

Gramsci and Marxist Theory

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5 Hegemony and ideology in Gramsci

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The theory of ideology was for a long time one of the most neglected areas of the marxist analysis of society. Yet this is a key area involving some extremely important issues which are not only theoretical but also political. It is vital, therefore, to attempt to understand the nature of those obstacles which have hindered the formulation of a theory which offers an adequate explanation of the significance and role of ideology, since it is no exaggeration to say that these have constituted the main impediment to the development of marxism, both as a theory and as a political movement.

At first sight the answer seems fairly simple. The various obstacles all seem in effect to proceed from the unique phenomenon which a vast body of contemporary literature has termed *economism*. However, the apparent obvious simplicity of the term hides a whole series of problems which begin to emerge as soon as one attempts a rigorous definition of its specificity and extent. Although it is clear that all forms of economism imply a misrecognition of the distinct autonomy of politics and ideology, this generic definition is inadequate, as it gives rise to two possible spheres of ambiguity. The first stems from the fact that the notion of the economic is indeed ambiguous and far from being clear itself (it is not clear for example, what is the relative importance attributed to the forces of production and the relations of production in this area). The second is the result of the vagueness and imprecision characterising the mechanism of the subordination of politics and ideology to economics, since this is always defined resorting to purely allusive metaphors, ('subordination', 'reduction', 'reflexion'). In this way one is left with the possibility of the existence of complex forms of economism which are not easy to detect since they do not appear as such at first sight.

1 Economism and ideology

It is here that we can locate the reason for the complexity of the problem of economism in relation to the theory of ideology, since the former occurs in numerous forms some of which have only rarely been identified. The economic problematic of ideology has two intimately linked but quite distinct facets. The first one consists in seeing a causal link between the structure and the superstructure and in viewing the latter purely as a mechanical reflection of the economic base. This leads to a vision of ideological superstructures as epiphenomena which play no part in the historical process. The second facet is not concerned with the role of the superstructures but with their actual nature, and here they are conceived as being determined by the position of the subjects in the relations of production. This second aspect is not identifiable with the first since here it is in fact possible to attribute 'differential time sequences' and even a certain efficacy to the ideological superstructures.

It is important to understand the various forms in which these two aspects have been combined in the marxist tradition. They can in fact be divided into three main phases: the first, which is the one in which the two aspects have combined, constitutes the pure and classic form of economism; in the second there is a move away from the classic view as the two aspects begin to be dissociated; finally, in the third phase there is a break with the two aspects of economism, and the theoretical bases for a rethinking of historical materialism in a radically anti-economistic perspective are established.

There are various reasons why the distinction of these three moments is necessary for an accurate understanding of economism. First of all, although it is generally agreed that the Second and Third Internationals were economicist, the particular forms of economism involved have not been adequately specified, with the result that reductionism and epiphenomenism have tended to be identified with each other, or at least to be seen in a relation of mutual implication. As regards the 'superstructural' marxist interpretations (Lukács, Korsch, etc.), it is important to see that they only partially break with economism because although they reject the epiphenomenalist concept of ideology, class reductionism is none the less still present. Finally, it must be realised that the third moment is only just beginning and that the superseding of both aspects of economism is a theoretical task which for the most part still remains to be carried out.

Antonio Gramsci must surely be the first to have undertaken a

complete and radical critique of economism, and it is here that his main contribution to the marxist theory of ideology lies. It is the object of this article, therefore, to analyse Gramsci's contribution within this perspective. First, however, it is important to recognise the particular difficulties that such a reading would involve. Some of these are inherent in any attempt at what is called a 'symptomatic reading', while others stem from the particular nature of Gramsci's writings and their fragmentary character. The main pitfall to be avoided at all costs, is an instrumental reading of Gramsci, one which takes advantage of the unsystematic nature of his work to extrapolate passages in an arbitrary fashion in order to back up a thesis bearing little relation to his thought. If symptomatic readings involve *practising a problematic* it is vital to make the latter explicit in order to avoid transferring to the text in question the contradictions of the conceptual system upon which the analysis is based. In addition one should not lose sight of the fact that the problematic underlying the analysis of the text is *external* to it, and that the unity of the text is often established along quite separate lines from the problematic itself. To avoid any ambiguity I shall start by defining the fundamental principles of the anti-reductionist problematic which is the basis of this reading of Gramsci. It should then be possible to judge whether the hypothesis with which I intend to proceed, which consists in attributing to Gramsci the merit of having laid the foundations of such a conception, can be accepted or not.

Principles of a non-reductionist conception of ideology

The non-reductionist conception of ideology which constitutes the theoretical foundation of this symptomatic reading of Gramsci is based on the following principles:

1 The notion of the concrete as overdetermination of contradictions. Faced with a hegelian-type conception which reduces each conjuncture to a process of the auto-development of a single contradiction, which as a result reduces the present to an *abstract* and *necessary* moment of a linear and predetermined development, I accept Althusser's conception which establishes the primacy of the notion of conjuncture in the analysis of the concrete, and considers every conjuncture as an overdetermination of contradictions each one of which can be thought *abstractly* in conceptual independence from the others. This constitutes the basis of a non-reductionist conception of the political and the

ideological given the fact that reductionism stems precisely from marxism's adoption of a hegelian historicist model. This leads to a consideration of all contradictions as moments in the development of a single contradiction – the class contradiction – which as a consequence leads one to attribute a class character to all political and ideological elements. The central problem of contemporary marxism lies in the elaboration of a non-reductionist theory of ideology and of politics which will account for the determination in the last instance by the economic.

2 How is this need for a conception which is both marxist and non-reductionist expressed in the concrete case of the theory of ideology? Following Althusser on this point, I understand by ideology a practice producing subjects.¹ The subject is not the originating source of consciousness, the expression of the irruption of a subjective principle into objective historical processes, but the *product* of a specific practice operating through the mechanism of interpellation. If, according to Althusser's conception, social agents are not the constitutive principle of their acts, but supports of the structures, their subjective principles of identity constitute an additional structural element resulting from specific historical practices. In this case how are the principles of overdetermination and of the determination in the last instance by the economic combined? Let us first take overdetermination.

The social agent possesses several principles of ideological determination, not just one: he is hailed (interpellated) as the member of either sex, of a family, of a social class, of a nation, of a race or as an aesthetic onlooker etc., and he lives these different subjectivities in which he is constituted in a relation of mutual implication. The problem consists in determining the *objective* relation between these subjective principles or ideological elements. In a reductionist perspective each of these has a necessary class-belonging. But if, on the contrary, we accept the principle of overdetermination, we must conclude that there can exist no necessary relation between them, and that it is consequently impossible to attribute a necessary class-belonging to them. However, it is here that the second principle – the determination in the last instance by the economic – intervenes. To stress determination in the last instance by the economic is equivalent to saying determination in the last instance by the social classes inasmuch as we define classes as constituting antagonistic poles in the dominant relations of production. This brings us, therefore, to the following assertion: if the ideological elements

referred to do not *express* social classes, but if nevertheless classes do in the last instance, determine ideology, then we must thereby conclude that this determination can only be the result of the establishing of an articulating principle of these ideological elements, one which must result in actually *conferring upon them* a class character. This point, however, leaves a whole series of questions unresolved, and it is in this area that the elaboration of the anti-reductionist conception of ideology still remains to be done. In effect the assertion that the class character of an ideology is conferred upon it by its own articulating principle suggests the area in which the solution is to be found, but this in itself does not provide the theoretical answer to the problem.

The two points above have dealt with the theoretical bases of a non-reductionist conception of ideology, and the ground still to be covered in order to achieve a rigorous formulation of this conception has been indicated. The central concern of this article is to determine the ways in which these problems were recognised as such by Gramsci and to see what kind of solutions he proposed. I will attempt to show how the gramscian conception of *hegemony* involved, in the practical state, the operation of an anti-reductionist problematic of ideology. I shall go even further and maintain that it is this whole anti-reductionist conception of ideology which is the actual condition of *intelligibility* of Gramsci's conception of hegemony, and that the difficulties encountered in the interpretation of this conception stem from the fact that this anti-reductionist problematic has not so far been stressed.

Before going on to analyse Gramsci's conception it will first be necessary to take a detour via the Second International. In effect, economism did not present itself to Gramsci as an abstract or academic problem since it was on the contrary deeply embedded in the political practice of the Second International and was the root cause of the massive defeats suffered by the German and Italian working-class movements in the decade following the First World War. It is within this context that Gramsci's thought gains its significance and is to be understood.

