

The Contemporary Discourse on Civil Society: A Gramscian Critique

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In an incisive and memorable article excoriating George Bush and Tony Blair for the carnage and devastation they were wreaking in Iraq during the early days of their illegitimate and immoral war of aggression, the renowned Indian writer and activist Arundhati Roy introduced a note of hope and encouragement. There is a difference, she pointed out, between the governments of the Anglo-American coalition and the people they govern. The multitudes that took to the streets all across the world in vigorous opposition to the war represented, in Roy's words, "the most spectacular display of public morality ever seen." She heaped special praise on the antiwar movement in the United States. "Most courageous of all, are the hundreds of thousands of American people on the streets of America's great cities. . . . The fact is that the only institution in the world today that is more powerful than the American government is American civil society. American citizens have a huge responsibility riding on their shoulders. How can we not salute and support those who not only acknowledge but act upon that responsibility? They are our allies, our friends."¹

1. Arundhati Roy, "Mesopotamia. Babylon. The Tigris and Euphrates," *The Guardian*, April 2, 2003.

Roy was by no means alone in overestimating the magnitude and the longevity of U.S. domestic opposition to the Iraq War displayed in the months prior to the first “shock and awe” attack on Baghdad. Since few had expected the antiwar movement to draw into it such a broad cross section of the U.S. public, and since everyone was surprised when countless people who had never in their lives attended a political demonstration showed up with their children in tow at rallies in Washington, D.C., New York, and elsewhere, there was a tendency toward euphoria (or, at the very least, extravagant wishful thinking) among the most dedicated anti-Bush activists. Impressive though they were, the achievements of the antiwar movement in the United States paled in comparison to what took place elsewhere. On February 15, the antiwar demonstration in London drew well over a million people; the number of protestors in the United States on the same weekend was less than half of that. The United States has five times the population of the United Kingdom. Had five million people gathered in U.S. cities to oppose the war, the Bush administration might have been compelled to take notice, and the Democratic Party might have been shamed into living up to its political responsibilities as the formal opposition. Instead, Bush was able to brush aside all forms of domestic resistance with imperious disdain. Once the war was launched, the opinion polls showed that his actions enjoyed the support of well over two-thirds of the population. To be sure, once Iraqi resistance to foreign occupation made the situation quite messy and the costs of restoring some semblance of order soared, public discontent started rising again—and that, in turn, emboldened many hitherto cautious Democratic candidates for office to voice disapproval of the Bush administration’s foreign policy. Even so, would a repudiation of Bush in the presidential election vindicate Roy’s bold assertion that “the only institution in the world today that is more powerful than the American government is American civil society”?

It is difficult to understand why Roy has pinned her hopes on “American civil society” as an antidote to the Bush administration’s bellicose policies. Indeed, while the rest of her article is as lucid as it is trenchant, it is not at all clear what she means by “civil society.” The context suggests that she equates civil society with “the people” as opposed to “the government.” In this respect, she may be echoing certain theorists for whom civil society means, more or less, an ensemble of popular progressive oppositional movements not formally or necessarily affiliated with a specific political party. This is the meaning attached to the term *global civil society* by the researchers associated with the London School of Economics Centre for Civil Society, who, among other things, publish the *Global Civil Society* year-

book. In the opening chapter of the 2003 yearbook, the editors, Mary Kaldor, Helmut Anheier, and Marlies Glasius, identify the anti-Iraq War movement with global civil society; they refer to the massive protests by millions of people all across the world as “the mobilisation of global civil society.” In the same chapter, they also write about “the normative implications of the concept [of global civil society],” one of which is “finding and giving ‘voice’ to those affected by old, new, and emerging inequities in the broadest sense, and providing a political and social platform for such voices to be heard.”² Seen in this light, Roy’s remark is simply an expression of a laudable—albeit overly optimistic and, perhaps, misplaced—hope that popular dissent could prove strong enough to overwhelm the massive power of the U.S. government when it is misused.

