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# Hegemony as a Protean Concept

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## Introduction

In 2014 Podemos exploded onto the Spanish electoral landscape. Founded in the wake of the 15M *Indignados* movement when millions occupied public spaces to protest austerity, the party fed off the movement's rejection of the political establishment. The mood was encapsulated in the 15M slogan *no nos representan* — 'they don't represent us' — with elites and the political class attracting the ire of mass mobilisations. Pablo Iglesias, Podemos party co-founder, spoke openly about the organisation's Gramscian orientation. He argued Gramsci was 'the first to understand hegemony not as the necessity of the socialist organizations to lead subaltern sectors which are different from the working class...but as a set of superstructural mechanisms, especially in a cultural sense' (cited in Rosso and Dal Maso, 2015). Iglesias was claiming Gramsci had reoriented the notion of hegemony from one centred on the class struggle over economic production, to one focussed on and within the cultural and superstructural. This reimagining of hegemony was some distance from the way Gramsci's developed it in the *Prison Notebooks*, steeped in the influential work of post-Marxist scholars Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001). As such, built on the *rejection* of a Marxist metanarrative.

In reading Edward Said's masterwork *Orientalism* (1978) we find a version of Gramsci's hegemony influenced by Foucault's notion of discourse. For Said (1978: 7), hegemony is 'an indispensable concept for any understanding of cultural life', for clarifying how culture operates within 'civil society, where the influence of ideas, of institutions, and other persons works not through domination' but consent. These forms of cultural leadership are 'hegemony, or rather the result of cultural hegemony at work', and what gives Orientalism as a worldview and instrument of domination its potency (Said, 1978: 7). Said did more than Laclau and Mouffe to avoid the 'descent into discourse', as Bill Carroll (2006: 10) terms it, which can render analysis of hegemony devoid of a grounding in the material and economic conditions, and purely discursive in content. It is nevertheless the case that Gramsci's conception of hegemony 'inadvertently launched' the discipline of post-colonial theory which was founded by Said, as well as the discipline of cultural studies, both of 'which developed in such a way that Gramsci's terminology was used freely, in loose combinations with ideas quite alien to, and often incompatible with, Gramsci's own affiliations' (Brandist, 2015: 3).

Today when we encounter Gramsci's notion of hegemony, almost 100 years after his carceral writings, varied interpretations clutter scholarly and activist worlds. It is the concept most identified with Gramsci and by far the most used word taken from the Marxist vocabulary, influential across the humanities and social sciences in literature, education, linguistics and international relations. Hegemony has an everyday meaning to refer to the leadership or domination by a nation state or social group over others, or in a general sense

to hegemonic ideas. In a simple way this is what Gramsci means, but, as we will see, his use of the term is more specific and multifaceted. Utilising Gramsci's notion of hegemony we can locate ways to understand the ruling ideas of the day as inseparable from the processes which secure capital accumulation for particular interests, and as a concept that illuminates the struggle for new forms of social order.

This chapter overviews the influences on, and multiple meanings of, Gramsci's concept of hegemony, by situating it in his broader framework of historical materialism as a 'philosophy of praxis'. The first section below considers how we are going to explore Gramsci's notion of hegemony and the *Prison Notebooks*, and the challenges in doing so. The second considers how previous uses of the term hegemony influenced Gramsci's thinking including how he was developing the notion before he was incarcerated, by focusing on his important essay 'The Southern Question'. The third investigates how hegemony is elaborated within the notebooks by situating it in Gramsci's wider conceptual armamentarium, by looking in turn at the *terrain* of hegemony (in civil society and the 'integral state') and the *project* of hegemony (through Gramsci's analysis of the role of intellectuals and his notion of the 'modern prince').

### A study must be made

Gramsci developed his notion of hegemony to explicate how the dominant class rules, the mechanisms by which this occurs, and how the ruling ideas of the day are connected to the way society is structured. For Gramsci, hegemony is about the way power is secured for particular — bourgeois class — interests within capitalism. He also advanced the concept to illuminate processes whereby non-dominant classes struggle, and how these activities can lead to new forms of social and political order from below. Occupying the centre of Gramsci's concepts and insights, and developed over and through his life's work, hegemony is fundamental to how he analysed and explained the dynamics of capitalism.