The Second International and economism

The Second International's theory of the collapse of capitalism was based on an interpretation of Marx's thought whereby the proletarian revolution was the necessary and inevitable consequence of the

development of the economic contradictions of the capitalist mode of production. Ideology did not have any autonomy since the development of socialist consciousness was the corollary of the numerical growth of the proletariat as a class, and of the exacerbation of economic contradictions. On the other hand, socialist consciousness was identified with the consciousness of the social agents, and the latter's principle of identity was to be found in the class to which they belonged. The two forms of economism were therefore combined: that is to say the epiphenomenalist conception of the role of ideology and the reductionist conception of its nature. This type of interpretation of marxism had its epistemological foundations in a positivist conception of science which viewed historical materialism in terms of a model of scientificity then prevalent in the physical sciences.² This gave rise to the assumption that the validity of Marx's theory depended on the empirical proof of the three laws considered to constitute the basis of his analysis of the capitalist mode of production: increasing concentration, overproduction, and proletarianisation. The conviction that these laws would be enacted and that they would automatically bring about the proletarian revolution led the defenders of the catastrophe theory to assert the inevitable nature of socialism. As Kautsky wrote in his commentary on the Erfurt programme:³

We believe that the collapse of the existing society is inevitable because we know that economic development naturally and necessarily produces contradictions which oblige the exploited to combat private property. We know that it increases the numbers and strength of the exploiters whose interests lie in the maintenance of the existing order, and that it finally brings about unbearable contradictions for the mass of the population which is left only with the choice between brutalisation and inertia or the overturning of the existing system of ownership.

The Second International was strongly reductionist from an ideological point of view, and since it considered that all ideological elements had a necessary class-belonging it concluded from this that all elements belonging to the discourse of the bourgeoisie had to be decisively rejected by the working class whose aim had to be to cultivate pure proletarian values and to guard against all external contamination. This is how democracy came to be considered the typical ideological expression of the bourgeoisie.

In order to understand how such an interpretation of marxism was

able to come into being it is important to recapture the historical climate of those years. On the one hand there was a strong bourgeoisie which had succeeded in extending its hold over the whole of society and in articulating the democratic demands to its class discourse. On the other hand there was the working class organised into powerful unions and mass parties, which made it possible to achieve success in its struggle for economic demands. This situation caused a twofold tension in socialist thought between (a) the need to establish a radical break between socialist ideology and bourgeois ideology, which was the only way to ensure the independence of the socialist movement at a time when the bourgeoisie still exercised a considerable power of attraction, and (b) the need to establish a point of contact between the revolutionary objectives of the workers' movement and its growing success in the field of reforms within the capitalist system. Kautsky's economism constituted a full reply to these two needs. Since the bourgeoisie had succeeded in assimilating popular and democratic ideology to its discourse kautskyism concluded that democracy was necessarily a bourgeois ideology. Democracy therefore ceased to be seen, as in the young Marx, as the terrain of a permanent revolution begun by the bourgeoisie but concluded by the proletariat, and became instead a class ideology. The class criterion began to become the fundamental criterion at all levels and this is how one of the fundamental characteristics of economism originated, that is to say, class reductionism. On the other hand, if the working class was to take no part in the direction of other social forces and was to limit itself to the defence of its own interests, then revolution could not be the result of the conscious intervention of the working class presenting itself as a political alternative for all the exploited, but had instead to represent the unfolding of the possibilities inherent in the economic contradictions. From this ensues the theory of the collapse of capitalism. However, since this collapse was seen as merely the result of the play of economic forces, the latter were considered to contain all the elements necessary to explain the historical process. As a consequence, political and ideological factors simply became epiphenomena, which constitute the second characteristic of Kautsky's economism.

This mechanistic conception was to undergo a crisis on several points at the beginning of the twentieth century. But the development of the critique of kautskyan dogmatism had its own particular characteristics: in its most diverse and even antagonistic forms, the critique indicated the contradictions and inconsistencies of kautskyism without, however,

abandoning its presuppositions. What is more, these critiques constituted both a negation of kautskyism as a system and a development of the various potentialities present in its ideological presuppositions. This tendency is particularly clear in the case of Bernstein and in the debate on revisionism. As a result of the non-realisation of predictions based on the theory of the collapse of capitalism and also of certain glaring contradictions in the theory of the spontaneous determination of the socialist consciousness of the working class – as in the case of the British working class – Bernstein was driven to reject marxism which he declared incapable of understanding real historical developments. Bernstein was to replace the marxist vision of scientific socialism with a view of socialism as an 'ethical ideal', as a type of society towards which humanity should voluntarily orientate itself by virtue of moral principles.

Bernstein had understood that in view of the new conditions in which capitalism was developing, the theory of catastrophe could no longer be upheld and that in advanced capitalist countries the superstructures played an increasingly important part. This is why, unlike Kautsky, he saw the importance of the working-class struggle being extended to the political and ideological fields. It was, therefore, this recognition of the need to pose the problem of ideology in a radically different way which led Bernstein to challenge the economistic version of marxism. However, since he identified Marx's doctrine with the theory of catastrophe, his critique of economism led him to reject marxism outright. In effect he considered that the attribution of an active role to ideologies had necessarily to contradict the marxist theory of history. Thus Bernstein's break with marxism is to be located within the theoretical domain constituted by the ideological presuppositions of the Second International which were never seriously challenged. If on the one hand he identified marxism and the theory of catastrophe, on the other he identified democracy and bourgeois parliamentarianism. This is why it is impossible to use Bernstein's revisionism as a basis for a theory of the autonomy of the political and the ideological as *specific objective levels*. For him objectivity meant determination, and the only form of determination with which he was acquainted was mechanical economic determinism. As a result, although he did intuit the fact that class reductionism and economic determinism had prevented marxism from understanding the specific problems of the age of monopoly capital, the only alternative intellectual expression open to him lay in the opposite, extreme, in a flight from objectivity, an irruption of subjectivity – the

ethical ideal – into history. This gave rise to his recourse to kantian ethics. From Sorel to Croce, all the tendencies which at the beginning of the century attempted to oppose the dominant positivist trend, did so in the name of voluntarism, of subjectivism or even of irrationalism. There was no other solution in an intellectual world where mechanical determination and objectivity had become synonymous.

Leninism and its consequences

If reductionism and epiphenomenalism had ended up by being inextricably linked in the thought of the Second International, then the historic experience of the Russian Revolution was to lay the basis for the breaking up of this unity. On the one hand the revolution had triumphed in the European countries where it was least expected – in complete contradiction with the theory that revolution was the result of the mechanical unfolding of economic forces. It was obvious that this revolution had resulted from political intervention in a conjuncture which traditional Marxism had considered could never bring about a socialist outcome. As a result, this discredited the type of political reasoning which linked all historical changes to the relation between the forces of production and the relations of production, and it also called into question epiphenomenist presuppositions. On the other hand, Lenin's analysis of combined development, and the transformation of democratic slogans into socialist ones during the Russian Revolution, brought new prestige to the analyses made by the young Marx on the subject of the dialectic between democracy and classes, and it established a link between the Russian Revolution and the cycle of permanent revolutions which had been interrupted by the failure of the 1848 revolutions. In this way the reductionist presupposition was also seriously called into question.

Nevertheless, Lenin's analyses on this subject are on the one hand extremely succinct and on the other fairly ambiguous, since in various ways they did remain prisoner to the old problematic. In fact, it was Lenin's *political practice* rather than his actual thought which really proved to be a transforming force which shattered the narrow economistic confines of Western marxist thought at the beginning of the century.

There were three possible attitudes which could further develop the new point of departure represented by leninism. One of these was to see revolution as the result of the irruption of consciousness and will into

history in opposition to fatalism and the determinism of economic forces. This represented the continuation of the voluntarist subjectivism of the pre-war period. The young Gramsci saw the Bolshevik triumph as the revolution against 'Capital'; Sorel saw it as the triumph of 'the method of liberating violence' and of the will. In the confusion of the post-war world in which an infinite variety of anti *status quo* ideologies flourished and proliferated, bolshevism had become for numerous sections of society the symbol of a revolutionary *élan* which spurned all restrictions and objective conditions.

Another possible attitude consisted in trying to make the primacy of consciousness and the autonomy of the political moment compatible with an objective class logic. This was possible as long as one defined classes by their position in the process of production while at the same time making class consciousness the highest moment in their process of self-development. It is this sort of conception which defines the parameters of Lukács' project in his *History and Class Consciousness* and this is why he only half succeeded in superseding economism. In effect although by his insistence on the decisive function of class consciousness he was anti-economist because of the *efficacy* which he attributed to ideology, he was incapable of overcoming reductionism in his conception of the *nature* of ideology. For him ideology was identified with class consciousness, and he therefore defined it as the 'imputed consciousness' of a social class which is determined by the place which it occupies in the relations of production. This means that Lukács broke with the Second International's epiphenomenalism but not with class reductionism. He used the heritage of leninism in a one-sided fashion and only continued one of the two potential lines of development which this had opened up.

