
Antonio Gramsci's Theory of the Civil Society

Andrea Mubi Brighenti

Abstract

This article focuses on one relatively under-researched notion in Gramsci's cultural theory, namely the notion of civil society. Civil society is a direct expression of hegemony, which Gramsci famously theorised as a pattern of established power relations among social groups in a given historical political situation. In Gramsci's view, hegemony is not simply a matter of domination because it also requires "direction", that is, headship or consensual leadership. With Gramsci, hegemony stretches beyond the pure "economic-corporative" level, being supplemented by a veritable "ethical-political" layer. In this context, the civil society features simultaneously an object of conquest, a battlefield among different social and political groups, and the outcome of a given configuration of forces in a specific historic context. Civil society is also intimately linked to the production, circulation and consumption of discourses and myths; its constitution, in other words, is ideological. Gramsci took ideology seriously arguing that, to become operative, critical ideas must make their way into in people's everyday existence. As a consequence, common sense – the domain of ideas and discourses as they exist in the everyday – emerges as the real battlefield for any political project.

Keywords

Civil Society • Hegemony • Corporatism • Ideology • Culture • Intellectuals • Common Sense • Liberalism • Neoliberalism • Voluntarism VS Determinism

A.M. Brighenti (✉)

Dipartimento di Sociologia e Ricerca Sociale, Università di Trento, Trento, Italien

E-Mail: Andrea.Brighenti@unitn.it

Inhalt

1	Introduction	2
2	Liberalism and the Civil Society	4
3	Hegemony for Self-governing Individuals	5
4	Conclusion	6
	References	7

1 Introduction

Carrying out a thorough critique of positivism and economic determinism, stressing that history cannot be explained by either general laws of development or natural mechanisms alone, Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) definitely broke with nineteenth century positivistic evolutionism, endorsing a voluntarist, activist theory of social and political action. In his Socialist and then (since 1921) Communist political commitment, Gramsci argued against all sort of fatalistic doctrines; yet at the same time, he increasingly realised that any successful political programme had to face the complexities inherent in the creation of a shared will, such as the one embodied in the “consciousness” of the proletarian class. In his formative years in Turin (1911–1915), Gramsci’s liberal teachers had taught him that “the modern man can and must live without any revealed or positive or mythological religion” (Gramsci 1965: letter of Aug. 17, 1931; see also Gramsci 1980[1913-17] and 1992[1908-22]). But this programme of the Enlightenment, Gramsci believed, sidestepped the role of ideology in an analogous way as traditional Marxism also did (Gramsci 1984 [1918-19]). In reaction, he placed at the core of his political and philosophical research programme an in-depth reflection on culture and discursive formations. Also, his years as a journalist made him particularly sensitive to both the mundane and concrete experiences of oppression and the invisible political implications of works of fiction such as theatre and literature. Since its international re-discovery during the 1970s, in particular in the milieu of British Cultural Studies and the New Left in Britain and the U.S. (where Gramsci was liberated from the trademark post-World War II Togliatti’s Italian Communist Party has stamped upon him), Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony has entered the canon of the sociological study of culture. The notion of civil society – including not simply an asset of power but a large-scale production in the social imagination, as attested by type of cultural productions Gramsci contemptuously referred to as “national-popular” – is the cradle wherein hegemony can be theorised and researched upon. As such, civil society deserves the attention of cultural sociologists, both theoretically and in empirical research.

