Chapter Six
‘The Realisation of Hegemony’

The assumptions examined in the previous chapter concerned the conceptual determination of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. In this chapter, we will confront assumptions that are equally theoretical, but of a different order. The first two assumptions (regarding the relation of coercion and consent in Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, and the terrain of its efficacy) involved the reduction of Gramsci’s thought to well known motifs drawn from the most venerable traditions in the history of Western political philosophy; they thereby distanced Gramsci from the political debates of the international workers’ movement in the 1920s and 1930s to which his concepts were a direct response. The final two assumptions (regarding Gramscian hegemony’s geopolitical determination and class basis) take one step forward in order to go two steps backwards. That is, these assumptions, more historical than conceptual in nature, assimilate Gramsci to one or another of the conflicting tendencies of the early years of the Third International. As we will see, Gramsci’s thought is only properly comprehended when it is placed in this context, amid the cut and thrust of debates that sealed the fate of revolutionary Marxism in the twentieth century. However, the positions proposed by Gramsci cannot be reduced to
one or another of those currents that subsequently won (or were spectacularly defeated) in this decisive theoretico-political conjuncture. Rather, Gramsci proposes positions that are properly seen as a distinctive contribution to these debates, or as attempts to find a dialectical ‘third path’ beyond the antinomies into which the socialist imagination was then falling. The actuality of Gramsci’s thought today lies precisely in the extent to which his proposals remain solitary—including in our own time.

6.1. West versus East

The third assumption further extends the consent-civil society/coercion-state binary opposition, in order to characterise two qualitatively distinct geographical zones of West and East. According to this reading, Gramsci regarded the former as the zone of consensual hegemony in civil society; the latter, following a variation of the thesis of Oriental despotism, is then presented as fated to a coercive dictatorship (of Tsarist absolutism, of the proletariat) of the state. War of position is the appropriate strategy for overcoming the solidified institutional structures of the former, while the latter, at least at the time of the Russian Revolution, was still susceptible to the frontal assault of the ‘classical’ war of manoeuvre. Support for this position is drawn from one of the most famous aphorisms of the *Prison Notebooks*.

> In the East, the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relationship between State and civil society.¹

The ‘powerful system of fortresses and earthworks’ in the West therefore called for a qualitatively different revolutionary strategy.² In the *Prison Notebooks*, with the concept of hegemony, Gramsci aimed to become its theorist.

> ‘The theorist of revolution in the West’ has long constituted one of the most pervasive ‘images of Gramsci’. The political benefits of this reading are obvious: in different conjunctures in which the legacy of the Russian Revolution has

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¹ *Q 7, §16; SPN*, p. 238; written in November–December 1930.
² Ibid.