The third attitude was that of trying to extract all the theoretical consequences from Lenin's political practice, and this led to a complete and radical questioning of all aspects of the economistic problematic. Unfortunately, the extremely active period of theoretical elaboration of the 1920s was followed by the sterile silence of the stalinist era which effectively blocked the development of marxism for several decades. And yet, at that time there was one solitary effort made in this third direction. During his long years of captivity, in his reflections on the causes for the defeat of the working-class movement and the victory of fascism, alone in the isolation of his cell, Antonio Gramsci arrived at the source of all the errors: the lack of understanding of the nature and role of politics and ideology. In his *Prison Notebooks* this was to lead him to rethink all

the problems central to marxism in a radically anti-economistic perspective, and hence to develop all the potentialities present in leninism.

2 Gramsci and hegemony

Having now sketched in broad outline the marxist problematic which provided the background against which Gramsci's thought developed, we must now return to the central problem of this article, that is, Gramsci's contribution to the marxist theory of ideology. Let us first restate our main argument: this consists in showing that a radically anti-economistic problematic of ideology is operating in the *practical state* in Gramsci's conception of *hegemony* and that it constitutes its actual condition of *intelligibility*. I shall therefore begin by analysing the texts where Gramsci presents the concept of hegemony, in order to define its meaning and to study its evolution. I shall then discuss the implications which it has for the marxist theory of ideology.

The concept of hegemony first appeared in Gramsci's work in 1926 in *Notes on the Southern Question*. It was introduced in the following way:⁴

The Turin communists posed concretely the question of the 'hegemony of the proletariat': i.e. of the social basis of the proletarian dictatorship and 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 alliances which allows it to mobilise 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.

This work marked a step forward in Gramsci's thought. Naturally he had understood the importance of an alliance with the peasantry before 1926, since already in 1919, in an article entitled 'Workers and Peasants', he had insisted on the role which the peasants had to play in the proletarian revolution. It was in his *Notes on the Southern Question*, however, that he was to put the question of this alliance in terms of hegemony for the first time and to stress the political, moral and intellectual conditions which were necessary to bring this about. Hence he insisted, for example, on the fact that the working class had to free itself entirely of corporatism in order to be capable of winning over the Southern intellectuals to its cause, since it was through them that it

would be able to influence the mass of the peasantry. The existence of an intellectual and moral dimension in the question of hegemony was already something typical of Gramsci and was later to take on its own importance. However, we are still at the stage of the leninist conception of hegemony seen as the leadership of the proletariat over the peasantry, that is to say that it was political leadership which constituted the essential element of this conception in view of the fact that hegemony was thought of in terms of a *class alliance*. It is only later in the *Prison Notebooks* that hegemony in its typically gramscian sense is to be found, and here it becomes the indissoluble union of political leadership and intellectual and moral leadership, which clearly goes beyond the idea of a simple class alliance.

The problematic of hegemony is to be found right from the first of the *Prison Notebooks*, but with an important innovation: Gramsci no longer applies it only to the *strategy* of the proletariat, but uses it to think of the practices of the ruling classes in general.⁵

The following historical and political criterion is the one on which research must be based: a class is dominant in two ways, that is to say it is dominant and ruling. It rules the allied classes and dominates the opposing classes.

There is no doubt that in mentioning the direction of the allied classes Gramsci is referring here to hegemony, and there are innumerable statements to this effect throughout the *Prison Notebooks*. For example, a few pages further on in the same *Notebook 1*, in his examination of the role of the Jacobins in the French Revolution, he declares:⁶

not only did they organise a bourgeois government, i.e., make the bourgeoisie the dominant class – they did more. They created the bourgeois State, made the bourgeoisie into the leading, hegemonic class of the nation, in other words gave the new State a permanent basis and created the compact modern French nation.

He indicates that it was by forcing the bourgeoisie to overcome its corporatist nature that the Jacobins managed to make it a hegemonic class. They in fact forced it to widen its class interests and to discover those interests which it had in common with the popular sectors, and it was on this basis that they were able to put themselves in command and to lead those sectors into the struggle. Here, therefore, we find once more the opposition between corporatist and hegemonic classes encountered in *Notes on the Southern Question*, but this time it is applied to the

bourgeoisie. Gramsci had in fact begun to understand that the bourgeoisie had also needed to ensure itself popular support and that the political struggle was far more complex than had ever been thought by reductionist tendencies, since it did not consist in a simple confrontation between antagonistic classes but always involved complex relations of forces.

Gramsci analyses the relations of forces in all societies and studies the transition from a corporate to a hegemonic stage in a fundamental passage in *Notebook 4*.⁷ He begins by distinguishing three principal levels at which the relations of forces exist:

- 1 the relation of social forces linked to the structure and dependent on the degree of development of the material forces of production;
- 2 the relation of political forces, that is to say the degree of consciousness and organisation within the different social groups;
- 3 the relation of military forces which is always, according to Gramsci, the decisive moment.

In his analysis of the different moments of political consciousness he distinguished three more degrees:

- a the *primitive economic* moment in which the consciousness of a group's own professional interests are expressed but not as yet their interests as a social class;
- b the *political economic* moment which is the one in which the consciousness of class interests is expressed, but only at an economic level;
- c the third moment is that of *hegemony*, 'in which one becomes aware that one's own corporate interests, in their present and future development, transcend the corporate limits of the purely economic class, and can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups too.'⁸ For Gramsci this is where the specifically political moment is situated, and it is characterised by ideological struggle which attempts to forge unity between economic, political and intellectual objectives, 'placing all the questions around which the struggle rages on a "universal", not a corporate level, thereby creating the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate ones.'⁹

This text (which was to be reworked by Gramsci into its definitive form two years later in *Notebook 13*) is, I believe, one of the key texts for an understanding of the gramscian conception of hegemony and it is

surprising that until now little importance has been attached to it.¹⁰ It is here in fact that Gramsci sets out a very different conception of hegemony from the one found in *Notes on the Southern Question*, since here it is no longer a question of a simple political alliance but of a complete fusion of economic, political, intellectual and moral objectives which will be brought about by one fundamental group and groups allied to it *through the intermediary of ideology* when an ideology manages to 'spread throughout the whole of society determining not only united economic and political objectives but also intellectual and moral unity.'¹¹ From *Notebook 4* the leninist conception of hegemony is doubly enriched: firstly its extension to the bourgeoisie and then the addition of a new and fundamental dimension (since it is through this that unity at the political level will be realised), that of intellectual and moral direction. It was only later that Gramsci was to develop all the implications of this enrichment, but from *Notebook 4* onwards hegemony does assume its specifically gramscian dimension. It is therefore already possible on the basis of what has so far been discussed, to advance a tentative initial definition of a *hegemonic class*: it is a class which has been able to articulate the interests of other social groups to its own by means of ideological struggle. This, according to Gramsci, is only possible if this class renounces a strictly corporatist conception, since in order to exercise leadership it must genuinely concern itself with the interests of those social groups over which it wishes to exercise hegemony – 'obviously the fact of hegemony presupposes that one takes into account the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony will be exercised, and it also presupposes a certain equilibrium, that is to say that the hegemonic groups will make some sacrifices of a corporate nature.'¹² This conception of hegemony has certain very important consequences in relation to the way in which Gramsci envisaged the nature and the role of the state.¹³

It is true that the State is seen as the organ of one particular group, destined to create favourable conditions for the latter's maximum expansion. But the development and expansion of the particular group are conceived of, and presented, as being the motor force of a universal expansion, of a development of all the 'national' energies. In other words the dominant group is coordinated concretely with the general interests of the subordinate groups, and the life of the State is conceived of as a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria (on the juridical plane) between the

interests of the fundamental group and those of the subordinate groups – equilibria in which the interests of the dominant group prevail, but only up to a certain point, i.e. stopping short of narrowly corporate economic interest.

It is, therefore, the problematic of hegemony which is at the root of this 'enlarging of the state' whose importance has quite rightly been stressed by Christine Buci-Glucksmann.¹⁴ This was to permit Gramsci to break with the economistic conception of the state, only envisaged as a coercive bureaucratic apparatus in the hands of the dominant class, and to formulate the notion of the *integral state* which consisted of 'dictatorship + hegemony'. This is not the place to analyse Gramsci's contribution to the marxist theory of the state (which is also of the utmost importance), so I shall limit myself to pointing out that this enlargement of the state works on two levels: first, it involves the enlarging of the social base of the state and the complex relations established between the state, the hegemonic class and its mass base; second, it also involves the enlarging of the state's functions, since the notion of the integral state implies the incorporation of the apparatuses of hegemony, of civil society, to the state.

