very military experts who are believers in wars of position, just as they previously were in war of manoeuvre, naturally do not maintain that the latter should be expunged from military science.

⁴ All references to Gramsci's work will be to the Critical Edition edited by Valentino Gerratana: Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Turin 1975, I-IV. Volumes I-III present for the first time the complete and exact texts of the notebooks, in their order of composition; Volume IV contains the critical apparatus assembled by Gerratana, with admirable care and discretion. The edition as a whole is a model of scholarly scruple and clarity. Wherever the texts cited in this essay are included in the English collection, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, London 1971, references are also given to the latter, and translations are usually taken from it, with occasional modifications. The English editors provide far the best informative apparatus available to any foreign-language readership of Gramsci. Abbreviations will be QC and SPN respectively, throughout.

They merely maintain that in wars among the more industrially and socially advanced States, war of manoeuvre must be considered reduced to more of a tactical than a strategic function, occupying the same position as siege warfare previously held in relation to it. The same reduction should be effected in the art and science of politics, at least in the case of the advanced States, where “civil society” has become a very complex structure and one that is resistant to the catastrophic “incursions” of the immediate economic element (crises, depressions, and so on). The superstructures of civil society are like the trench-systems of modern warfare. In war it would happen sometimes that a fierce artillery attack seemed to have destroyed the enemy’s entire defensive system, whereas in fact it had only destroyed the outer surface of it; and at the moment of their advance and attack the assailants would find themselves confronted by a line of defence which was still effective. The same thing happens in politics, during the great economic crises. A crisis cannot give the attacking forces the ability to organize with lightning speed in time and space; still less can it endow them with fighting spirit. Similarly, the defenders are not demoralized, nor do they abandon their positions, even among the ruins, nor do they lose faith in their own strength or in their own future. Of course, things do not remain exactly as they were; but it is certain that one will not find the element of speed, of accelerated time, of the definitive forward march expected by the strategists of political Cadornism. The last occurrence of the kind in the history of politics was the events of 1917. They marked a decisive turning-point in the history of the art and science of politics.⁵

East and West

In the second text, Gramsci proceeds to a direct counterposition of the course of the Russian Revolution and the character of a correct strategy for socialism in the West, by way of a contrast between the relationship of State and civil society in the two geopolitical theatres. ‘It should be seen whether Trotsky’s famous theory about the *permanent* character of the movement is not the political reflection of . . . the general economic-cultural-social conditions in a country in which the structures of national life are embryonic and loose, and incapable of becoming “trench” or “fortress”. In this case one might say that Trotsky, apparently “Western”, was in fact a cosmopolitan—that is, superficially Western or European. Lenin on the other hand was profoundly national and profoundly European. . . . It seems to me that Lenin understood that a change was necessary from the war of manoeuvre applied victoriously in the East in 1917, to a war of position which was the only possible form in the West—where, as Krasnov observed, armies could rapidly accumulate endless quantities of munitions, and where the social structures were of themselves still capable of becoming heavily-armed fortifications. This is what the formula of the “united front” seems to me to mean, and it corresponds to the conception of a single front for the Entente under the sole command of Foch. Lenin, however, did not have time to expand his formula—though it should be remembered that he could only have expanded it theoretically, whereas the fundamental task was a national one; that is to say, it demanded a reconnaissance of the terrain and

⁵ QC III, pp. 1614–16; SPN 234–5.

identification of the elements of trench and fortress represented by the elements of civil society, and so on. In the East, the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relationship between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an outer ditch, behind which there was a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks: more or less numerous from one State to the next, it goes without saying—but this precisely necessitated an accurate reconnaissance of each individual country.⁶

There are a number of memorable themes in these two extremely compressed and dense passages, which are echoed in other fragments of the Notebooks. For the moment, our intention is not to reconstitute and explore either of them, or relate them to Gramsci's thought as a whole. It will merely be enough to set out the main apparent elements of which they are composed, in a series of oppositions:

	<i>East</i>	<i>West</i>
<i>Civil Society</i>	Primordial/Gelatinous	Developed/Sturdy
<i>State</i>	Preponderant	Balanced
<i>Strategy</i>	Manoeuvre	Position
<i>Tempo</i>	Speed	Protraction

While the terms of each opposition are not given any precise definition in the texts, the relations between the two sets initially appear clear and coherent enough. A closer look, however, immediately reveals certain discrepancies. Firstly, the economy is described as making 'incursions' into civil society in the West as an elemental force; the implication is evidently that it is situated outside it. Yet the normal usage of the term 'civil society' had ever since Hegel pre-eminently included the sphere of the economy, as that of material needs; it was in this sense that it was always employed by Marx and Engels. Here, on the contrary, it seems to exclude economic relations. At the same time, the second note contrasts the East, where the State is 'everything', and the West where the State and civil society are in a 'proper' relationship. It can be assumed, without forcing the text, that Gramsci meant by this something like a 'balanced' relationship; in a letter written a year or so before, he refers to 'an equilibrium of political society and civil society', where by political society he intended the State.⁷ Yet the text goes on to say that in the war of position in the West, the State constitutes only the 'outer ditch' of civil society, which can resist its demolition. Civil society thereby becomes a central core or inner redoubt, of which the State is merely an external and dispensable surface. Is this compatible with the image of a 'balanced relationship' between the two? The contrast in the two relationships between State and civil society in East and West becomes a simple inversion here—no longer preponderance *vs* equilibrium, but one preponderance against another preponderance.

A scientific reading of these fragments is rendered even more complex when it is realized that while their formal objects of criticism are Trotsky

⁶ QC II, pp. 865–6; SPN, pp. 236–8.

⁷ *Lettere dal Carcere*, Turin 1965, p. 481.

and Luxemburg, their real target may have been the Third Period of the Comintern. We can surmise this from the date of their composition—somewhere between 1930 and 1932 in the Notebooks—and from the transparent reference to the Great Depression of 1929, on which many of the sectarian conceptions of ‘social-fascism’ during the Third Period were founded. Gramsci fought these ideas resolutely from prison, and in doing so was led to reappropriate the Comintern’s political prescriptions of 1921, when Lenin was still alive, of tactical unity with all other working-class parties in the struggle against capital, which he himself along with nearly every other important leader of the Italian Communist Party had rejected at the time. Hence the ‘dislocated’ reference to the United Front in a text which seems to speak of a quite different debate.

‘Permanent Revolution’

A comparison of these fragments with another crucial text from the Notebooks reveals even more difficulties. Gramsci alludes to the theme of ‘Permanent Revolution’ a number of times. The other main passage in which he refers to it is this: ‘The political concept of the so-called “Permanent Revolution”, which emerged before 1848 as a scientifically evolved expression of the Jacobin experience from 1789 to Thermidor, belongs to a historical period in which the great mass political parties and the economic trade unions did not yet exist, and society was still in a state of fluidity from many points of view, so to speak. There was a greater backwardness of the countryside, and virtually complete monopoly of political and State power by a few cities or even by a single one (Paris in the case of France); a relatively rudimentary State apparatus, and a greater autonomy of civil society from State activity; a specific system of military forces and national armed services; greater autonomy of the national economies from the economic relations of the world market, and so on. In the period after 1870, with the colonial expansion of Europe, all these elements change. The internal and international organizational relations of the State become more complex and massive, and the Forty-Eightist formula of the “Permanent Revolution” is expanded and superseded in political science by the formula of “civil hegemony”. The same thing happens in the art of politics as in military art: war of movement increasingly becomes war of position, and it can be said that a State will win a war in so far as it prepares for it minutely and technically in peacetime. The massive structure of the modern democracies, both as State organizations and as complexes of associations in civil society, are for the art of politics what “trenches” and permanent fortifications of the front are for the war of position. They render merely “partial” the element of movement which used to be the “whole” of war. This question is posed for the modern States, but not for the backward countries or for the colonies, where forms which elsewhere have been superseded and have become anachronistic are still in vigour.’⁸

Here the terms of the first two fragments are recombined into a new order, and their meaning appears to shift accordingly. Permanent Revolution now clearly refers to Marx’s Address to the Communist League of 1850, when he advocated an escalation from the bourgeois

⁸ QC.III, pp. 1566–7; SPN, pp. 242–3.

revolution which had just swept Europe to a proletarian revolution. The Commune marks the end of this hope. Henceforward war of position replaces permanent revolution. The distinction East/West reappears in the form of a demarcation of 'modern democracies' from 'backward and colonial societies' where a war of movement still prevails. This change in context corresponds to a shift in the relations between 'state' and 'civil society'. In 1848, the State is 'rudimentary' and civil society is 'autonomous' from it. After 1870, the internal and international organization of the State becomes 'complex and massive', while civil society also becomes correspondingly developed. It is now that the concept of hegemony appears. For the new strategy necessary is precisely that of 'civil hegemony'. The meaning of the latter is unexplained here; it is, however, clearly related to that of 'war of position'. What is striking in this third fragment, then, is its emphasis on the massive expansion of the Western State from the late nineteenth century onwards, with a subordinate allusion to a parallel development of civil society. There is no explicit reversal of the terms, yet the context and weight of the passage virtually imply a new prepotence of the State.

It is not difficult, in effect, to discern in Gramsci's text the echo of Marx's famous denunciation of the 'monstrous parasitic machine' of the Bonapartist State in France. His periodization is somewhat different from that of Marx, since he dates the change from the victory of Thiers and not that of Louis Napoleon, but the theme is that of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* and *The Civil War in France*. In the former, it will be remembered, Marx wrote: 'Only under the second Bonaparte does the State seem to have attained a completely autonomous position. The State machine has established itself so firmly *vis-à-vis* civil society that the only leader it needs is the head of the Society of 10 December . . . The State enmeshes, controls, regulates, supervises and regiments civil society from the most all-embracing expressions of its life down to its most insignificant motions, from its most general modes of existence down to the private life of individuals.'⁹ Gramsci makes no such extreme claim. Yet, setting aside the rhetoric of Marx's account, the logic of Gramsci's text leans in the same direction, to the extent that it clearly implies that civil society has lost the 'autonomy' of the State which it once possessed.

Three Positions of the State

There is thus an oscillation between at least three different 'positions' of the State in the West in these initial texts alone. It is in a 'balanced relationship' with civil society, it is only an 'outer surface' of civil society, it is the 'massive structure' which cancels the autonomy of civil society. These oscillations, moreover, concern only the relationship *between* the terms. The *terms themselves*, however, are subject to the same sudden shifts of boundary and position. Thus in all the above quotations, the opposition is between 'State' and 'civil society'. Yet elsewhere Gramsci speaks of the State itself as inclusive of civil society, defining it thus: 'The general notion of the State includes elements which need to be referred back to the notion of civil society (in the sense that one might say that the State = political society + civil society, in other words hegemony

⁹ Karl Marx, *Surveys from Exile*, London 1973, pp. 238, 186.

armoured with coercion).¹⁰ Here the distinction between ‘political society’ and ‘civil society’ is maintained, while the term ‘state’ encompasses the two. In other passages, however, Gramsci goes further and directly rejects any opposition between political and civil society, as a confusion of liberal ideology. ‘The ideas of the Free Trade movement are based on a theoretical error, whose practical origin is not hard to identify; they are based on a distinction between political society and civil society, which is rendered and presented as an organic one, whereas in fact it is merely methodological. Thus it is asserted that economic activity belongs to civil society, and that the State must not intervene to regulate it. But since in actual reality civil society and State are one and the same, it must be made clear that laissez-faire too is a form of State “regulation”, introduced and maintained by legislative and coercive means.’¹¹ Political society is here an express synonym for the State, and any substantive separation of the two is denied. It is evident that another semantic shift has occurred. In other words, the State itself oscillates between three definitions:

State	contrasts with	Civil Society
State	encompasses	Civil Society
State	is identical with	Civil Society

Thus both the terms and the relations between them are subject to sudden variations or mutations. It will be seen that these shifts are not arbitrary or accidental. They have a determinate meaning within the architecture of Gramsci’s work. For the moment, however, an elucidation of them can be deferred.

For there remains one further concept of Gramsci’s discourse which is centrally related to the problematic of these texts. That is, of course, hegemony. The term, it will be remembered, occurs in the third passage as a *strategy* of ‘war of position’ to replace the ‘war of manoeuvre’ of an earlier epoch. This war of manoeuvre is identified with the ‘Permanent Revolution’ of Marx in 1848. In the second text, the identification reappears, but the reference here is to Trotsky in the 1920s. The ‘war of position’ is now attributed to Lenin and equated with the idea of the United Front. There is thus a loop

Civil Hegemony = War of Position = United Front.

The next question is therefore naturally what Gramsci meant precisely by war of position or civil hegemony. Hitherto, we have been concerned with terms whose ancestry is familiar. The notions of ‘state’ and ‘civil society’, dating from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment respectively, present no particular problems. However diverse their usage, they have long formed part of common political parlance on the Left. The term ‘hegemony’ has no such immediate currency. In fact, Gramsci’s concept in the Prison Notebooks is frequently believed to be an entirely novel coinage—in effect, his own invention.¹² The word

¹⁰ QC II, pp. 763–4; SPN, p. 263. ¹¹ QC III, pp. 1589–90; SPN, p. 160.

¹² See, for representative examples, Norberto Bobbio, ‘Gramsci e la concezione della società civile’, in the symposium *Gramsci e la Cultura Contemporanea*, Rome 1969, p. 94; and more recently, Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi, *Pour Gramsci*, Paris 1974, p. 140.

might perhaps be found in stray phrases of writers before him, it is often suggested, but the *concept* as a theoretical unit is his creation.

'Hegemony': the Concept's History

Nothing reveals the lack of ordinary scholarship from which Gramsci's legacy has suffered more than this widespread illusion. For in fact the notion of hegemony had a long prior history, before Gramsci's adoption of it, that is of great significance for understanding its later function in his work. The term *gegemoniya* (hegemony) was one of the most central political slogans in the Russian Social-Democratic movement, from the late 1890s to 1917. The idea which it codified first started to emerge in the writings of Plekhanov in 1883–4, where he urged the imperative necessity for the Russian working class to wage a political struggle against Tsarism, not merely an economic struggle against its employers. In his founding programme of the Emancipation of Labour Group in 1884, he argued that the bourgeoisie in Russia was still too weak to take the initiative in the struggle against absolutism: the organized working class would have to take up the demands of a bourgeois-democratic revolution.¹³ Plekhanov in these texts used the vague term 'domination' (*gospodstvo*) for political power as such, and continued to assume that the proletariat would support the bourgeoisie in a revolution in which the latter would necessarily emerge in the end as the leading class.¹⁴ By 1889, his emphasis had shifted somewhat: 'political freedom' would now be 'won by the working class or not all'—yet at the same time without challenging the ultimate domination of capital in Russia.¹⁵ In the next decade, his colleague Axelrod went further. In two important pamphlets of 1898, polemicizing against Economism, he declared that the Russian working class could and must play an 'independent, leading role in the struggle against absolutism', for the 'political impotence of *all other classes*' conferred a 'central, pre-eminent importance' on the proletariat.¹⁶ 'The vanguard of the working class should systematically behave as the leading detachment of democracy in general.'¹⁷ Axelrod still oscillated between ascription of an 'independent' and a 'leading' role to the proletariat, and ascribed exaggerated importance to gentry opposition to Tsarism, within what he reaffirmed would be a bourgeois revolution. However, his ever greater emphasis on the 'all-national revolutionary significance'¹⁸ of the Russian working class soon catalysed a qualitative theoretical change. For it was henceforward the *primacy* of the proletariat in the bourgeois revolution in Russia that was to be unambiguously announced.

In a letter to Struve in 1901, demarcating social-democratic from liberal perspectives in Russia, Axelrod now stated as an axiom: 'By virtue of the historical position of our proletariat, Russian Social-Democracy can

¹³ G. V. Plekhanov, *Izbrannye Filosofskie Proizvedeniya*, I, Moscow 1956, p. 372.

¹⁴ Plekhanov, *Sochineniya*, (ed. Ryazanov), Moscow 1923, II, pp. 55, 63, 77; III, p. 91.

¹⁵ *Sochineniya*, II, p. 347.

¹⁶ P. Axelrod, *K Voprosu o Sovremennykh Zadachykh i Taktik Russkikh Sotsial-Demokratov*, Geneva 1898, pp. 20, 26.

¹⁷ Axelrod, *Istoricheskoe Polozhenie i Vzaimnoe Otnoshenie Liberalnoi i Sotsialisticheskoi Demokratii v Rossii*, Geneva 1898, p. 25.

¹⁸ Axelrod, *K Voprosu*, p. 27.

acquire hegemony (*gegemoniya*) in the struggle against absolutism.¹⁹ The younger generation of Marxist theorists adopted the concept immediately. In the same year, Martov was to write in a polemical article: “The struggle between the “critics” and “orthodox” Marxists is really the first chapter of a struggle for political hegemony between the proletariat and bourgeois democracy.”²⁰ Lenin, meanwhile, could without further ado refer in a letter written to Plekhanov to ‘the famous “hegemony” of Social-Democracy’ and call for a political newspaper as the sole effective means of preparing a ‘real hegemony’ of the working class in Russia.²¹ In the event, the emphasis pioneered by Plekhanov and Axelrod on the vocation of the working class to adopt an ‘all-national’ approach to politics and to fight for the liberation of every oppressed class and group in society was to be developed, with a wholly new scope and eloquence, by Lenin in *What is to be Done?* in 1902—a text read and approved in advance by Plekhanov, Axelrod and Potresov, which ended precisely with an urgent plea for the formation of the revolutionary newspaper that was to be *Iskra*.

The slogan of the hegemony of the proletariat in the bourgeois revolution was thus a common political inheritance for Bolsheviks and Mensheviks alike at the Second Congress of the RSDLP in 1903. After the scission, Potresov wrote a lengthy article in *Iskra* reproaching Lenin for his ‘primitive’ interpretation of the idea of hegemony, summarized in the celebrated call in *What is to be Done?* for Social-Democrats to ‘go among all classes of the population’ and organize ‘special auxiliary detachments’ for the working class from them.²² Potresov complained that the gamut of social classes aimed at by Lenin was too wide, while at the same time the type of relationship he projected between the latter and the proletariat was too peremptory—involving an impossible ‘assimilation’ rather than an alliance with them. A correct strategy to win hegemony for the working class would betoken an external orientation, not towards such improbable elements as dissident gentry or students, but to democratic liberals, and not denial but respect for their organizational autonomy. Lenin, for his part, was soon accusing the Mensheviks of abandoning the concept by their tacit acceptance of the leadership of Russian capital in the bourgeois revolution against Tsarism. His call for a ‘democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry’ in the 1905 revolution was precisely designed to give a governmental formula to the traditional strategy, to which he remained faithful.

After the defeat of the revolution, Lenin vehemently denounced the Mensheviks for their relinquishment of the axiom of hegemony, in a series of major articles in which he again and again reasserted its political indispensability for any revolutionary Marxist in Russia. ‘Because the bourgeois-democratic tasks have been left unfulfilled, a revolutionary crisis is still inevitable’, he wrote. ‘The tasks of the proletariat that arise from this situation are fully and unmistakably definite. As the only

¹⁹ *Perpiska G. V. Plekhanova i P. B. Axelroda*, Moscow 1925, II, p. 142.

²⁰ Y. Martov, ‘Vsegda v Menshinstve. O Sovremennykh Zadachakh Russkoi Sotsial-isticheskoi Intelligentsii’, *Zarya*, Nos. 2–3, December 1901, p. 190.

²¹ Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 34, p. 56.

²² A. Potresov, ‘Nashi Zakliucheniya. O Liberalizme i Gegemonii’, *Iskra*, No. 74, 20 November 1904.

consistently revolutionary class of contemporary society, it must be the leader in the struggle of the whole people for a fully democratic revolution, in the struggle of *all* the working and exploited people against the oppressors and exploiters. The proletariat is revolutionary only in so far as it is conscious of and gives effect to this idea of the hegemony of the proletariat.²³ Menshevik writers, claiming that since 1905 Tsarism had effected a transition from a feudal to a capitalist state, had therewith recently declared the hegemony of the proletariat to be obsolete, since the bourgeois revolution was now over in Russia.²⁴ Lenin's response was thunderous: 'To preach to the workers that what they need is "*not* hegemony, but a class party" means to betray the cause of the proletariat to the liberals; it means preaching that *Social-Democratic* labour policy should be replaced by a *liberal* labour policy. Renunciation of the idea of hegemony is the crudest form of reformism in the Russian Social-Democratic movement.'²⁵ It was in these polemics, too, that Lenin repeatedly contrasted a 'hegemonic' with a 'guild' or 'corporatist' phase within proletarian politics. 'From the standpoint of Marxism the class, so long as it renounces the idea of hegemony or fails to appreciate it, is not a class, or not yet a class, but a *guild*, or the sum total of various guilds. . . . It is the consciousness of the idea of hegemony and its implementation through their own activities that converts the guilds (*tsekhi*) as a whole into a class.'²⁶

'Hegemony' and the Comintern

The term hegemony, then, was one of the most widely-used and familiar notions in the debates of the Russian labour movement before the October Revolution. After the revolution, it fell into relative disuse in the Bolshevik Party—for one very good reason. Forged to theorize the role of the working class in a bourgeois revolution, it was rendered inoperative by the advent of a socialist revolution. The scenario of a 'democratic dictatorship of workers and peasants' remaining within the bounds of capitalism never materialized, as is well-known. Trotsky, who had never believed in the coherence or feasibility of Lenin's programme for 1905, and whose contrary prediction of a socialist revolution had been rapidly vindicated in 1917, later wrote in his *History of the Russian Revolution*: 'The popular and officially accepted idea of the *hegemony* of the proletariat in the democratic revolution . . . did not at all signify that the proletariat would use a peasant uprising in order with its support to place upon the order of the day its own historic task—that is, the direct transition to a socialist society. The hegemony of the proletariat in the democratic revolution was sharply distinguished from the dictatorship of the proletariat, and polemically contrasted against it. The Bolshevik Party had been educated in these ideas ever since 1905.'²⁷ Trotsky was not to know that a 'polemical contrast' between the 'hegemony' and the 'dictatorship' of the proletariat would re-emerge again in an altered context, in another epoch.