The important issue is whether there is anything to be gained in political theory as well as political strategy by the effort of researchers and activists to so drastically restrict the meaning of the term *civil society*. It would appear, at first sight, that the addition of *global* to *civil society* is felicitous, for it takes into account the thick web of relations among societies that are today more intertwined than ever before and that are governed by regimes whose policies and actions have consequences that are increasingly transnational in character. By necessity (and also because of the easy, relatively inexpensive, and rapid means of communication available to them), social movements from virtually every corner of the earth now maintain close ties with one another, coordinate their activities, and, when appropriate, amalgamate their forces. Unfortunately, however, the use of the seemingly all-encompassing adjective *global* by the London School of Economics researchers camouflages the fact that their definition of *civil society* is extremely narrow—narrower than what is found in the work of any major political philosopher from Hobbes and Locke to Hegel and Gramsci. The oppressed, the marginalized, and the voiceless are indeed important elements of civil society, and they merit special attention precisely because they are generally overlooked, even though they are in the majority; but to regard them as tantamount to civil society can only result in a false understanding of the complex dynamics of power relations within, among, and across States. Even worse, the definition of *civil society* as a more or less

2. Mary Kaldor, Helmut Anheier, and Marlies Glasius, “Global Civil Society in an Era of Regressive Globalisation,” in *Global Civil Society 2003*, ed. Kaldor, Anheier, and Glasius (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3–4. The text of this volume is obtainable in PDF format from the following Web site: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/global/Yearbook/outline2003.htm>.

cohesive formation that stands in opposition to the State may be strategically disabling.

1

In spite of its centuries-long genealogy, the concept of civil society was not much discussed by Anglophone political theorists during the first eight decades of the twentieth century. It regained prominence in the West mostly because of its widespread use by Latin American and Eastern European dissident intellectuals and political activists in their struggles against their respective dictatorial regimes during the 1980s. As Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato observe in the preface to their huge volume entitled *Civil Society and Political Theory*, "The concept of civil society, in a variety of uses and definitions, has become quite fashionable today, thanks to struggles against communist and military dictatorships in many parts of the world."³ In this context, civil society came to be seen as the central feature of a new political strategy, that is, as a space separate from the State wherefrom one can mount oppositional movements that have none of the objectionable features of discredited, unfashionable, or obsolete Marxist/socialist parties. Thus, for example, Cohen and Arato comment favorably upon Antonio Gramsci's appreciation of the "dynamism of civil society as the terrain of social movements," while pouring scorn on Marx's supposed "hatred for modern civil society."⁴

Understandable though it might be in its immediate historical context, the conflating of civil society, global or otherwise, with popular oppositional movements results in an oversimplification of the immensely intricate, interdependent relations between society (or "the people") and government (or the State), and in a reductive understanding of the myriad connections and divergences among the various elements that constitute civil society. It gives rise to politically debilitating misdiagnoses of the operations of power

3. Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), vii.

4. Cohen and Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, 147 and 159. Cohen and Arato, it appears, confuse or conflate what Gramsci and Marx wrote on the topic. Marx was contemptuous of bourgeois society ("bürgerliche Gesellschaft"), which is a quite different phenomenon than what Gramsci refers to as civil society ("società civile"). For a thorough and meticulous clarification of this not uncommon confusion, see Jan Rehmann, "'Abolition' of Civil Society? Remarks on a Widespread Misunderstanding in the Interpretation of 'Civil Society,'" *Socialism and Democracy* 13, no. 2 (Fall–Winter 1989): 1–18.

and of the resilience of the very forces one presumably wants to combat. For what is to be gained from the belief that resisting and limiting the power of the State necessarily benefits the victims of “old, new, and emerging inequities”? If that were the case, the pronouncements of the Cato Institute would be vatic, and the Libertarians would merit the enthusiastic support of the populace. Likewise, is it not politically counterproductive to presume that the underprivileged strata of society (or, in fashionable academic parlance, “the subaltern”) generally tend to oppose the most blatantly oppressive and repressive actions of the State? How, then, would one explain the widespread support for the Patriot Act and all the Stars and Stripes flags fluttering from the pickup trucks and gas-guzzling vehicles cruising on U.S. highways? These are contradictions that the London School of Economics Centre for Civil Society, as well as many others who hold similar views, refrains from addressing—a shortcoming that is due, in large measure, to a misunderstanding of the operations of hegemony in a modern liberal democracy. What distinguishes hegemony from domination is precisely the symbiotic relationship between the government (which is frequently identified with the State in mainstream political theory) and civil society, a relationship, then, that cannot be analyzed in any meaningful way if one starts with a conception of civil society as something separate from and opposed to the State. No one explained this more clearly than Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*.