Despite the centrality of hegemony in Gramsci's work, we face three challenges in coming to grips with the concept. First, the notebooks where it was most significantly elaborated, were not intended for publication in the form we confront them and are evidently incomplete. Second, there is a work-in-progress form to his pre-prison and carceral writings, and their categories. We are reading Gramsci as he is thinking through and developing the scope and applicability of his concepts. He applies the conception of hegemony to various historical circumstances to illuminate both the events and the notion itself, at times making more radical transformations to how he is using it. In other words, the concept of hegemony is protean — changeable — and the term is remade through Gramsci's own use of it. This context is important, because some have rested on the claim Gramsci was unclear as to what he meant, to argue his intellectual work is contradictory. His work is best thought of as a project of clarification over his life. Third, as indicated above, we also encounter Gramsci indirectly through the writings of those who followed him, whose political frameworks can be some distance from his own. Gramsci's notion of hegemony has been recast extensively and we need to be conscious of these shifts with theory, and that they are not always made clear. This is not to say that there is a comprehensive disjuncture between (Gramsci's) past and (our) present, but, rather, there is work of interpretation to be done.

The incomplete nature of the notebooks and the protean nature of the concept is not something to be overcome by placing an external order onto Gramsci's work. Rather, in notebook 16 he provides a path forward for us, in a note titled 'Questions of Method':

If one wishes to study the birth of a conception of the world which has never been systematically expounded by its founder (and one furthermore whose essential coherence is to be sought not in each individual writing or series of writings but in the whole development of the multiform intellectual work in which the elements of the conception are implicit) ... [i]t is necessary, first of all, to reconstruct the process of intellectual development of the thinker in question in order to identify those elements which were to become stable and 'permanent' (Gramsci, 1971: 382; Q16 §2).

Using this as our guide, Gramsci (2011b: 137; Q4 §1) tells us we should not 'search for origins or telos' but to read him as he suggested we read others, in a search 'for the *Leitmotiv*, for the rhythm of thought as it develops'.

We might also usefully ask whether debate over what Gramsci meant by hegemony is important, or if it is only a matter of arcane scholarly interest? This chapter, and others in this collection, argue it is important to develop clarity around Gramsci's concepts given their significant potential to help us understand and act in the world. When a conceptual framework is articulated and clarified in relation to — and through — social struggle, the work of politics is done. Gramsci's methodology, what he calls the philosophy of praxis, was a redevelopment of Marxism as a world view. This was not a revitalisation 'against' Marx, but the refoundation of an anti-determinist, anti-economistic, and non-instrumental Marxist project. Gramsci (2011c: 187; Q7 §35) argues that ideas are developed through practical activity and reflection within the historical process: 'Everything is political, even philosophy or philosophies ... and the only "philosophy" is history in action, life itself'. Ideas do not float freely, meaning they are not metaphysical in origin, they are embedded in the practical efforts of humans: 'In this way we also arrive at a fusion, a making into one, of "philosophy and politics", of thinking and acting, in other words we arrive at a philosophy of praxis' (Gramsci, 2011c: 187; Q7 §35). Gramsci was not interested in Marxism 'as defence of some orthodoxy', but rather what it offered as a philosophy 'in the conquest of autonomy and historical subjectivity for the working class: philosophy is that specific "power" capable of awakening consciousness and thus producing revolutionary action' (Frosini, 2008: 676). Thus, for Gramsci, his philosophy of praxis and the actuality of hegemony (current and potential) are dialectically embedded.

Gramsci finely balances two things in his writings, which are useful for our own approach: concepts are not ahistorical or fixed, they must be adapted to specific circumstances; and, at the same time, 'history is not a collection of unique, unrelated episodes' (Antonini et al., 2019: 162). Gramsci's concepts always require translation from his past to our present, and we should follow his approach and seek 'the real identity underneath the apparent differentiation and contradiction and finding the substantial diversity underneath the apparent identity' (Gramsci, 2011a: 128–129; Q1 §43). The 'nexus between explication of the past and strategic analysis of the present is characteristic of the originality of Gramsci's approach' and thus we are never dealing with static coordinates (Antonini et al., 2019: 1). The elaboration of Gramsci's concepts in contemporary and specific circumstances is also part of a broader effort in developing Marxist concepts that 'rise above their place of origin' and eschew a historicist flattening (Buci-Glucksmann, 1980: 11).

