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Dizionario gramsciano / Gramsci dictionary: Hegemony

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Dizionario gramsciano / Gramsci dictionary: Hegemony

Abstract

Hegemony is by now the most widely used concept of all those found in the Prison Notebooks and developed there by Gramsci. The first use in the Notebooks occurs very early on, purely in the sense of a political hegemony exercised by the so-called “Moderates” in the Risorgimento. There is no unique meaning attached to “hegemony” but an oscillation between a narrow “leadership” as contrasted with “domination” and a broader one which includes both “leadership” and “domination”, leading the allied classes or groups and dominating the opposing ones: in Gramsci’s words, the “‘normal’ exercise of hegemony” is characterized by a “combination of force and consent”. Hegemony is exercised across a variety of fields – not solely political as in the first use of the term, but “political-intellectual”, “intellectual, moral and political”, “politico-cultural” and “cultural”. And the content of political hegemony “must be predominantly of an economic order”. The intellectuals, as defined and discussed by Gramsci in the Notebooks, occupy a particular role in the exercise of hegemony in society by the dominant group and in the domination over society embodied by the State. In a struggle for hegemony, a subaltern group must go beyond the economic-corporative phase, to advance to “political-intellectual hegemony in civil society and become dominant in political society”. Hegemony is intimately connected with democracy, such that in a hegemonic system “there is democracy between the leading groups and the groups that are led”.

[N.b. All footnotes in Cospito’s contribution are editorial additions; other editorial additions in the text are given in square brackets, whereas curly brackets are used to indicate the author’s textual abbreviations.]

Keywords

Hegemony, domination, consent, civil society, political society, State.

Gramsci Dictionary / Dizionario gramsciano: Hegemony

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The first occurrence of the lemma “hegemony” appears in Q1§44, *QdC* p. 41 [in English *PN* Vol. 1, p. 137],¹ where we meet the expression “ ‘political hegemony’ ”, introduced by Gramsci in inverted commas to indicate the particular connotation, as compared with the generic meaning of “pre-eminence”, “supremacy”, found when following up after the continuation of the same note, ending in the constitution of an extremely broad spectrum of meanings in various contexts ranging from the economic to literature, from religion to anthropology, from psychology to linguistics. We are moreover dealing with distinctions which, to use Gramscian terminology, are “methodological” and not “organic” (cf. Q13§18, *QdC* p. 1590 [*SPN*, p. 160]), as comes over clearly right up to the last occurrence of the term (Q29§3, *QdC* p. 2346):

Every time the question of language surfaces {...} it means that a series of other problems are coming to the fore: the formation and enlargement of the governing class, the need to establish more intimate and secure relationships between the governing groups and the national-popular masses, in other words to reorganize the cultural hegemony [*SCW*, pp. 183-4].

Cultural hegemony which in its turn must not be contraposed to *political* hegemony, as evidenced by the use of expressions such as “politico-cultural hegemony”, “political-intellectual” and “intellectual, moral and political” hegemonies, and similar ones, in addition to the thesis according to which “the philosophy of praxis conceives the reality of human relationships of knowledge as an element of political ‘hegemony’” (Q10II§6, *QdC* p. 1245 [*FSPN*, p. 306]).

¹ *PN* will be used to indicate Joseph Buttigieg’s English translation of Gerratana’s Critical Edition of 1975 (*QdC* in the text) for the Columbia University Press, New York (Vols. 1, 2 and 3 published in 1992, 1996 and 2007 respectively). *SPN* will be used to refer in the text to *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith, 1971; *SCW* for *Selections from Cultural Writings*, ed. D. Forgacs and G. Nowell-Smith, trans. W. Q. Boelhower, 1985; and *FSPN* for *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. D. Boothman, , 1995. The last three volumes are all published in London by Lawrence and Wishart.