Concerning the methods by which a class can become hegemonic, Gramsci distinguishes two principal routes: the first is that of transformism and the second is that of expansive hegemony. Let us first take *transformism*. This is the method by which the Moderate Party during the Risorgimento managed to secure its hegemony over the forces fighting for unification. Here what was involved was 'the gradual but continuous absorption, achieved by methods which varied in their effectiveness, of the active elements produced by allied groups – and even those which came from the antagonistic groups ...'¹⁵ This naturally was only a bastard form of hegemony and the consensus obtained with these methods was merely a 'passive consensus'. In fact the process whereby power was taken was termed a 'passive revolution' by Gramsci, since the masses were integrated through a system of absorption and neutralisation of their interests in such a way as to prevent them from opposing those of the hegemonic class. Gramsci contrasted this type of hegemony through absorption by what he called successful hegemony, that is to say, *expansive hegemony*. This had to consist in the creation of an active, direct consensus resulting from the genuine adoption of the interests of the popular classes by the hegemonic class, which would give rise to the creation of a genuine 'national-

popular will'. Unlike the passive revolution, in fact, where vast sectors of the popular classes are excluded from the hegemonic system, in an expansive hegemony the whole society must advance. This distinction of two methods of hegemony makes it possible to specify further the tentative definition of hegemony already put forward. In fact, if hegemony is defined as the ability of one class to articulate the interest of other social groups to its own, it is now possible to see that this can be done in two very different ways: the interests of these groups can either be articulated so as to neutralise them and hence to prevent the development of their own specific demands, or else they can be articulated in such a way as to promote their full development leading to the final resolution of the contradictions which they express.

These texts prompt a series of further observations. First, only a fundamental class (that is to say one which occupies one of the two poles in the relations of production of a determinate mode of production) can become hegemonic, as Gramsci unequivocally states: 'though 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.'¹⁶ This condition not only restricts the possible number of hegemonic classes, it also indicates the possible limitations of any forms of hegemony. If in fact the exercise of hegemony involves economic and corporate sacrifices on the part of the aspiring leading class, the latter cannot, however, go so far as to jeopardise its basic interests. Sooner or later, therefore, the bourgeoisie comes up against the limitations of its hegemony, as it is an exploiting class, since its class interests must, at a certain level, necessarily clash with those of the popular classes. This, says Gramsci, is a sign that it has exhausted its function and that from then on 'the ideological bloc tends to crumble away; then "spontaneity" may be replaced by "constraint" in ever less disguised and indirect forms, culminating in outright police measures and *coups d'état*.'¹⁷ Thus only the working class, whose interests coincide with the limitation of all exploitation, can be capable of successfully bringing about an expansive hegemony.

The most important aspect of Gramsci's hegemony still remains to be studied. This is the aspect of *intellectual and moral leadership* and the way in which this is achieved. In fact, all the points which have been raised could be entirely compatible with a conception of hegemony seen as alliance of classes. However, if Gramsci's hegemony were limited to political leadership it would only differ from Lenin's concept in that Gramsci does not restrict its use to the strategy of the proletariat, but also

applies it to the bourgeoisie. Now it has been pointed out that the conception of hegemony is doubly enriched with respect to Lenin, as it also involves the addition of a new dimension which is inextricably linked to political direction, and that is intellectual and moral leadership. As a result, the establishing of hegemony became a phenomenon which went far beyond a simple class alliance. In fact, for Gramsci – and it is this which constitutes his originality – hegemony is not to be found in a purely instrumental alliance between classes through which the *class demands* of the allied classes are articulated to those of the fundamental class, with each group maintaining its own individuality within the alliance as well as its own ideology. According to him hegemony involves the creation of a *higher synthesis*, so that all its elements fuse in a 'collective will' which becomes the new protagonist of political action which will function as the protagonist of political action during that hegemony's entire duration. It is through ideology that this collective will is formed since its very existence depends on the creation of ideological unity which will serve as 'cement'.¹⁸ This is the key to the indissoluble unity of the two aspects of gramscian hegemony, since the formation of the collective will and the exercise of political leadership depends on the very existence of intellectual and moral leadership. To account for these two aspects and the way in which they are articulated undoubtedly constitutes the major difficulty to be faced in any study of the conception of hegemony in Gramsci's thought. It is this, moreover, which explains why a comprehensive definition of hegemony has not been established so far despite the abundant literature existing on this subject. In fact, most interpretations unilaterally stress one or the other aspect which gives rise to widely differing and often opposing interpretations according to whether political direction or moral and intellectual direction is stressed.¹⁹ The few interpretations which do try to account for both aspects at once, do so on the basis of an erroneous conception of one or the other of the two, or else of the link between them.²⁰

If, therefore, we wish finally to manage to establish a comprehensive definition of Gramsci's conception of hegemony which accounts for its specificity and does not ignore any of its potentialities, it is important to be able to think theoretically the kind of relation established between its two components, that is, the secret of their unity, and to see what are the main characteristics resulting from this. To do this the following question needs to be answered: how can one forgo genuine ideological unity between different social groups in such a way as to make them

unite into a single political subject? To answer this problem it is of course necessary to discuss the conception of ideology which is present – both explicitly and implicitly – in Gramsci's work. It will then be shown how it is impossible to give a coherent account of the specificity of Gramsci's conception from the perspective of an economic problematic of ideology.

3 Hegemony and ideology

The best point of departure for an analysis of the conception of ideology operating in the gramscian problematic of hegemony is to study the way in which he envisaged the process of the formation of a new hegemony. The notes referring to how a new collective will must be formed through moral and intellectual reform which will be the work of the 'Modern Prince' are, therefore, the most revealing on this subject.²¹ But first the few texts in which Gramsci explicitly sets out his conception of ideology must be discussed.

The problematic of ideology

Gramsci immediately places himself on entirely different ground from those viewing ideology as false consciousness or as a system of ideas, and he rebels against all epiphenomenalist conceptions which reduce it to mere appearances with no efficacy.²²

The claim, presented as an essential postulate of historical materialism, that every fluctuation of politics and ideology can be presented and expounded as an immediate expression of the structure, must be contested in theory as primitive infantilism, and combated in practice with the authentic testimony of Marx, the author of concrete political and historical works.

According to Gramsci, the starting point of all research on ideology must be Marx's assertion that 'men gain consciousness of their tasks on the ideological terrain of the superstructures'.²³ So that the latter, he declares, must be considered 'operating realities which possess efficacy'²⁴, and if Marx sometimes terms them illusions it is only in a polemical sense in order to clearly specify their historical and transitory nature. Gramsci was to formulate his own definition of ideology as the terrain 'on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle'.²⁵ Ideology, he declares, must be seen as a battle field, as a continuous struggle, since

men's acquisition of consciousness through ideology will not come individually but always through the intermediary of the ideological terrain where two 'hegemonic principles' confront each other.²⁶ The self's acquisition of consciousness is in effect only possible through an ideological formation constituted not only of discursive elements, but also of non-discursive elements which Gramsci designates by the rather vague term 'conformism'. His intention becomes clear, however, when he indicates that the acquisition of this necessary consciousness through conformism results in the fact 'that one is always mass-man or collective man'.²⁷ One finds here, in fact, the idea that the subjects are not originally given but are always produced by ideology through a socially determined ideological field, so that subjectivity is always the product of social practice. This implies that ideology has a material existence and that far from consisting in an ensemble of spiritual realities, it is always materialised in practices. The nature of ideology as practice is further reinforced by the identification Gramsci establishes between ideology and religion (in the crocean sense of a world-view with its corresponding norms of action), as it serves to stress that ideology organises action. In effect Gramsci considers that a world-view is manifest in all action and that this expresses itself in a very elaborate form and at a high level of abstraction – as is the case with philosophy – or else it is expressed in much simpler forms as the expression of 'common sense' which presents itself as the spontaneous philosophy of the man in the street, but which is the popular expression of 'higher' philosophies.²⁸ These world-views are never individual facts but the expression of the 'communal life of a social bloc', which is why Gramsci calls them 'organic ideologies'.²⁹ It is these which 'organise the human masses' and which serve as the informative principle of all individual and collective activities, since it is through these that men acquire all their forms of consciousness.³⁰ But if it is through organic ideologies that men acquire all their forms of consciousness, and if these organic ideologies are world-views of determinate social blocs, this means that all forms of consciousness are necessarily political. This enables Gramsci to make the following equation: philosophy = ideology = politics. This identification has generally been misunderstood and it is this which underlies all the misinterpretations of Gramsci's historicism which present it as a hegelian reading of marxism.³¹ In fact what Gramsci was trying to do was to think the role of subjectivity, but so as not to present it as the irruption of the individual consciousness into history. To achieve this he posits consciousness not as originally given but as the effect of the system

of ideological relations into which the individual is inserted. Thus it is ideology which creates subjects and makes them act.