## Hegemony before the notebooks

### *Origins and influences*

Imported into both Italian (and English) from the Greek word *hēgemonia*, which made a first known appearance in the work of historian Herodotus (c. 484 BC – c. 425 BC), the term was initially one with military connotations and referred to a coming together of city-states through agreement for a common interest. Hegemony was ‘leadership freely conceded by members of a league, but it was a specific commission, not a general authority’ (Anderson, 2022). This original understanding of the concept ‘as the system of power relations between competing — or between dominant and vassal — states’ is one of the ways Gramsci uses the term in the *Notebooks*, ‘for example, on how US power was created [Q2 §16] and on the history of subaltern states explained by that of hegemonic ones [Q15 §5]’ (Boothman, 2011: 203).

The word was used in Greece for some time in this general fashion, to describe consensual agreement between states, but after the fall of Rome in 476 AD it went into a lengthy abeyance. Hegemony did not return to general use until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, and then only briefly in the context of political efforts to unite various states under the leadership of Prussia in Europe. In this context, of efforts to create a German state, it was used to mean a general political, military and cultural leadership (Anderson, 2022). In the wake of the successful construction of the German nation, the term again entered a period of suspension. While it is unlikely this particular usage had much direct influence on Gramsci, the context is not dissimilar to how Gramsci uses hegemony (on occasion and in a general way) to discuss the unification of Italy in the processes of the Risorgimento.

Importantly, we can trace the development of Gramsci’s notion to Marx’s 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* (1975), although Marx did not use the word hegemony himself. Gramsci translated part of the Preface in one of the notebooks set aside for this purpose (notebook 7) and acknowledged its influence several times. Marx (1975: 425) argues in the Preface that it is not consciousness that determines a person’s existence, but rather the economic foundations of society (the material productive forces) that determine their social existence (the relations of production). He argues that the economic base of society produces a ‘legal and political superstructure’, that ‘conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life’ (Marx, 1975: 425). When the economic mode of production changes it comes into conflict with the existing social (class) relations, and this ‘begins an era of social revolution’ as changes in the economic base ‘lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure’ (Marx, 1975: 426). Marx argued the rise of capitalism delivered a very particular state form, but that it does not seek to organise social cohesion as an end in its own right but in order to secure accumulation. This deeply shaped Gramsci’s thinking on how a ruling class operates, gains, and maintains hegemony.

### *Lenin and the Bolsheviks*

Of central importance for Gramsci's development of the term was its return and prominent use by revolutionaries in the context of political and social struggles in Russia at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. While in Greece hegemony had been associated with relations between city-states, and in Germany the unification of separate states, in the context of the revolutions against absolutism in Russia the word *gegemoniya* entered discourse to define political relations within a state (Anderson, 2022).

Many believed that in the economically underdeveloped context of the Russian Empire, the emergent capitalist class was too weak to lead a bourgeois revolution against the remnants of feudalism and the autocratic rule of the Tsars (Byres, 2012). In this context, revolutionaries argued that democracy could only be delivered through the overthrow of the Tsarist state and the institution of a 'dictatorship of the proletariat', by which they meant the hegemony of the working class. This proletarian movement would unite with other oppressed sections of society, most notably the far larger in size peasant population, to establish a new hegemonic order under the leadership of the working class but with the consent of the allied classes. This understanding of hegemony spread within communist movements across Europe and was used in writings and speeches by various leaders in the period, including Joseph Stalin, Nicolai Bukharin, Hungarian Béla Kun, and — most influentially on Gramsci — by Vladimir Lenin. In line with Lenin's understanding of the term, Gramsci argued in July 1925 in *L'Unità*, an official newspaper of the PCI which he founded, that a key task for the upcoming party congress was to 'examine what the essential problems of Italian life are' in order to understand 'which solution to them will encourage and bring about the revolutionary alliance of the proletariat with the peasants, and accomplish the hegemony of the proletariat' (Gramsci, 1978: 305).

It is important to understand these links to contextualise 'unilateral or debatable interpretations ... by friendly commentators, who sometimes overlook or deny economic and class factors, or by hostile ones, who neglect consensual aspects' (Boothman, 2011: 55). Some have argued that Lenin did not use the term *gegemoniya*, most prominently Norbert Bobbio, while others have suggested there was limited direct influence on Gramsci of his deployment of the notion, most notably in and through the reception of Perry Anderson's influential *The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci* (1976). Anderson in fact argued the term largely fell into disuse after this period in Russia. This 'inadvertently encouraged the reader to assume...erroneously, that the concept of hegemony had no cultural or linguistic dimensions in Russian Marxism', which it did, and in turn 'legitimised the search for the essential sources of these dimensions of Gramsci's thought elsewhere' (Brandist, 2015: 8). However, there is now a range of scholarship demonstrating the Russian use of the term was in general use amongst Communists in Europe, including by Gramsci while living in Russia and Italy, in this period (Boothman, 2011: 59–60; Brandist, 2015).