One of the theoretical sources of the London School of Economics group is, indeed, the work of Gramsci. A brief account of how they read Gramsci is provided in the 2001 yearbook: “Gramsci [unlike Marx and Hegel] divorces the notion of civil society from economic interactions. He views civil society as consisting of cultural institutions, notably the church . . . but also schools, associations, trade unions, and other cultural institutions. Gramsci is ambiguous about this civil society of his. On the one hand, it is through this cultural ‘superstructure’ that the bourgeois class imposes its hegemony, using it to keep the working class in its place. On the other hand, it is a kind of wedge between the state and the class-structured economy, which has the revolutionary potential of dislodging the bourgeoisie.”⁵ Immediately, one notices a crucial misinterpretation of Gramsci in the phrase, “the bourgeois class imposes its hegemony.” Hegemony, as theorized by Gramsci, is not imposed; quite the opposite, the governing class achieves hegemony (i.e.,

5. Helmut Anheier, Marlies Glasius, and Mary Kaldor, eds., *Global Civil Society 2001* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 13.

becomes hegemonic) through leadership and persuasion, so that instead of imposing itself on the subordinate or subaltern classes, it acquires their consensus. This leadership is not exercised solely or even primarily from the seat of government, but also and much more importantly within the sphere of civil society where consensus is generated. Consequently, Gramsci explains, civil society in the modern liberal State is the arena wherein the prevailing hegemony is constantly being reinforced, not just contested. The observation that “Gramsci is ambiguous about this civil society of his” reflects nothing other than a fundamental incomprehension of a core element of Gramsci’s theory of the State and civil society.

What the editors of the *Global Civil Society* yearbook find ambiguous—namely, that civil society is simultaneously the terrain of hegemony and of opposition to hegemony—is actually one of Gramsci’s most valuable insights. Unable to break free from the binary State/non-State opposition that resides at the heart of classical liberal theory, they are totally baffled by Gramsci and woefully misread him. They assert, “None of this is stated very clearly in Gramsci. It is stated confusingly, self-contradictorily, and certainly not as one of his central theses. Nevertheless, Gramsci’s idea of civil society as the non-state *and* the non-economic area of social interaction, which he himself seems to contradict a few pages later in the *Prison Notebooks* (see for instance Gramsci 1971: 263), has become the dominant one.”⁶ The supposedly contradictory passage they allude to is actually the locus classicus of Gramsci’s most succinct expression of his theory of the State: “one might say that State = political society + civil society, in other words hegemony protected by the armor of coercion.”⁷ Far from being an instance of Gramsci contradicting himself, this is one of many passages in the *Prison Notebooks* that invalidates the unfounded, though widespread, notion that Gramsci conceived of civil society as a sphere that lies outside and in opposition to the State. As Christine Buci-Glucksmann pointed out many years ago in *Gramsci and the State*, a work that remains to this day the most thorough and authoritative study of the subject, one of Gramsci’s most original contributions to political theory consists precisely in his expansion or enlargement of the concept of the State: the State, as defined by Gramsci,

6. Anheier, Glasius, and Kaldor, eds., *Global Civil Society 2001*, 13–14. The authors do not cite the specific passage or passages where Gramsci is supposed to have affirmed that “civil society is the non-state. . . .”

7. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 263. This passage is in Notebook 6, §88.

encompasses both civil society and governmental institutions.⁸ Gramsci's theory of hegemony hinges on his radical rejection of the sharp distinction drawn in mainstream liberal theory between the State or government, on the one hand, and civil society, on the other.

"The distinction between political society and civil society," Gramsci writes, "is merely methodological . . . in reality, civil society and State are one" (Q13, §18).⁹ Here, Gramsci uses the word *State* to mean "political society," or what, in the liberal tradition, is normally called "government"; but his meaning is clear, namely, that civil society, in reality, is not separable (except heuristically) from political society or government (which, in liberal theory, is also called the State), insofar as they together constitute the State in Gramsci's "integral" understanding of it. Throughout the *Notebooks*, Gramsci uses the word *State* sometimes in the liberal sense, and at other times in his innovative definition of it. This might give rise to some confusion, but only if Gramsci's prison writings are read selectively and individual notes are removed from their context. Three examples, out of many possible others, should suffice to clarify and reinforce this crucial point. The first is from a letter Gramsci wrote to his sister-in-law, Tatiana Schucht, on September 7, 1931, and which she, in turn, transcribed for his friend and benefactor, Piero Sraffa. In it, Gramsci explicitly links his concept of the State to two other major elements of his complex research, namely, the question of the intellectuals and the collapse of the medieval Communes in Italy (which also forms part of his extensive study of Machiavelli):

This study [on the intellectuals] also leads to certain definitions of the concept of the State that is usually taken to mean political society (or dictatorship, or coercive apparatus to make the popular masses conform to the type of production and economy of a given moment) and not as an equilibrium between political society and civil society (or the hegemony of a social group over the entire national society, exer-

8. See Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980), esp. chap. 3, "The Gramscian Expansion of the Concept of the State," 69–110.