Ideology as a practice producing subjects is what appears to be the real idea implicit in Gramsci's thoughts on the operative and active nature of ideology and its identification with politics. However, he did not have the necessary theoretical tools at his disposal to express this intuition adequately, and he had to content himself with making allusions to it using very ambiguous formulas strongly influenced by crocean historicism. Let us take, for example, the definition of ideology as 'a conception of the world implicitly manifest in art, in law, in economic activity, in all individual and collective manifestations of life'.³² If this definition is examined in the light of the one in which ideology is seen as a world-view with its corresponding norms of action and Gramsci's repeated insistence on the fact that ideology is the terrain on which men acquire all their forms of consciousness, then it becomes plain that this definition (far from having to be interpreted as showing that Gramsci is dealing with a hegelian problematic of expressive totality in which ideology plays the central role), must be understood as an allusion to the fact that it is through ideology that all possible types of 'subjects' are created.

Another very new aspect of the gramscian problematic of ideology is the importance which he attributes to the *material and institutional nature of ideological practice*. In effect Gramsci insists on the fact that this practice possesses its own agents, that is to say, the *intellectuals*. They are the ones in charge of elaborating and spreading organic ideologies,³³ and they are the ones who will have to realise moral and intellectual reform.³⁴ Gramsci classes the intellectuals into two main categories depending on whether they are linked to one of the two fundamental classes (organic intellectuals), or to classes expressing previous modes of production (traditional intellectuals). Apart from stressing the role of the intellectuals, Gramsci insists on the importance of the material and institutional structure for the elaboration and spreading of ideology. This is made up of different *hegemonic apparatuses*: schools, churches, the entire media and even architecture and the name of the streets.³⁵ This ensemble of apparatuses is termed the *ideological structure* of a dominant class by Gramsci, and the level of the superstructure where ideology is produced and diffused is called *civil society*. This constitutes the ensemble of 'private' bodies through which the political and social hegemony of a social group is exercised.³⁶

It is now obvious that we are far from the economic problematic of

ideology and that Gramsci is clearly situated on a different terrain. What is quite new in him is the awareness of the material nature of ideology and of the fact that it constitutes a practice inscribed in apparatuses which plays an indispensable practical-social role in all societies. He intuited the fact that this practice consists in the production of subjects, but he did not quite manage to formulate this theoretically. Besides, one should never forget that all these new ideas are expressed by Gramsci in an ambiguous form which is now outdated. Since, as has already been indicated, the only intellectual tradition available to assist in the elaboration of an anti-economistic problematic was Croce's historicism. In any case, Gramsci never set out to elaborate a theory of ideology and his thought is not presented in a systematic way. Having said all this, however, it does nevertheless seem possible to assert that Gramsci's problematic anticipated Althusser in several respects: the material nature of ideology, its existence as the necessary level of all social formations and its function as the producer of subjects are all implicit in Gramsci, although it was Althusser who was to be the first to formulate this conception in a rigorous fashion.

A non-reductionist conception

Gramsci's contribution to the marxist theory of ideologies, however, is not limited to his having shown that they were objective and operative realities, as real as the economy itself, and that they played a crucial role in all social formations. Such a conception, however, only definitively supersedes the first facet of economism and still leaves room for the possible existence of complicated forms of reductionism. Now Gramsci was not simply content to criticise the epiphenomenal conception as he went much further and queried the reductionist conception which made ideology a function of the class position of the subjects. There can be no doubt that it is here that the most important and original aspect of his contribution is to be found. Unfortunately, it is also the least understood aspect, and this explains why all the potentialities which this opened out to marxist analysis have virtually remained undeveloped.

It must be admitted here that this is a much more difficult area, since Gramsci never presented the anti-reductionist problematic in an explicit fashion, although it does exist in the *practical state* in the way in which he conceived hegemony. This problematic must, therefore, be clearly brought out, and it must be shown that it provides the *actual condition of intelligibility* of Gramsci's hegemony. However, before embarking on a

study of texts which will serve as points of reference, it is worth briefly recapitulating the three principles underlying the reductionist problematic of ideology, since this will make it easier to bring out the difference between Gramsci's conception and this one. The three principles are as follows:

- 1 all subjects are class subjects;
- 2 social classes have their own paradigmatic ideologies;
- 3 all ideological elements have a necessary class belonging.

Gramsci's opposition to the first principle emerges clearly at once. According to him the subjects of political action cannot be identified with social classes. As has already been seen, they are 'collective wills' which obey specifically formed laws in view of the fact that they constitute the political expression of hegemonic systems created through ideology. Therefore, the subjects (the social classes) which exist at the economic level, are not duplicated at the political level; instead, different 'inter class' subjects are created. This constitutes Gramsci's break with the first principle of reductionism and provides him with the necessary theoretical basis to enable him to think hegemony beyond a simple class alliance as the creation of a superior unity where there will be a fusion of the participant elements of the hegemonic bloc. We know that this fusion will be realised through ideology, but the question remains, how and on what basis? We have now, in effect, reached the point of having to answer our previously formulated question: how can genuine ideological unity between different social groups be created?

There are two possible solutions to the problem. The first is the only one which can be formulated within a reductionist problematic of ideology (as exemplified by principles 2 and 3). It consists in viewing this ideological unity as the imposition of the class ideology of the main group upon the allied groups. This leads one to define a hegemonic class as one which has been capable of creating ideological consensus with other groups on the basis of the role played by its own ideology as the dominant one, and to reduce the problematic of ideology to a mere phenomenon of ideological inculcation. This, for example, is the kind of solution underlying Nicos Poulantzas's interpretation of Gramsci's conception of hegemony.³⁷ According to him, in so far as hegemony in Gramsci refers to a situation in which class domination involves a function of direction by means of which active consent of the dominated class is created, then this is similar to Lukács' notion of class-consciousness-world-view, and hence to the hegelian problematic of the

subject. He declares that if this kind of problematic is transposed to marxism, then it leads to the conception that class is the subject of history, the genetic totalising principle of the instances of a social formation. In this context it is the ideology consciousness world-view of the class viewed as the subject of history, that is of the hegemonic class, which founds the unity of a formation, in so far as it determines the adhesion of the dominated classes within a determinate system of domination.³⁸

Such an interpretation of Gramsci's thought is only possible if one identifies hegemony with the imposition of the dominant ideology (understood here in the lukácsian form of the dominant class's world-view—class consciousness). I think that what has so far been demonstrated is already sufficient to show that this is a completely incorrect interpretation of Gramsci's thought. This does, in fact, prevent Poulantzas from grasping the full extent of Gramsci's conception of hegemony and it leads him to find some incoherent elements in it especially as regards the extension of this conception to the strategy of the proletariat. Poulantzas declares this extension unacceptable since it implies 'that a class imposes its own world-view on a formation and therefore actually conquers the place of the dominant ideology before the conquest of political power'.³⁹ Now, not only does Gramsci indicate the possibility of a class becoming hegemonic before the seizure of power, but he insists on the *necessity* of its doing so. Can one really talk of incoherence on his part? If so, then it must seriously affect the whole of his work in view of the importance which this conception plays in his thought. On the other hand, could this not rather indicate a way of understanding hegemony which differs from the one which Poulantzas attributes to him, that is to say a conception which assumes that the problem of the creation of an ideological unity is tackled on the basis of a non-reductionist conception of ideology? In fact, this is the case, and it is this which explains why this fundamental aspect of Gramsci's thought remained for a long time completely unnoticed, since it was absolutely *unthinkable* within the reductionist problematic dominating marxist thought.⁴⁰

So we must now present the second solution – the one to be found in Gramsci – to the problem of the possibility of forming ideological unity between different social groups. It is a solution which, of course, does not consist in the imposition of the class ideology of one of the groups over the others. An analysis of the way in which Gramsci visualises the process leading to the constitution of a new hegemony through

intellectual and moral reform will throw light on the subject.