### *Croce and Machiavelli*

In his essential overview of the sources for Gramsci's development of the notion hegemony, Derek Boothman (2011) provides useful context for two important influences from outside the Marxist tradition: the work of Benedetto Croce, an idealist liberal philosopher and the leading Italian intellectual figure of Gramsci's day, and that of Renaissance philosopher and

author Niccolò Machiavelli. Analysis of the writings of both are significant features of the notebooks.

Regarding Croce, Boothman (2011: 61–62) considers most significant his writings on ‘ethico-political history’ as the history of ‘moral or civil life’. The ‘history of the complex of moral institutions in the broadest sense, as opposed to histories that consider “economic life as the substantive reality and moral life as an appearance”, or “merely military and diplomatic” ones’ (Croce cited in Boothman, 2011: 61–62). While Gramsci would agree it is essential to understand this aspect of history, he did not believe it counterposed to — or able to be separated from — politics and economics. For Gramsci, these are rendered whole in the hegemony of civil society and the state (or more precisely the ‘integral state’). Political and social rule is made manifest on the terrain of civil society and, although deeply rooted in the cultural and ideological trappings that engender consent, ultimately connected and buttressed by coercion: ‘The “normal” exercise of hegemony ... is characterised by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent’ (Gramsci, 1971: 80; Q 13 §37). As Marx (1976: 272) usefully explicated in his analysis of the ‘double freedom’ of labour, force is not simply the state, or police or military that might legally monopolise physical violence, but also the social relations of production and private property. These are social, legal and economic compulsions that engender consent in the heart of the capitalist system itself. In relation to Gramsci’s notion of hegemony — chiefly understood as a form of rule by consent in liberal and social democratic states — the line between coercion and consent was, as it was for Marx, not always distinct.

In Machiavelli’s book *The Prince*, Centaur Chiron is for Gramsci an influential metaphor that shaped his focus on the symmetry required in political struggle:

... Achilles and many other princes of old were given to the Centaur Chiron to nurse, who brought them up in his discipline; which means solely that, as they had for a teacher one who was half beast and half man, so it is necessary for a prince to know how to make use of both natures, and that one without the other is not durable (Machiavelli, 1998).

Gramsci argues this ‘dual nature’ represents ‘levels of force and consent, authority and hegemony, violence and civilisation, of the indivisible movement and the universal moment (“Church” and “State”), of agitation and propaganda, of tactics and strategy, etc’ (cited in Boothman, 2011: 62; Q 13 §37). Caterina Carta (2017: 360) also highlights how the dual nature of the Centaur corresponds to the ‘spontaneous and rational components of political action’, to the interplay of popular moments of social upheaval that lead to radical action and the need for a systematic elaboration of a political program to achieve the dictatorship of the proletariat (Carta, 2017: 362–363). As such, she argues that the notebooks ‘eminently and systematically’ connect two texts: Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, and Marx and Engel’s *Manifesto* (Carta, 2017: 360). For Gramsci, this liberation would not be found in a leader like Machiavelli’s however, but rather delivered through a mass working-class party he called the modern prince.

*Pre-prison writings*



While the *Prison Notebooks* are where Gramsci more fully extends his conception of hegemony, in the two years prior to his arrest he was developing his thinking on the relationship between philosophy and reality, as well as a 'first interpretation' of hegemony as the making real of ideology through a political project (Frosini, 2008: 676). Gramsci's Marxism was emerging as 'the theory-practice of hegemony', both 'aware of the hegemonic character of every ideological reality' and 'a political force that works actively in the criticism of the dominant hegemony' (Frosini, 2008: 677). In Gramsci's celebrated 'Some Aspects of the Southern Question' (1990), which he was working on when arrested, we can find essential grains of what would be at the centre of his endeavours in prison. This includes an analysis of — although the term hegemony appears only once in the text — the particularities of the Italian state formation and bourgeois rule, and the potential way through this political domination.