In a critical afterthought on his own experience at the journal *l’Ordine nuovo*, which he co-founded in May 1919, Gramsci wrote that his associate and former socialist Angelo Tasca wanted to make a *cultural* newspaper. However, Gramsci (1987 [1919–20]) bitterly remarks, “by *culture* [Tasca] meant *remembering*, not *thinking*, he meant *remembering* old relics from the past, all the clutter [paccottiglia] of proletarian thinking (. . .) the first issues of *l’Ordine nuovo* contained just reviews

of abstract culture, abstract information, with the tendency to publish horrible romances and good-willed engravings.” The idea of culture held by Gramsci clearly emerges here *a contrario*: in fact, culture concerns concrete action and active thinking in the present. In other words, it concerns *praxis*. For Gramsci, a Marxism rescued from positivism, capable of learning from liberal idealist thinking while simultaneously overcoming it, is a philosophy of praxis which postulates the unity of theory and practice. Economic struggle, Gramsci (1961 [1923–26]) argued, cannot be dissociated from political struggle, which in turn cannot be dissociated from ideological struggle. While, writing these lines, Gramsci had probably in mind the conflicts and uprisings of the “red year” of 1920–1921 in Italy, punctuated by workers’ strikes, pickets and repression (Gramsci 1966[1921–22]), his claim also bears a larger significance. Before they become operative, in this view, critical ideas must make their way into in people’s everyday existence. As a consequence, common sense emerges as the real battlefield for any political project (Gramsci 1982 [1917–18]). The notion of civil society is perhaps the locus in Gramsci’s oeuvre where culture and power appear most intimately interwoven. Overcoming the poor analysis of ideology in terms of “false consciousness” (an expression which, truly, Marx himself never used and which only belongs in the Marxist *vulgata*), Gramsci takes seriously in consideration the fact that humans *think*: all humans, he claims, are intellectuals, although not all of them are professional intellectuals (Gramsci 1975: 1375; 1516). Ideology thus occupies a position in between high philosophy and everyday practice. Ideologies are “valid” in the measure in which they support mass organisation, rather than being sheer individual arbitrary speculations (*ibid.*, 868–869).

One important caveat in reconstructing this notion concerns the nature of Gramsci’s *Quaderni dal carcere*, the Prison Notebooks. This is a difficult and fragmentary work upon which Gramsci worked in the years from 1929 to 1935. One should not overlook the context in which it was laid out. The Fascist Authorities’ outspoken aim was to “stop this brain from functioning for twenty years” (the infamous words were pronounced by the Public Prosecutor Michele Isgro); Gramsci (1965: letter of Nov. 19, 1928) himself depicted the Fascist prison as “a monstrous machines that crushes and progressively planes off” the prisoner’s psyche, in order to “make life impossible”. Under such circumstances, Gramsci’s prison notebooks are an almost miraculous work of resistance: “My volition – he wrote to his sister-in-law – has by now acquired the highest degree of concreteness and validity” (1965: Aug. 3, 1931). Despite some shortcomings in his contingent political evaluations (e.g., he had gravely underestimated Mussolini), Gramsci’s pivotal analysis of deeper transformations in the structure of power remains to date extremely novel and insightful. Writing in harsh prison conditions and with limited access to contemporary literature, Gramsci understood precisely the underlying nexuses and trends of what would later be known as *neoliberalism*, a unique nexus of economy, politics and ideology. Historically intriguing is also the fact that Gramsci’s inquiries preceded by about a decade the birth of German neoliberal theory, launched by a group of scholarly economists who were discreet dissidents under the Nazi regime, later to be analysed by Michel Foucault in his 1978–1979 course *Naissance de la biopolitique* (Foucault 2004).