As already previously mentioned, the importance of intellectual and moral reform lies in the fact that the hegemony of a fundamental class consists in the creation of a 'collective will' (on the basis of a common world-view which will serve as a unifying principle) in which this class and its allies will fuse to form a 'collective man'.⁴¹

From this one can deduce the importance of the 'cultural aspect', even in practical (collective) activity. An historical act can only be performed by 'collective man', and this presupposes the attainment of a 'cultural-social' unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous aims, are welded together with a single aim, on the basis of an equal and common conception of the world.

The creation of a new hegemony, therefore, implies the transformation of the previous ideological terrain and the creation of a new world-view which will serve as a unifying principle for a new collective will. This is the process of ideological transformation which Gramsci designates with the term 'intellectual and moral reform'. What is important now is to see how this process is envisaged by Gramsci. The two following passages are extremely significant in this context:

What matters is the criticism to which such an ideological complex is subjected by the first representatives of the new historical phase. This criticism makes possible a process of differentiation and change in the relative weight that the elements of the old ideologies used to possess. What was previously secondary and subordinate, or even incidental, is now taken to be primary – becomes the nucleus of a new ideological and theoretical complex. The old collective will dissolves into its contradictory elements since the subordinate ones develop socially⁴²

How, on the other hand should this historical consciousness, proposed as autonomous consciousness, be formed? How should everyone choose and combine the elements for the constitution of such an autonomous consciousness? Will each element imposed have to be repudiated *a priori*? It will have to be repudiated inasmuch as it is imposed, but not in itself, that is to say that it will be necessary to give it a new form which is specific to the given group.⁴³

Here Gramsci indicates extremely clearly that intellectual and moral reform does not consist in making a clean sweep of the existing world-

view and in replacing it with a completely new and already formulated one. Rather, it consists in a process of transformation (aimed at producing a new form) and of rearticulation of existing ideological elements. According to him, an ideological system consists in a particular type of articulation of ideological elements to which a certain 'relative weight' is attributed. The objective of ideological struggle is not to reject the system and all its elements but to rearticulate it, to break it down to its basic elements and then to sift through past conceptions to see which ones, with some changes of content, can serve to express the new situation.⁴⁴ Once this is done the chosen elements are finally rearticulated into another system.

It is obvious that viewed in this way moral and intellectual reform is incomprehensible within a reductionist problematic which postulates the existence of paradigmatic ideologies for each social class, and the necessary class-belonging of all ideological elements. If, in effect, one does accept the reductionist hypothesis, moral and intellectual reform can only amount to replacing one class ideology by another. In the case of the hegemony of the working class, therefore, the latter would have to extricate the social groups which it required as allies from the influence of bourgeois ideology and impose its own ideology upon them. In order to do this it would have to combat bourgeois ideology by totally rejecting all its elements since these would be intrinsically and irremediably bourgeois, and since the presence of one of these elements within socialist discourse would prove that working class ideology had been contaminated by bourgeois ideology; in this event ideological struggle would always be reduced to the confrontation of two closed and previously determined systems. This, of course, is not Gramsci's conception, and the information so far available already makes it possible to assert that his conception of ideology *cannot be reductionist* since in that case the way in which he visualises moral and intellectual reform would be totally incomprehensible.

What, then, is the conception of ideology developed in Gramsci's theory of hegemony? In order to clarify this it is first necessary to determine what kind of answers Gramsci gives to the following questions:

- 1 What constitutes the unifying principle of an ideological system?
- 2 How can one determine the class character of an ideology or of an ideological element?

This brings us to one of the least developed aspects of Gramsci's thought

and we will have to be content with a few rather imprecise indications which will need to undergo the test of a symptomatic reading. To begin with, let us recall the elements of the problem which have already been analysed. We know that according to Gramsci hegemony (which is only possible for a fundamental class) consists in the latter exercising a political, intellectual and moral role of leadership within a hegemonic system which is cemented by a common world-view (organic ideology). We also know that intellectual and moral leadership exercised by the hegemonic class does not consist in the imposition of the class ideology upon the allied groups. Time and time again Gramsci stresses the fact that every single hegemonic relation is necessarily 'pedagogic and occurs amongst the different forces of which it is composed'.⁴⁵ He also insists that in a hegemonic system there must exist democracy between the ruling group and the ruled groups.⁴⁶ This is also valid at the ideological level, of course, and it implies that this common world-view unifying the hegemonic bloc is really the organic expression of the whole bloc (and here we have the explanation of the chief meaning of the term 'organic ideology'). This world-view will therefore include ideological elements from varying sources, but its unity will stem from its articulating principle which will always be provided by the hegemonic class. Gramsci calls this articulating principle a *hegemonic principle*. He never defines this term very precisely, but it seems that it involves a system of values the realisation of which depends on the central role played by the fundamental class at the level of the relations of production. Thus the intellectual and moral direction exercised by a fundamental class in a hegemonic system consists in providing the articulating principle of the common world-view, the value system to which the ideological elements coming from the other groups will be articulated in order to form a unified ideological system, that is to say an organic ideology. This will always be a complex ensemble whose contents can never be determined in advance since it depends on a whole series of historical and national factors and also on the relations of forces existing at a particular moment in the struggle for hegemony. It is, therefore, by their articulation to a hegemonic principle that the ideological elements acquire their class character which is not intrinsic to them. This explains the fact that they can be 'transformed' by their articulation to another hegemonic principle. Ideological struggle in fact consists of a process of *disarticulation-rearticulation* of given ideological elements in a struggle between two hegemonic principles to appropriate these elements; it does not consist of the confrontation of two already elaborated, closed world-

views. Ideological ensembles existing at a given moment are, therefore, the result of the relations of forces between the rival hegemonic principles and they undergo a perpetual process of transformation.⁴⁷

It is now possible to answer our two questions:

- 1 The unifying principle of an ideological system is constituted by the hegemonic principle which serves to articulate all the other ideological elements. It is always the expression of a fundamental class.
- 2 The class character of an ideology or of an ideological element stems from the hegemonic principle which serves as its articulating centre.

However, we are still a long way from having solved all the problems. There remains for example the problem of the nature of those ideological elements which do not have a necessary class character. It is not clear what they express, and Gramsci does not give us an answer. But, in spite of this, it is possible to find a few very significant definite pointers to a solution. In a passage where he reflects on what will determine the victory of one hegemonic principle over another, Gramsci declares that a hegemonic principle does not prevail by virtue of its intrinsic logical character but rather when it manages to become a 'popular religion'.⁴⁸ What are we supposed to understand by this? Elsewhere Gramsci insists that a class wishing to become hegemonic has to 'nationalise itself',⁴⁹ and further on he declares:⁵⁰

the particular form in which the hegemonic ethico-political element presents itself in the life of the state and the country is 'patriotism' and 'nationalism', which is 'popular religion', that is to say it is the link by means of which the unity of leaders and led is effected.

In order to understand what Gramsci means it is necessary to relate all these statements to his conception of the 'national-popular'. Although this conception is not fully formulated, it plays an important role in his thought. For Gramsci everything which is the expression of the 'people-nation' is 'national-popular'.⁵¹ A successful hegemony is one which manages to create a 'collective national-popular will', and for this to happen the dominant class must have been capable of articulating to its hegemonic principle all the national-popular ideological elements, since it is only if this happens that it (the class) appears as the representative of the general interest. This is why the ideological elements expressing the 'national-popular' are often at stake in the fierce struggle between classes fighting for hegemony. As regards all this Gramsci points out some

changes of meaning undergone by terms like 'nationalism' and 'patriotism' as they are appropriated by different fundamental classes and articulated to different hegemonic principles.⁵² He also stresses the role which those terms play as a link leading to the creation of the union between leaders and led and in providing a base for a popular religion.

It is now possible to understand Gramsci's statement in which he declares that a hegemonic principle asserts itself when it manages to become a popular religion. What he means is that what has to be chiefly at stake in a class's struggle for hegemony is the attempt to articulate to its discourse all national-popular ideological elements. This is how it can 'nationalise itself'.⁵³

The conception of ideology found in the practical state in Gramsci's problematic of hegemony consists therefore of a practice which transforms the class character of ideological elements by the latter's articulation to a hegemonic principle differing from the one to which they are at present articulated. This assumes that these elements do not in themselves express class interests, but that their class character is conferred upon them by the discourse to which they are articulated and by the type of subject thus created.