²³ Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 17, pp. 231, 232.

²⁴ I have elsewhere discussed the importance of these polemics of 1911, for an account of the nature of Tsarism, in *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, London 1975, pp. 354–5.

²⁵ Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 17, pp. 232–3. See also pp. 78–9.

²⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 57, 58.

²⁷ Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, 1, London 1965, pp. 296–7.

At the time, in the aftermath of October, the term hegemony ceased to have much internal actuality in the USSR. It survived, however, in the external documents of the Communist International. At the first two World Congresses of the Third International, the Comintern adopted a series of theses which for the first time internationalized Russian usages of the slogan of hegemony. The proletariat's duty was to exercise hegemony over the other exploited groups that were its class allies in the struggle against capitalism, within its own soviet institutions; there 'its hegemony will permit the progressive elevation of the semi-proletariat and poor peasantry'.²⁸ If it failed to lead the toiling masses in all arenas of social activity, confining itself to its own particularist economic objectives, it would lapse into corporatism. 'The proletariat becomes a revolutionary class only in so far as it does not restrict itself to the framework of a narrow corporatism and acts in every manifestation and domain of social life as the guide of the whole working and exploited population. . . . The industrial proletariat cannot absolve its world-historical mission, which is the emancipation of mankind from the yoke of capitalism and of war, if it limits itself to its own particular corporative interests and to efforts to improve its situation—sometimes a very satisfactory one—within bourgeois society.'²⁹ At the Fourth Congress in 1922, the term hegemony was—for what seems to be the first time—extended to the domination of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat, if the former succeeded in confining the latter to a corporate role by inducing it to accept a division between political and economic struggles in its class practice. 'The bourgeoisie always seeks to separate politics from economics, because it understands very well that if it succeeds in keeping the working class within a corporative framework, no serious danger can threaten its hegemony.'³⁰

The transmission of the notion of hegemony to Gramsci, from the Russian to the Italian theatres of the socialist movement, can with reasonable certainty be located in these successive documents of the Comintern. The debates of the pre-war RSDLP had become archival after the October Revolution; although Gramsci spent a year in Moscow in 1922–3 and learnt Russian, it is extremely unlikely that he would have had any direct acquaintance with the texts of Axelrod, Martov, Potresov or Lenin which debated the slogan of hegemony. On the other hand, he naturally had an intimate knowledge of the Comintern resolutions of the time: he was, indeed, a participant at the Fourth World Congress itself. The consequences can be seen in the Prison Notebooks: for Gramsci's own treatment of the idea of hegemony descends directly from the definitions of the Third International.

'Hegemony' in the Prison Notebooks

We can now revert to Gramsci's texts themselves. Throughout the Prison Notebooks, the term 'hegemony' recurs in a multitude of different contexts. Yet there is no doubt that Gramsci started from certain constant connotations of the concept, which he derived from the Comintern

²⁸ *Manifestes, Thèses et Résolutions des Quatre Premiers Congrès Mondiaux de l'Internationale Communiste 1919–1923*, Paris 1969 (reprint), p. 20.

²⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 45, 61.

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 171.

tradition. For in the first instance, the term refers in his writings to *the class alliance of the proletariat* with other exploited groups, above all the peasantry, in a common struggle against the oppression of capital. Reflecting the experience of NEP, he laid a somewhat greater emphasis on the need for ‘concessions’ and ‘sacrifices’ by the proletariat to its allies for it to win hegemony over them, thereby extending the notion of ‘corporatism’ from a mere confinement to guild horizons or economic struggles, to any kind of ouvrierist isolation from the other exploited masses. ‘The fact of hegemony presupposes that account is taken of the interests and tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain balance of compromise should be formed—in other words that the leading group should make sacrifices of an economico-corporative kind. But there is no doubt that although hegemony is ethico-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity.’³¹ At the same time, Gramsci also stressed more eloquently than any Russian Marxist before 1917 the *cultural* ascendancy which the hegemony of the proletariat over allied classes must bespeak. ‘Previously germinated ideologies become “party”, come into conflict and confrontation, until only one of them, or at least a single combination, tends to prevail, gaining the upper hand and propagating itself throughout society. It thereby achieves not only a unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity, posing all questions over which the struggle rages not on a corporate but on a universal plane. It thus creates the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate groups.’³²

In a further development in the same theoretical direction, Gramsci went on expressly to counterpose the necessary use of violence against the common enemy of the exploited classes, and the resort to compromise within these classes, by the proletariat. In doing so, he was in effect restating the traditional opposition between ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ (over the bourgeoisie) and ‘hegemony of the proletariat’ (over the peasantry), so sharply recalled by Trotsky. ‘If the union of two forces is necessary in order to defeat a third, a recourse to arms and coercion (even supposing that these are available) can be nothing more than a methodological hypothesis. The only concrete possibility is compromise. Force can be employed against enemies, but not against a part of one’s own side which one wants to assimilate rapidly, and whose “goodwill” and enthusiasm one needs.’³³ The ‘union’ of which Gramsci speaks here acquires a much more pronounced inflection in his texts than in the Bolshevik vocabulary: the mechanical Russian image of the *smychka*—or ‘yoking’—of working class and peasantry, popularized during NEP, becomes the organic fusion of a ‘new historical bloc’ in the Notebooks. Thus in the same passage, Gramsci refers to the necessity to ‘absorb’ allied social forces, in order ‘to create a new, homogeneous, politico-economic historical bloc, without internal contradictions’.³⁴

³¹ QC III, p. 1591; SPN, p. 161.

³² QC III, p. 1584; SPN, pp. 181–2.

³³ QC III, pp. 1612–13; SPN, p. 168.

³⁴ QC III, pp. 1612; SPN, p. 168. It will be remembered that Potresov specifically denounced any interpretation of hegemony that involved an ‘assimilation’ of allied classes.

The heightened register of the formula corresponds to the novel charge given to the cultural and moral radiation of hegemony in Gramsci's usage of it.

So far, the recurrent appeal in the Prison Notebooks to the term hegemony represents no major departure from the Russian revolutionary canon from which it was taken. However, the very *form* of the prison writings was insensibly to shift the significance and function of the concept, in their context as a whole. For the characteristic medium in which Gramsci presented his ideas was that of a protocol of general axioms of political sociology, with 'floating' referents—sometimes allusively specified by class or régime or epoch, but equally often ambiguously evocative of several possible exemplars. This procedure, foreign to any other Marxist, was of course dictated to Gramsci by the need to lull the vigilance of the censor. Its result, however, was a constant indeterminacy of focus, in which the bourgeoisie and the proletariat can often alternate simultaneously as the hypothetical subjects of the same passage—whenever, in fact, Gramsci writes in the abstract of a 'dominant class'. The mask of generalization into which Gramsci was thus frequently driven had serious consequences for his thought: for it induced the unexamined premise that the structural positions of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, in their respective revolutions and their successive states, were historically equivalent. The risks of such a tacit comparison will be seen in due course. At present, what is important is to note the way in which the 'desituated' mode of discourse peculiar to so many of the texts of Gramsci's imprisonment permitted an imperceptible *transition* to a much wider theory of hegemony than had ever been imagined in Russia, which produced a wholly new theoretical field of Marxist enquiry in Gramsci's work.

Extension of the Concept

For in effect, Gramsci extended the notion of hegemony from its original application to the perspectives of the working class in a bourgeois revolution against a feudal order, to the mechanisms of bourgeois rule over the working class in a stabilized capitalist society. There was a precedent for this in the Comintern theses, it will be recollected. Yet the passage in question was brief and isolated: it did not issue into any more developed account of the sway of capital. Gramsci, by contrast, now employed the concept of hegemony for a *differential analysis of the structures of bourgeois power in the West*. This was a new and decisive step. The passage from one usage to the other was mediated through a set of generic maxims in principle applicable to either. The result was an apparently formal sequence of propositions about the nature of power in history. Symbolically, Gramsci took Machiavelli's work as his starting-point for this new range of theory. Arguing the necessity of a 'dual perspective' in all political action, he wrote that at their 'fundamental levels', the two perspectives corresponded to the 'dual nature of Machiavelli's Centaur—half-animal and half-human'. For Gramsci, these were 'the levels of force and consent, domination and hegemony, violence and civilization'.³⁵ The terrain of discourse here is manifestly universal, in emulation of the

³⁵ QC III, p. 1576; SPN, pp. 169–70.

manner of Machiavelli himself. An explicit set of oppositions is presented, valid for any historical epoch:

Force	Consent
Domination	Hegemony
Violence	Civilization

The term ‘domination’ which is the antithesis of ‘hegemony’ recurs in another couplet to be found in other texts, in opposition to ‘direction’. In the most important of these, Gramsci wrote: ‘The supremacy of a social group assumes two forms: “domination” and “intellectual and moral direction”. A social group is dominant over enemy groups which it tends to “liquidate” or subject with armed force, and is directive over affinal and allied groups.’³⁶ Here, the classical Russian distinction between ‘dictatorship’ and ‘hegemony’ is particularly clearly restated, in a slightly new terminology. The critical significance of the passage, however, is that it refers unambiguously *not* to the proletariat, but to the bourgeoisie—for its subject is the role of the Moderates in the Italian Risorgimento, and their ascendancy over the Action Party. In other words, Gramsci has swung the compass of the concept of hegemony towards a study of capitalist rule, albeit still within the context of a bourgeois revolution (the original framework for the notion in Russia). The elision of ‘direction’ with ‘hegemony’ is made later in the same paragraph on the Risorgimento.³⁷ The two are equated straightforwardly in a contemporary letter written by Gramsci, when he remarks that ‘Croce emphasizes solely that moment in historico-political activity which in politics is called “hegemony”, the moment of consent, of cultural direction, to distinguish it from the moment of force, of constraint, of state-legislative or police intervention.’³⁸

At the same time, the powerful *cultural* emphasis that the idea of hegemony acquired in Gramsci’s work combined with his theoretical application of it to traditional ruling classes, to produce a new Marxist theory of intellectuals. For one of the classical functions of the latter, Gramsci argued, was to mediate the hegemony of the exploiting classes over the exploited classes, via the ideological systems of which they were the organizing agents. Croce himself represented for Gramsci one of those ‘great intellectuals who exercise a hegemony that presupposes a certain collaboration, or voluntary and active consent’³⁹ from the subordinate classes.

The next question that Gramsci posed was specific to him. Where are the two functions of ‘domination’ and ‘direction/hegemony’ exercised? In particular, what is the site of ‘hegemony’? Gramsci’s first and firmest answer is that hegemony (direction) pertains to civil society, and coercion (domination) to the State. ‘We can now fix two major superstructural levels—one that may be called “civil society”, that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called “private”, and the other that of “political

³⁶ QC III, p. 2010; SPN, p. 57.

³⁷ QC III, p. 2011; SPN, p. 58.

³⁸ *Lettere dal Carcere*, p. 616.

³⁹ QC II, p. 691; SPN, p. 271.

society” or the State. These two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of “hegemony” which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of “direct domination” or command exercised through the State and “juridical” government.⁴⁰ There was no precedent for such a theorization in the Russian debates. The reason is evident. Gramsci was by now unmistakably more concerned with the constellation of *bourgeois* political power in an orthodox capitalist social order. The allusion to the ‘private’ institutions of civil society—inappropriate to any social formation in which the working class exercises collective power—indicates the real object of his thought here. In a contemporary letter, Gramsci referred even more directly to the contrast within the context of capitalism, writing of the opposition between political society and civil society as the respective sites of two modes of class power: ‘political society (or dictatorship, or coercive apparatus to ensure that the popular masses conform to the type of production and economy of a given moment)’ was counterposed to ‘civil society (or hegemony of a social group over the whole national society exercised through so-called private organizations, like the church, trade unions, schools and so on)’.⁴¹ Here the listing of church and schools as instruments of hegemony within the private associations of civil society puts the application of the concept to the capitalist societies of the West beyond any doubt. The result is to yield these unambiguous set of oppositions:

Hegemony	Domination
=	=
Consent	Coercion
=	=
Civil Society	State

It has, however, already been seen that Gramsci did not use the antonyms of State and civil society univocally. Both the terms and the relationship between them undergo different mutations in his writings. Exactly the same is true of the term ‘hegemony’. For the texts quoted above contrast with others in which Gramsci speaks of hegemony, not as a pole of ‘consent’ in contrast to another of ‘coercion’, but as itself a synthesis of consent and coercion. Thus, in a note on French political history, he commented: ‘The normal exercise of hegemony on the now classical terrain of a parliamentary régime is characterized by a combination of force and consent which form variable equilibria, without force ever prevailing too much over consent.’⁴² Here Gramsci’s reorientation of the concept of hegemony towards the advanced capitalist countries of Western Europe, and the structures of bourgeois power within them, acquires a further thematic accentuation. The notion is now directly connected with the phenomenon of parliamentary democracy, peculiar to the West. At the same time, parallel with the shift in the function of hegemony from consent to consent-coercion, there occurs a relocation of its topographical position. For in another passage, Gramsci writes of the executive, legislature and judiciary of the liberal state as ‘organs of political hegemony’.⁴³ Here hegemony is firmly situated *within* the

⁴⁰ QC III, pp. 1518–19; SPN, p. 12. The context is precisely a discussion of intellectuals.

⁴¹ *Lettere dal Carcere*, p. 481. ⁴² QC III, p. 1638; SPN, p. 80n. ⁴³ QC II, p. 752; SPN, p. 246.

State—no longer confined to civil society. The nuance of ‘political hegemony’, contrasting with ‘civil hegemony’, underlines the residual opposition between political society and civil society, which as we know is one of Gramsci’s variants of the couplet State and civil society. In other words, hegemony is here located not in one of the two terms, but in both.

$$\begin{array}{ccc}
 \text{State} & & \text{Civil Society} \\
 = & & = \\
 \text{Political Hegemony} & & \text{Civil Hegemony}
 \end{array}$$

This version cannot be reconciled with the preceding account, which remains the predominant one in the Notebooks. For in the first, Gramsci counterposes hegemony to political society or the State, while in the second the State itself becomes an apparatus of hegemony. In yet another version, the distinction between civil and political society disappears altogether: consent and coercion alike become co-extensive with the State. Gramsci writes: ‘The State (in its integral meaning) is dictatorship + hegemony.’⁴⁴ The oscillations in the connotation and location of hegemony amplify those of the original pair of terms themselves. Thus in the enigmatic mosaic that Gramsci laboriously assembled in prison, the words ‘State’, ‘civil society’, ‘political society’, ‘hegemony’, ‘domination’ or ‘direction’ all undergo a persistent *slippage*. We will now try to show that this slippage is neither accidental nor arbitrary.

Concepts and Problems

In effect, three distinct versions of the relations between Gramsci’s key concepts are simultaneously discernible in his Prison Notebooks, once the problematic of hegemony shifted away from the social alliances of the proletariat in the East towards the structures of bourgeois power in the West. It will be seen that each of these corresponds to a fundamental *problem* for Marxist analysis of the bourgeois State, without providing an adequate answer to it: the *variation* between the versions is precisely the decipherable symptom of Gramsci’s own awareness of the aporia of his solutions. To indicate the limits of Gramsci’s axioms, of course, more than a philological demonstration of their lack of internal coherence is needed. However summary, certain political assessments of their external correspondence with the nature of the contemporary bourgeois States in the West will be suggested.

At the same time, however, these will remain within the limits of Gramsci’s own system of categories. The question of whether the latter in fact provide the best point of departure for a scientific analysis of the structures of capitalist power today will not be prejudged. In particular, the binary oppositions of ‘State and civil society’ and ‘coercion and consent’ will be respected as the central elements of Gramsci’s discourse; it is their application, rather than their function, in his Marxism that will be reviewed. The difficulties of any too dualist theory of bourgeois class power will not be explored here. It is evident, in effect, that the whole range of directly *economic* constraints to which the exploited classes within capitalism are subjected cannot immediately be classified within either of

⁴⁴ QC II, pp. 810–11; SPN, p. 239.

the political categories of coercion or consent—armed force or cultural persuasion. Similarly, a formal dichotomy of State and civil society, however necessary as a preliminary instrument, cannot in itself yield specific knowledge of the complex relations between the different institutions of a capitalist social formation (some of which typically occupy intermediate positions on the borders of the two). It is possible that the analytic issues with which Gramsci was most concerned in fact need to be reconceptualized within a new order of categories, beyond his binary landmarks. These problems, however, fall outside the scope of a textual commentary. For our purposes here, it will be sufficient to stay on the terrain of Gramsci's own enquiry—still today that of a pioneer.

Gramsci's First Model

We may start by examining the first and most striking configuration of Gramsci's terms, the most important for the ulterior destiny of his work. Its central text is the initial passage cited in this essay, in which Gramsci writes of the difference between East and West, and says that in the East, the 'State is everything', while in the West, the State is an 'outer ditch' of the inner fortress of civil society, which can survive the worst tremors in the State, because it is not 'primordial and gelatinous' as in the East, but robust and structured. A 'war of manoeuvre' is thus appropriate in the East, a 'war of position' in the West. This thesis can then be linked to the companion argument, reiterated in so many other texts, that the State is the site of the armed domination or coercion of the bourgeoisie over the exploited classes, while civil society is the arena of its cultural direction or consensual hegemony over them—the opposition between 'force and consent, coercion and persuasion, state and church, political society and civil society'.⁴⁵ The result is to aggregate a combined set of oppositions for the distinction East/West:

<i>East</i>	<i>West</i>
State	Civil Society
/	/
Civil Society	State
Coercion	Consent
Domination	Hegemony
Manoeuvre	Position

In other words, the preponderance of civil society over the State in the West can be equated with the predominance of 'hegemony' over 'coercion' as the fundamental mode of bourgeois power in advanced capitalism. Since hegemony pertains to civil society, and civil society prevails over the State, it is the cultural ascendancy of the ruling class that essentially ensures the stability of the capitalist order. For in Gramsci's usage here, hegemony means the ideological subordination of the working class by the bourgeoisie, which enables it to rule by consent.

Now the preliminary aim of this formula is evident. It is to establish one obvious and fundamental difference between Tsarist Russia and Western Europe—the existence of representative political democracy. As such, it is analogous to Lenin's lapidary formula that the Russian Tsars ruled by

⁴⁵ QC II, p. 763; SPN, p. 170.

force and the Anglo-French bourgeoisie by deception and concession.⁴⁶ The great theoretical merit of Gramsci was to have *posed* the problem of this difference far more persistently and coherently than any other revolutionary before or since. Nowhere in the writings of Lenin or Trotsky, or other Bolshevik theorists, can there be found any sustained or systematic reflection on the enormous historical divide within Europe traced by the presence—even if still fitful and incomplete in their time—of parliamentary democracy in the West, and its absence in the East. A problem registered at most in marginal asides in the Bolshevik tradition, was developed for the first time into a commanding theme for Marxist theory by Gramsci.

Illusions of Left Social-Democracy

At the same time, the first solution he sketches to it in the Prison Notebooks is radically unviable: the simple location of 'hegemony' within civil society, and the attribution of primacy to civil society over the State. This equation, in effect, corresponds very exactly to what might be called a common-sense view of bourgeois democracy in the West, on the Left—a view widely diffused in militant social-democratic circles since the Second World War.⁴⁷ For this conception, the State in the West is not a violent machine of police repression as it was in Tsarist Russia: the masses have access to it through regular democratic elections, which formally permit the possibility of a socialist government. Yet experience shows that these elections never produce a government dedicated to the expropriation of capital and the realization of socialism. Fifty years after the advent of universal suffrage, such a phenomenon seems farther away than ever. What is the reason for this paradox? It must lie in the *prior* ideological conditioning of the proletariat *before* the electoral moment as such. The central locus of power must therefore be sought within civil society—above all, in capitalist control of the *means of communication* (press, radio, television, cinema, publishing), based on control of the *means of production* (private property). In a more sophisticated variant, the real inculcation of voluntary acceptance of capitalism occurs not so much through the ideological indoctrination of the means of communication, as in the invisible diffusion of commodity fetishism through the market or the instinctual habits of submission induced by the work-routines of factories and offices—in other words, directly within the ambit of the means of production themselves. Yet whether the primary emphasis is given to the effect of cultural or economic apparatuses, the analytic conclusion is the same. It is the strategic nexus of civil society which is believed to maintain capitalist hegemony within a political democracy, whose State institutions do not directly debar or repress the masses.⁴⁸ The

⁴⁶ 'The world-wide experience of bourgeois and landowner governments has evolved *two* methods of keeping people in subjection. The first is violence', with which the Tsars 'demonstrated to the Russian people the maximum of what can and cannot be done', Lenin wrote. 'But there is another method, best developed by the British and French bourgeoisie . . . the method of deception, flattery, fine phrases, promises by the million, petty sops, and concessions of the unessential while retaining the essential.' *Collected Works*, Vol. 24, pp. 63-4.