As regards the meaning to be attached to the term “hegemony”, from the start (Q1§44, *QdC* p. 41) Gramsci oscillates between a more restricted sense of “leadership”, contraposed to “domination”, and a broader one that includes both (leadership plus domination). Indeed he writes that a

class is dominant in two ways, namely it is “leading” and “dominant”. It leads the allied classes, it dominates the opposing classes. Therefore, a class can (and must) “lead” even before assuming power; when it is in power it becomes dominant but it also continues to “lead” [*PN* Vol. 1, p. 136-7].

The oscillation continues in the following notes, thereby creating not a few difficulties of interpretation, which may be resolved at least in part by reference to the context. In Q1§48, *QdC* p. 59 [*PN* Vol. 1, pp. 155-6], for example a distinction is drawn between the “‘normal’ exercise of hegemony on the now classic terrain of the parliamentary regime [...] characterized by a combination of force and consent which balance each other” (hegemony as leadership plus domination), and situations in which “the hegemonic apparatus cracks and the exercise of hegemony becomes ever more difficult” (hegemony vs. domination). Such situations, defined there as a “crisis of the principle of authority” - “dissolution of the parliamentary regime” and later as an “organic crisis” or explicitly as a “crisis of hegemony” (Q13§23, *QdC* p. 1603 [*SPN*, p. 210]), may be assimilated to those in which the State is not fully developed; such was the case of the United States, in which (Q1§61, *QdC* p. 72 [*PN* Vol. 1, p. 169]) “hegemony is born in the factory and does not need so many political and ideological intermediaries”, since “there has not yet been (except sporadically, perhaps) any ‘superstructural’ blossoming; therefore, the fundamental question of hegemony has not yet been posed”. In Q6§10, *QdC* p. 692 [*PN* Vol. 3, p. 10] Gramsci was to say that “America has yet to surpass overcome the economic-corporative phase, which Europe traversed during the Middle Ages”; in Q8§185, *QdC* p. 1053, the judgment is extended to any new State form:

If it is true that no type of State can avoid passing through a phase of economic-corporative primitivism, one can deduce that the content of {...} political hegemony {...} must be predominantly of an economic order [*PN* Vol. 3, p. 342].

The terrain on which the “struggle for hegemony” takes place is that of civil society (Q4§46, *QdC* p. 473 [*PN* Vol. 2, p. 197]). The relation between hegemony and civil society had already been dealt with in some detail in Q4§38, pp. 457-60, devoted to the “*Relations between structure and superstructures*”. In this paragraph Gramsci distinguishes between three moments: the first is “closely linked to the structure”; the second “is the political ‘relation of forces’”; the third is the “relation of military forces”. The second moment passes through different phases, culminating in the

most patently “political” phase {...} in which previously germinated ideologies come into contact and confrontation with one another, until only one of them – or, at least, a single combination of them – tends to prevail, to dominate, to spread across the entire field, bringing about, in addition to economic and political unity, intellectual and moral unity, not on a corporate but on a universal level, of hegemony [*PN* Vol. 2, pp. 179-83].

At this point the group that up to then had been subaltern can leave behind “the economic-corporate phase in order to advance to the phase of political-intellectual hegemony in civil society and become dominant in political society”. This subject is developed especially in Notebook 6 (Q6§24, *QdC* p. 703 [*PN* Vol. 3, p. 20 and *FSPN*, p. 75] where Gramsci is at pains to indicate the “sense it {civil society} is often used in these notes (that is, in the sense of the political and cultural hegemony of a social group over the whole of society)”; in Q6§81, *QdC* p. 751 [*PN* Vol. 3, p. 64; *SPN* p. 245], even from the title we see the nexus that is formulated between *Hegemony (civil society) and the separation of powers*. In Q7§83, *QdC* p. 914 [*PN* Vol. 3, p. 213], speaking of “what is called ‘public opinion’” Gramsci notes that this “is tightly connected to political hegemony, in other words it is the point of contact between ‘civil society’ and ‘political society’, between consent and force”. As compared with the previous identification between hegemony and civil society, the apparent contradiction is resolved by taking into account the polysemy of the two concepts and that of State: in a series of notes, in fact, Gramsci intends “State = political society + civil society, that is, hegemony protected by the armor of coercion” (Q6§88, 763-4 [*PN* Vol. 3, pp. 75-6; *SPN*, p. 262-3]). In another group of notes devoted to the critique of Croce’s ethico-political history, read as an attempted, albeit partial and unilateral,