The 'Southern Question' opens by quoting from *L'Ordine Nuovo (The New Order)*, a newspaper Gramsci co-founded within the Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI), arguing that the 'Northern bourgeoisie has subjugated the South of Italy and the Islands, and reduced them to exploitable colonies' and that 'by emancipating itself from capitalist slavery, the Northern proletariat will emancipate the Southern peasant masses enslaved to the banks and the parasitic industry of the North' (Gramsci, 1990: 441). He reflects on debates amongst the Turin communists several years prior, and the potential for just such a strategic alliance:

The Turin communists posed concretely the question of the 'hegemony of the proletariat': i.e. of the social basis of the proletarian dictatorship and of the workers' State. The proletariat can become the leading [*dirigente*] and the dominant class to the extent that it succeeds in creating a system of class alliances which allows it to mobilize the majority of the working population against capitalism and the bourgeois State. In Italy, in the real class relations which exist there, this means to the extent that it succeeds in gaining the consent of the broad peasant masses (Gramsci, 1990: 443).

Gramsci (1990: 443) goes on to outline how 'the peasant question is historically determined in Italy', and that it is not the 'peasant and agrarian question in general'. For Gramsci (1990: 443), in his homeland 'the peasant question, through the specific Italian tradition, and the specific development of Italian history, has taken two typical and particular forms — the Southern question and that of the Vatican' — and '[w]inning the majority of the peasant masses thus means, for the Italian proletariat, making these two questions its own from the social point of view'. In these passages there are the reverberations of the Bolsheviks' theory and practice of revolution in Russia, and debates about the peasant question within Marxism. Yet, it is not the presentation of a formula — meaning not the 'peasant and agrarian question in general' — but an application specific to Gramsci's location and questions of the Italian South and the Catholic Church (Gündoğan, 2008: 46).

If the Italian (bourgeois) state was to be defeated, Gramsci reasoned that the working class needed to lead *and* dominate the allied classes as well as the intellectuals. To do so, it must shed itself of the bourgeois ideology of the day, which was routinely voiced by those on the left, and which advanced (incorrectly in Gramsci's view obviously) that:

...the South is the ball and chain which prevents the social development of Italy from progressing more rapidly; the Southerners are biologically inferior beings, semi-barbarians or total barbarians, by natural destiny: if the South is backward, the fault does not lie with the capitalist system or with any other historical cause, but with Nature, which has made Southerners lazy, incapable, criminal and



barbaric — only tempering this harsh fate with the purely individual explosion of a few great geniuses, like isolated palm-trees in an arid and barren desert (Gramsci, 1990: 444).

Far from a rudimentary articulation of a concept of hegemony, related simply to the conquering of state power to institute the dictatorship of the proletariat, Gramsci is already here weaving elements of the political, economic, and cultural together in his exposition of the mechanisms of the hegemony of the North *and* a potential strategy for liberation. Gramsci's 'mode of thinking not only conceives of social life and history as discontinuously and unevenly shaped, but [he] always undertakes to expose the world as a stage for struggle for rule or hegemony' (Xie, 2003: 77).

With the 'Southern Question' unfinished, Gramsci was arrested in 1926, and jailed. In March 1927 Gramsci (1979: 79) famously wrote to his sister-in-law Tatiana Schucht that while prevented from working in the struggle day to day, he wished to devote himself to intellectual work so as to accomplish something '*für ewig*' (forever). Before him lay 'a tremendous amount of detailed work and patient reflection...before the ideas first touched upon in the 'Southern Question' essay could acquire the weight and the power of conviction of a major breakthrough' (Buttigieg, 2011: 22). At the centre of this work was his conception of hegemony. Although he had reading materials in his first years, he was only allowed access to writing tools from February 1929, and from this time his efforts commenced in earnest.

### Hegemony in the *Prison Notebooks*

When we first encounter Gramsci's deployment of hegemony in the notebooks it is without fanfare. Written in 1929-30, notebook 1 note 44 undertakes a lengthy examination of the Risorgimento in Italy, and more broadly passive and bourgeois revolutions in Europe. Gramsci (2011a: 136-137; Q 1 §44) outlines that 'a class is dominant in two ways, namely it is "leading" and "dominant". It leads the allied classes, it dominates the opposing classes'. He argues that in order to assume power a class must be a 'political hegemony', that the dominance of assuming power must be accompanied by this leadership: 'in order to exercise political leadership or hegemony one must not count solely on the power and material force that is given by government' (Gramsci, 2011a: 136-137; Q 1 §44). Gramsci uses this framework in the remainder of the note to examine the processes of unification of the Italian state, the experience of the Jacobins and the French Revolution (drawing a comparison with the agrarian question in Italy) and the role of intellectuals, and the hegemony of the North over the South. For Gramsci, intellectuals are an essential element of hegemony, and:

...there does not exist an independent class of intellectuals, but every class has its intellectuals; however, the intellectuals of the historically progressive class exercise such a power of attraction that, in the final analysis, they end up by subordinating the intellectuals of the other classes and creating an environment of solidarity among all the intellectuals (Gramsci, 2011a: 137-138; Q 1 §44).