⁴⁷ The first major interpretation of Gramsci of this sort was the work of a PSI theorist: Giuseppe Tamburrano, *Antonio Gramsci. La vita, il pensiero, l'azione*, Bari 1963.

⁴⁸ For a representative version of these ideas, see Perry Anderson, 'Problems of Socialist Strategy', in the collection *Towards Socialism*, London 1965, pp. 223-47.

system is maintained by consent, not coercion. Therefore the main task of socialist militants is not combat with an armed State, but ideological conversion of the working class to free it from submission to capitalist mystifications.

This characteristic syndrome of left social-democracy contains a number of illusions. The first and most immediate of its errors is precisely the notion that the ideological power of the bourgeoisie in Western social formations is exercised above all in the sphere of civil society, its hegemony over which subsequently neutralizes the democratic potential of the representative State. The working class has access to the State (elections to parliament), but does not exercise it to achieve socialism because of its indoctrination by the means of communication. In fact, it might be said that the truth is if anything the inverse: the general form of the representative State—bourgeois democracy—is itself the principal ideological lynchpin of Western capitalism, whose very existence deprives the working class of the idea of socialism as *a different type of State*, and the means of communication and other mechanisms of cultural control thereafter clinch this central ideological ‘effect’. Capitalist relations of production allocate all men and women into different social classes, defined by their differential access to the means of production. These class divisions are the underlying reality of the wage-contract between juridically free and equal persons that is the hallmark of this mode of production. The political and economic orders are thereby formally *separated* under capitalism. The bourgeois State thus by definition ‘represents’ the totality of the population, *abstracted* from its distribution into social classes, as individual and equal citizens. In other words, it presents to men and women their unequal positions in civil society as if they were equal in the State. Parliament, elected every four or five years as the sovereign expression of popular will, reflects the fictive unity of the nation back to the masses as if it were their own self-government. The economic divisions within the ‘citizenry’ are masked by the juridical parity between exploiters and exploited, and with them the complete *separation* and *non-participation* of the masses in the work of parliament. This separation is then constantly presented and represented to the masses as the ultimate incarnation of liberty: ‘democracy’ as the terminal point of history. The existence of the parliamentary State thus constitutes the formal framework of all other ideological mechanisms of the ruling class. It provides the general code in which every specific message elsewhere is transmitted. The code is all the more powerful because the juridical rights of citizenship are not a mere mirage: on the contrary, the civic freedoms and suffrages of bourgeois democracy are a tangible reality, whose completion was historically in part the work of the labour movement itself, and whose loss would be a momentous defeat for the working class.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ In other words, it is quite wrong simply to designate parliament an ‘ideological apparatus’ of bourgeois power without further ado. The *ideological function* of parliamentary sovereignty is inscribed in the formal framework of every bourgeois constitution, and is always central to the cultural dominion of capital. However, parliament is also, of course, a ‘political apparatus’, vested with real attributes of debate and decision, which are in no sense a mere subjective trick to lull the masses. They are objective structures of a once great—still potent—historical achievement, the triumph of the ideals of the bourgeois revolution.

By comparison, the economic improvements won by reforms within the framework of the representative State—apparently more material—have typically left less ideological mark on the masses in the West. The steady rise in the standard of living of the working class for twenty-five years after the Second World War, in the leading imperialist countries, has been a critical element in the political stability of metropolitan capitalism. Yet the material component of popular assent to it, the subject of traditional polemics over the effects of reformism, is inherently unstable and volatile, since it tends to create a constant progression of expectations which no national capitalist economy can totally ensure, even during long waves of international boom, let alone phases of recession; its very ‘dynamism’ is thus potentially destabilizing and capable of provoking crises when growth fluctuates or stalls. By contrast, the juridico-political component of consent induced by the parliamentary state is much more stable: the capitalist polity is not subject to the same conjunctural vicissitudes. The historical occasions on which it has been actively questioned by working-class struggles have been infinitely fewer in the West. In other words, the ideology of bourgeois democracy is far more potent than that of any welfare reformism, and forms the permanent syntax of the consensus instilled by the capitalist State.

It can now be seen why Gramsci’s primary formula was mistaken. It is impossible to partition the ideological functions of bourgeois class power between civil society and the State, in the way that he initially sought to do. The fundamental form of the Western parliamentary State—the juridical sum of its citizenry—is itself the hub of the ideological apparatuses of capitalism. The ramified complexes of the cultural control-systems within civil society—radio, television, cinema, churches, newspapers, political parties—undoubtedly play a critical *complementary* role in assuring the stability of the class order of capital. So too, of course, do the distorting prism of market relations and the numbing structure of the labour process within the economy. The importance of these systems should certainly not be underestimated. But neither should it be exaggerated or—above all—counterposed to the cultural-ideological role of the State itself.

The Mistake of Poulantzas and Mandel

A certain vulgar leftism has traditionally isolated the problem of consent from its structural context, and hypostasized it as the unique and distinguishing feature of capitalist rule in the West, which becomes reduced to the soubriquet of ‘parliamentarism’. To refute this error, many Marxists have pointed out that all ruling classes in history have normally obtained the consent of the exploited classes to their own exploitation—feudal lords or slave-owning latifundists no less than industrial entrepreneurs. The objection is, of course, correct. But it is not an adequate reply, unless it is accompanied by an accurate definition of the *differentia specifica* of the consent won from the working class to the accumulation of capital in the West today—in other words, the *form and content* of the bourgeois ideology which it is induced to accept. Nicos Poulantzas, whose work *Political Power and Social Classes* contains many critically acute comments on the Prison Notebooks, in effect dismisses Gramsci’s concern with the problem, remarking that the only novelty of

this consent is its claim to rationality—i.e. its non-religious character. ‘The specific characteristic of (capitalist) ideologies is not at all, as Gramsci believed, that they procure a more or less active “consent” from the dominated classes towards political domination, since this is a general characteristic of *any* dominant ideology. What specifically defines the ideologies in question is that they do not aim to be accepted by the dominated classes according to the principle of participation in the sacred: they explicitly declare themselves and are accepted as scientific techniques.’⁵⁰ In a similar fashion, Ernest Mandel has written in his *Late Capitalism* that the major contemporary form of capitalist ideology in the West is an appeal to technological rationality and a cult of experts: ‘Belief in the omnipotence of technology is the specific form of bourgeois ideology in late capitalism.’⁵¹ These claims involve a serious misconception.

For the peculiarity of the historical consent won from the masses within modern capitalist social formations is by no means to be found in its mere secular reference or technical awe. The novelty of this consent is that it takes the fundamental form of a belief by the masses that *they exercise an ultimate self-determination* within the existing social order. It is thus not acceptance of the superiority of an acknowledged ruling class (feudal ideology), but credence in the democratic equality of all citizens in the government of the nation—in other words, disbelief in the existence of any ruling class. The consent of the exploited in a capitalist social formation is thus of a qualitatively new type, which has suggestively produced its own etymological extension: consensus, or mutual agreement. Naturally, the active ideology of bourgeois ideology coexists and combines in a wide number of mixed forms with much older and less articulated ideological habits and traditions—in particular, those of passive resignation to the way of the world and diffidence in any possibility of changing it, generated by the differential knowledge and confidence characteristic of any class society.⁵² The legacy of these diuturnal traditions does indeed often take the modern guise of deference to technical necessity. They do not, however, represent any real departure from previous patterns of class domination; the condition of their continued efficacy today is their insertion into an ideology of representative democracy which overarches them. For it is the freedom of bourgeois democracy alone that appears to establish the limits of what is socially possible for the collective will of a people, and thereby can render the bounds of its impotence tolerable.⁵³

⁵⁰ Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, London 1973, p. 217.

⁵¹ Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, London 1975, p. 501.

⁵² See the stimulating comments in Göran Therborn, ‘What does the Ruling Class do when it Rules?’, *The Insurgent Sociologist*, Vol. vi, No. 3, Spring 1976.

⁵³ A real and central belief in popular sovereignty can, in other words, coexist with a profound scepticism towards all governments that juridically express it. The divorce between the two is typically mediated by the conviction that no government could be otherwise than distant from those it represents, yet many are not representative at all. This is not a mere fatalism or cynicism among the masses in the West. It is an active assent to the familiar order of bourgeois democracy, as the dull maximum of liberty, that is constantly reproduced by the radical absence of *proletarian democracy* in the East, whose régimes figure the infernal minimum. There is no space to explore the effects of fifty years of Stalinism here: their importance is enormous for understanding the complex historical meaning of bourgeois democracy in the West today.

Gramsci himself was, in fact, very conscious of the need for careful discrimination of the successive historical forms of 'consent' by the exploited to their exploitation, and for analytic differentiation of its components at any one moment of time. He reproached Croce precisely for assuming in his *History of Liberty* that all ideologies prior to liberalism were of the 'same serene and indistinct colour, devoid of development or conflict'—stressing the specificity of the hold of religion on the masses of Bourbon Naples, the power of the appeal to the nation which succeeded it in Italy, and at the same time the possibility of popular combinations of the two.⁵⁴ Elsewhere, he contrasted the epochs of the French Revolution and Restoration in Europe precisely in terms of the distinct types of consent—'direct' and 'indirect'—that they obtained from the oppressed, and the forms of suffrage—universal and censitary—that corresponded to them.⁵⁵ Paradoxically, however, Gramsci never produced any comprehensive account of the history or structure of bourgeois democracy in his Prison Notebooks. The problem that confers its deepest meaning on his central theoretical work remains the horizon rather than the object of his texts. Part of the reason why the initial equations of his discourse on hegemony were miscalculated, was due to this absence. Gramsci was not wrong in his constant reversion to the problem of consent in the West: until the full nature and role of bourgeois democracy is grasped, nothing can be understood of capitalist power in the advanced industrial countries today. At the same time, it should be clear why Gramsci was mistaken in his first location of 'consent' within civil society. For, in fact, the very *nature* of this consent excludes such an allocation, since it is precisely the parliamentary representative State that first and foremost induces it.

The Second Solution

Let us now look at Gramsci's second version of the relationship between his terms. In this, he no longer ascribes to civil society a preponderance over the State, or a unilateral localization of hegemony to civil society. On the contrary, civil society is presented as in balance or equilibrium with the State, and hegemony is distributed between State—or 'political society'—and civil society, while itself being redefined to *combine* coercion and consent. These formulations express Gramsci's unease with his first version, and his acute awareness—despite and against it—of the central ideological role of the Western capitalist State. He does not merely register this role in general. However, it may be noted that his comments on the particular dimensions of the State which specialize in the performance of it are selective, focusing on its subordinate rather than its superordinate institutions. For Gramsci's specific references to the ideological functions of the State are concerned not so much with parliament, as with education and law—the school system and the judicial system. 'Every State is ethical in so far as one of its most important functions is to elevate the great mass of the population to a given cultural and moral level, a level or standard which corresponds to the needs of development of the forces of production and hence to the interests of the dominant classes. The school as a positive educational function and the courts as a negative and repressive educational function are the most important such activities of the State. But in reality a multiplicity of other

⁵⁴ QC II, pp. 1236–7.

⁵⁵ QC I, p. 443.

so-called private initiatives and activities tend towards the same end, which constitute the apparatus of political and cultural hegemony of the ruling class.⁵⁶

This emphasis is extremely important. It underlines all the distance between Gramsci and many of his later commentators, whatever the limits of Gramsci's development of it. Yet at the same time, it cannot be accepted as a true correction of the first version. Gramsci now grasps the co-presence of ideological controls within civil society and the State. But this gain on one plane is offset by a loss of clarity on another. Hegemony, which was earlier allocated to civil society only, is now exercised by the State as well. Simultaneously, however, its meaning tends to change: it now no longer indicates cultural supremacy alone, for it also includes coercion. 'The normal exercise of hegemony' is now 'characterized by a combination of force and consent'. The result is that Gramsci now commits an error from the other direction. *For coercion is precisely a legal monopoly of the capitalist State.* In Weber's famous definition, the State is the institution which enjoys a monopoly of legitimate violence over a given territory.⁵⁷ It alone possesses an army and a police—'groups of men specialized in the use of repression' (Engels). Thus it is not true that hegemony as coercion + consent is co-present in civil society and the State alike. The exercise of repression is juridically absent from civil society. The State reserves it as an exclusive domain.⁵⁸ This brings us to a first fundamental axiom governing the nature of power in a developed capitalist social formation. There is always a *structural asymmetry* in the distribution of the consensual and coercive functions of this power. Ideology is shared between civil society and the State: violence pertains to the State alone. In other words, the State enters twice over into any equation between the two.

It is possible that one reason why Gramsci had difficulty in isolating this asymmetry was that Italy had witnessed in 1920–22 the exceptional emergence of military squads organized by the fascists, which operated freely outside the State apparatus proper. The structural monopoly of violence by the capitalist State was thus to some extent masked by conjunctural commando operations (Gramsci's term) within civil society. Yet in fact, of course, the *squadristi* could only assault and sack working-class institutions with impunity, because they had the tacit coverage of the police and army. Gramsci, with his customary lucidity, was naturally well aware of this: 'In the present struggles, it often happens that a weakened State machine is like a flagging army: commandos, or private armed organizations, enter the field to accomplish two tasks—to use illegality, while the State appears to remain within legality, and thereby to

⁵⁶ QC II, p. 1049. See also QC III, p. 1570; SPN, p. 246.

⁵⁷ 'Politics as a Vocation', in *From Max Weber*, ed. Gerth and Mills, London 1948, p. 78.

⁵⁸ This is a regulative principle of any modern capitalist State. It naturally permits of certain variations and qualifications in practice. The State's monopoly of the means of coercion may be legally drawn at the line of automatic weapons, rather than hand-guns, as in the USA or Switzerland. There may be semi-legal organizations of private violence, such as the American goon-squads of the twenties and thirties. Gramsci was certainly impressed by the existence of the latter. However, these phenomena have always been of marginal importance compared with the central machinery of the State, in the advanced capitalist social formations.

reorganize the State itself.⁵⁹ Commenting on the March on Rome, he wrote: ‘There could be no “civil war” between the State and the fascist movement, only a sporadic violent action to modify the leadership of the State and reform its administrative apparatus. In the civil guerrilla struggle, the fascist movement was not against the State, but aligned with it.’⁶⁰ The relatively atypical episode of the fascist squads—whose expeditions could only be ‘sporadic’—does not in fact seem to have had any notable effect on the balance of Gramsci’s thought.

More important for the uncertainty of his account of the relationship between State and civil society in this respect was the recurrent tendency of his theory towards an over-extension of its concepts. His dissolution of the police into a wider and vaguer social phenomenon is a not untypical example. ‘What is the police? It is certainly not merely the official organization, juridically acknowledged and assigned to the function of public security, that is usually understood by the term. The latter is the central nucleus that has formal responsibility for the “police”, which is actually a much vaster organization, in which a large part of the population of a State participates, directly or indirectly, with more or less precise and definite links, permanently or occasionally.’⁶¹ In fact, it is striking that in precisely the area of law, which particularly interested him as a function of the State, Gramsci could simultaneously note the absence of any coercive equivalent to its sanctions within civil society, yet argue that legality should nevertheless be regarded as a more ubiquitous system of pressures and compulsions at work in civil society as much as in the State, to produce particular moral and cultural standards. ‘The concept of “law” should be extended to include those activities which today are designated “juridically neutral” and are within the domain of civil society, which operates without taxative sanctions or obligations, but nonetheless exercises a collective pressure and obtains objective results in determining customs, ways of thinking and behaving, morals, and so on.’⁶² The result is a structural indistinction between law and custom, juridical rules and conventional norms, which impedes any accurate demarcation of the respective provinces of civil society or the State in a capitalist social formation. Gramsci was never quite able to fix the asymmetry between the two: his successive formulations constantly grope towards it, without ever exactly reaching it.

A Third Attempt

For Gramsci’s third version of the relationship between his terms represents a final attempt to grasp his elusive object. In this version, the State now *includes* ‘political society’ and ‘civil society’ alike. In effect, there is a radicalization of the categorial fusion incipient in the second version. There is now no longer merely a distribution of hegemony, as a synthesis of coercion and consent, across State and civil society. State and civil society themselves are merged into a larger suzerain unity. ‘By the State should be understood not merely the governmental apparatus, but also the “private” apparatus of hegemony or civil society.’⁶³ The conclusion of this argument is the abrupt dictum: ‘In reality civil society and State are one and the same.’⁶⁴ In other words, the State becomes coextensive with the social formation, as in international usage. The concept of civil

⁵⁹ QC I, p. 121; SPN, p. 232.

⁶¹ QC I, pp. 279–80.

⁶³ QC II, p. 801; SPN, 261.

⁶⁰ QC II, pp. 808–9.

⁶² QC III, p. 1566; SPN, p. 242.

⁶⁴ QC III, p. 1590; SPN, p. 160.

society as a distinct entity disappears. 'Civil society is also part of the "State", indeed is the State itself.'⁶⁵ These formulations can be said to reveal Gramsci's frequent awareness that the role of the State in some sense 'exceeds' that of civil society in the West. They thus constitute an important correction of his second version. Yet once again, the gain on the new terrain is accompanied by a loss on the previous one. For in this final version; the very *distinction* between State and civil society is itself cancelled. This solution has grave consequences, which undermine any scientific attempt to define the specificity of bourgeois democracy in the West.

Althusser and Gramsci

The results can be seen in the adoption of this version by Louis Althusser and his colleagues. For if the first version of Gramsci's equations was above all appropriated by left currents within European social-democracy after the war, the third version has been more recently utilized by left currents within European communism. The origins of this adoption can be found in a well-known passage of *For Marx*, in which Althusser, equating the notion of 'civil society' with 'individual economic behaviour' and attributing its descent to Hegel, dismissed it as alien to historical materialism.⁶⁶ In fact, of course, while the young Marx did use the term primarily to refer to the sphere of economic needs and activities, it is far from the case that it disappears from his mature writings. If the earlier signification of it disappears from *Capital* (with the emergence of the concepts of forces/relations of production), the term itself does not—for it had *another* meaning for Marx, that was not synonymous with individual economic needs, but was a generic designation for all non-State institutions in a capitalist social formation. Marx not only never abandoned this function of the concept of 'civil society', his later political writings repeatedly revolve on a central usage of it. Thus the whole of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* is built on an analysis of Bonapartism which starts from the assertion that: 'The State enmeshes, controls, regulates, supervises and regiments civil society from the most all-embracing expressions of its life down to its most insignificant motions, from its most general modes of existence down to the private life of individuals.'⁶⁷

It was this usage which Gramsci took over in his prison writings. In doing so, however, he delimited the concept of 'civil society' much more

⁶⁵ QC III, p. 2302; SPN, p. 261.

⁶⁶ *For Marx*, London 1970, p. 110.

⁶⁷ Marx, *Surveys from Exile*, p. 186. 'The Civil War in France' is the pendant work that provides a theory of the diametric opposite of Bonapartism: 'The direct antithesis to the Empire was the Commune... The unity of the nation was not to be broken, but, on the contrary, to be organized by the Communal constitution and to become a reality by the destruction of the state power which claimed to be the embodiment of that unity independent of, and superior to, the nation itself... its legitimate functions were to be wrested from an authority usurping pre-eminence over society itself, and restored to the responsible agents of society'. Marx, *The First International and After*, London 1974, pp. 208, 210. The 'Critique of the Gotha Programme' repeats the same contrast: 'Freedom consists in converting the State from an organ superimposed on society into one thoroughly subordinate to it.' (ibid. p. 354). The term 'civil society' is abbreviated to 'society' in Marx's later work, in all probability because of the ambiguity of the German *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, but it clearly occupies the same structural position in these contrasts between State and society.

precisely. In Gramsci, civil society does not refer to the sphere of economic relations, but is precisely contrasted with it as a system of superstructural institutions that is intermediary between economy and State. 'Between the economic structure and the State, with its legislation and coercion, stands civil society.'⁶⁸ This is why Gramsci's list of the institutions of hegemony in civil society rarely includes factories or plants—precisely the economic apparatuses that many of his disciples today believe to be primary in inculcating ideological subordination among the masses. (If anything, in his Turin writings, if not in his notes on Americanism in prison, Gramsci often tended to regard the discipline of these as schools of socialism rather than capitalism.) Gramsci's definition of the term 'civil society' can thus be described as a refinement of its use in the late Marx, explicitly dissociating it from its economic origins. At the same time, we have just seen that in his last version of the dyad State and civil society he abandons the distinction between the two altogether, to proclaim their identity. Can the term, however, be simply rejected even in its non-economic usage? There is no question that its variegated passage through Locke, Ferguson, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel and Marx has loaded it with multiple ambiguities and confusions.⁶⁹ It will doubtless be necessary to frame a new and unequivocal concept in the future, within a developed scientific theory of the total articulation of capitalist social formations. But until this is available, the term 'civil society' remains a necessary *practico-indicative* concept, to designate all those institutions and mechanisms outside the boundaries of the State system proper. In other words, its function is to draw an indispensable *line of demarcation* within the politico-ideological superstructures of capitalism.