‘translation’ of the concept of hegemony, Gramsci on the other hand opposes the excessive contraposition between “the aspect of history that is related to ‘civil society’, to hegemony” and “the aspect of history related to state-governmental initiative” (Q7§9, *QdC* p. 858 [PN Vol. 3, p. 161]), and insists on hegemony as the element that forms the juncture between civil society and political society. Moreover, different from Croce, the refusal to contrapose the two aspects does not imply their crude identification, as proposed by Gentile, for whom Gramsci claims (Q6§10, *QdC* p. 691)

hegemony and dictatorship are indistinguishable, force is no different from consent; it is impossible to distinguish political society from civil society; only the State exists and of course the State-as-government” [PN Vol. 3, p. 10]).

However at the moment when Gentile’s position is unmasked as a mere hypostatization of the totalitarian regime imposed by the Fascist Party, Gramsci distinguishes between situations in which “the given party is bearer of a new culture and one has a progressive phase” from others in which “the party in question wants to prevent another force, bearer of a new culture, from becoming itself ‘totalitarian’ – this is an objectively regressive and reactionary phase” (Q6§136, *QdC* p. 800 [PN Vol. 3, p. 108]). The difference between fascist totalitarianism and communist totalitarianism consists therefore in the fact that while the former tends to reabsorb civil society within the State, reducing hegemony to force, in the latter,

it is possible to imagine the State-coercion element withering away gradually, as the increasingly conspicuous elements of regulated society (or ethical State or civil society) assert themselves. {...} In the theory of the State → regulated society (from a phase in which State equals Government to a phase in which State is identified with civil society), there must be a transition phase of the State as night watchman, that is of a coercive organization that will protect the development of those elements of regulated society that are continually on the rise and, precisely, because they are on the rise, will gradually reduce the State’s authoritarian and coercive interventions

up to “an era of organic freedom” (Q6§88, *QdC* p. 763-4 [PN Vol. 3, pp. 75-6; *SPN*, p. 263]). Starting from Q6§138, *QdC* p. 802 [PN Vol. 3, p. 109], Gramsci describes the long struggle to install this new model of social organization with the concept of the war of position, which requires “an unprecedented concentration of hegemony”. In Q8§52, *QdC* p. 973 [PN Vol. 3, p. 266], this strategy is contraposed

to Trotsky's strategy of the permanent revolution: the "1848 concept of the war of movement is precisely the concept of permanent revolution: in politics the war of position is the concept of hegemony".

As for the protagonists of this war, in the initial stage of Gramsci's prison reflections, his attention seems centred on the class. In Q1§44, *QdC* p. 40 we read that

the whole problem of the various political currents of the Risorgimento {...} is reducible to the following basic fact: that the Moderates represented a relatively homogeneous class, and therefore their leadership underwent relatively limited oscillations, whereas the Action Party did not found itself specifically upon any historical class and the oscillations which its leading organs underwent resolved themselves, in the last analysis, according to the interests of the Moderates [*PN* Vol. 1, p. 136].

This is a vision that, in presupposing a somewhat mechanical nexus between the structure and the superstructure, would reduce the struggle for hegemony to an epiphenomenon of the class struggle on the terrain of the relations of production. Afterwards, Gramsci would attenuate this rigidity, writing in Q6§200, *QdC* pp. 839-40 that in

the development of a national class, one must take into account not only the process of its formation within the economic sphere, but also its parallel growth in the ideological, juridical, religious, intellectual, philosophical, spheres etc. {...}. Still every movement that is the bearer of a 'thesis' leads to movements of 'antithesis' and {then} to partial and provisional 'syntheses' [*PN* Vol. 3, p. 143].