2 Liberalism and the Civil Society

Gramsci understood the *civil society* as an expression of what he called *hegemony*, that is, a pattern of established power relations among social groups in a given historical political situation – a “historic bloc”. Hegemony is not simply a matter of domination; it also requires “direction” or, if one wishes, headship, consensual leadership. Gramsci explains that hegemony stretches beyond the pure “economic-corporative” level, being supplemented by a veritable “ethical-political” layer (Gramsci 1975: 703). Under many circumstances, the leading or directing group can be required to at least partly sacrifice its own direct economic interests to preserve its overall hegemony (*ibid.* 1591). Just as Foucault would do 45 years later, Gramsci closely associated the topic of civil society with liberalism and its problems. Indeed, Gramsci saw the bourgeoisie as a morally expansionist class aiming at assimilating both culturally and economically the whole society. The bourgeoisie, in other words, promotes and spreads an attitude of “will to conformism” which is essential to build an ethical or, if one wishes, hegemonic State. In the measure in which the latter is capable of transcending the stage of domination, repression can be waived and left behind. During this transitional process, the State can act as a “night guardian”, that is, metaphorically speaking, an institution that only controls the backstage of large scale social processes. Conversely, the occurrence of repressive moments when the State manifests itself as force only signals a weakening in the civil-socializing process and lack of effective hegemony (for her part, Arendt (1970) would later speak of *weakening of the authority*).

Illiberal governments, Gramsci reasoned, attempt to enact a control of the political society – that is, of the State apparatus – over the civil society. But this can only be an extrinsic and external control, like it happens for instance with the political control and censorship over the media (“state journalism”). Such attempts, in the long run, are doomed to fail. By contrast, the real hegemonic success takes place where civil society has the opportunity to flourish and strengthen itself. When civil society becomes fully “organic”, the very distinction between the political and the civil is no longer necessary and they can be overcome by a new formation, the “regulated society” (Gramsci 1975: 734). It is in this case, that, under perfectly hegemonic conditions, civil society can be said to have absorbed simultaneously the State and the law (*ibid.* 764). Totalitarianism operates to the same aim, but moving from the opposite direction: in this case, it is the political party that makes an attempt to occupy the whole civil society, presenting itself as a compact total unit (*ibid.* 800).

In practice, civil society is simultaneously an object of conquest, a battlefield among different social and political groups, and the outcome of a given configuration of opposing forces in a given historic bloc. It is not an inert entity, rather, it possesses an agency of its own. Indeed, in the nations Gramsci calls “advanced” (arguably, referring to France, Germany and England) the civil society has developed into a complex and robust entity capable of resisting the pressures of the immediate economic element (*ibid.* 860). In these cases, the civil society has, on various occasions, proved to be even stronger than State structure itself (*ibid.* 866). Gramsci uses the following famous image: in advanced nations, the State is only an

advanced entrenchment, beyond which there lays a complex system of fortresses that lies *en profondeur*, stretching deep into the territory (*ibid.* 866, 1615). One can nourish the illusion of conquering the State by a rapid war of movement which overpowers the first trench, but it is actually beyond that line that the real battle begins, in the wearing, static war of position in which every gain or loss can prove fatal.

Gramsci's analysis of the Russian revolution – which he quickly laid out before his Prison term – is quite telling in this respect. Why did the Russian Revolution succeed whereas other European revolutionary movements failed? In the East, Gramsci (1967–73 [1916–26]:§ I) claimed, revolution was easier because a civil society had not yet developed. Thus, power could be seized by merely storming the Palace, that is, through a war of movement or war of manoeuvre. On the contrary, “in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed.” This means that the civil society produces not simply a State, but a deeply legitimised, hegemonic State. In terms of a revolutionary politics, this means that any war of manoeuvre must be carefully prepared by a slower, long-term war of position. Such is the work of hegemony.

3 Hegemony for Self-governing Individuals

For Gramsci (1975: 751), the liberal ideology is integrally premised upon the principle of the division of powers in conjunction with the fiction of the *homo oeconomicus*. In “Noterelle di economia”, Gramsci remarks that the *homo oeconomicus* is but an abstraction of the economic agents who are operating in any given social and historical context. From this point of view, every society has its own *homo oeconomicus* (*ibid.* 1253). But once, as liberalism does, the *homo oeconomicus* is taken as a normative model, this can only mean that a new balance between economic structure, civil society and the State is being put in place. Hence, Gramsci advances an interpretation of the notion of “individual initiative” (also to be understood as private entrepreneurialism) which attempts to distinguish it from a mere manifestation of free-will voluntarism at the service of private interest. In fact, such a notion, which is so important for economic liberalism, constitutes a systemic requirement of not only an economic type.