Through the notebooks Gramsci moves between uses of the term hegemony to describe on the one hand leadership/direction and on the other domination, and contexts where the distinctions between these are bridged — such as when he uses the term *dirigente* to mean leading *and* dominant. Already in this note Gramsci had extended his use of hegemony from

the primary way it was used in the Russian context, expanding and generalising it ‘beyond [only] a working-class strategy, to characterise stable forms of rule by any social class’, to a term to analyse ‘not [only] the adhesion of allies in a common cause, but the submission of adversaries to an order inimical to them’ (Anderson, 2022).

Hegemony is discussed from this point in innumerable notes, often in association with other new concepts, to articulate a new way of both understanding and acting in the world. Hegemony ‘designate[s] a terrain where the logic of political strategy and leadership intersects the practical — economic, cultural and pedagogical — organisation of everyday life’ (Shandro, 2014: 3).

### *The terrain of hegemony: civil society and the ‘integral state’*

Gramsci (2011b: 197; Q4 §46) associates the production and functioning of hegemony, through which the dominant group exerts power over the whole, with civil society. Processes of consent (hegemony) in civil society are just as important as openly coercive state rule (domination) in maintaining power and order. Essential to grappling with the relationship between these in the functioning of hegemony, is Gramsci’s distinct innovation of the ‘integral state’. The integral state concept describes the dialectical unity between what we might usually think of as the state on the one hand (political society and the state apparatus), and civil society on the other (atomised social/economic interests and the relations between them). The most famous of Gramsci’s notes on the nature of the state explains the relationship like this:

. . . certain elements that fall under the general notion of the state must be restored to the notion of civil society (in the sense, one might say, that State + political society + civil society, that is, hegemony protected by the armour of coercion) (Gramsci, 2011c: 75; Q6 §88).

Conceiving of political society and the state as something that sit above civil society, involved in regulation and coercion alone, even through democratic means, overlooks that it is in practice a ‘the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules’ (Gramsci, 1971: 244; Q15 §10). As such, the integral state is the mechanism for maintaining capitalist hegemony, as ‘a network of social relations for the production of consent, for the integration of the subaltern classes into the expansive project of historical development of the leading social group’ (Thomas, 2009: 143). However, as Palmiro Togliatti has argued, for Gramsci ‘the difference between civil society and political society is methodological rather than organic’ (cited in Liguori, 2022: 109).

Thomas (2009: 189) explains that Gramsci’s definition of political society as an *involucro* — as an envelopment or enwrapping — ‘in which a civil society can be developed would not seem to correspond in any sense to the concept of the state apparatus’. He argues that ‘whereas the latter is normally conceived as a coercive instrument applied externally in order to regulate civil society’s inherent tendency towards anarchy’, Gramsci articulates an image of ‘political society’ as a ‘container’ of civil society, ‘surrounding or enmeshing and fundamentally reshaping it’ (Thomas, 2009: 189). Far from civil society and political society only being in contradistinction, civil society is in dialectical unity with the state. Civil society and political society are better conceptualised not as geographical locations, but as different

sites of social practice: civil society is the location of hegemonic practice and political society is the site of direct domination.

For Gramsci, civil society has a fundamental economic content, and the concept of hegemony itself has 'an economic foundation, as well as socio-economic content' (Liguori, 2022: 152). Thus, the battle for hegemony is 'the struggle for power, and superstructural activities have a class character, arising out of those contradictions that Marx had identified as central to modern history' (Liguori, 2022: 152). Gramsci was concerned with the character of production and accumulation, and the civil society which arises from this, which lead to contradictions that allow openings for hegemonic struggles by subaltern groups against capitalist class rule. As such, the *invulcro* of civil society, can be broken through. Hegemony is never complete, Gramsci argues, and through the role of intellectuals, and the political party as the 'collective individual', Gramsci identifies the main instruments for the transformation necessary to realise a new hegemonic system (or indeed to maintain the present one).