'Ideological State Apparatuses'

Once he had rejected the notion of civil society, Althusser was thus later logically led to a drastic assimilation of Gramsci's final formula, which effectively abolishes the distinction between State and civil society. The result was the thesis that 'churches, parties, trade unions, families, schools, newspapers, cultural ventures' in fact all constitute 'Ideological State Apparatuses'.⁷⁰ Explaining this notion, Althusser declared: 'It is unimportant whether the institutions in which they (ideologies) are realized are "public" or "private"'—for these all indifferently form sectors of a single controlling State which is 'the precondition for any distinction between public and private'.⁷¹ The political reasons for this

⁶⁸ QC II, p. 1253; SPN, p. 208.

⁶⁹ For successive usages of the term, from the Enlightenment onwards, see Bobbio, 'Gramsci e la concezione della società civile', op. cit., pp. 80–84. Prior to Hegel, 'civil society' was customarily opposed to 'natural society' or 'primitive society', as civilization to nature, rather than to 'political society' or 'state', as divisions within civilization.

⁷⁰ *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, London 1971, pp. 136–7. Althusser commented: 'To my knowledge, Gramsci is the only one who went any distance down the road I am taking . . . Unfortunately, Gramsci did not systematize his intuitions, which remained in the state of acute but fragmentary notes.'

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 137–8. Once this argument is accepted, of course, there is no reason why not only bourgeois newspapers or families but also capitalist factories and offices should not be dubbed 'State apparatuses'—a conclusion at which Althusser, to his credit, evidently balked. (Nothing would be easier thereafter than to announce the identity of the 'State bourgeoisie' in the USSR and the bourgeoisie in the USA.) This omission, however, merely serves to suggest the lack of seriousness of the whole trope.

sudden and arbitrary theoretical decision are not entirely clear. However, it seems probable that they were in large measure a product of the attraction exercised by the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the late sixties, on semi-oppositional sectors of the European Communist Parties. The revolutionary character officially claimed for the process in China could, in effect, only be squared with classical Marxist definitions of a revolution—the overthrow and destruction of a State machine—by decreeing all manifestations of culture to be State apparatuses.⁷² In the Chinese press of the time such manifestations were, indeed, typically discerned in the psychological traits displayed by individuals. To provide Marxist credentials for this ‘revolution of the spirits’ under way in China, a radical redefinition of the State was necessary. There is little need to dwell today on the inadequacy of this procedure for any rational account of the Cultural Revolution, now an archived chapter in the history of the CCP. Much more serious were its potential consequences for a responsible socialist politics in the West.

For once the position is adopted that all ideological and political superstructures—including the family, reformist trade unions and parties, and private media—are by definition State apparatuses, in strict logic it becomes impossible and unnecessary to distinguish between bourgeois democracies and fascism. For the fact that in the latter total State control over trade unions or mass media was institutionalized would, according to this reasoning, be—to use Althusser’s phrase—‘unimportant’. A similar conflation of State and civil society could conversely lead younger disciples of the Frankfurt School at the same time to argue that ‘liberal democracy’ in post-war Germany was functionally equivalent to fascism in pre-war Germany, since the family now fulfilled the authoritarian instance previously occupied by the police, as part of the State system. The unscientific character of such theses is obvious; the European working class paid heavily for anticipations of them in the twenties and early thirties. The *boundaries* of the State are not a matter of indifference to Marxist theory or revolutionary practice. It is essential to be able to chart them accurately. To blur them is, in fact, to misunderstand the specific role and efficacy of the superstructures *outside* the State within bourgeois democracy. Ralph Miliband, in a prescient criticism of the whole notion of ‘State Ideological Apparatuses’, correctly emphasized this. ‘To suggest that the relevant institutions are actually part of the State system does not seem to me to accord with reality, and tends to obscure the difference in this respect between these political systems and systems where ideological institutions are indeed part of a State monopolistic system of power. In the former systems, ideological institutions do retain a very high degree of autonomy; and are therefore the better able to conceal the degree to which they do belong to the system of capitalist power.’⁷³

⁷² See the perceptive remarks in Isaac Deutscher’s interview on the Cultural Revolution, *La Sinistra*, Vol. 1, No. 2, November 1966, pp. 13–16.

⁷³ ‘The Capitalist State: A Reply to Nicos Poulantzas’, *NLR* 59, January-February 1970, p. 59. Poulantzas, however, can certainly not be charged with indifference to the problem of the fascist state. His remarkable work, *Fascism and Dictatorship*, London 1974, represents a rare example of theoretical and empirical synthesis in contemporary Marxist literature. While retaining the etiquette of ‘ideological state apparatuses’ in vogue at the time, Poulantzas nevertheless argued that ‘this in no way means that the “private” or “public” character of the ideological State apparatuses is of no importance’, and sought to define the

So far as Althusser was concerned, it would in fact have been unjust to ascribe any identification of the structures of fascism and bourgeois democracy to him: there is no sign that he was ever tempted by such ultra-leftist errors—or, alternatively, by the reformist consequences that could also be formally deduced from the idea that trade-union locals or cinema studios were part of the State apparatus in the West (in which case the victory of a communist slate or the making of a militant film would putatively count as gradual conquests of ‘parts’ of a divisible State apparatus—in defiance of the fundamental Marxist tenet of the political unity of the bourgeois State which precisely necessitates a revolution to end it). The reason for the actual innocuousness of a theory that was so potentially dangerous lay in its inspiration. Designed for an arcane compliance with events in the Far East, its exoteric applications in the West lacked any local impetus. The real mark of the thesis was not its political gravity for the working class, so much as its levity.

The Influence of Croce

The case of Gramsci was naturally very different. No distant political determinant was at work in his theorizations of the relationship between State and civil society. The difficulties and contradictions of his texts were rather a reflection of the impediments of his imprisonment. There was, however, a philosophical determinant of his tendency to distend the frontiers of the State. For Gramsci did not produce the idea of an indefinite extension of the State as a political structure from nowhere. He took it, quite directly, from Benedetto Croce. No less than four times in the Prison Notebooks, Gramsci cited Croce’s view that the ‘State’ was a higher entity, not to be identified with mere empirical government, that could at times find its real expression in what might seem institutions or arenas of civil society. ‘Croce goes so far as to assert that the true “State”, that is the directing force in the historical process, is sometimes to be found not where it is usually believed to be, in the State as juridically defined, but often in “private” forces, and sometimes in so-called revolutionaries. This proposition of Croce’s is very important for a comprehension of his conception of history and politics.’⁷⁴ The metaphysical character of Croce’s conception is, of course, manifest: the idea of a numinous essence of the State, floating majestically above mere

specificity of the fascist State by its reorganization of the respective branches of the State apparatus into a new and more centralized pattern (pp. 305, 315–30). If his account of the latter remains finally insufficient, it is because his general explanation of the nature of fascism suffers from a certain historical under-determination. Internally, it tends to minimize the acuity of the class threat from the proletariat that evoked it (working-class defeat is held to have preceded fascist victory in Italy and Germany—in which case fascism would have been supererogatory for the bourgeoisie), while externally it neglects the dynamics of inter-imperialist struggle (the Second World War is omitted altogether, and with it decisive revelations of the social nature and rationale of fascist expansionism). A more drastic theoretical delimitation of the fascist states from the bourgeois democracies would follow from any study of these determinants. Given their absence, however, the scope and quality of Poulantzas’s work remains all the more impressive.

⁷⁴ QC III, p. 1302. The same idea is cited in QC II, p. 858; QC II, p. 1087; QC II, pp. 1223–4. Gramsci objected to Croce’s undue generalization of his thesis, but he accepted its validity as a principle. ‘The claim is not paradoxical for the theory of State-hegemony-moral consciousness, because it can in fact happen that the moral and political direction of a country in a given epoch is not exercised by the legal government, but by a “private” organization or even a revolutionary party.’

juridical or institutional appearances, was a typically Hegelian heritage. Its innocent reproduction by a strenuously anti-Hegelian school within Western Marxism has a peculiar irony.

This speculative and anti-scientific legacy of Croce's thought undoubtedly had its effects on Gramsci's work. An example of the vagaries for which it was responsible is such a text from the Notebooks as that in which Gramsci entertains the idea that parliament might, in certain cases, not be part of the State at all.⁷⁵ The misguided direction in which the Crocean fancy led is evident in all those passages of Gramsci's writings which assert or suggest a dissolution of the boundaries between State and civil society. At the same time, however, it is noticeable that wherever Gramsci had to speak directly of the experience of fascism in Italy, he never mistook the significance of the delimitation between the two. For fascism precisely tended to suppress this boundary in practice, and once political concerns proper were primary, Gramsci had no difficulty in registering historical realities. 'With the events of 1924-6, when all political parties were suppressed', he wrote, 'the coincidence of *pays réel* and *pays légal* was henceforward proclaimed in Italy, because civil society in all its forms was now integrated into a single party-political organization of the State.'⁷⁶ Gramsci had no illusions about the significance of the innovations imposed by the counter-revolutionary dictatorship of which he was a victim. 'The contemporary dictatorships juridically abolish even the modern forms of autonomy' of the subordinate classes, he wrote—such as 'parties, trade unions, cultural associations'—and so 'seek to incorporate them into the activity of the State: the legal centralization of all national life in the hands of a ruling group that is now "totalitarian".'⁷⁷ Thus whatever analytic errors were due to Croce's influence in Gramsci's texts, the aberration of equating fascist and parliamentary forms of the capitalist State was not among them.

The oscillations in Gramsci's usage of his central terms have been noted: he never unambiguously committed himself to any of them. It can, nevertheless, be said that his third version of the relationship between State and civil society—identification—is a reminder that in his Prison Writings there is no comprehensive comparison of bourgeois democracy and fascism. The problem of the specific difference between the two remains in a sense unresolved in them, which is partly why Gramsci—victim of a police dictatorship in a relatively backward European country—could paradoxically appear after the Second World War as the theorist *par excellence* of the parliamentary State of the advanced capitalist countries. The importance of an operational *distinction* between State and civil society is posed with particular urgency, as we have seen, for any such comparative analysis. Gramsci's third version in the end tends to *suppress* the central theoretical problem of his first two versions. The Gordian knot of the *relationship between* State and civil society in Western social formations, as distinct from Tsarist Russia, is cut by preemptorily decreeing that the State is coextensive with the social formation anyway.

⁷⁵ QC III, pp. 1707-8; SPN, pp. 253-4.

⁷⁶ QC III, p. 2058.

⁷⁷ QC III, p. 2287; SPN, p. 54n.

The problem, however, remains, and the greater number of Gramsci's texts devoted to exploring his first equations testify to his undiminished consciousness of it.

The Key Asymmetry

Keeping for the moment to the terms of the Prison Notebooks,⁷⁸ it has been seen that the key distribution, which eludes each of Gramsci's successive versions, although they miss it from different directions, is an asymmetry between civil society and the State in the West: coercion is located in the one, consent is located in both. This 'topological' answer, however, itself poses a further and deeper problem. Beyond their distribution, what is the *inter-relation* or *connection* between consent and coercion in the structure of bourgeois class power in metropolitan capitalism? The workings of bourgeois democracy appear to justify the idea that advanced capitalism fundamentally rests on the *consent* of the working class to it. In fact, acceptance of this conception is the cornerstone of the strategy of the 'parliamentary road to socialism', along which progress can be measured by the conversion of the proletariat to the prospect of socialism, until an arithmetical majority is achieved, whereupon the rule of the parliamentary system makes the enactment of socialism painlessly possible. The idea that the power of capital essentially or exclusively takes the form of cultural hegemony in the West is in effect a classical tenet of reformism. This is the involuntary temptation that lurks in some of Gramsci's notes. Is it truly banished by his alternative assertion that the hegemony of the Western bourgeoisie is a combination of consent and coercion? There is no doubt that this is an improvement, but the *relationship* between the two terms cannot be grasped by their mere conjunction or addition. Yet within Gramsci's framework everything depends on an accurate calibration of precisely this relation. How should it be conceived, theoretically?

No adequate answer to the question can be presented here. For a scientific solution of it is only possible through historical enquiry. No philological commentary, or theoretical fiat, can settle the difficult problems of bourgeois class power in the West. A directly substantive and comparative investigation of the actual political systems of the major

⁷⁸ The caution should be repeated. The dualist analysis to which Gramsci's notes typically tend does not permit an adequate treatment of economic constraints that act directly to enforce bourgeois class power: among others, the fear of unemployment or dismissal that can, in certain historical circumstances, produce a 'silenced majority' of obedient citizens and pliable voters among the exploited. Such constraints involve neither the conviction of consent, nor the violence of coercion. Their importance has, it is true, diminished with the post-war consolidation of bourgeois democracies in the West, compared with the role of earlier patronage or cacique systems. However, their lesser forms remain myriad in the day-to-day workings of a capitalist society. Another mode of class power that escapes Gramsci's main typology is corruption—consent by purchase, rather than by persuasion, without any ideological fastening. Gramsci was, of course, by no means unaware of either 'constraint' or 'corruption'. He thought, for example, that political liberties in the USA were largely negated by 'economic pressures' (QC III, p. 1666); while in France during the Third Republic, he noted that 'between consent and force stood corruption/fraud', or the neutralization of movements of opposition by bribery of their leaders, characteristic of conjunctures in which the use of force was too risky (QC III, p. 1638; SPN, 80n). However, he never intercalated them, to form a more sophisticated spectrum of concepts, systematically into his main theory. The comments above deliberately remain within the confines of the latter.

imperialist countries in the twentieth century can alone establish the real structures of the rule of capital. Historical materialism permits of no other procedure. This essay naturally cannot even broach it. All that can be attempted here is to advance certain critical suggestions within the textual limits of Gramsci's discourse. Their verification necessarily remains subject to the ordinary disciplines of scientific study.

The Nature of Bourgeois Class Rule

To formulate a preliminary response, we can turn to a phrase of Gramsci himself. In the first notebook he composed in prison, he referred in passing to 'forms of mixed struggle' that were 'fundamentally military and preponderantly political' in character—noting at the same time that 'every political struggle always has a military substratum'.⁷⁹ The paradoxical juxtaposition and distinction of 'fundamental' and 'preponderant' to describe the relationship between two forms of struggle, provides a formula that can be adapted for a more adequate account of the dispositions of bourgeois class power in advanced capitalism. The Althusserian tradition was later to codify the same duality with its distinction between 'determinant' and 'dominant'—taken not from Gramsci, but from Marx. In analysing the contemporary social formations of the West, we can substitute 'coercion' or 'repression' for Gramsci's 'military struggle'—as the mode of class rule enforced by violence; 'culture' or 'ideology' for his 'political struggle'—as the mode of class rule secured by consent. It is then possible to capture something like the real nature of the relationship between the two variables by which Gramsci was haunted. If we revert to Gramsci's original problematic, *the normal structure of capitalist political power in bourgeois-democratic states* is in effect simultaneously and indivisibly *dominated by culture* and *determined by coercion*. To deny the 'preponderant' or dominant role of culture in the contemporary bourgeois power system is to liquidate the most salient immediate difference between Western parliamentarism and Russian absolutism, and to reduce the former to a myth. The fact is that this cultural domination is embodied in certain irrefutably concrete institutions: regular elections, civic freedoms, rights of assembly—all of which exist in the West and none of which directly threaten the class power of capital.⁸⁰ The day-to-day system of bourgeois rule is thus based on the consent of the masses, in the form of the ideological belief that they exercise self-government in the representative State. At the same time, however, to forget the 'fundamental' or determinant role of violence within the power structure of contemporary capitalism in the final instance is to regress to reformism, in the illusion that an electoral majority can legislate socialism peacefully from a parliament.

⁷⁹ QC1, p. 123; SPN, p. 230.

⁸⁰ These formulations deliberately remain within the purview of Gramsci's concepts. They involve one major simplification, characteristic of the Prison Notebooks—the elision of the 'cultural' and 'political' dimensions of popular consent to the rule of capital. The two cannot, however, be straightforwardly equated. No bourgeois parliament was ever merely a secular simulacrum of a religious church. (See footnote 49 above.) It can be said that Gramsci's attention always tended more towards the purely cultural institutions for securing the consent of the masses—churches, schools, newspapers and so on—than to the specifically political institutions which assure the stability of capitalism, with their necessarily greater complexity and ambiguity. For the purposes of the argument above, the indeterminacy characteristic of Gramsci's discussions of consent has been retained.

An analogy may serve to illuminate the relationship in question—provided its limits (those of any analogy) are kept in mind. A monetary system in the capitalist mode of production is constituted from two distinct media of exchange: paper and gold.⁸¹ It is not a *summation* of these two forms, for the value of fiduciary issue which circulates every day and thus maintains the system under normal conditions is *dependent on* the quantum of metal in the bank reserves at any given moment, despite the fact that this metal is completely *absent* from the system as a medium of exchange. Only the paper, not the gold, appears within circulation, yet the paper is in the final instance determined *by* the gold, without which it would cease to be currency. Crisis conditions, moreover, will necessarily trigger a *sudden reversion* of the total system to the metal which always lies invisibly behind it: a collapse of credit infallibly produces a rush to gold.⁸² In the political system, a similar structural (non-additive and non-transitive) relationship between ideology and repression, consent and coercion, prevails. The normal conditions of ideological subordination of the masses—the day-to-day routines of a parliamentary democracy—are themselves *constituted by* a silent, absent force which gives them their currency: the monopoly of legitimate violence by the State. Deprived of this, the system of cultural control would be instantly fragile, since the limits of possible actions against it would disappear.⁸³ With it, it is immensely powerful—so powerful that it can, paradoxically, do ‘without’ it: in effect, violence may normally scarcely appear within the bounds of the system at all.

In the most tranquil democracies today, the army may remain invisible in its barracks, the police appear uncontentious on its beat.

⁸¹ Talcott Parsons, with his characteristic *mélange* of involuntary insight and ingenuous confusion, once advanced a comparison between power and money of a very different sort, mystifying any analogy completely by drawing the inimitable conclusion that a ‘democratic political system’ can increase the total amount of classless ‘power’ in a society by ‘votes’ in the same way that a banking system can increase purchasing power by ‘credit’ (votes do ‘double duty’, like dollars in a bank, in his phrase). See ‘On the Concept of Political Power’, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, June 1963, now republished in *Sociological Theory and Modern Society*, New York 1967.

⁸² Or to stronger foreign currencies, with a superior ratio to gold.

⁸³ A classical example of such a sudden disappearance of ‘limits’ is provided by the commentaries and refutations inserted by typographical workers in bourgeois newspapers during a revolutionary situation. In Russia and Cuba alike, compositors retorted to the propaganda of the capitalist press in its own pages, by appending what the Cuban workers called ‘tails’ to the more mendacious articles contained in it. The cultural control system was thereby sprung into the air the moment the ‘rights’ of private property were defied, because there was no stable State apparatus of repression to enforce them. Trotsky commented on this structural relationship, in his account of the situation in Russia after the February Revolution: ‘How about the force of property? said the petty-bourgeois socialists, answering the Bolsheviks. Property is a relation among people. It represents an enormous power so long as it is universally acknowledged and supported by that system of compulsion called Law and the State. But the very essence of the present situation was that the old State had suddenly collapsed, and the entire old system of rights had been called into question by the masses. In the factories the workers were more and more regarding themselves as proprietors, and the bosses as uninvited guests. Still less assured were the feelings of the landlords in the provinces, face to face with those surly vengeful muzhiks, and far from that governmental power in whose existence they did for a time, owing to their distance from the capital, believe. The property-holders, deprived of the possibility of using their property, or protecting it, ceased to be real property-holders and became badly frightened philistines who could not give any support to the government for the simple reason that they needed it themselves.’ *History of the Russian Revolution*, I, p. 197.

The analogy holds too in another respect. Just as gold as a material substratum of paper is itself a convention that needs acceptance as a medium of exchange, so repression as a guarantor of ideology itself depends on the assent of those who are trained to exercise it. Given this critical proviso, however, the 'fundamental' resort of bourgeois class power, beneath the 'preponderant' cusp of culture in a parliamentary system, remains coercion.

For historically, and this is the most essential point of all, the development of any revolutionary crisis necessarily displaces the dominance within the bourgeois power structure from ideology to violence. Coercion becomes both *determinant and dominant* in the supreme crisis, and the army inevitably occupies the front of the stage in any class struggle against the prospect of a real inauguration of socialism. Capitalist power can in this sense be regarded as a topological system with a 'mobile' centre: in any crisis, an objective redeployment occurs, and capital reconcentrates from its representative into its repressive apparatuses. The fact that the subjectivity of leading cadres of these apparatuses in Western countries today may remain innocent of any such scenario, is not proof of their constitutional neutrality, but merely of the remoteness of the prospect to them. In fact, any revolutionary crisis within an advanced capitalist country must inevitably produce a reversion to the ultimate determinant of the power system: force. This is a law of capitalism, which it cannot violate, on pain of death. It is the rule of the end-game situation.