9. For the quotations from the *Prison Notebooks*, I have provided the notebook (Q) and section (§) numbers that would enable the reader to locate them quickly in the Italian critical edition, *Quaderni del carcere*, 4 vols., ed. Valentino Gerratana (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), as well as in other existing editions in various languages. A concordance (by Marcus Green) of the Italian critical edition and Anglophone anthologies of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* is available on the International Gramsci Society Web site: <http://www.italnet.nd.edu/gramsci/>.

cised through so-called private organizations, such as the church, the trade unions, the schools, etc.). It is precisely within civil society that the intellectuals operate first and foremost. (Ben[edetto] Croce, for ex., is a sort of lay pope and he is a very effective instrument of hegemony even though he is occasionally at odds with this or that government, etc.) This way of looking at the intellectuals, in my view, sheds light on the reason, or one of the reasons, for the collapse of the medieval Communes, that is, of the government of an economic class that was unable to create its own category of intellectuals and thus exercise a hegemony and not just a dictatorship.¹⁰

The second example consists of a note entitled “Concept of the State,” composed sometime in the late summer of 1931:

Through a discussion of Daniel Halévy’s recent book *Décadence de la liberté*—I read a review of it in *Nouvelles Littéraires*—one can show that the mainstream conception of the State is one-sided and leads to gross errors. For Halévy the “State” is the representative apparatus; and he discovers that the most important events in French history from 1870 to the present were due not to initiatives of political organisms that sprung out of universal suffrage, but to initiatives of private organisms (capitalist corporations, General Staffs, etc.) or of high-ranking civil servants unknown to the general public, etc. But that means only one thing: State does not mean only the apparatus of government but also the “private” apparatus of hegemony or civil society. It is noteworthy that this critique of the non-interventionist State that trails behind events, etc., gives rise to the dictatorial ideological current of the right, with its reinforcement of the executive, etc. Still, one must read Halévy’s book to find out whether he too has embarked on this line of thought—which is not unlikely in principle, in light of his previous work (his leanings towards Sorel, Mauras, etc.). (Q6, §137)

This passage is particularly noteworthy because of its suggestion that an antiliberal and antidemocratic ideologue is likely to find in the liberal conception of the State a confirmation of the weakness or ineffectiveness of

10. My translation. For a complete text of the letter, see Antonio Gramsci, *Letters from Prison*, vol. 2, ed. Frank Rosengarten, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 65–68.

the parliamentary system of government and thus would have all the more reason to advocate rule by executive fiat.

The third example is from his note “War of Position and War of Maneuver or Frontal War”; written toward the end of 1930, it brings into relief one of the best-known motifs running through the *Prison Notebooks*. In this instance, Gramsci uses the term *State* in the traditional or mainstream sense of government, as he contrasts the weakness of the Czarist State (here referred to as the East), a premodern formation in which all power was concentrated in the ruler and his court, with the resilience of the modern liberal State (here labeled the West), whose strength resides in the sturdiness of civil society: “In the East the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the State tottered a sturdy structure of civil society was immediately revealed. The State was just a forward trench; behind it stood a succession of sturdy fortresses and emplacements—needless to say, the configuration varied from State to State, which is precisely why an accurate reconnaissance on a national scale was needed” (Q7, §16). As is evident from the rest of the note, Gramsci wanted to dispel any notion that, despite its success, Lenin’s frontal assault on the seat of power in Russia provides a useful model for revolutionary strategy in a liberal democracy. A direct confrontation—for example, a general strike, as was advocated by Rosa Luxemburg—would not threaten the rule of the leading groups in a liberal democracy as long as their legitimacy is rooted in civil society. Civil society, in other words, far from being a threat to political society in a liberal democracy, reinforces it—this is the fundamental meaning of hegemony. It does not follow, of course, that radical change is totally out of the question; what Gramsci makes clear, though, is that in a liberal democracy, one should refrain from facile rhetoric about direct attacks against the State and concentrate instead on the difficult and immensely complicated tasks that a “war of position” within civil society entails. One such important task, as he points out in the same note, consists in “a reconnaissance of the terrain and an identification of the trench and fortress represented by the components of civil society”; in other words, one must arrive at a thorough knowledge of the intricate, wide-ranging, and capillary operations of the prevailing hegemony before devising strategies for supplanting it.