### *The project of hegemony: Intellectuals and the 'modern prince'*

In the notebooks Gramsci returns many times to the role of intellectuals in the organisation of hegemony: 'a human mass does not "distinguish" itself, does not become independent in its own right without, in its widest sense, organising itself' and 'there is no organization without intellectuals, that is, without organisers and leaders' (Gramsci, 1971: 334). He analyses the roles of both 'traditional intellectuals' — who serve the interests of the dominant class and are essential to the maintenance of the current hegemony — and what he terms the 'organic intellectuals', which arise from all groups and are essential to the struggle of non-dominant groups. Gramsci (1971: 10; Q12 §1) articulates organic intellectuals as the conscious development of a layer essential to a rising class winning hegemony, with their practice consisting of 'active participation in practical life, as constructor, as organizer, "permanent persuader" and not just a simple orator'. As such:

Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields. The capitalist entrepreneur creates alongside himself the industrial technician, the specialist in political economy, the organisers of a new culture, of a new legal system, etc (Gramsci, 1971: 6).

While the notion of organic intellectuals might appear to be a spontaneous elaboration, the entire purpose of Gramsci's analysis is to make the process conscious and purposeful. Old conceptions of the world (what he would term the 'common sense' of the current 'historical bloc'<sup>i</sup>), must be replaced with new ideas (meaning the 'good sense' of a new one) — this is as much the case for the bourgeois class as the working class and subalterns. The question of hegemony 'goes beyond culture...in its insistence on relating the whole social process to specific distributions of power and influence' (Williams, 1977). It is closely related to what Gramsci calls 'conceptions of the world', that being the shared beliefs and values that shape our understanding of the world and place in it. As Raymond Williams argues, the mechanisms of hegemony:

not only articulate upper level of ideology which has manipulation and indoctrination; but it is a whole body of practices and expectation over the whole of living...our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values — constitutive and constituting — which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It constitutes a sense of reality for people (Williams, 1977).

Hegemony is, for Gramsci, based on consent to the dominant ideas and ways of thinking, internalised by individuals and collectively, which legitimise the existing social order. As Gramsci (1971: 419; Q11 §13) explains, common sense is essential to this, as a ‘conception of the world which is uncritically absorbed by the various social and cultural environments in which the moral individuality of the average man is developed’, although it is not metaphysical it is based in material realities. Schematically, Gramsci talks of common sense as being halfway between folklore (cultural conceptions of the world like superstitions and fables) and the philosophy and science of specialists. This process of developing hegemonic common sense is chaotic but purposeful, as ‘[e]very relationship of ‘hegemony’ is necessarily an educational relationship’ (Gramsci, 1971: 350). ‘Common sense is not something rigid and immobile, but is continually transforming itself, enriching itself with scientific ideas and with philosophical opinions which have entered ordinary life’, Gramsci argues (1978: 326n). Set against this is his notion of ‘good sense’, an enlightened understanding of the world that is critical and reflective, which he argues is attainable through working class struggle — meaning, through the philosophy of praxis.

In the context of these battles, Gramsci (1971: 340; Q11 §12) argues that organic intellectuals need to complete two tasks: ‘[n]ever to tire of repeating its own arguments’; and to ‘work incessantly to raise the intellectual level of ever-growing strata of the populace’. This production of ‘elites of intellectuals of the new type which arise directly out of the masses, but remain in contact with them to become, as it were, the whalebone in the corset’ of the struggle from below (Gramsci, 1971: 340; Q11 §12). In the struggle for a new hegemony, however, these intellectuals need to be organised collectively. ‘What becomes of the political party in relation to the problem of the intellectuals?’, Gramsci asks. In response to his own question, he answers that the ‘political party, it seems to me, can be said to be precisely the mechanism that carries out in civil society the same function that the state carries out, to a greater extent, in political society’ (Gramsci, 2011b: 202; Q4 §49).