II. The Balance between Coercion and Consent

It should now be clear why Gramsci's concept of hegemony, for all its immense merits as a first theoretical 'divining-rod' of the uncharted specificity of Western social formations,⁸⁴ contains a potential political danger. It has been seen how the term, originated in Russia to define the relationship between the proletariat and peasantry in a bourgeois revolution, was transferred by Gramsci to describe the relationship between the bourgeoisie and proletariat in a consolidated capitalist order in Western Europe. The common thread which permitted this extension was the consensual tenor of the idea of hegemony. Used in Russia to denote the persuasive nature of the influence the working class should seek to win over the peasantry, as opposed to the coercive nature of the struggle to overthrow Tsarism, it was then applied by Gramsci to the forms of consent to its rule won by the bourgeoisie from the working class in the West. The service which he rendered to Marxism, by focusing so centrally on the—hitherto evaded—problem of the consensual legitimacy of parliamentary institutions in Western Europe, was a solitary and signal one. At the same time, however, the risks attendant on the new extension of the concept of hegemony were soon evident in his writings.

For whereas in Russia the term could exhaust the relationship between proletariat and peasantry, since the former was an alliance between *non-*

⁸⁴ The greatest achievement of Gramsci's thought in prison—his theory of intellectuals, which produced the most sustained single text in the Notebooks—is perforce omitted altogether from this essay. Suffice it to say that in this field, Gramsci's historical exploration of the complexities of European societies had, and has, no equal within Marxism.

antagonistic classes, the same could never be true in, say, Italy or France of the relationship between bourgeoisie and proletariat—inherently a conflict between *antagonistic* classes, founded on two adversary modes of production. In other words, capitalist rule in the West necessarily comprised coercion as well as consent. Gramsci's awareness of this was expressed in the numerous formulations in his notebooks which refer to the combinations between the two. But, as we have seen, these never succeed in locating definitely or precisely either the position or the interconnection of repression and ideology within the power structure of advanced capitalism. Moreover, in so far as Gramsci at times suggested that consent primarily pertained to civil society, and civil society possessed primacy over the State, he allowed the conclusion that bourgeois class power was primarily consensual. In this form, the idea of hegemony tends to accredit the notion that the dominant mode of bourgeois power in the West—'culture'—is also the determinant mode, either by suppressing the latter or fusing the two together. It thereby omits the unappealable role in the last instance of force.

However, Gramsci's use of the term hegemony was not, of course, confined to the bourgeoisie as a social class. He also employed it to trace the paths of ascent of the proletariat in the West. A further passage in the evolution of the concept was involved here. The prescriptive relationship proletariat/peasantry had plausibly been equated with a cultural ascendancy; the actual relationship bourgeoisie/proletariat certainly included a cultural ascendancy, although it could not be equated or reduced to it; but could the relationship proletariat/bourgeoisie be said in any sense to betoken or promise a cultural ascendancy? Many admirers of Gramsci have thought so. Indeed, it has often been held that his most original and powerful single thesis was precisely the idea that the working class can be hegemonic culturally *before* becoming the ruling class politically, within a capitalist social formation. Official interpretations of Gramsci have, in particular, been keyed to such a prospect. The text from the Prison Notebooks to which reference is customarily made does not, however, assert this. In it, Gramsci wrote: 'A social group is dominant over enemy groups which it tends to "liquidate" or subject with armed force, and is directive over affinal and allied groups. A social group can and indeed must be directive before conquering governmental power (this is one of the main conditions for the conquest of power itself); afterwards, when it exercises power and keeps it firmly in its grasp, it becomes dominant but also continues to be "directive".'⁸⁵ Gramsci here carefully distinguishes the necessity for coercion of *enemy* classes, and consensual direction of *allied* classes. The 'hegemonic activity' which 'can and must be exercised before the assumption of power' is related in this context only to the problem of the alliances of the working class with other exploited and oppressed groups; it is not a claim to hegemony over the whole of society, or the ruling class itself, by definition impossible at this stage.

It is true, however, that an unwary reader can be led to misconstrue this passage, where Gramsci is actually on safe ground, by ambiguities in his use of the term hegemony elsewhere. We shall see why shortly. For the

⁸⁵ QC III, pp. 2010–11; SPN, pp. 57–8.

moment, what is important to recall is the familiar Marxist tenet that the working class under capitalism is inherently incapable of being the culturally dominant class, because it is structurally expropriated by its class position from some of the essential means of cultural production (education, tradition, leisure)—in contrast to the bourgeoisie of the Enlightenment, which could generate its own superior culture within the framework of the Ancien Régime. Not only this, but even *after* the socialist revolution—the conquest of political power by the proletariat—the culturally dominant class remains the bourgeoisie in certain respects (not all—habits more than ideas) and for a certain time (in principle shorter with each revolution), as Lenin and Trotsky emphasized in different contexts.⁸⁶ Gramsci was intermittently conscious of this too.⁸⁷ So long, however, as the lack of structural correspondence between the positions of the bourgeois class within feudal society and the working class within capitalist society was not constantly registered, the risk of a theoretical slide from one to the other was always potentially present in the common use of the term hegemony for them. The more than occasional assimilation of the bourgeois and proletarian revolutions in his writings on Jacobinism demonstrates that Gramsci was not immune to this confusion. The result was to permit later codifications of his thought to make a direct linkage of his two extensions of the concept of hegemony into a classically reformist syllogism. For once bourgeois power in the West is primarily attributed to cultural hegemony, the acquisition of this hegemony would mean effective assumption by the working class of the ‘direction of society’ without the seizure and transformation of State power, in a painless transition to socialism: in other words, a typical idea of Fabianism. Gramsci himself, of course, never drew this conclusion. But in the scattered letter of his texts, it was not an entirely arbitrary interpolation either.

The Comintern Frame of Reference

How was it possible for Gramsci, a communist militant with a past of unwavering—indeed undue—political hostility to reformism, to leave a legacy of such ambiguity? The answer must be sought in the framework of reference within which he wrote. The theory and practice of the Third International, from the inception of its history with Lenin to the incarceration of Gramsci, had been saturated with emphasis on the historical necessity of violence in the destruction and construction of States. The dictatorship of the proletariat, after the armed overthrow of the bourgeois state apparatus, was the touchstone—tirelessly proclaimed in every official document—of the Marxism of the Comintern. Gramsci

⁸⁶ Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 28, pp. 252–3; Trotsky *Literature and Revolution*, Michigan 1966, pp. 184–200.

⁸⁷ Thus in one fragment he argued that in the necessary absence of cultural superiority, the working class would initially have to rely to excess on political command, producing the phenomenon of what he called statolatry. ‘For some social groups, which before their ascent to autonomous State life have not had a long independent period of cultural and moral development on their own (such as was made possible in mediaeval society and under the Absolute régimes by the juridical existence of privileged Estates or orders), a period of statolatry is necessary and indeed opportune. This “statolatry” is nothing other than the normal form of “State life”, or at least initiation to autonomous State life and the creation of a “civil society” which it was not historically possible to create before the ascent to independent State life.’ QC II, p. 1020; SPN, p. 268.

never questioned these principles. On the contrary, when he started his theoretical explorations in prison, he seems to have taken them so much for granted that they scarcely ever figure directly in his discourse at all. They form as it were the familiar acquisition, which no longer needed reiteration, in an intellectual enterprise whose energies were concentrated elsewhere—on the discovery of the unfamiliar. But in the absence of any possibility of integrated composition, denied him in prison, Gramsci's intent pursuit of new themes and ideas exposed him to the persistent risk of temporarily losing sight of older verities, and so of neglecting or mistaking the relationship between the two. The problem of consent, which forms the real fulcrum of his work, is the critical point of this process. Gramsci was acutely aware of the *novelty* and *difficulty* for Marxist theory of the phenomenon of institutionalized popular consent to capital in the West—hitherto regularly evaded or burked within the Comintern tradition. He therefore focused all the powers of his intelligence on it. In doing so, he never intended to deny or rescind the classical axioms of that tradition on the inevitable role of social coercion within any great historical transformation, so long as classes subsisted. His objective was, in one of his phrases, to 'complement' treatment of the one with an exploration of the other.

The premises and aims that produced the selective lens of his work can be seen with particular clarity in his commentaries on Croce. The importance of Croce for Gramsci's whole programme in prison is well known. His remarks on Croce's historical studies are therefore especially revealing. Gramsci repeatedly and expressly criticized Croce for his unilateral exaltation of the consensual and moral, and concomitant evasion of the military and coercive, moments in European history. 'In his two recent books, *The History of Italy* and *The History of Europe*, it is precisely the moments of force, of struggle, of misery that are omitted . . . Is it an accident, or is it tendentiously, that Croce starts his narratives from 1815 and 1871 respectively? In other words, that he excludes the moment of struggle, the moment in which conflicting forces are formed, assembled and deployed, the moment in which one system of social relations dissolves and another is forged in fire and steel, the moment in which one system of social relations disintegrates and declines while another emerges and affirms itself—and instead placidly assumes the moment of cultural or ethico-political expansion to be all history?'⁸⁸

The terse terms of Gramsci's summary of the political bent of Crocean idealist historiography show how naturally he assumed the classical canons of revolutionary Marxism. 'Ethico-political history is an arbitrary and mechanical hypostasis of the moment of hegemony, of political direction, of consent, in the life and in the development of the State and of civil society.'⁸⁹ Yet at the same time, Gramsci regarded Croce as a superior thinker to Gentile, who committed the opposite hypostasis—a fetishism of force and State—in his philosophy of actualism. 'For Gentile, history is exclusively history of the State. For Croce it is rather "ethico-political", that is Croce wants to preserve a distinction between civil society and political society, between hegemony and dictatorship; great

⁸⁸ QC II, p. 1316. QC II, p. 1227; SPN, p. 119.

⁸⁹ QC II, p. 1222.

intellectuals exercise hegemony, which presupposes a certain collaboration, in other words an active and voluntary (free) consent, in a liberal-democratic order. Gentile poses the economico-corporative phase as the ethical phase in the act of history: hegemony and dictatorship are indistinguishable, force is consent without further ado; political society cannot be differentiated from civil society: the State alone exists, and naturally as the government State.⁹⁰

Croce and Historical Materialism

For in fact, with all its exaggeration, it was precisely Croce's emphasis on the role of culture and the significance of consent that was the reason for the pre-eminent theoretical status Gramsci attributed to him. To Gramsci, these represented a philosophical exordium or equivalent to the doctrine of hegemony within historical materialism. 'Croce's thought should therefore at the very least be appreciated as an instrumental value, for it can be said that he has energetically drawn attention to the importance of the phenomena of culture and of thought in the development of history, of the function of major intellectuals in the organic life of civil society and the State, of the moment of hegemony and consent in the necessary form of any concrete historical bloc.'⁹¹ Thus Croce could even be compared by Gramsci to Lenin, as joint authors of the notion of hegemony: 'Contemporaneously with Croce, the greatest modern theorist of Marxism has, on the terrain of political organization and struggle, and in political terminology, revalued—in opposition to diverse "economist" tendencies—the doctrine of hegemony as the complement to the theory of the State as coercion.'⁹²

In his final assessment, Gramsci was so seized with the importance of Croce's 'ethico-political history' that he could argue that Marxism as a philosophy could only achieve a modern renewal through a critique and integration of Croce, comparable to Marx's assimilation and supersession of Hegel. In his famous dictum: 'It is necessary for us to repeat today the same reduction of Croce's philosophy as the first theorists of Marxism accomplished for Hegel's philosophy. This is the sole historically fecund way of achieving an adequate renewal of Marxism, of elevating its conceptions—perforce "vulgarized" in immediate practical life—to the heights necessary for it to be able to resolve the more complex tasks of the present development of struggle—that is, the creation of an integral new culture, which would have the popular characteristics of the Protestant Reformation and the French Enlightenment, and the classical traits of Greek culture and of the Italian Renaissance, a culture which would—in Carducci's phrase—synthesize Maximilien Robespierre and Immanuel Kant, politics and philosophy in a single dialectical unity, belonging to a social group that was not merely French or German, but European and universal. The heritage of German classical philosophy must not merely be inventoried, but made to live actively again. For that, it is necessary to come to terms with the philosophy of Croce.'⁹³ The curvature of

⁹⁰ QC II, p. 691; SPN, p. 271. ⁹¹ QC II, p. 1235.

⁹² QC II, p. 1235. See also *Lettere dal Carcere*, p. 616, for the same comparison.

⁹³ QC II, p. 1223. Elsewhere, Gramsci compared Croce—the greatest Italian prose-writer since Manzoni—to Goethe, for his 'serenity, composure and imperturbability'. *Lettere dal Carcere*, p. 612.

Gramsci's comments on Croce thus traces very accurately the way in which he presumed the gains of the Comintern tradition; preferred to explore what it had relatively neglected; and ended by overstating the case for a bourgeois tradition that had not done so, whose weaknesses he had precisely started by criticizing.

The inadvertent movement of thought visible in these texts on Croce was responsible for the paradoxes of Gramsci's theorization of hegemony. To understand them, it is necessary to separate the objective logic of Gramsci's terms from his subjective political stance as a whole. For the involuntary concatenation of the one yielded results in profound contradiction with the inmost will of the other. The disjuncture that silently developed in Gramsci's notebooks was due, of course, to his inability to write any ordinary statement of his overall views. In this sense, fascist censorship, while not preventing his research, exacted an undeniable toll on it. Gramsci wrestled throughout his imprisonment with the relations between coercion and consent in the advanced capitalist societies of the West. But because he could never produce a unitary theory of the two—which would necessarily have had to take the form of a direct and comprehensive survey of the intricate institutional patterns of bourgeois power, in either their parliamentary or their fascist variants—an unwitting list gradually edged his texts towards the pole of consent, at the expense of that of coercion.

The conceptual slippage which results in Gramsci's work can be compared with that which marks the thought of his celebrated ancestor and inspiration in prison. For Machiavelli, from whom Gramsci took so many themes, had also set out to analyse the dual forms of the Centaur—half-man, half-beast—symbol of the hybrid of compulsion and consent by which men were always governed. In Machiavelli's work, however, the slide occurred in exactly the opposite direction. Ostensibly concerned with 'arms' and 'laws', coercion and consent, his actual discourse slipped unstoppably towards 'force' and 'fraud'—in other words, the animal component of power alone.⁹⁴ The result was the rhetoric of repression later generations were to call Machiavellianism. Gramsci adopted Machiavelli's myth of the Centaur as the emblematic motto of his research: but where Machiavelli had effectively collapsed consent into coercion, in Gramsci coercion was progressively eclipsed by consent. *The Prince* and *The Modern Prince* are in this sense distorting mirrors of each other. There is an occult, inverse correspondence between the failings of the two.

III. The Comparison between East and West

We may now recollect the famous comparison between East and West in the Prison Notebooks, with which we started. Gramsci defined the

⁹⁴ For an analysis of the sliding structures of Machiavelli's thought, and their relation to the political setting of Renaissance Italy, see *Lineages of the Absolute State*, pp. 163–8. The dualist cast of Gramsci's political theory descended directly from Machiavelli, for whom 'arms' and 'laws' were naturally exhaustive of power—two centuries before the emergence of economic theory in Europe, and three before the advent of historical materialism. Gramsci's return to the voluntarist categories of the Renaissance necessarily bypassed the problem of economic constraints.

contrast between the two in terms of the relative position occupied by State and civil society in each. In Russia, the State was 'everything', while civil society was 'primordial and gelatinous'. In Western Europe, on the contrary, the State was merely an 'outer ditch', while civil society was a 'powerful system of fortresses and earthworks' whose complex structures could withstand seismic political or economic crises for the State. These texts of Gramsci, which seek to capture the strategic differences between Russia and the West for a socialist revolution, set him apart from his contemporaries. In the immediate aftermath of the October Revolution, there were many socialists in Central and Western Europe who sensed that the local conditions in which they had to fight were far from those which had obtained in Russia, and who initially said so.⁹⁵ None, however, provided any coherent analysis or serious explanation of the fateful divergence in the historical experience of the European working class of the time. By the end of the twenties, the problem of the contrast between Russia and the West had effectively disappeared from Marxist debate. With the Stalinization of the Comintern, and the institutionalization of what was presented as an official Leninism within it, the example of the USSR became the mandatory and unquestioned paradigm for all issues of revolutionary theory and practice to militants across Europe. Gramsci was unique among Communists in persisting, at the nadir of the defeats of the thirties, to see that Russian experience could not be merely repeated in the West, and in trying to understand why. No other thinker in the European working-class movement has to this day addressed himself so deeply or centrally to the problem of the specificity of a socialist revolution in the West.

Yet, for all the intensity and originality of his enquiry, Gramsci never finally succeeded in arriving at an adequate Marxist account of the distinction between East and West. The image from the compass itself proved, in the end, a snare. For a simple geographical opposition includes by definition an unproblematic comparability of the two terms. Transferred to social formations, however, it implies something that can never be taken for granted: that there is a straightforward *historical* comparability between them. In other words, the terms East and West assume that the social formations on each side of the divide exist in the *same temporality*, and can therefore be read off against each other as variations of a common category. It is this unspoken presupposition which lies behind the central texts of Gramsci's notebooks. His whole *contrast* between Russia and Western Europe revolves on the difference in the relationship between State and civil society in the two zones: its unexamined premise is that the State is the same *type of object* in both. But this 'natural' assumption was precisely what needed to be questioned.

For, in fact, there was no initial unity to found a simple distinction between East and West of the sort that Gramsci was seeking. In its nature and structure, the Tsarism of Nicholas II was a specifically 'Eastern' variant of a *feudal* State, whose Western counterparts—the Absolute monarchies of France or England, Spain or Sweden—had died out centuries before.⁹⁶ In other words, the constant comparison between the

⁹⁵ Lukács and Gorter were examples, among others.

⁹⁶ For a full-length discussion, see *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, pp. 345–60.

Russian and Western States was a *paralogism*, unless the differential historical time of each was specified. A prior comprehension of the uneven development of European feudalism was thus a necessary preamble to a Marxist definition of the Tsarist State which was finally destroyed by the first socialist revolution. For it alone could yield the *theoretical concept* of Absolutism that would allow socialist militants to see the enormous gulf between the Russian autocracy and the capitalist States with which they were confronted in the West (and whose theoretical concept had to be constructed *separately*).

Bourgeois Power in the West

The representative State which had gradually emerged in Western Europe, North America and Japan, after the complex chain of bourgeois revolutions whose final episodes dated only from the late nineteenth century, was still a largely uncharted political object for Marxists when the Bolshevik Revolution occurred. In the early years of the Third International, the light of October blinded many revolutionaries outside Russia to the nature of their national enemy altogether. Those who remained lucid initially tried to adapt to their indigenous realities without relinquishing their fidelity to the cause of the Russian Revolution, by evoking the difference between East and West. They soon desisted. Gramsci alone, isolated from the Comintern, took up this path again and pursued it with matchless courage in prison. But so long as the simultaneity of its terms was assumed, the conundrum of the difference was ultimately unanswerable. The failure to produce a scientific comparative analysis of the respective types of State and structures of power in Russia and the West was in no way peculiar to Gramsci. From the other side of the continental divide, no Bolshevik leader succeeded in developing a coherent theory of it either. The true contrast between the Tsarist and the Western States eluded each from opposite ends. Thus Lenin never mistook the class character of Tsarism: he always expressly insisted, against Menshevik opponents, that Russian Absolutism was a feudal State machine.⁹⁷ Yet he also never adequately or systematically contrasted the parliamentary States of the West with the autocratic State in the East. There is no direct theory of bourgeois democracy anywhere in his writings. Gramsci, on the other hand, was intensely conscious of the novelty of the capitalist State in the West, as an object for Marxist analysis and adversary for Marxist strategy, and of the integrity of representative institutions to its normal operation. He, however, never perceived that the Absolutism in Russia with which he contrasted it was a feudal State—a political edifice of a different order altogether. In the no man's land between the thought of the two, revolutionary socialism missed a theoretical junction vital for its future in Europe.

In the case of Gramsci, his inability to grasp the historical disjuncture concealed by the geographical form of his unity-distinction left its determinate effects on his theory of bourgeois power in the West. Gramsci, as we have seen, was constantly aware of the twin character of this power, but he never succeeded in giving it a stable formulation. Thus

⁹⁷ Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 17, pp. 114–15, 146, 153, 187, 233–41; Vol. 18, pp. 70–77; Vol. 24, pp. 44, 57.

his passages on the distinction between East and West all suffer from the same flaw; their ultimate logic is always to tend to revert to the simple schema of an opposition between 'hegemony' (consent) in the West and 'dictatorship' (coercion) in the East: parliamentarism versus Tsarism. In Tsarist Russia, 'there was no legal political freedom, nor any religious freedom either',⁹⁸ within a State that left no autonomy to civil society. In Republican France, by contrast, 'the parliamentary régime realized the permanent hegemony of the urban class over the population as a whole' by means of 'rule by permanently organized consent', in which 'the organization of consent is left to private initiatives, and is thus moral or ethical in character, because in one way or another "voluntarily" given'.⁹⁹ The weakness of Gramsci's counterposition was not so much its over-estimation of the ideological claims of the Tsarist State within the Russian social formation—which was indeed far more extensive than that of any contemporary Western State, if not as absolute as Gramsci's attribution to it of a command over 'everything'. It was its underestimation of the specificity and stability of the repressive machinery of army and police, and its functional relationship to the representative machinery of suffrage and parliament, within the Western State.