Within any given hegemonic context, Gramsci argues, each individual is, in a sense, “a functionary” (*ibid.* 1028). This does not mean that every individual is a public administration employee, rather that, by operating spontaneously, by developing her or his own individual initiative, she or he is also developing a productivity which ultimately identifies with the productivity of the State, ethically understood. Here is where the notion of civil society proves to be a crucial structure of power articulation where the requirements of freedom and hegemony meet: civil society is made of individuals who are capable of self-government, thus providing an organic complement to the government exercised by the political society (*ibid.* 1020).

In such a task of developing a fully working civil society, the State is of course not neutral. In contrast to the situation of the “advanced nations” and their civil society configured as a system of in-depth fortresses, weaker elites might opt for the creation of a myth of the state, a “statolatry” – here perhaps Gramsci is referring to the situation of Italy. Statolatry refers to the strategic use of the political society as a scaffold within which civil society can be let grow and put into shape. Contrary to authoritarian politics, which aims at having a political party occupy and suffocate the civil society, the aim of statolatry within a liberal framework is actually to nurture civil society through the political society. Of course, this also entails specific risks: the veritable Achilles’ heel of liberalism is actually the situation in which the administrative ruling bureaucracy, entrusted with so much power, turns into a corporative caste (*ibid.* 751) whose action, so to speak, hijacks the ethical mission of hegemony.

4 Conclusion

As hinted above, in Gramsci’s view, an essential ingredient of any hegemonic framework is common sense. On the one hand, common sense is charged with saving the normal appearances of the status quo, making sure that it appears as inevitable. Institutions such as the school, the church, the newspapers, the journals, the publishing industry etc. are primary social places where common sense reproduces; hence, the particular interest Gramsci devoted the “national-popular” cultural productions. On the other hand, however, common sense is the true ground where a new vision of society can appear. Gramsci (1975: 1375–95) juxtaposes philosophy, the individual elaboration of personal thinking, and common sense, the diffused and dispersed characters of knowledge that are present in a given social milieu. Since every philosophy tends to become socialised within a certain group – albeit an initially restricted one – one can say that it has a tendency to become transfused into common sense. Upon these premises, the task of a philosophy of praxis is to both challenge common sense and simultaneously renew it through the coherence and the strength of its philosophical conception and its new worldview. Gramsci saw this as an opportunity to overcome the great weakness of immanentist philosophies who had failed in creating any vital ideological bridges between small groups of intellectuals and the subaltern classes.

Looking at the theorisation of hegemony and the civil society, noticeable aspects of resonance between Gramsci and Foucault emerge. Foucault (2012) mentions hegemony only in passing, and carefully distinguishes his own usage from what he refers to as the “modern one”, preferring the “ancient meaning” of the term. By doing so, he basically employs hegemony as a synonym of, or an alias for, *governance*. However, there is perhaps a more correct translation of Gramsci’s notion into Foucault’s vocabulary, namely, *positive power*. Modern, positive power takes life in charge and sets for itself the task of nourishing it, essentially through either disciplinary or security devices, i.e., respectively, anatomopolitics and biopolitics. But, a problem also appears, which in Gramscian terms could be described as follows: the

ethical-political dimension of the State is not always capable of subsuming and taming the economical-corporative interests that work through it. In Foucault's terms, positive power as elaborated in the governmental sciences of police, statistics and demography can hardly cope with freedom with its radical requirements. The totalising unity of juridical sovereignty stands in opposition to the non-totalised multiplicity of economic actors and stakeholders. This is the intrinsic tension that cuts across the civil society as a simultaneously mature and yet inescapably centrifugal social formation, a centrifugal tendency which persists as a counterpoint to every attempt at "organic" synthesis – what Gramsci called a "unitary and homogeneous conception".

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