Earlier in his years in Turin, Gramsci was heavily influenced by the anti-determinism of socialist intellectual Anthony Labriola and had come to believe that revolutionary change was not fated or automatic. Rather, it would only be delivered through conscious intervention of those who understood the nature of capitalism. He believed that a new hegemony would only be possible when people ‘understood and overcame’ current dominant ideas, a phrase taken from Labriola but originally from Hegel (Davidson, 1974: 126). Gramsci held that the role of intellectuals (including himself) was to educate the masses to ensure awareness of social oppression, and of their own role in altering the course of history. However, some argue that at this time he still clung in part to a traditional and idealist conception of the process of enlightenment — one to be delivered through publications, lectures and seminars (Davidson, 1974: 126–127) — and his insights into the philosophy of praxis were still in development. At the same time, Gramsci was deeply involved in the workers’ movement in Turin, and as such this was not a belief in a mechanical Marxism to be imposed on the movement, but rather ‘a practice of collective

discussion, the construction of spaces free from the hegemony of the dominant ideology, and the formation of new ideological relations' (Frosini, 2008: 276). He took the view that philosophy itself was capable of being a liberation from prejudice and hegemonic thought, and 'forming a critical and independent mass point of view' (Frosini, 2008: 675).

In the notebooks, Gramsci moves forward from this approach and begins to articulate a 'collective intellectual' in the form of the modern prince, the notion taken from Machiavelli and then recast. For Gramsci the:

...human mass does not 'distinguish' itself, does not become independent in its own right without, in the widest sense, organising itself; and there is no organisation without intellectuals, that is without organisers and leaders, in other words, without the theoretical aspect of the theory-practice nexus being distinguished concretely by the existence of a group of people 'specialised' in conceptual and philosophical elaboration of ideas (Gramsci, 1971: 334).

As Gramsci (1971: 129) redefines it, 'the modern prince [...] cannot be a real person, a concrete individual. It can only be an organism, a complex element of society in which a collective will, which has already been recognised and has to some extent asserted itself in action, begins to take concrete form'. The modern prince as a way to establish a new hegemony is no abstract formation for Gramsci, despite the literary tone and origins of his term, rather it is the actuality of a revolutionary Marxist party.

## Conclusion

How then are we to systematise the range of ways Gramsci deploys the term hegemony across his lifetime? Thomas (2013: 24–25) argues that the most useful approach is to see the four key uses of the term as 'integrally and dialectically' connected 'moments', which 'constitute a "dialectical chain" along which Gramsci deepens his researches'. Hegemony is: first 'social and political leadership'; second, 'a political project'; third, 'the realization of this hegemonic project in the concrete institutions and organizational forms of a "hegemonic apparatus"'; and fourth, ultimately and decisively, the social and political hegemony of the workers' movement' (Thomas, 2013: 24–25). Thus, hegemony is both as a conceptual lens on, as well as the actuality of, ruling class domination. Alongside this, Gramsci reveals for us that hegemony is always already incomplete, and through the philosophy of praxis there is the potentiality for new forms of understanding and social rule.

Gramsci's efforts were to develop a new Marxism in opposition to that of the Second International, and determinist and instrumental readings of Marx. For many contemporary scholars and activists their task has been to reclaim Gramsci's intellectual endeavours as ones firmly rooted in the political economy and materialism of the communist tradition, rather than the realm of culture alone. Redrawing a line directly from Marx and Engels, through Lenin, to Gramsci, is essential to both salvage Marxism from the actuality of totalitarian communism, as well as to answer contemporary questions as to how hegemony functions.

In the battle for new forms of social rule — a new or anti/counter hegemony — Gramsci's method and insights offer hope of overcoming what is now an existential threat created by capitalism in climate change. This is a climate crisis embedded in the legacy and

contemporary actuality of colonialism, as well the intersecting crisis of inequality. While there are tentative signs of struggle in some locations, these remain limited. In key industrial heartlands struggles are often violently repressed. The world is always in the process of being remade, however, and in Gramsci's celebrated notion we have an essential tool to understand how the subaltern battle for liberation. Gramsci's insights were not simply about how hegemony is produced by the (bourgeois) integral state, but that the chaos of civil society — as it is produced and reproduced by the anarchic process of capital accumulation — can break through the political container in which it finds itself enwrapped. It is this dual nature of Gramsci's notion of hegemony, as both a mode of rule and potential liberation within the historical processes of class and subaltern struggles, that imbue it with the possibility of new ways of comprehending our world and new forms of social rule. Gramsci's legacy is one of insight into the radical potential to disrupt and, if organised through a modern prince, end capitalist rule.

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<sup>i</sup> A 'historical bloc' for Gramsci is social order, combining economic, political and ideological institutions and social relations, for the maintenance of hegemony or the winning of a new one.