Bordiga's Formulation

Strangely, in the tormented decade of the twenties, it was not Gramsci but his comrade and antagonist Amadeo Bordiga who was to formulate the true nature of the distinction between East and West, although he never theorized it into any cogent political practice. At the fateful Sixth Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, in February-March 1926, Bordiga—by now isolated and suspected within his own party—confronted Stalin and Bukharin for the final time. In a remarkable speech to the Plenum, he said: 'We have in the International only one party that has achieved revolutionary victory—the Bolshevik Party. They say that we should therefore take the road which led the Russian party to success. This is perfectly true, but it remains insufficient. The fact is that the Russian party fought under special conditions, in a country where the bourgeois-liberal revolution had not yet been accomplished and the feudal aristocracy had not yet been defeated by the capitalist bourgeoisie. Between the fall of the feudal autocracy and the seizure of power by the working class lay too short a period for there to be any comparison with the development which the proletariat will have to accomplish in other countries. For there was no time to build a bourgeois State machine on the ruins of the Tsarist feudal apparatus. Russian development does not provide us with an experience of how the proletariat can overthrow a liberal-parliamentary capitalist State that has existed for many years and possesses the ability to defend itself. We, however, must know how to attack a modern bourgeois-democratic State that on the one hand has its own means of ideologically mobilizing and corrupting the proletariat, and on the other can defend itself on the terrain of armed struggle with greater efficacy than could the Tsarist

⁹⁸ QC III, p. 1666.

⁹⁹ QC III, p. 1636; SPN, p. 80n.

autocracy. This problem never arose in the history of the Russian Communist Party.¹⁰⁰

Here the real opposition between Russia and the West emerges clearly and unambiguously: feudal autocracy against bourgeois democracy. The accuracy of Bordiga's formulation allowed him to grasp the essential twin character of the capitalist State: it was *stronger* than the Tsarist State, because it rested not only on the *consent of the masses*, but also on a *superior repressive apparatus*. In other words, it is not the mere 'extent' of the State that defines its location in the structure of power (what Gramsci elsewhere called 'Statolatry'), but also its *efficacy*. The repressive apparatus of any modern capitalist State is inherently superior to that of Tsarism, for two reasons. Firstly, because the Western social formations are much more industrially advanced, and this technology is reflected in the apparatus of violence itself. Secondly, because the masses typically consent to this State in the belief that they exercise government over it. It therefore possesses a popular legitimacy of a far more reliable character for the exercise of this repression than did Tsarism in its decline, reflected in the greater discipline and loyalty of its troops and police—juridically the servants, not of an irresponsible autocrat, but of an elected assembly. The keys to the power of the capitalist State in the West lie in this conjoined superiority.

IV. The Strategy of War of Position

We can now, in conclusion, review Gramsci's strategic doctrine—in other words, the political perspectives that he deduced from his theoretical analysis of the nature of bourgeois rule in the West. What were the lessons of the morphology of capitalist hegemony, as he sought to reconstruct it in prison, for the working-class movement? What was the political crux of the whole problem of the bourgeois State for a Western strategy of the proletarian revolution? Gramsci, as a theorist and a militant, never separated the two. His solution to the cipher of success in the West was, as we have seen, a 'war of position'. What was the real meaning and effect of this formula?

To understand Gramsci's strategic theory, it is necessary to retrace the decisive original polemic within the European workers' movement to which it was a hidden, ulterior response. With the victory of the Russian Revolution, and the collapse of the Hohenzollern and Habsburg empires in central Europe, key theorists of German communism came to believe that, in the aftermath of the First World War, the seizure of power by the proletariat was on the immediate agenda in every imperialist country, because the world had now definitively entered the historical epoch of the socialist revolution. This belief was most fully and forcefully expressed by Georg Lukács, then a leading member of the exiled Hungarian Communist Party, writing in the German-language theoretical review *Kommunismus* in Vienna. For Lukács, there was now a 'universal actuality

¹⁰⁰ *Protokoll der Erweiterten Exekutive der Kommunistischen Internationale, Februar-März 1926*, Hamburg 1926, p. 126. Note that the French version of this speech in *Correspondance Internationale*, 13 March 1926, has been very abbreviated. Bordiga went on to make an eloquent indictment of the demagogic ouvrierm and organizational inquisitions under way in the Third International by that date.

of the proletarian revolution', determined by the general stage of the development of capitalism, which was henceforward in mortal crisis. 'This means that the actuality of the revolution is no longer only a world-historical horizon arching over the self-liberating working class, but that revolution is already on its agenda . . . The actuality of the revolution provides the key-note of the whole epoch.'¹⁰¹ This fusion—confusion—between the theoretical concepts of historical *epoch* and historical *conjunction* allowed Lukács and prominent colleagues in the KPD such as Thalheimer and Frohlich to ignore the whole problem of the concrete preconditions for a revolutionary situation by abstractly affirming the revolutionary character of the time itself. On this premise, they went on to argue for a novel practical tactic: the *Teilaktion* or 'partial' armed action against the capitalist State.

'Teilaktionen'

Within the ranks of the Second International, Bernstein and co-thinkers had maintained the possibility of 'partial' ameliorations of capitalism by means of parliamentary reforms, that would in a gradual process of evolution eventually lead to the peaceful completion of socialism. The illusion that the inherent *unity* of the capitalist State could be divided or attained by successive partial measures, slowly transforming its class character, had been a traditional prerogative of reformism. There now, however, emerged an *adventurist* version of the same fundamental error in the Third International. For in 1920–21, Thalheimer, Frohlich, Lukács and others theorized putschist 'partial actions' as a series of armed attacks against the bourgeois State, limited in scope yet constant in tempo. In the words of *Kommunismus*: 'The principal characteristic of the present period of the revolution lies in this, that we are now compelled to conduct even partial battles, including economic ones, with the instrumentalities of the final battle', above all 'armed insurrection'.¹⁰²

There was thus created the famous theory of the 'revolutionary offensive'. Since the epoch was revolutionary, the only correct strategy was an offensive one, to be mounted in a series of repeated armed blows against the capitalist State. These should be undertaken even if the working class was not in an immediately revolutionary mood: they would then precisely serve to 'awaken' the proletariat from its reformist torpor. Lukács provided the most sophisticated justification of these adventures. He argued that partial actions were not so much 'organizational measures by which the Communist Party could seize State power' as 'autonomous and active initiatives of the KPD to overcome the ideological crisis and menshevik lethargy of the proletariat, and standstill of revolutionary development'.¹⁰³ For Lukács, the rationale of the *Teilaktionen* was thus not their objective aims, but their subjective impact on the consciousness of the working class. 'If revolutionary development is not to run the risk of stagnation, another outcome must be found: the action of the KPD in an offensive. An offensive signifies: the independent

¹⁰¹ Georg Lukács, *Lenin*, London 1970, p. 12.

¹⁰² 'Der Krise der Kommunistischen Internationale und der Dritte Kongress', Editorial in *Kommunismus*, 15 June 1921, p. 691.

¹⁰³ 'Spontaneität der Massen, Aktivität der Partei', *Die Internationale*, III 8, 1921, pp. 213–14. For an English text, see Georg Lukács, *Political Writings 1919–1929*, London 1972, p. 102.

action of the party at the right moment with the right slogan, to awaken the proletarian masses from their inertia, to wrest them away from their menshevik leadership by action (in other words organizationally and not merely ideologically), and thereby to cut the knot of the ideological crisis of the proletariat with the sword of the deed.¹⁰⁴

The fate of these pronouncements was rapidly settled by the lesson of events themselves. The radical misunderstanding of the integral unity of capitalist State power, and the necessarily all-or-nothing character of any insurrection against it, naturally led to disaster in Central Germany. In March 1921, the KPD launched its much vaunted offensive against the Prussian State government, by falling into the trap of a badly prepared rising against a preventive police occupation of the Mansfeld-Merseburg area. In the absence of any spontaneous working-class resistance, the KPD desperately resorted to dynamiting actions designed to prove police bombardments; seizure of factories and street fighting followed; wandering guerrilla bands submerged any discipline in anarchic forays through the countryside. For a week, heavy fighting raged in Central Germany between KPD militants and the police and Reichswehr units mobilized to suppress them. The result was a foregone conclusion. Isolated from the rest of the German proletariat, bewildered and dislocated by the arbitrary character of the action, hopelessly outnumbered by the concentration of Reichswehr troops in the Merseburg-Halle region, the vanguard flung into this confrontation with the full might of the army was routed. A drastic wave of repression succeeded the March action. Some 4,000 militants were sentenced to prison, and the KPD received its quietus in Prussian Saxony. Not only was the objective of State power never achieved, but the subjective impact on the German working class and the KPD itself was calamitous. Far from rousing the proletariat from its 'menshevik lethargy', the March Action demoralized and disillusioned it. The vanguard zone of the Merseburg mines relapsed into a desert of apolitical backwardness. Worse still, the KPD never wholly regained the trust of wide sections of the German proletariat thereafter. Its membership had been 350,000 before the March offensive: within a few weeks, it had plummeted to half that number in the wake of the disaster. It never attained comparable levels of strength again in the Weimar Republic.

The adventurism of the KPD in 1921 was condemned by the Third World Congress of the Comintern. Lenin wrote a famous letter to the German Party, demolishing its justifications of it. Trotsky denounced the whole theory of *Teilaktion* aptly and scathingly: 'A purely mechanical conception of the proletarian revolution—which proceeds solely from the fact that the capitalist economy continues to decay—has led certain groups of comrades to construe theories which are false to the core: the false theory of an initiating minority which by its heroism shatters 'the wall of universal passivity' among the proletariat, the false theory of uninterrupted offensives conducted by the proletarian vanguard as a 'new method' of struggle, the false theory of partial battles which are waged by applying the methods of armed insurrection and so on. The clearest exponent of this is the Vienna journal *Kommunismus*. It is absolutely self-

¹⁰⁴ 'Spontaneität der Massen, Aktivität der Partei', p. 215; *Political Writings*, p. 104.

evident that tactical theories of this sort have nothing in common with Marxism. To apply them in practice is to play directly into the hands of the bourgeoisie's military-political leaders and their strategy.¹⁰⁵ Lenin and Trotsky together waged a resolute fight against the theory of the *Teilaktion* at the Third World Congress of the Communist International, and over German opposition it was formally repudiated by the Comintern.

Gramsci's Correction

Against this background it is now possible to reconsider Gramsci's later attempt to define the specificity of a Western revolutionary strategy as a 'war of position'. For Gramsci's axiom was designed precisely to represent the political *correction* he believed necessary after the failure of the March Action—which he saw as the expression of a 'war of manoeuvre'. His dating of the two is precise and unequivocal: 'In the present epoch, the war of movement occurred politically between March 1917 and March 1921, and it was then followed by a war of position.'¹⁰⁶ The contrast between war of manoeuvre and war of position, it will be remembered, was derived by analogy from the First World War. Whereas in Russia, Gramsci wrote, the revolution could make fast, mobile sorties against the State, and overthrow it at great speed, in the industrialized West such insurrectionary tactics would lead to defeat, much as the campaign of the Tsar's army in Galicia had done. 'It seems to me that Lenin understood that a change was necessary from the war of manoeuvre applied victoriously in the East in 1917, to a war of position which was the only possible form in the West—where, as Krasnov observes, armies could rapidly accumulate endless quantities of munitions, and where the social structures were of themselves still capable of becoming heavily-armed fortifications. This is what the formula of the "United Front" seems to me to mean.'¹⁰⁷

Gramsci's explicit equation of 'united front' with 'war of position', which might otherwise seem baffling, now becomes immediately clear. For the United Front was precisely the political line adopted by the Comintern after the Third World Congress had condemned the 'theory of the offensive' advocated by the KPD—a war of manoeuvre. The strategic objective of the United Front was to *win over the masses* in the West to revolutionary Marxism, by patient organization and skilful agitation for working-class unity in action. Lenin, who coined the slogan 'To the Masses' with which the Comintern Congress of 1921 closed, expressly emphasized its importance for a *differential* strategy adapted to countries in Western Europe, in contradistinction to those in Russia. In his speech of 1 July, replying to Terracini—the representative of Gramsci's own party, the PCI—he devoted his address precisely to this theme. 'We were victorious in Russia not only because the undisputed majority of the working class (during the elections of 1917 the overwhelming majority of the workers were with us against the Mensheviks) was on our side, but also because half the army, immediately after our seizure of power, and

¹⁰⁵ Trotsky, 'The Main Lessons of the Third Congress', in *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, I, New York 1945, pp. 295–6.

¹⁰⁶ QC II, p. 1229; SPN, p. 120.

¹⁰⁷ QC II, p. 866; SPN, p. 237.

nine-tenths of the peasants, in the course of some weeks, came over to our side; we were victorious because we took, not our agrarian programme, but that of the Socialist-Revolutionaries and put it into effect. Our victory lay in the fact that we carried out the Socialist-Revolutionary Programme; that is why this victory was so easy. Is it possible that you in the West have such illusions (about the repeatability of this process)? It is ridiculous. Just compare the economic conditions! . . . We were a small Party in Russia, but we had with us in addition the majority of the Soviets of Workers' and Peasants' Deputies throughout the country. Where do you have that? We had with us nearly half the army, which numbered at least 10 million men. Do you really have the majority of the army behind you? Show me such a country! . . . Can you point to any country in Europe where you could win over the majority of the peasantry in some weeks? Perhaps Italy? (laughter).¹⁰⁸

Lenin went on to stress the absolute necessity of winning the masses in the West, before any attempt to achieve power could be successful. This need not always imply the creation of a vast political party: it meant that the revolution could only be made *with* and *by* the masses themselves, who would have to be *convinced* of this goal by their vanguard in an extremely arduous preparatory phase of struggle. 'I am certainly not denying that revolution can be started by a very small party and brought to a victorious conclusion. But we have to know the methods by which the masses can be won over to our side . . . An absolute majority is not always essential; but for victory and for retaining power, what is essential is not only the majority of the working class—I use the term working class in its West European sense, i.e. in the sense of the industrial proletariat—but also the majority of the working and exploited population. Have you thought about this?'¹⁰⁹

Gramsci was thus correct in thinking that Lenin had formulated the policies of the United Front in 1921 to answer to the specific problems of revolutionary strategy in Western Europe. At the time, of course, Gramsci himself—together with nearly the whole leadership of the PCI—had stubbornly *rejected* the United Front in Italy, and had thereby materially facilitated the victory of fascism, which was able to triumph over a radically divided working class. From 1921 to 1924, the years when the Comintern seriously tried to secure the implementation of United Front tactics towards the PSI Maximalists in Italy, both Bordiga and Gramsci refused and resisted the line of the International. By the time Gramsci had assumed the leadership of the party in 1924, and rallied to a policy of fidelity to the International, fascism was already installed and the Comintern—now radically changed in character—had largely abandoned United Front tactics itself. Thus Gramsci's insistence on the concept of the 'united front' in his Prison Notebooks in the thirties does not represent a renewal of his political past: on the contrary, it marks a conscious retrospective break with it.

United Front vs Third Period

For it was the *contemporary* situation in the Communist International

¹⁰⁸ Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 32, pp. 474–5, 471, 474.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.* p. 476.

which essentially determined the nature and direction of the strategic texts written during Gramsci's imprisonment. In 1928, the famous Third Period of the Comintern had started. Its premise was the prediction of an immediate and catastrophic crisis of world capitalism—apparently vindicated shortly afterwards by the Great Depression. Its axioms included the identity of fascism and social-democracy, the equivalence of police dictatorships and bourgeois democracies, the necessity of break-away trade unions, the duty of physical combat against recalcitrant workers and labour officials. This was the epoch of 'social-fascism', 'independent unions' and 'storming the streets', when left social-democrats were declared the worst of all enemies of the working class, and the advent of the Nazis to power was greeted in advance as a welcome clarification of the class struggle. In these years, the Communist International plunged into an ultra-left frenzy that made the partisans of the March Action seem responsible and restrained by comparison. In Italy itself, at the height of Mussolini's power, the exiled PCI declared a revolutionary situation to be present, and the dictatorship of the proletariat the only permissible immediate goal of struggle. Socialists in common exile—whether maximalist or reformist—were denounced as agents of fascism. Wave after wave of cadres were sent into the country, only to be arrested and jailed by the secret police, while their successes were announced in official propaganda abroad.

Confronted with this general rush to disaster, in which his own party was implicated, Gramsci refused its official positions and in his search for another strategic line recalled the United Front. The reason is now easy to see: a decade earlier, the latter had been precisely a riposte to adventurist aberrations that anticipated—in a less extreme form—those of the Third Period. The United Front thus acquired a new relevance for Gramsci in the dire conjuncture of the early thirties. Indeed, it can be said that it was the madness of the Third Period that finally helped him to understand it. His emphasis on the United Front in his Prison Notebooks thus has an unequivocal meaning. It is a denial that the Italian masses had abandoned social-democratic and bourgeois-democratic illusions, were in a revolutionary ferment against fascism, or could be immediately aroused to mobilize for the dictatorship of the proletariat in Italy; and an insistence that these same masses must be won over to the struggle against fascism, that working-class unity could and should be achieved by pacts of action between communists and social-democrats, and that the fall of fascism would not automatically be the victory of socialism, because there was always the possibility of a restoration of parliamentarism. The United Front, in other words, signified the necessity for deep and serious ideological-political work among the masses, untainted by sectarianism, before the seizure of power could be on the agenda.

At the same time, Gramsci's strategic re-orientation in prison moved beyond the conjunctural imperatives of peninsular resistance to fascism. It was Western Europe as a whole, not simply Italy, that was the spatial horizon of his political thought in these years. Similarly, it was the entire post-war epoch after 1921, not merely the darkness of the early thirties, that was its temporal reference. To convey the scope of the change in political perspective which he sought to theorize, Gramsci constructed

the precept of the 'war of position'. Valid for a complete era and an entire zone of socialist struggle, the idea of a 'war of position' thus had a much wider resonance than that of the tactic of the United Front once advocated by the Comintern. Yet it was at this delicate point of transition in Gramsci's thought, where it sought a superior strategic resolution, that it ran into jeopardy.

Kautsky and the 'Strategy of Attrition'

For, unknown to himself, Gramsci had an illustrious predecessor. Karl Kautsky, in a famous debate with Rosa Luxemburg, had in 1910 argued that the German working class in its fight against capital should adopt an *Ermattungsstrategie*—a 'strategy of attrition'. He had explicitly counterposed this conception to what he called a *Niederwerfungsstrategie*—a 'strategy of overthrow'. Kautsky did not coin these terms. He borrowed them from the terminology of the major debate over military history then under way among scholars and soldiers in Wilhelmine Germany. The inventor of the antithesis between *Ermattungsstrategie* and *Niederwerfungsstrategie* was Hans Delbrück, the most original military historian of his day. Delbrück had first presented his theory of the two types of war in 1881, at an inaugural lecture to the University of Berlin, in which he contrasted the campaigns of Frederick II and Napoleon—the first as an exemplar of the protracted strategy of attrition characteristic of the European ancien régimes, the second as the prototype of the rapid strategy of overthrow inaugurated by the mass popular armies of the modern epoch.¹¹⁰ Vehemently contested within Prussian academic circles, for whom Delbrück's account of the Frederician wars verged on contumely, the theory of the two strategies was developed by Delbrück in a series of writings which culminated in his monumental *Geschichte der Kriegskunst im Rahmen der Politischen Geschichte*, spanning the evolution of military theory and practice from antiquity to the twentieth century.¹¹¹ Successive volumes of this work were keenly studied in the ranks of the German High Command and those of German Social-Democracy alike. Schlieffen, Chief of the General Staff, plotted his war exercises meticulously against Delbrück's categories (opting eventually for a strategy of overthrow, not of attrition, in his plan against France). Mehring, in *Die Neue Zeit*, enthusiastically recommended Delbrück's histories to working-class readers in 1908 as 'the most significant work produced by the historical writing of bourgeois Germany in the new century'.¹¹² In an essay on them over one hundred pages long, Mehring dwelt on the perennial validity of the opposition between attrition and

¹¹⁰ Hans Delbrück, *Über den Kampf Napoleons mit dem alten Europa*, later expanded into *Über die Verschiedenheit der Strategie Friedrichs und Napoleons*, Berlin 1881. The remote inspiration for Delbrück's theory was the postscript note in Book 8 of Clausewitz's *Vom Kriege* (from 1827), where Clausewitz discussed the case of wars with a 'limited aim', which therefore departed from his general schema that the aim of war was the 'overthrow' of the enemy. See Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, Bonn 1952, pp. 882–906.

¹¹¹ The first three volumes appeared in 1900, 1901 and 1907 successively. The fourth volume was published after the war, in 1920. For the 'two strategies', see especially Vol. 1, pp. 123–7, and Vol. IV, pp. 333–63. Otto Hintze wrote the most effective criticism of Delbrück's account of Frederick II's military practice.