Hegemony and war of position

It is only now that the anti-reductionist problematic of ideology implied by Gramsci's hegemony has been made explicit that it is possible to really grasp the meaning and *full extent* of his concept of hegemony: a class is hegemonic when it has managed to articulate to its discourse the overwhelming majority of ideological elements characteristic of a given social formation, in particular the national-popular elements which allow it to become the class expressing the national interest. A class's hegemony is, therefore, a more complex phenomenon than simple political leadership: the latter in effect is the consequence of another aspect which is itself of prime importance. This is the creation of a unified coherent ideological discourse which will be the product of the articulation to its value system of the ideological elements existing within a determinate historical conjuncture of the society in question. These elements which have no necessary class-belonging rightly constitute for this reason the terrain of ideological struggle between the two classes confronting each other for hegemony. Therefore if a class becomes hegemonic it is not, as some interpretations of Gramsci would have it, because it has succeeded in imposing its class ideology upon society or in

establishing mechanisms legitimising its class power. This kind of interpretation completely alters the nature of Gramsci's thought because it reduces his conception of ideology to the traditional marxist conception of false consciousness which necessarily leads to presenting hegemony as a phenomenon of ideological inculcation. Now, it is precisely against this type of reductionism that Gramsci is rebelling when he proclaims that 'politics is not a "*marché de dupes*"'.⁵⁴ For him, ideology is not the mystified-mystifying justification of an already constituted class power, it is the 'terrain on which men acquire consciousness of themselves', and hegemony cannot be reduced to a process of ideological domination.

Once the real meaning of Gramsci's hegemony has been understood, all the pseudo-incoherences disappear from his thought. For example, the problem of knowing why Gramsci can use this conception both to designate the practices of the bourgeoisie and those of the working class becomes clear as does the reason for his envisaging the possibility of a class becoming hegemonic before the seizure of power. It is, in fact, the link which had been established between hegemony and ideological domination which made it impossible to grasp the internal coherence of Gramsci's thought and which made it appear full of discrepancies. Once, however, the problematic of ideology which is operating in the practical state in Gramsci's conception of hegemony, has been established, all the other conceptions fall quite naturally into place in a perfectly structured ensemble and the underlying meaning of his thought is revealed in all its coherence. I shall only take one example, but it is a crucially important one since it is the conception upon which Gramsci bases his entire strategy of transition to socialism in the West: I am referring to the *war of position*.

Gramsci's thought on the strategy of the working class in its struggle for socialism is organised around the conception of hegemony. This thought has its starting point in the enlarging of the phenomenon of hegemony which Gramsci began to consider applicable to the bourgeoisie as well, since he understood that state power was not limited to the power of a single class and that the bourgeoisie had managed to ensure itself a 'historical base', a group of allies led by it through its hegemonic apparatuses. In this way it had created a 'collective man' which functioned as an autonomous political subject. From here Gramsci reaches the conclusion that political struggle does not only take place between the two fundamental antagonistic classes, since the 'political subjects' are not social classes but 'collective wills' which are

comprised of an ensemble of social groups fused around a fundamental class. If, therefore, the struggle between the antagonistic classes constitutes, in the final instance, the determining level of all political struggle, the struggle of all the other groups within a social formation must nevertheless be articulated to it. These other groups will provide the 'historical base' of a dominant class and it is on this terrain that the struggle for hegemony – by means of which a fundamental class tries to win over the other social groups – takes place. The revolutionary process can, therefore, not be restricted to a movement organised on strict class lines which would tend to develop a pure proletarian consciousness detached from the rest of society. The road to hegemony in fact makes it imperative to take into account a double process: the self awareness of oneself as an autonomous group, and the creation of a basis of consensus.⁵⁵

A study of how these innovatory forces developed, from subaltern groups to hegemonic and dominant groups, must therefore seek out and identify the phases through which they acquired: i. autonomy *vis-à-vis* the enemies they had to defeat, and ii. support from the groups which actively or passively assisted them; for this entire process was historically necessary before they could unite in the form of the State. It is precisely by these two yardsticks that the level of historical and political consciousness which the innovatory forces progressively attained in the various phases can be measured – and not simply by the yardstick of their separation from the formerly dominant forces.

It is, therefore, vital for the working class not to isolate itself within a ghetto of proletarian purism. On the contrary, it must try to become a 'national class', representing the interests of the increasingly numerous social groups. In order to do this it must cause the disintegration of the historical bases of the bourgeoisie's hegemony by disarticulating the ideological bloc by means of which the bourgeoisie's intellectual direction is expressed. It is in fact only on this condition that the working class will be able to rearticulate a new ideological system which will serve as a cement for the hegemonic bloc within which it will play the role of a leading force. This process of disarticulation–rearticulation constitutes in fact the famous 'war of position' which Gramsci conceives as the revolutionary strategy best adapted to countries where the bourgeoisie has managed to firmly establish its hegemony due to the development of civil society. Unless one has grasped the real meaning of

Gramsci's concept of hegemony – which consists in the capacity of a fundamental class to articulate to its discourse the ideological elements characteristic of a given social formation – then it is impossible to understand the nature of the war of position. In effect the war of position is the process of ideological struggle by means of which the two fundamental classes try to appropriate the non-class ideological elements in order to integrate them within the ideological system which articulates itself around their respective hegemonic principles. This is, therefore, only a stage in the struggle, the one in which the new hegemonic bloc cements itself, but it is a decisive moment since Gramsci states, 'in politics, once the war of position has been won, it has been won definitively.'⁵⁶ It will in fact only be a question of time before the military relations of forces begin to lean towards the bloc of socialist forces as soon as all the popular forces rally to socialism and the bourgeoisie finds itself isolated. As a result, far from designating a reformist strategy as certain interpretations of Gramsci maintain,⁵⁷ the war of position represents the translation into political strategy of a non-reductionist conception of ideology and politics. This stresses the fundamental role of ideological struggle and the form of popular war which the struggle for socialism must assume: 'in politics the war of position is the conception of hegemony.'⁵⁸ This statement of Gramsci's can only be understood in the light of the anti-reductionist problematic of ideology which has been presented as the very condition of intelligibility of his conception of hegemony. Only when this has been grasped can one glimpse all the political consequences involved. These are crystallised into a conception of socialist revolution seen not as a strictly proletarian one but as a complex process of political and ideological transformations in which the working class plays the leading role. The war of position understood as the struggle for hegemony within all the anti-capitalist sectors also explains Gramsci's insistence on the 'national' character of the struggle.⁵⁹

the international situation should be considered in its national aspect. In reality, the internal relations of any nation are the result of a combination which is 'original' and (in a certain sense) unique; these relations must be understood and conceived in their originality and uniqueness if one wishes to dominate them and direct them. To be sure, the line of development is towards internationalism, but the point of departure is 'national' – and it is from this point of departure that one must begin.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that in Gramsci's conception of hegemony one finds in the practical state a radically *anti-economistic* problematic of ideology and that it constitutes the condition of intelligibility of the specificity of his conception of hegemony. However, I am not claiming that all the problems of the marxist theory of ideology are solved by Gramsci – even in the practical state. In any case the conceptual tools which he had to use have been completely superseded, and nowadays we are equipped to deal with the problem of ideology in a far more rigorous fashion thanks to the development of disciplines such as linguistics and psycho-analysis. Nevertheless, Gramsci's contribution to the marxist theory of ideology must be considered of crucial importance for several reasons:

- 1 Gramsci was the first to stress the material nature of ideology, its existence as a necessary level of all social formations, its inscription in practices and its materialisation into apparatuses.
- 2 He broke away radically from the conception of ideology as false consciousness, i.e. a distorted representation of reality because it is determined by the place occupied by the subject in the relations of production, and he anticipated the conception of ideology as a practice producing subjects.
- 3 Finally, he also queried the general principle of reductionism which attributes a necessary class-belonging to all ideological elements.

As regards the first two points, Gramsci's thought has been taken up and thoroughly developed by Louis Althusser – although the latter reached the same point of view in quite a different way – and so his ideas have spread through the althusserian school. As regards his criticism of reductionism, however, it is unfortunate that his contribution has not been fully recognised as it is in this area that the theoretical potentialities of his thought urgently need developing. This is particularly so since the marxist theory of ideology has not yet managed to free itself entirely of the reductionist problematic and hence remains trapped by insidious forms of economism.

The topicality and importance which Gramsci's work has for marxist researchers working in the field of ideology lies in the fact that Gramsci's conception points the way to a possible solution to the most serious problem of marxist theory of ideology. The problem consists in superseding economism while at the same time adhering to the

problematic of historical materialism. In fact once the elementary phase of ideology seen as an epiphenomenon has been superseded, marxist theory still has to face the following difficulty: how to show to what extent ideological practice actually has real autonomy and efficacy while still upholding the principle of the determination in the last instance by the economic. This is a problem which Althusser himself has not yet been capable of solving satisfactorily, and it is why he has recently been accused of economism.⁶⁰ However, if his critics propose a solution which effectively resolves the problem of economism, this is done at the expense of abandoning historical materialism. In effect, by identifying economism with the thesis of the determination in the last instance by the economy, and by proposing the total autonomy of ideological practices as a solution, they call into question the basic tenets of historical materialism.

