The “abnormal” usage of the term “civil society” in Gramsci’s discourse has been the subject of much discussion. The normal usage of the term, as Perry Anderson has rightly pointed out, has ever since the mid-eighteenth century been preeminently associated with the sphere of the economy (i.e., the “system of needs” as advanced by Hegel) or *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*. It was in this sense that the term was always employed by Marx, Engels, Weber, and virtually every founder of modern social theory. As we have seen, a principal aim of Weber’s comparative religion was to conceptualize *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* as an economic mode of legitimation so as to explain why this distinctive mode of legitimation was and remains a phenomenon peculiar to the heritage of Western civilization. In the work of Gramsci, by contrast, the concept of civil society evidently excluded economic relations and pertained directly to hegemony or moral-intellectual leadership. Thus Gramsci wrote in an oft-quoted passage from the *Prison Notebooks*:

What we can do, for the moment, is to fix two major superstructural “levels”: the one that can be called “civil society,” that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called “private,” and the other of “political society” or the State. These two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of “hegemony” which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of “direct domination” or command exercised through the State and “juridical” government.

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This important passage, as Norberto Bobbio notes in his seminal essay on Gramsci’s concept of civil society (published in 1968), clearly indicates that civil society in Gramsci “does not belong to the structural sphere, but to the superstructural sphere.” Civil society in this light compromises not “all material relationships” but “all ideological-cultural relationships”; not “the whole of commercial and industrial life” but “the whole of spiritual and intellectual life” or, in Gramsci’s own words, “the ethico-political sphere.” The debate on the issue of civil society in Marxism has since Marx and Engels revolved around the principal antithesis between the structural “base” and the superstructure. But Gramsci replaces this antithesis with a new one: the antithesis within the superstructure between civil society (defined as the ethico-political sphere or consent) and the state (the coercive power or domination by force). Of these two terms, the first is always the positive element (which for Gramsci concurs with what Arendt calls the “freedom” of the political realm), while the second is always the negative. “Civil society” and “political society” should therefore be conceived of as two major superstructural domains or two constitutive elements of the integral state. Hence civil society is the locus of consent or hegemony while political society is the terrain of coercion and domination.

The problem with such a “superstructural” understanding of “civil society” seems obvious. As Anderson has further argued, all ruling classes in history “have normally obtained the consent of the exploited classes to their own exploitation—feudal lords or slave-owning latifundists no less than industrial entrepreneurs.” The Gramscian identification of civil society with consent has conspicuously overlooked the peculiarity of the historical consent within modern capitalist social formations.

The novelty of this consent is that it takes the fundamental form of a belief by the masses that they exercise an ultimate self-determination within the existing social order. It is thus not the acceptance of the superiority of an acknowledged ruling class (feudal ideology), but credence in the democratic equality of all citizens in the government of the nation—in other words, disbelief in the existence of any ruling class. The consent of the exploited

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5 Bobbio, “Gramsci and the Concept of Civil Society,” p. 83.
6 Bobbio, “Gramsci and the Concept of Civil Society,” p. 87.
7 Bobbio, “Gramsci and the Concept of Civil Society,” p. 87.