¹¹² See 'Eine Geschichte der Kriegskunst', now in Franz Mehring, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 8, Berlin 1967, devoted to his military writings and entitled *Kriegsgeschichte und Militärfrage*, p. 135.

overthrow for the art of war. He ended by remarking pointedly that Delbrück had written a work of 'scientific research in a field in which the modern labour movement has a more than merely scientific interest'.¹¹³

It was Kautsky who then took the next step of annexing Delbrück's military concepts—without acknowledgment—into a political debate on the strategic perspectives of proletarian struggle against capitalism. The occasion of his intervention was a momentous one. For it was in order to rebut the demand by Luxemburg for the adoption of militant mass strikes, during the SPD's campaign for a democratization of the neo-feudal Prussian electoral system, that Kautsky counterposed the necessity of a more prudent 'war of attrition' by the German proletariat against its class enemy, without the risks involved in mass strikes. The introduction of the theory of two strategies—attrition and overthrow—was thus the actual precipitate of the fateful scission within orthodox German Marxism before the First World War.¹¹⁴

The formal similarity of the opposition 'strategy of overthrow—strategy of attrition', and 'war of manoeuvre—war of position' is, of course, striking.¹¹⁵ However, the substantive analogies between the two pairs of concepts, in the texts of Kautsky and of Gramsci, are even more disconcerting. For to support his argument for the superiority of a strategy of attrition over a strategy of overthrow, Kautsky evoked *precisely the same historical and geographical contrasts* as Gramsci was to do in his discussion of war of position and war of manoeuvre. The coincidence is an arresting one. Thus Kautsky too fixed the predominance of a 'strategy of overthrow' (Gramsci: 'war of manoeuvre') from 1789 to 1870, and its supersession by a 'strategy of attrition' (Gramsci: 'war of position') from the fall of the Commune: 'Through a coincidence of propitious circumstances, the revolutionaries in France during the years 1789–93 succeeded in bringing down the dominant régime in a bold attack in a few decisive blows. This strategy of overthrow was then the only one available for a revolutionary class, in an absolutist police state which excluded any possibility of building parties, or of the popular masses exercising any constitutional influence on the government. Any strategy of attrition would have failed because the government, confronted with opponents who wanted to unite for a durable resistance to it, could always cut off their possibilities of organization or co-ordination. This strategy of overthrow was still in full bloom when our party was founded in Germany. The success of Garibaldi in Italy and the

¹¹³ *Ibid.* pp. 147–50, 200.

¹¹⁴ The polemic between Kautsky and Luxemburg took the form of a sequence of lengthy exchanges in *Die Neue Zeit* in 1910. These were, in order: Kautsky, 'Was Nun?', 8 April, pp. 33–40, 15 April, pp. 65–80; Luxemburg, 'Ermattung oder Kampf?', 27 May, pp. 257–66, 3 July, pp. 291–305; Kautsky, 'Eine Neue Strategie', 17 June, pp. 364–74, 24 June, pp. 412–421; Luxemburg, 'Die Theorie und Die Praxis', 22 July, pp. 564–78, 29 July, pp. 626–42; Kautsky, 'Zwischen Baden und Luxemburg', 5 August, pp. 652–67; Luxemburg, 'Zur Richtigstellung', 19 August, pp. 756–60; Kautsky, 'Schlusswort', 19 August, pp. 760–65. It should be emphasized that Kautsky nowhere attributed his categories to Delbrück, whom he cited only once in the entire polemic, in a passing reference to ancient history. Luxemburg, consequently, seems to have remained unaware of the source of Kautsky's ideas to the end.

¹¹⁵ Delbrück expressly equated a 'strategy of attrition' (*Ermattungsstrategie*) with a 'war of position' (*Stellungskrieg*), during the First World War. He advocated the latter for the German struggle in the West, by contrast with Schlieffen.

glittering, if eventually defeated, struggles of the Polish Insurrection immediately preceded Lassalle's agitation and the founding of the International. The Paris Commune followed soon afterwards. But it was precisely the Commune which showed that the days of a tactic of overthrow were now past. It was adapted to political circumstances characterized by a dominant capital city and an inadequate communications system which made it impossible to concentrate large masses of troops quickly from the countryside; and to a level of technique in street-planning and military equipment which gave considerable chances to street-fighting. It was then that the foundations of a new strategy of the revolutionary class were laid, which Engels eventually counterposed so sharply to the old revolutionary strategy in his introduction to *The Class Struggles in France*, and which can very well be designated a strategy of attrition. This strategy has hitherto won us the most shining successes, endowed the proletariat from year to year with greater strength, and put it ever more at the centre of European politics.¹¹⁶

The nub of this strategy of attrition were successive electoral campaigns, which Kautsky hopefully asserted might give the SPD a numerical majority in the Reichstag next year. Denying that aggressive mass strikes had any relevance in the present conjuncture in Germany, Kautsky went on to advance the idea of a geo-political separation between Eastern and Western Europe. In Tsarist Russia, Kautsky wrote, there was no universal suffrage, no legal rights of assembly, no freedom of the press. In 1905, the government was isolated at home, the army defeated abroad, and the peasantry in revolt across the vast and uncoordinated imperial territory. In these circumstances, a strategy of overthrow was still possible. For the Russian proletariat, which lacked elementary political or economic rights, could launch an 'amorphous and primitive' revolutionary general strike, directed indifferently against government and employers.¹¹⁷ The gathering storm of mass strikes in Russia then spontaneously escalated to a decisive contest with the State. In the event, the 'policy of violence' pursued by the Russian working class encountered ultimate defeat. But its strategy of overthrow was the natural product of Russian society's historical backwardness.

'The conditions for a strike in Western Europe and especially in Germany are, however, very different from those in pre-revolutionary and revolutionary Russia.'¹¹⁸ In Western Europe, the workers were more numerous and better organized, and they had long possessed civic liberties. They were also confronted with a stronger class enemy, equipped—above all in Germany—with a disciplined army and bureaucracy. The Prussian State machine, in fact, was now the most powerful in Europe. The working class was also more isolated from other classes than in Russia. Hence tumultuous mass strikes such as occurred during 1905 in Russia were inappropriate in the West. 'Demonstrations of this sort have never yet occurred in Western Europe. Nor is it probable that they will do so—not in spite, but because of half a century of the socialist movement, social-democratic organization and political

¹¹⁶ 'Was Nun?', p. 38. Compare Gramsci's text cited on p. 11 above.

¹¹⁷ 'Eine Neue Strategie', p. 369.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

freedom.¹¹⁹ In these circumstances, to unleash mass strikes to secure the reform of the Prussian franchise, as Luxemburg demanded, would merely compromise the chances of the SPD at the next Reichstag elections. Formally, Kautsky did not deny that in 'the final battle' of the class struggle, a transition to a strategy of overthrow would be necessary in the West too. But the weapon of the mass strike should be reserved solely for this decisive engagement, when victory or defeat would be total. For the moment, 'preliminary skirmishes should not be fought with heavy artillery'.¹²⁰ The only correct path in the West was a strategy of attrition, recalling that of Fabius Cunctator in Ancient Rome.¹²¹

Luxemburg's Reply

Luxemburg, whom Gramsci reproached for her 'mysticism' in his central text on East and West,¹²² grasped with immediate lucidity the logic of Kautsky's contrast between the two zones. The polemic between them on *just this issue* in 1910 was precisely the occasion for her historic political break with Kautsky, four years in advance of Lenin, who only understood it when war arrived in 1914. Luxemburg denounced the 'whole theory of the two strategies' and its 'crude contrast between revolutionary Russia and parliamentary Western Europe',¹²³ as a rationalization of Kautsky's refusal of mass strikes and his capitulation to electoralism. She rejected Kautsky's description of the Russian Revolution of 1905: 'The picture of a chaotic, "amorphous and primitive" strike of the Russian workers . . . is a flowering fantasy.'¹²⁴ It was not political backwardness but advance that distinguished the Russian proletariat within the European working class. 'The Russian strikes and mass strikes, which gave form to so audacious a creation as the famous Petersburg Soviet of Workers' Delegates for the unitary leadership of the whole movement in the enormous Empire, were so little "amorphous and primitive" that in daring, strength, solidarity, persistence, material achievements, progressive goals and organizational successes, they can calmly be set by the side of any "West European" trade-union movement.'¹²⁵

Luxemburg contemptuously dismissed Kautsky's circumspect assessment of the Prussian State, retorting that he had confused its police crudity and brutality with political strength, for the purposes of justifying timidity towards it. Kautsky's avowed retention of the use of a mass strike for the single apocalyptic contingency of a 'final battle' in the distant future was a token clause, designed to absolve the SPD from any commitment to serious struggles in the concrete present, and to allow it to accommodate to the most mundane opportunism. Luxemburg's political instinct led her unerringly to isolate the ultimate drift of Kautsky's arguments: 'In practice, Comrade Kautsky directs us insistently towards the coming

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 370.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 374.

¹²¹ 'Was Nun?', pp. 37–8. Kautsky, of course, knew of the existence of the Fabian Society, but appears to have forgotten the revealing coincidence of eponymous hero in his expository zeal.

¹²² QC III, pp. 1613–14; SPN, p. 233.

¹²³ 'Die Theorie und die Praxis', p. 576.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 572.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

Reichstag elections. These are the basic pillar of his strategy of attrition. It is from the Reichstag elections that salvation is to be expected. They will surely bring us an overwhelming victory, they will create a wholly new situation, they will immediately “put in our pocket the key to this tremendous historical situation”. In a word, there are so many violins in the heaven of the next Reichstag elections that we would be criminally light-minded to think of any mass strike when we have before us such a certain victory, put “in our pocket” by the voting slip.¹²⁶

Luxemburg’s own position in these debates was not without its flaws. She made no adequate reply to Kautsky’s characterization of the Russian State, as opposed to the Russian working class, evading the genuine problem of its structural difference from the Western States of the time, which Kautsky had not been wrong to emphasize. Nor did she possess, here or elsewhere, any etched theory of the conquest of power by the proletariat—her conception of mass strikes as continuous exercises in working-class autonomy and combativity blurring the inevitably discontinuous rupture of a revolutionary rising against the capitalist State itself, necessarily transcending the level of a strike.¹²⁷ However, these limitations were secondary when compared with the acuity of her insight into the dynamics of Kautsky’s theory. Her prescience about its evolution is all the more impressive, when it is compared with Lenin’s complaisance towards Kautsky.

The Debate extends to Russia

For the debate within German social-democracy had a revealing sequel within Russian social-democracy. A few weeks later, Martov wrote an article in *Die Neue Zeit* on ‘The Prussian Debate and Russian Experience’.¹²⁸ Warmly approving Kautsky’s overall theses, Martov argued that Russia was actually in no way exempt from their lessons. Luxemburg should not be allowed to utilize the Russian Revolution of 1905 as her ‘trump card’ against official SPD policy in Germany. Her account of the revolution should not be conceded by Western socialists, in the name of the *privilegium odiosum* of Russian exceptionalism. Russian experience was now essentially similar in every way to European experience as a whole. Where it had diverged in 1905, it had ended in disaster. The blending of economic with political strikes, vaunted by Luxemburg, was a weakness rather than a strength of the Russian proletariat. The Moscow uprising was the calamitous result of an ‘artificial’ propulsion of the movement towards a ‘decisive clash’ with the State. For Kautsky’s sagacity was then unknown in Russia: ‘The idea of a “strategy of attrition” occurred to no one.’ Now, however, after the failure of the extremism of 1905, it was the responsibility of the Russian labour movement to adopt it. ‘The proletariat must strive, not merely to struggle, but to win.’¹²⁹

¹²⁶ ‘Ermattung oder Kampf?’, pp. 294–5.

¹²⁷ Luxemburg, of course, always asserted the need for proletarian insurrection to achieve socialism: but she tended to merge it into vaster ongoing waves of working-class militancy, in which its political incommensurability was typically obscured.

¹²⁸ L. Martov, ‘Die preussische Diskussion und die russische Erfahrung’, *Die Neue Zeit*, 16 September 1910, pp. 907–19.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 907, 913, 919.

Martov's prompt utilization of Kautsky's theses to justify Menshevik policies in Russia duly provoked a reply from the Polish Bolshevik Marchlewski in *Die Neue Zeit*. Marchlewski's response appears to have pre-empted Lenin's own reply—the latter desisting from a draft after Kautsky had accepted a prior article on the same subject from the former. Lenin, however, wrote to Marchlewski with suggestions for inclusion in his answer to Martov, most of which were integrated into the published text. The two documents are of the greatest interest. For the burden of Marchlewski's argument was that the Bolsheviks in Russia had—contrary to Martov's distortions—never deviated from the logic of Kautsky's precepts. On the contrary, Marchlewski wrote, 'Lenin's recommendations were—if you like—the same as Kautsky's: due application of a "strategy of overthrow" and of a "strategy of attrition" at the appropriate times for them.'¹³⁰ Now, in the long Tsarist reaction after the revolution of 1905, it was the time for a strategy of attrition. Russian social-democracy must at present 'learn to speak German'.

Lenin himself meanwhile, in his letter to Marchlewski, expressly endorsed the validity of Kautsky's claims of ultimate intransigence in his polemic with Luxemburg—indeed emphatically reiterated them, despite the alacrity of Martov's appropriation of Kautsky's arguments for a vindication of Menshevism in Russia. 'Rosa Luxemburg argued with Kautsky as to whether in Germany the moment had arrived for *Niederwerfungstrategie*, and Kautsky *plainly and bluntly* stated that he considered this moment was unavoidable and imminent but had not yet arrived . . . All the Mensheviks seized on Rosa Luxemburg's dispute with Kautsky in order to declare Kautsky a "Menshevik". Martov is trying his hardest, by means of petty and miserable diplomacy, to *deepen* the gulf between Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Kautsky. These wretched devices cannot succeed. Revolutionary social-democrats may argue about the *timing* of *Niederwerfungstrategie* in Germany, but not about its *appropriateness* in Russia in 1905.'¹³¹

The contrast with Luxemburg is striking. For Luxemburg perceived at once that the real effect of Kautsky's arguments was a sophisticated apologia for reformism. Her vigorous denunciations of them received their vindication by the end of the polemic between the two. For Luxemburg's characterization of Kautsky's theory as what she called *Nichtsalparlamentarismus*—nothing but parliamentarism—was finally confirmed in so many words by Kautsky himself in one of his closing rejoinders, in a formulation which sums up his position in a classic expression of what can be called the social-democratic 'defence clause': 'The more democratic the constitution of a country, the less there exist conditions for a mass strike, the less necessary for the masses does such a strike become, and therefore the less often it happens. Where the proletariat possesses sufficient electoral rights, a mass strike is only to be expected as a defensive measure—as a means to protect voting rights or a

¹³⁰ J. Karsky (Marchlewski), 'Ein Missverständnis', *Die Neue Zeit*, 28 October 1910, p. 102.

¹³¹ Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 34, pp. 427–8. Martov, in Lenin's angry phrase, was "deepening" (botching) Kautsky', by denying the applicability of a *Niederwerfungstrategie* to the year 1905 in Russia (p. 427). Actually, Kautsky's comments on what he termed the 'policy of violence' of the Russian proletariat in 1905–6 had evinced a thinly disguised lack of enthusiasm. Martov's reading of them was thus not far from the mark.

parliament with strong social-democratic representation, against a government that refuses to obey the will of the people's representatives.¹³²

Gramsci's Formula

Gramsci, cut off from the outside world in prison during the thirties, was unaware of this ominous precedent while he struggled to forge concepts to resist the renewal of adventurism within the Comintern. It was in this context that he was able to produce a notion formally analogous to that of Kautsky (strategy of attrition/war of position), without seeing its dangers. Gramsci's 'war of position' was intended, as we have seen, as a reply to Thalheimer's and Lukács's 'war of manoeuvre'—in the spirit, he believed, of the Comintern Congress that had condemned them. The errors of the theory of the *Teilaktion* have already been discussed. Did Gramsci's formula, however, completely correct them? It will be noticed that what he did was in effect to *invert* their way of posing the problem. Revolutionary strategy in Gramsci's account becomes a long, immobile trench-warfare between two camps in fixed positions, in which each tries to undermine the other culturally and politically. 'The siege is a reciprocal one', Gramsci wrote, 'concentrated, difficult, demanding exceptional qualities of patience and invention.'¹³³ There is no doubt that the danger of adventurism disappears in this perspective, with its overwhelming emphasis on the ideological allegiance of the masses as the central object of struggle, to be gained only by pursuit of a united front within the working class. But what happens to the phase of insurrection itself—the storming and destruction of the State machine that for Marx or Lenin was inseparable from the proletarian revolution? Gramsci never relinquished the fundamental tenets of classical Marxism on the ultimate necessity for violent seizure of State power, but at the same time his strategic formula for the West fails to integrate them. The mere counterposition of 'war of position' to 'war of manoeuvre' in any Marxist strategy in the end becomes an opposition between reformism and adventurism.

An objection must immediately occur to such a judgment. Why should Gramsci not have precisely intended the strategy of 'war of position' to be a *preparation* for a concluding 'war of manoeuvre' against the class enemy? In other words, did he not in fact advocate a thesis that Lenin had wrongly ascribed to Kautsky—the necessity of 'a transition from the "strategy of attrition" to the "strategy of overthrow"', a transition which was '*inevitable*' in the period of a political crisis when 'the revolution reaches its highest intensity'?¹³⁴ In this schema, Gramsci's war of position would correspond to the phase in which a revolutionary party seeks to win the masses ideologically (consensually) to the cause of socialism,

¹³² 'Zwischen Baden und Luxemburg', p. 665. There is no space here to go into the history of the 'defence clause'—now standard in the official documents of the heirs of the Third International. Suffice it to say that it was a common patrimony of the classical parties of the Second International. Bebel, Turati and Bauer all devoted major speeches to it, at respective party congresses of the SPD, PSI and ÖSPD.

¹³³ QC II, p. 802; SPN, p. 239.

¹³⁴ Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 16, p. 383. This article contains the formal reply that Lenin drafted for publication in *Die Neue Zeit*, in answer to Martov's use of Kautsky's 'strategy of attrition', during the composition of which he wrote his letter to Marchlewski. The article was refused by Kautsky and never printed in Germany.

prior to the phase in which it will lead them politically into a final (coercive) revolt against the bourgeois State. 'Hegemony' would then indeed be exercised within civil society, in the formation of a class bloc of the exploited, while 'dictatorship' would be asserted over against the exploiters, in the forcible destruction of the State apparatus that secured their rule.

Such an interpretation would be in incontestable conformity with the classical principles of historical materialism. Yet in all the 2,000 pages of the Prison Notebooks, there is only one, glancing sentence that appears to be in concordance with it. Even that is oblique and ambiguous. At the very end of the long passage comparing East and West which we have cited so often, Gramsci penned a short afterthought—gratuitously suppressed by his editors after the war. 'One attempt to start a revision of the current tactical methods was perhaps that outlined by Trotsky at the Fourth World Congress, when he made a comparison between the Eastern and Western fronts. The former had fallen at once, but unprecedented struggles had then ensued; in the case of the latter, the struggles would occur beforehand. The question, therefore, was whether civil society resists before or after the attempt to seize power; where the latter occurs, and so on. However, the question was outlined only in a brilliant, literary form, without directives of a practical character.'¹³⁵

In this passage alone can be found a single, fleeting instance of the correct *theoretical and temporal order* in which Gramsci's concepts should have been deployed, to yield a revolutionary political strategy for advanced capitalism. For in the West, the resistance of 'civil society' would precisely have to be overcome *before* that of the State, by the work of the United Front—yet victory within this arena would then have to be *succeeded* by what Gramsci here directly calls an armed 'assault' (*assalto*) on the State. Unfortunately, the insight contained in this allusion to another thinker was a momentary one. The whole weight of Gramsci's own imagery—indeed cast in a 'brilliant, literary form'—in his central strategic texts goes in exactly the opposite direction. There it is the State which is merely an 'outer ditch', and civil society which is the 'powerful system of fortresses and earthworks' that lies '*behind*' it. In other words, it is the civil society of capitalism—repeatedly described as the domain of consent—that becomes the ultimate barrier to the victory of the socialist movement. The war of position is then the struggle by the organized working class to win hegemony over it—a hegemony which therewith by tacit definition merges into a political paramountcy over the social formation as a whole. 'In politics, war of position is hegemony', Gramsci wrote, while 'hegemony is rule by permanently organized consent'.¹³⁶

A False Solution

The theoretical slippage noted earlier thus recurs again in Gramsci's strategic thought, with yet more serious consequences. For in a direct

¹³⁵ QC III, p. 1616; SPN, p. 236. To Quintin Hoare belongs the credit of having first seen the significance of this passage, in his editing of the political sections of *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci was referring to Trotsky's speech to the Fourth World Congress of the Comintern in 1922.