In the meantime Gramsci had developed a further agent of hegemonic influence, represented by the intellectual. Already tangible as from the note of Q1§44, *QdC* p. 41 [*PN* Vol. 1, p. 137], where the leaders of the moderate party were defined as "organic intellectuals" or "condensed" ones, a "vanguard" of their own class; as from Q4§49 (*QdC* pp. 474-84 [*PN* Vol. 2, p. 199-210]) the weight of the intellectuals assumes a notable increase equally with the extension of the concept itself, up to the point of including not only professional, industrial, scientific, ecclesiastical, clerical intellectuals and so on, concluding in the second draft (Q12§1, *QdC* p. 1516 [*SPN*, p. 9]) that "all men are intellectuals", even though "not all men have in society the function of intellectuals". As from the A text [a first draft text – tr. note] of Q4§49, *QdC* p. 476, Gramsci attributes to the intellectuals

a function in the ‘hegemony’ that is exercised through-out society by the dominant group and in the “domination” over society that is embodied by the State and this function is precisely “organizational” or “connective” [PN Vol. 2, p. 200].

The study of the role of the intellectuals as “functionaries” or, as he was to say in the C text, [the second draft text – tr. note] (Q12§1, *QdC* p. 1519 [SPN, p. 12]) “the dominant group’s ‘deputies’ exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government”, involves going into detail into another subject sketched out in Q1, viz. *hegemonic apparatuses* or *systems*: first of all this means the scholastic system in the broadest meaning of the term, from the moment when (Q10II§44, *QdC* p. 1331 [SPN, p. 350]) “every relationship of ‘hegemony’ is necessarily a pedagogical relationship”; thus, journalistic undertakings, the legal organizations – repressive and non-repressive – but also, as noted in Q8§179, *QdC* p. 1049 [PN Vol. 3, p. 338], “numerous other so-called private initiatives and activities” including “charitable institutions and legacies to charity” (Q14§56, *QdC* p. 1715 [FSPN, p. 154]). The progressive loss of importance of class, compared to intellectuals, in the exercise of hegemony, to be correlated to his frequent substitution of ‘group’ or ‘social grouping’ (e.g. in his rewritten version of Q1§44 (*QdC* pp. 40-54 [PN Vol. 1, pp. 136-54]) in Q19§24 (*QdC* esp. pp. 2010-11) [SPN, esp. pp. 57-9]), makes it possible to establish a less mechanical connection between the economic plane and the hegemonic one; it is indeed true, as one reads in Q4§49, *QdC* pp. 474-6, that

every social group, coming into existence on the primal basis of an essential function in the world of economic production creates together with itself, organically, a rank or several ranks of intellectuals;

however,

the relationship between the intellectuals and production is not as direct as in the case of the fundamental social groups, but mediated {...} by two types of social organization: (a) by civil society {...} {and} (b) by the State

as well as by the existence of “pre-existing categories of intellectuals” which represent “a historical continuity uninterrupted

even by the most complicated changes of social and political forms” [PN Vol. 2, pp. 199 and 200]².

