Chapter 12

Hegemony and Its Interpreters

1 After ’56: Between Dictatorship and Democracy

Probably everybody today recognises that the concept of hegemony is the most important theoretical-political category of the *Notebooks*. For some thirty years now, all of the works that have concerned themselves with Gramsci’s thought, taken as a whole, have also addressed the concept of hegemony. It will obviously not be possible, here, to devote our attention to each and every one of them. I will limit myself to noting works specifically dedicated to hegemony and those works that have made some specific contribution to illuminating this category.

This theme has not always been in the forefront in the reception and study of Gramsci’s thought. Indeed, full awareness of its relevance, its novelty, and its specificity only emerged and began its rise as late as the 1970s. It should be noted, nonetheless, that already in 1958, beginning his contribution to the Rome ‘Gramsci studies’ conference, Giuseppe Tamburrano lamented the fact that the ‘conception of hegemony’ was ‘an aspect of Gramsci’s political thought that has not been sufficiently studied and delved into’.1 This was, without doubt, a truthful statement. The category of hegemony had been somewhat left in the background of the reconstruction of ‘the great national intellectual’ Gramsci’s thought that was long dominant in the postwar period, especially following the first publication of the *Letters* and the *Notebooks*. This had been a great hegemonic operation, which had evidently been unable to insist on this theme explicitly, or not needed to do so in order to be driven forward.

The debate on hegemony can be said to have begun – after 1956 – with the onset of the theoretical-strategic reflection on the new question of *what is to be done?*; it was thus that the debate on Gramsci returned, his work being seen as a terrain of reflection and examination of the political questions facing the workers’ movement (both Socialist and Communist) internationally. Indeed, in two talks on ‘Gramsci and Leninism’ at the 1958 Rome conference, Togliatti replied to the polemic, also concerning Gramsci, advanced by certain parts of the Socialist and Communist intelligentsia. His response both underlined how much Gramsci’s mature reflection owed to the encounter with Lenin, and

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1 Tamburrano 1973 p. 277.
indicated the extent to which in the Notebooks Gramsci had, in reality, begun to write a ‘new chapter’ of Leninism. As concerned hegemony, Togliatti stated that ‘there is a difference, but not one of substance’ between the terms ‘hegemony’ and ‘dictatorship’ – since even if it was true that ‘hegemony’ referred to civil society, and was thus a ‘broader concept’, it should not be forgotten that for Gramsci the difference between civil and political society ‘is purely methodological, and not organic. Every state is a dictatorship, and every dictatorship presupposes not only the power of one class, but a system of alliances and mediations’.

This was a philologically accurate, but politically weak response. Tamburranno himself had grasped this, insisting with some justification – at Rome and after – upon the specificity of the concept; even if he was pressuring the PCI secretary on the basis of rather instrumental positions, given his tendency to uphold the democratic character of Gramsci’s thought also to the end of denying the legitimacy of the Communist tradition. In his intervention appearing in the volume La città futura, the most important moment of the polemic against the PCI on the terrain of post-’56 readings of Gramsci, Tamburrano stressed that Gramsci had insisted on the fact ‘that it is not enough to conquer the instruments of political dominion; it is necessary [to obtain] the consent of the masses with an interest in socialism before the conquest of state power. This means ... democratically conquering and democratically maintaining proletarian power’. Resuming this polemic in his 1963 monograph on Gramsci, Tamburrano reminded Togliatti – not wrongly – that ‘if it is true that every state is a dictatorship in the Marxist sense, it is also true that this fundamental dictatorship can be exercised democratically or in an authoritarian manner’. Therefore, for Tamburrano the theory of hegemony meant ‘the examination and overcoming of the Leninist theory of the state’, and as such ‘the theory of hegemony is a democratic theory and a new line of thought in Gramsci and the communist doctrine’.

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4 Tamburrano 1959 p. 61.
5 Tamburrano 1977, p. 290.