Chapter Five

The ‘Extended’ Theory of the State

5.1. The concept of ‘civil society’

When we referred, in a previous chapter, to the first formulations of the Gramscian concept of hegemony (as a concretisation and dialectical overcoming of Lenin’s formulations), we observed that an essential element was still lacking for the determination of the specificity and novelty of Gramsci’s political theory: the concept of ‘civil society’ as the material bearer of the social figure of hegemony, as the sphere of mediation between the economic infrastructure and the state in the narrow sense. This concept took shape only in the Notebooks. Norberto Bobbio wrote one of the most complete philological analyses of this concept and noted that,

In order to rebuild Gramsci’s political thought, the key concept, the concept that must be taken as a starting-point, is the concept of civil society.¹

However, I believe Bobbio’s analysis – in spite of its philological merits – leads to false theoretical conclusions.² He correctly points to an essential difference in the concept of civil society as held by Gramsci and

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¹ Bobbio 1976, p. 21.
² The first harsh critic of Bobbio’s position was Jacques Texier, who presented his objections right after Bobbio’s exposition on the theme: see Texier 1975, pp. 152–7. See also Texier 1979, pp. 48–79. A recent, consistent critique of Bobbio’s reading and of Bruno Trentin’s similar positions (Trentin 1997) can be found in Liguori 2006, especially on pp. 30–6 and pp. 43–53. For a proper understanding of Gramsci’s concept of civil society, see also Buttigieg 2002.
Marx: whereas Marx treated civil society as the material base, the economic infrastructure, ‘for Gramsci civil society does not belong to the moment of structure, but rather to the moment of superstructure’. From this, however, Bobbio moves to a false conclusion: as civil society (the economic base) was, for Marx, the primary ontological factor in the explanation of History, Bobbio apparently believes the change effected by Gramsci led him to strip infrastructure of its ontologico-genetic, explanatory centrality, and ascribe it to an element from superstructure, namely civil society. ‘In Marx, this active and positive moment is a structural one; in Gramsci it is superstructural’. Thus, Gramsci as a social theorist is characterised as an idealist, placing the determinant element in the historical process on the political superstructure, and not on the economic base.

In fact, Bobbio’s mistake comes from two misunderstandings. First, there is a lack of consequentiality in his argument: if Gramsci’s concept of civil society is not the same as Marx’s, why, then, should we believe that it had the same function (that of ‘ultimate’ determinant) for both the author of the Notebooks and the German thinker? Second, in close relation with what has just been said, Bobbio examines the issue of civil society in Gramsci in relation to the mutually-conditioning link between infrastructure and superstructure, without realising that the concept actually refers to the issue of the state: the concept of ‘civil society’ is Gramsci’s preferred means of enriching with new determinations the Marxist theory of the state. And if, indeed, it is true, as we have seen, that this enrichment leads to a dialectical concretisation of the issue of how economic base determines superstructure (that is, the determination becomes more complex and mediated as civil society grows stronger), this does not in any way deny Gramsci’s acceptance of the basic principle of historical materialism: the production and reproduction of global social relations is the primary ontological factor in the explanation of history. To correctly identify this point is, I believe, essential for a fair estimation not only of Gramsci’s place in the evolution of Marxism, but also for an understanding of his concept of civil society. Gramsci neither denied nor reversed Marx’s essential discoveries, but ‘merely’ enriched, broadened and concretised them within the framework of a full acceptance of the method of historical materialism.

How, then, did Gramsci ‘broaden’ the ‘classic’ Marxist theory of the state with his concept of civil society? The great discovery by Marx and Engels in the field of political theory was the affirmation of the class-nature of every

5. As far as I know, the use of the phrase ‘extended theory of the State’ in reference to Gramsci’s reflections first appeared in Buci-Glucksman, 1975, pp. 87–138.