One must, moreover, consider the progressive emergence, starting with Q5§127, *QdC* p. 662 [PN Vol. 2, p. 382}, of the role of the party understood as the “modern Prince”, from the moment that “in reality in certain States, the ‘head of State’ {...} is precisely the ‘political party’” which holds “*de facto* power”, and exercises the hegemonic and thus the equilibrating function between different interests in “civil society”. The party presents itself as the bearer of a new model of *substantial* democracy, different from the previous one, if not totally antithetic as compared with the *formal* parliamentary one, as is demonstrated in a series of late notes in which this latter is re-valued in contraposition to tacit or implicit “black parliamentarism”, represented by fascist corporativism but which may also be imputed to Stalin’s regime (“the self-criticism of self-criticism”, the “liquidation” of Trotsky and so on: Q14§74 and Q14§76), in which it is clear that “care must be taken to exclude the slightest appearance of support for ‘absolutist’ tendencies” [SPN, pp. 255-7].³ This allows Gramsci to create a nexus (Q8§191, *QdC* p. 1056) between

Hegemony and Democracy. Among the many meanings of democracy, the most realistic and concrete one, in my view, is that which can be brought into relief through the connection between democracy and the concept of hegemony. In the hegemonic system, there is democracy between the leading groups and the groups that are led [PN Vol. 3, p. 345; see also SPN, footnote on p. 56].

This is the particular meaning attached by Gramsci to “democratic centralism”, which “consists in a critical research [...] to separate out the ‘international’ and ‘unitary’ element in national and localistic reality” (Q9§68, *QdC*, p. 1140).⁴ Gramsci returns to this nexus between the national and international elements in paragraphs leading up to Q14§68, *QdC* p. 1729 [SPN, pp. 240-41]: “To be sure, the line of development is towards internationalism, but the point of departure is ‘national’ {...}. It is in the concept of hegemony that those exigencies are knotted together”.

² Readers may wish to compare this with its well-known second draft in Q12§1 that begins the text of the SPN volume (pp. 5-7).

³ Here, in line with the manuscript of the *Quaderni*, the plural “tendencies” is written, rather than the singular of the SPN translation.

⁴ Cf. the second draft of this passage, included with rewrites of other previous paragraphs, now in Q13§36 (SPN, pp. 185-90: here pp. 189-90).

The centrality of the role of the party in the struggle for hegemony makes the relationship between the structural plane and the super-structural ones less mechanical; moreover, as from Q7§24, *QdC* p. 871, Gramsci has recourse precisely to the concept of hegemony to combat

the assumption (put forward as an essential postulate of historical materialism) that one can present and explain every political and ideological fluctuation as a direct expression of the structure [*PN* Vol. 3, p. 173].

From this stems the critique of any economistic interpretation of historical materialism, which becomes ever more stringent as Gramsci realizes how widespread this is and what sort of obstacle it represents on the way towards the attainment of ideological hegemony by the philosophy of praxis. Different, for example, from the claim in Q4§14, *QdC* p. 436, that “historical materialism is not subjected to hegemonies, it has itself started to exercise a hegemony over the old intellectual world” [*PN* Vol. 2, p. 156], in Q16§9, *QdC* p. 1860-61 – in an innovation as compared with the first draft text of Q4§3 – Gramsci here instead recognizes that this

is the conception of a subaltern social group, deprived of historical initiative, in continuous but disorganised expansion, unable to go beyond a certain qualitative level, which still remains below the level of the possession of the State and of the real exercise of hegemony over the whole of society [*SPN*, p. 396].

It is not, then, for Gramsci a question of going beyond the horizon of Marxism, so much as returning to the original sources: hence the attribution, beginning with Q4§38, p. 465 [*PN* Vol. 2, p. 187], of the paternity of the very concept of hegemony, which indeed represents “Ilyich’s greatest contribution to Marxist philosophy, to historical materialism: an original and creative contribution”. And it is precisely through Lenin that Gramsci returns to Marx: in Q10II§41x, *QdC* p. 1315, again with an innovation as compared with the first draft text, he in fact writes that already in Marx there is “contained in a nutshell the ethico-political aspect of politics or theory of hegemony and consent, as well as the aspect of force and of the economy” [*FSPN*, p. 399].⁵

⁵ The last word in the original (*economia*) could also be interpreted “economics”, in the sense of subjection to “economic laws”, the choice which was made in *FSPN*.