¹³⁶ QC II, p. 973. QC III, p. 1636; SPN, p. 80n.

reversal of Lenin's order of battle, Gramsci expressly relegated 'war of movement' to a merely preliminary or subsidiary role in the West, and promoted 'war of position' to the concluding and decisive role in the struggle between labour and capital. In so doing, he was finally trapped by the logic of his own concepts. The fatal passage reads: 'The war of position demands enormous sacrifices by infinite masses of people. So an unprecedented concentration of hegemony is necessary, and hence a more "interventionist" government, which will take the offensive more directly against oppositionists and organize permanently the "impossibility" of internal disintegration—with controls of every kind, political, administrative and other, reinforcement of the hegemonic "positions" of the dominant group, and so on. All this indicates that we have entered a culminating phase in the political-historical situation, since in politics the "war of position", once won, is decisive definitively. In politics, in other words, the war of manoeuvre subsists so long as it is a question of winning positions that are not decisive.'¹³⁷

The condign errors of this text have their suspect symptom: the disquieting claims for the necessity of a more authoritarian command within the ranks of the working class, capable of suppressing all dissent. The association of the strategy of a war of position with a centralized uniformity of political expression, in homage to the worst heritage of the Comintern, is not a reassuring one. In fact, the socialist revolution will only triumph in the West by a maximum *expansion*—not constriction—of *proletarian democracy*: for its experience alone, in parties or councils, can enable the working class to learn the real limits of bourgeois democracy, and equip it historically to surpass them. For a Marxist strategy within advanced capitalism to settle on a war of position and an ethos of command to achieve the final emancipation of labour is to ensure its own defeat. When the hour of reckoning in the class struggle arrives, proletarian liberty and insurgency go together. It is their combination, and no other, that can constitute a true social war of movement capable of overthrowing capital in its strongest bastions.

The political solution for the future of the Western working class that Gramsci sought in prison, in the end eluded him. The perspective of a war of position was a deadlock. In the final analysis, the function of this idea in Gramsci's thought seems to have been that of a kind of moral metaphor: it represented a sense of stoical adjustment to the loss of any immediate hope of victory in the West. In one of those mysterious coincidences that are a signature of the time, the Marxist thinker in Western Europe whose fate was closest to that of Gramsci in the thirties reproduced the same idea in his very different work. Walter Benjamin, his fellow victim of fascism, expressed his political pessimism in the motto of an *Ermattungstaktik*—for which his friend Brecht commemorated him, unaware of any anterior

¹³⁷ QC II, p. 802; SPN, p. 239. It has sometimes been thought that this passage refers to the fascist, rather than to the communist, movement. A careful study of it seems to exclude this hypothesis. The 'enormous sacrifices' made by the 'masses' are unmistakably a reference to the working class. Similarly, Gramsci would never have regarded fascism as definitively victorious in Italy—which its installation in power, in the context of this paragraph, would have made it. In general, the emphasis on ultra-centralized authority and discipline here should probably be linked to the (otherwise enigmatic) call for the 'sole command' of a proletarian Foch in the major text on East and West: QC II, p. 866; SPN, p. 238.

history, on his death.¹³⁸ The poetic register of Benjamin's notion tells us something about the scientific status of Gramsci's formula. The debt that every contemporary Marxist owes to Gramsci can only be properly acquitted if his writings are taken with the seriousness of real criticism. In the labyrinth of the notebooks, Gramsci lost his way. Against his own intention, formal conclusions can be drawn from his work that lead away from revolutionary socialism.

Is it necessary to add that Gramsci was himself proof against any sort of reformism? The parliamentarist conclusions of Kautsky's strategic theory were absolutely foreign to him: his work is strewn elsewhere with assertions of the imperative necessity of the revolutionary *overthrow* of the capitalist State. We do not even have to look back at his countless statements before prison and censorship. In the document that can be regarded as Gramsci's effective political testament, his final direct counsel to the militants of the Italian working class recorded by the Athos Lisa Report, in which he insisted in defiance of Third Period doctrines on the necessity for popular intermediary objectives—above all, a Constituent Assembly—in the struggle against fascism, he also left no doubt about his commitment to ultimate objectives, as Marx and Lenin would have thought of them: 'The violent conquest of power necessitates the creation by the party of the working class of an organization of a military type, pervasively implanted in every branch of the bourgeois State apparatus, and capable of wounding and inflicting grave blows on it at the decisive moment of struggle.'¹³⁹

Gramsci not merely asserted the need for proletarian revolution in classical terms; many have done that verbally since him. He fought and suffered a long agony for it. Not merely his work, but his life is incomprehensible without this vocation. Gramsci himself was only too well aware of the conditions of his struggle against illness, isolation and death. The central passages in his notebooks on the distinction between East and West are all cast in the form of an extended military analogy: 'artillery', 'trenches', 'commanders', 'manoeuvre' and 'position'. The same man laconically warns us against any easy reading of his own vocabulary. 'In saying all this, the general criterion should be remembered that comparisons between military art and politics should always be taken with a pinch of salt—in other words as aids to thought or terms in a *reductio ad absurdum*'.¹⁴⁰

Trotsky and 'War of Manoeuvre'

The conditions of Gramsci's composition in prison produced a non-unitary, fragmentary theory, which inherently allowed discrepancies and incoherences in it. Nothing reveals this more clearly than the references

¹³⁸ 'Ermattungstaktik war's, was dir behagte' ('Tactics of attrition are what you enjoyed'): 'An Walter Benjamin', in Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. x, Frankfurt 1967, p. 828. Brecht had few illusions in the practical efficacy of his friend's perspective: 'Der Feind, der dich von deinem Büchern jagte/Lässt sich von unsreinem nicht ermatten' ('The enemy who drives you from your books/Will not be worn away by the likes of us').

¹³⁹ For the text of the Athos Lisa Report, see *Rinascita*, 12 December 1964, pp. 17–21. In it, Gramsci discusses the military problems of a future Italian revolution with a notable technical and organizational precision.

¹⁴⁰ QC1, p. 120; SPN, p. 231.

to Trotsky in the central texts discussed in this study. For in them, the concept of 'Permanent Revolution' is repeatedly the formal object of Gramsci's criticism, as the alleged expression of a 'war of manoeuvre'. Yet it was, of course, Trotsky who led the attack with Lenin on the generalized theory of the 'revolutionary offensive' at the Third Congress of the Comintern. It was Trotsky, again with Lenin, who was the main architect of the United Front which Gramsci equated with his 'war of position'. Finally, it was Trotsky, not Lenin, who wrote the document that was the classical theorization of the United Front in the twenties.¹⁴¹ Gramsci's confusion is here virtually total. The political proof of it was to be very concrete. For during the height of the Third Period in 1932, Gramsci in the prison of Turi di Bari and Trotsky on the island of Prinkipo developed effectively identical positions on the political situation in Italy, in diametric contrast to the official line of the PCI and of the Comintern. Prisoner and exile alike called for a United Front of working-class resistance to fascism including the social-democratic parties, and a transitional perspective including the possibility of a restoration of bourgeois democracy in Italy after the fall of fascism.¹⁴² Neither, of course, was aware of the other, in this convergence in the political night of the time.

There is a further irony in Gramsci's confusion, beyond even this. For in point of fact, it was above all Trotsky who provided the working-class movement, East or West, with a scientific critique of both the ideas of 'war of manoeuvre' and 'war of position', in the field where they really obtained—military strategy proper. For the political doctrines that emerged within the revolutionary movement of Central Europe in 1920–21 had their precise military equivalent in Russia. There, Frunze and Tukhachevsky played the role of Lukács and Thalheimer. In the great military debates in the USSR after the Civil War, Frunze, Tukhachevsky, Gusev and others had argued that the essence of revolutionary warfare was permanent attack, or war of manoeuvre. Tukhachevsky declared: 'Strategic reserves, the utility of which was always doubtful, we need not at all in our war. Now there is only one question: how to use numbers to gain the maximum force of the blow. There is one answer: release all troops in the attack, not holding in reserve a single bayonet.'¹⁴³ Frunze claimed that the lessons of the Civil War demonstrated that the primacy of the offensive for a revolutionary strategy coincided with the social nature of the proletariat itself: 'The tactics of the Red Army were and will be inspired with activity in the spirit of bold and energetically conducted offensive operations. This proceeds from the class nature of the workers' and peasants' army and at the same time coincides with the exigencies of military art.'¹⁴⁴ War of position, characteristic of the First World War and of the bourgeoisie,

¹⁴¹ 'On the United Front', in *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Vol. 11, New York 1953, pp. 91–104.

¹⁴² For Gramsci's views, see Paolo Spriano, *Storia del Partito Comunista Italiano*, Vol. 11, Turin 1969, pp. 262–74. Trotsky's analyses of the Italian situation are to be found in *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1929*, New York 1975; 1930, New York 1975; and 1930–1931, New York 1973. They are collected and discussed in Silverio Corvisieri, *Trotsky e il Comunismo Italiano*, Rome 1969, pp. 326–35.

¹⁴³ *Voyna Klassov*, Moscow 1921, p. 55.

¹⁴⁴ Theses submitted to the Eleventh Party Congress of the CPSU.

was henceforward an anachronism. 'Manoeuvre is the sole means of securing victory', wrote Tukhachevsky.¹⁴⁵

Trotsky, as we have seen, resolutely fought against the 'theory of the offensive' as a strategy within the Comintern. He now conducted a companion battle against it as a military doctrine within the Red Army. Replying to Frunze and others, Trotsky expressly made the comparison himself: 'Unfortunately, there are not a few *simpletons of the offensive* among our new fashioned doctrinaires who, under the banner of a military theory, are seeking to introduce into our military circulation the same unilateral "leftist" tendencies which at the Third World Congress of the Comintern attained their fruition in the guise of the theory of the offensive: *inasmuch* (!) as we are living in a revolutionary epoch, *therefore* (!) the Communist Party must implement the policy of the offensive. To translate "leftism" into the language of military doctrine is to multiply this error many times over.'¹⁴⁶

Combating these conceptions, Trotsky exposed the fallacy of generalizing from the experience of the Civil War, in which both sides (not just the Red Army) had primarily used manoeuvre, because of the backwardness of the social organization and military technique of the country. 'Let me point out that we are not the inventors of the manoeuvrist principle. Our enemies also made extensive use of it, owing to the fact that relatively small numbers of troops were deployed over enormous distances and because of wretched means of communication.'¹⁴⁷ But above all, Trotsky again and again criticized any strategic theory that fetishized either manoeuvre or position into an immutable or absolute principle. *All* wars would *combine* position and manoeuvre, and any strategy that unilaterally excluded one or the other was suicidal. 'It is possible to state with certainty that even in our supermanoeuvrist strategy during the Civil War the element of positionalism did exist and in certain instances played an important role.'¹⁴⁸ Therefore, Trotsky concluded: 'Defense and offense enter as variable moments into combat . . . Without the offensive, victory cannot be gained. But victory is gained by him who attacks when it is necessary to attack and not by him who attacks *first*.'¹⁴⁹ In other words, position and manoeuvre had a necessarily complementary relationship in any military strategy. To dismiss either one or the other was to invite defeat and capitulation.

Having disposed of false analogies or extrapolations whether in the Red Army or in the Comintern, Trotsky then went on to make the prediction that in a *genuinely military conflict* between classes—in other words an *actual, not a metaphorical civil war*—there would in all probability be a greater positionalism in the West than there had been in the East. All internal wars were naturally more manoeuvrist, because of the scission they effected within State and nation, compared with external wars between nations. In this respect, 'manoeuvrability is not peculiar to a

¹⁴⁵ *Voينا Klassov*, p. 105.

¹⁴⁶ *Military Writings*, New York 1969, p. 47.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 65, 88.

revolutionary army but to civil war as such'.¹⁵⁰ However, the greater historical complexity of economic and social structures in the advanced West would render future civil wars there more positional in character than in Russia. 'In the highly developed countries with their huge living centres, with their White Guard cadres prepared in advance, civil war may assume—and in many cases undoubtedly will assume—a far less mobile, a far more compact character, that is, one approximating to positional war.'¹⁵¹ In the final, dwindling moments of Gramsci's life, Europe was visited by just such a conflict. The Spanish Civil War was to vindicate Trotsky's judgment arrestingly. Fought on the Manzanares and the Ebro, the battle for the Republic proved a long positional ordeal—lost in the end because the working class could never regain the initiative of manoeuvre essential to victory. The prescience and nuance of Trotsky's analysis was to be strikingly confirmed in Spain. The reason was its pertinence to its object. It was a technical, not a metaphorical, theory of war.

Trotsky's military accuracy, the product of his unrivalled experience in the Russian Civil War, did not necessarily confer an equivalent privilege on his political strategy. His knowledge of Germany, England and France was in point of fact greater than that of Gramsci. His writings on the three major social formations of Western Europe in the inter-war period are commensurately superior to those in the Prison Notebooks. They contain indeed the only developed theory of a modern capitalist State in classical Marxism, in his texts on Nazi Germany. Yet while Trotsky's historical command of the specific socio-political structures of capitalism in the central countries of Western Europe had no equal in his own time, he never posed the problem of a differential strategy for making the socialist revolution in them, unscheduled by that in Russia, with the same anxiety or lucidity as Gramsci. In this essential respect, his questions were less troubled.

Conclusions

Gramsci's answers to his problems did not, as we have seen, resolve them. The lessons of the debate between Kautsky and Luxemburg, the contrast between Lukács and Gramsci, can however today at least yield two simple and concrete propositions. To formulate proletarian strategy in metropolitan capitalism essentially as a war of manoeuvre is to forget the unity and efficacy of the bourgeois State and to pit the working class against it in a series of lethal adventures. To formulate proletarian strategy as essentially a war of position is to forget the necessarily sudden and volcanic character of revolutionary situations, which by the nature of these social formations can never be stabilized for long and therefore need the utmost speed and mobility of attack if the opportunity to conquer power is not to be missed. Insurrection, Marx and Engels always emphasized, depends on the art of audacity.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 84–5. Trotsky was careful to go on immediately to say that this did not mean that military struggle between classes in the West could ever be described as a sheer 'war of position'. For 'Generally speaking, there cannot even be talk of some sort of absolute positionalism, all the more so in a civil war. In question here is the reciprocal relation between the elements of manoeuvrability and positionalism.' (p. 85).

In Gramsci's case, the inadequacies of the formula of a 'war of position' had a clear relationship to the ambiguities of his analysis of bourgeois class power. Gramsci equated 'war of position' with 'civil hegemony', it will be remembered. Thus just as his use of hegemony often tended to imply that the structure of capitalist power in the West essentially rested on culture and consent, so the idea of a war of position tended to imply that the revolutionary work of a Marxist party was essentially that of ideological conversion of the working class—hence its identification with the United Front, whose aim was to win a majority of the Western proletariat to the Third International. In both cases, the role of coercion—repression by the bourgeois State, insurrection by the working class—tends to drop out. The weakness of Gramsci's strategy is symmetrical with that of his sociology.

What is the contemporary relevance of these past debates over Marxist strategy? Any real discussion of the problems of the present would involve many questions to which there has been no allusion here. The limits of a philological survey have dictated these inevitable restrictions. Such central issues as the inter-connection of economic and political struggles in the labour movement, the alliances of the working class in largely post-peasant societies, the contemporary nature of capitalist crises, the possible catalysts and forms of dual power, the development of more advanced institutions of proletarian democracy—wider and freer than any past precedents—are all omitted here. Yet to deliberate in isolation from them on the structures of the bourgeois State and the strategies necessary for the working class to overthrow it, can lead to an irresponsible abstraction—unless these necessary other elements of any Marxist theory of the socialist revolution in the West are always recollected. If we accept this limitation, what can be concluded from the heritage reconstructed in this essay? There is space, and occasion, here for only two comments, strictly confined to the subjects of its debate.

The logic of Marxist theory indicates that it is in the nature of the bourgeois State that, in any final contest, the armed apparatus of repression inexorably displaces the ideological apparatuses of parliamentary representation, to re-occupy the dominant position in the structure of capitalist class power. This coercive State machine is the ultimate barrier to a workers' revolution, and can only be broken by pre-emptive counter-coercion. In the nineteenth century, barricades provided the traditional symbol of the latter. Yet Lenin long ago pointed out that these fortifications often had a moral rather than military function: their purpose was classically as much a fraternization with soldiers as a weapon against them. For in any revolution, the task of a proletarian vanguard, in Lenin's words, is not merely to fight *against* the troops but *for* the troops. This does not mean, he emphasized, mere verbal persuasion to join the camp of the proletariat, but a 'physical struggle' by the masses to win them over to the side of the revolution.¹⁵²

¹⁵² 'Of course, unless the revolution assumes a mass character and affects the troops, there can be no question of serious struggle. That we must work among the troops goes without saying. But we must not imagine that they will come over to our side at one stroke, as a result of persuasion or their own convictions. The Moscow uprising clearly demonstrated how stereotyped and lifeless this view is. As a matter of fact, the wavering of the troops,

An insurrection will only succeed if the repressive apparatus of the State itself divides or disintegrates—as it did in Russia, China or Cuba. The consensual ‘convention’ that holds the forces of coercion together must, in other words, be breached. The imperialist armies of Western Europe, North America and Japan today are characteristically composed of conscripts and recruits from the exploited classes, who possess a potential capacity to paralyse counter-revolutionary mobilization in a general crisis. A key objective of proletarian political struggle is thus always to act on the enlisted men by concrete class audacity and combat, so as to break the unity of the repressive apparatus of the State. In other words, a proletarian rising is always a *political* operation, whose fundamental aim is not to inflict casualties on the enemy, but to rally *all* the exploited masses together, whether in overalls or in uniform, women as well as men, for the creation of a new popular power. Yet it is also, however, necessarily a military operation. For no matter how successful the working class is in dividing the coercive apparatus of the State (army or police), detaching major segments from it, and winning them over to the cause of the revolution, there still always remains an irreducible core of counter-revolutionary forces, specially trained and hardened in their repressive functions, who cannot be converted; who can only be defeated. The Petrograd Garrison went over to the Military Revolutionary Committee: the Junkers and the Cossacks in the Winter Palace still resisted. The infantry and artillery may have rallied to the cause of socialism in Portugal: the commandos and airforce remained intact to suppress it.

Where the domestic institutions of repression disintegrate too suddenly or drastically, it is the external intervention of stronger military apparatuses from abroad, controlled by more powerful bourgeois States, that will be deployed—the ‘foreign currency’ of coercion towards which local capital moves in flight when its own reserves sink too low. The examples, from Russia to Spain, from Cuba to Vietnam, are celebrated. The *duality*—internal or international—of the armed apparatus of the enemy is an unvarying element of every revolution. Trotsky captured it with accuracy: ‘The workers must in advance take all measures to draw the soldiers to the side of the people by means of preliminary agitation; but at the same time they must foresee that the government will always be left with a sufficient number of dependable or semi-dependable soldiers for them to call out for the purposes of quelling an insurrection; and consequently in the final resort the question has to be decided by an armed conflict.’¹⁵³ The determination of the capitalist State in the final instance by coercion thus holds true of the coercive apparatus itself. Ideological and political struggle can undermine a bourgeois military machine in a revolutionary crisis, by a consensual conquest of the men enlisted in it. But the hard core of professional counter-revolutionary units—marines, paratroops, riot police or para-military gendarmerie—can only be swept away by the coercive attack of the masses. From beginning to end, the laws of the capitalist State are reflected and refused in the rules of a socialist revolution.

which is inevitable in every truly popular movement, leads to a real *fight for the troops* whenever the revolutionary struggle becomes acute.’ Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 11, p. 174.

¹⁵³ *Where is Britain Going?*, New York 1973, p. 87.

Such a revolution will only occur in the West when the masses have made the experience of a proletarian democracy that is tangibly superior to bourgeois democracy. The sole way for the victory of socialism to be secured in these societies is for it to represent incontestably more, not less, freedom for the vast majority of the population. It is the untapped store of popular energies that any inception of a real workers' democracy would thereby release, that will provide the explosive force capable of ending the rule of capital. For the exhibition of a new, unprivileged liberty must start before the old order is structurally cancelled by the conquest of the State. The name of this necessary overlap is dual power. The ways and means of its emergence—with or without the presence of a workers' government in office—constitute the critical intermediate problem of any socialist revolution. For the moment, however, the working-class movement in most of the countries of the West is some distance away from this threshold. It is probably the case that the majority of the exploited population in every major capitalist social formation today remains subject in one way or another to reformist or capitalist ideology. It is here that the most durable political theme of Gramsci's Notebooks acquires its sense. For the task that the United Front was designed to acquit is still unsolved fifty years later. The masses in North America, Western Europe and Japan have yet to be won over to revolutionary socialism, in their plurality. Therefore, the central problematic of the United Front—the final strategic advice of Lenin to the Western working-class movement before his death, the first concern of Gramsci in prison—retains all its validity today. It has never been historically *surpassed*. The imperative need remains to win the working class, before there can be any talk of winning power. The means of achieving this conquest—not of the institutions of the State, but of the convictions of workers, although in the end there will be no separation of the two—are the prime agenda of any real socialist strategy today.

The international disputes which united and divided Luxemburg, Lenin, Lukács, Gramsci, Bordiga or Trotsky on these issues represent the last great strategic debate in the European workers' movement. Since then, there has been little significant theoretical development of the political problems of revolutionary strategy in metropolitan capitalism that has had any direct contact with the masses. The structural divorce between original Marxist theory and the main organizations of the working class in Europe has yet to be historically resolved. The May-June revolt in France, the upheaval in Portugal, the approaching *dénouement* in Spain, presage the end of this long divorce, but have not accomplished it. The classical debates, therefore, still remain in many respects the most advanced limit of reference we possess today. It is thus not mere archaism to recall the strategic confrontations which occurred four or five decades ago. To reappropriate them, on the contrary, is a step towards a Marxist discussion that has the—necessarily modest—hope of assuming an 'initial shape' of correct theory today. Régis Debray has spoken, in a famous paragraph, of the constant difficulty of being contemporary with our present. In Europe at least, we have yet to be sufficiently contemporary with our past.