In Gramsci's work the outline of another kind of solution to the problem can be found and it is worth analysing it before deciding whether the solution to the problem of economism is really impossible within the theoretical framework of marxism. As presented here the problematic of hegemony contains in the practical state the broad outlines of a possible articulation between the relative autonomy of ideology and the determination in the last instance by the economy. In fact the conception of ideology brought out by Gramsci's conception of hegemony attributes real autonomy to it, since the ideological elements which ideological practice aims at transforming do not possess a necessary class-belonging and hence do not constitute the ideological representation of interests existing at the economic level. On the other hand, however, this autonomy is not incompatible with the determination in the last instance by economy, since the hegemonic principles serving to articulate these elements are always provided by the fundamental classes. Here, of course, I am only designating the area where a solution might be found, and if work is to be done in this direction there are a large number of problems still to be solved before it will be possible to formulate a theoretical solution. It does nevertheless seem to be an area which ought to prove fruitful.

Finally, I wish to indicate another area in which Gramsci's conception of hegemony opens out extremely fruitful perspectives. This is to be found in his *conception of politics*. Gramsci was extremely aware of this since after all he declared that economism had to be combated 'not only in the theory of historiography but also – and more especially – in political practice and theory', and that 'in this area the struggle can and

must be conducted by developing the concept of hegemony.⁶¹ The ways in which economism manifests itself in the field of politics are extremely varied and range from the 'wait-and-see' attitude of the Second International to the 'purism' of the extreme left. These are two apparently opposing forms and yet they do both express the same lack of understanding of the true nature of politics and its role in a social formation. The fundamental error of the economic conception – its epiphenomenalist and reductionist conception of the superstructures – manifests itself in this domain by an *instrumental* conception of the state and of politics. In identifying the state with the repressive apparatus it reduces the field of politics, since its vital relation with the ideological struggle is severed. Gramsci's 'enlarged' notion of the state which is correlative to the role attributed to hegemony, recuperates this forgotten dimension of politics, and ideological struggle becomes a fundamental aspect of political struggle. Politics thereby ceases to be conceived as a separate specialist activity and becomes a dimension which is present in all fields of human activity. In effect, if no individual can become a subject except through his participation in a 'mass-man', there is not one aspect of human experience which escapes politics and this extends as far as 'common sense'.

This conception of politics should make it possible to devise a completely new approach to the problem of *power* which has generally not been satisfactorily treated by marxists. Actually, once the hegemonic dimension of politics which expresses itself in Gramsci's notion of the 'integral state' has been re-established, and once it has been accepted that the supremacy of a class is not solely exercised by means of its domination over adversaries, but also by means of its role of leadership over allied groups, then one can begin to understand that far from being localised in the repressive state apparatuses, power is exercised at all levels of society and that it is a 'strategy' – as Michael Foucault puts it. So this is yet another field of research opened up by Gramsci's non-reductionist conception of hegemony, and it is an extremely topical one.

It is in fact quite remarkable to see the extraordinary way in which some contemporary research – such as that of Foucault or Derrida which brings out a completely new conception of politics⁶² – converges with Gramsci's thought, and having recognised the anti-reductionist character of his thought I do not think it too hazardous to predict that the topicality of Gramsci's work and his influence will go on increasing in the future.

Notes

This chapter was translated into English by Denise Derôme.

- 1 Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, London, New Left Books, 1971, pp. 160–5.
- 2 For a thorough analysis of the epistemological foundations of the marxism of the Second International as well as of Bernstein's revisionism, see Leonardo Paggi's excellent introduction to Max Adler's book, *Il socialismo e gli intellettuali*, Bari, De Donato, 1974.
- 3 Karl Kautsky, *Das Erfurter Programm*, Stuttgart, Verlag von J. H. W. Dietz, 1892, p. 106. This is cited by Lucio Colletti in his introduction to Bernstein's book, *I presupposti del socialismo e i compiti della socialdemocrazia*, Bari, Laterza, 1974, p. xix.
- 4 Antonio Gramsci, 'Quelques Thèmes sur la Question Meridionale'. This is published in the appendix of Marie-Antonietta Macciocchi, *Pour Gramsci*, Paris, Seuil, 1874, p. 316. English translation in *Selections from Political Writings 1921–26*, ed. and trans. Q. Hoare, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1978, p. 443.
- 5 Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni dal Carcere*, vol. 1, ed. V. Gerratana, Turin, Einaudi, 1975 (all the references to the *Prison Notebooks* are to this edition). English translation in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1971, p. 57.
- 6 *Quaderni*, vol. 1, p. 51, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 79. It is important to stress the fact that for Gramsci hegemony only refers to the moment of leadership and does not include the moment of domination, since several interpretations which declare that domination is part of hegemony reach conclusions which completely alter the character of Gramsci's thought. See for example, Luciano Gruppi, *Il concetto di egemonia in Gramsci*, Rome, Editori Riuniti, 1972, and Massimo Salvadori, 'Gramsci e il PCI: due concezioni dell'egemonia', *Mondo Operaio*, vol. 2, November 1976, in this volume, pp. 237–58.
- 7 *Quaderni*, vol. 1, pp. 457–9, *Prison Notebooks*, pp. 180–3. This text was reworked by Gramsci two years later and is to be found in its definitive form in *Notebook 13*. See *Quaderni*, vol. 3, pp. 1583–6.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 These texts have not passed totally unnoticed. Several works on Gramsci (for example Leonardo Paggi's article 'Gramsci's General Theory of Marxism' in this volume pp. 113–67) do attribute some importance to them, but not as regards the conception of hegemony.
- 11 *Quaderni*, vol. 3, p. 1584, *Prison Notebooks*, pp. 180–5.
- 12 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 461.
- 13 *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 1584, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 182.
- 14 For an analysis of Gramsci's contribution to the marxist theory of the state, see Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci et l'État*, Paris, Fayard, 1975.
- 15 *Quaderni*, vol. 3, p. 2011, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 59.
- 16 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 461, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 161.

- 17 *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 2012, *Prison Notebooks*, pp. 60–1.
- 18 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 1380.
- 19 If political leadership is exclusively stressed this leads to the reduction of Gramsci's hegemony to the leninist conception of hegemony as an alliance of classes. In his intervention at the Cagliari Congress in 1968 ('Gramsci e la concezione della società civile', translated in this volume as 'Gramsci and the Conception of Civil Society', pp. 21–47), Norberto Bobbio was the first to insist on the specificity of Gramsci's conception and on the importance which the latter attributed to moral and intellectual direction. However, the interpretation which Bobbio gave of this does not succeed in making clear its articulation to the economy and leads to an excessively 'superstructural' interpretation of Gramsci's thought.
- 20 A typical example of this kind of interpretation consists in presenting hegemony as an alliance of classes in which one of the two imposes its class ideology on the other. This problem will be dealt with again in the third part.
- 21 These are mainly to be found in *Notebook 13*, 'Noterelle sulla politica del Machiavelli', *Quaderni*, vol. 3, pp. 1555–652, *Prison Notebooks*, pp. 123–202.
- 22 *Quaderni*, vol. 2, p. 871, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 407.
- 23 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 437, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 365.
- 24 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 869, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 377.
- 25 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 337, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 377.
- 26 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 1236.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 1376, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 324.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 1063, *Prison Notebooks*, pp. 323–6.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 868, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 376.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 1492.
- 31 Most authors who criticise Gramsci for this reason base themselves on the critique of historicism developed by Louis Althusser in *Lire le Capital*, where, wrongly in my view, he assimilates Gramsci's problematic to that of Lukács, cf. Louis Althusser, *Reading Capital*, London, New Left Books, 1970, especially the chapter 'Marxism is not a Historicism'.
- 32 *Quaderni*, vol. 2, p. 1380, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 328.
- 33 *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 1518, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 12.
- 34 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 1407, *Prison Notebooks*, pp. 60–1.
- 35 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 332.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 476, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 12.
- 37 Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, London, New Left Books, 1973.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 204.
- 40 This is why even those writers who intuited the radical newness of Gramsci's conception of hegemony did not manage to think it. In my view this is the case of C. Buci-Glucksmann, op. cit. As regards work on Gramsci in English, the dominating tendency has been to identify hegemony with ideological domination. For exceptions to this see S. Hall, B. Lumley and G. McLennan, 'Politics and Ideology: Gramsci', *Cultural Studies*, 10, 1977;