The editors of the *Global Civil Society* yearbook misconstrue Gramsci’s core ideas on the State and civil society even while invoking him to bolster their incompatible basic thesis that civil society is “the non-state *and* the

non-economic area of social interaction.” They are blinded, it seems, by an unwavering determination to draw a line that clearly demarcates the absolute autonomy of civil society. For the same reason, they ascribe to Gramsci something else that one does not find in his theory—namely, a clear-cut separation between civil society and the economic sphere. This, again, is an erroneous reading of Gramsci that is repeated by others and appears to have gained rather wide currency. Thus, for example, in his contribution to the *Global Civil Society 2001* volume, John Keane refers to the “Gramscian bias which draws a thick line between (bad) business backed by government and (good) voluntary associations.” Keane also comments on what he regards as the “originally Gramscian distinction between civil society—the realm of non-profit, non-governmental organizations—and the market—the sphere of profit-making and profit-taking commodity production and exchange.”¹¹ Gramsci’s rejection of economism (i.e., the economic determinism inherent in simplistic or vulgar versions of the base-superstructure model) is taken for a separation tout court between the economic sphere and civil society.

In his analyses of Italian society, Gramsci repeatedly brings into relief the intricate connections among the cultural, political, and economic roles of given segments or strata of the population. In his notes on the intellectuals, for example, he examines the ways in which they function variously to protect and/or promote not just certain political interests but also some form or another of the economic order. Likewise, his writings on the Italian *mezzogiorno* show how the role that the big landowners played in both civil society and political society was inseparable from their parasitic mode of existence in an economy based primarily on extraction. In the numerous pages he devoted to Americanism and Fordism, he offers a multifaceted account of the inextricably intertwined political, cultural, social, and economic transformations that were being wrought in his time by the processes of rapid modernization first adumbrated in the United States. “The new methods of work,” he writes in a note on the rationalization of production in the United States, “are inseparable from a specific mode of living, thinking, and feeling life” (Q22, §11). In Gramsci’s view, radical economic change (such as, for example, the passage from a quasi-feudal system of land ownership to *laissez-faire*, entrepreneurial capitalism) is bound to be accompanied by a fundamental transformation of civil society—a transformation spurred by measures (sometimes coercive) taken by political society (see espe-

11. John Keane, “Global Civil Society?” in *Global Civil Society 2001*, 29 and 31.

cially Q10, II, §15). Directly contradicting the notion that one could draw a “thick line” between civil society (which he often refers to as the realm of the “ethico-political”) and the economic sphere, Gramsci writes, “Intellectual and moral reform cannot but be linked to a program of economic reform; indeed, the program of economic reform is precisely the concrete form in which every moral and intellectual reform presents itself” (Q13, §1). Gramsci’s enlarged concept of the modern State is, therefore, triadic; its three elements, political society, civil society, and the economic sphere, are inextricably intertwined—they are separable only for methodological or heuristic purposes.

2

“In politics,” Gramsci writes, “the error stems from an inaccurate understanding of the nature of the State (in the full sense: dictatorship + hegemony).” It is an error, he goes on to explain, that results in an “underestimation of one’s adversary and his fighting organization” (Q6, §155), which, in the end, amounts to a strategic failure. What makes the modern liberal democratic State robust and resilient, in Gramsci’s view, is not the power of coercion that it can exercise through political society (the legislature, the executive, the judiciary, the police, etc.) but, rather, the myriad ways in which the core elements of its self-definition and self-representation are internalized or, to some degree or another, freely endorsed by most of its citizens—including those who belong to social strata other than the ruling or privileged groups’. The truest measure of the strength and stability of the State, then, is “the dialectical unity between government power and civil society” (Q15, §33). For this reason, Gramsci devoted much of his energy in prison to the study of “the entire ensemble of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to acquire the active consent of those over whom it rules” (Q15, §10). The “practical and theoretical activities” Gramsci refers to here are nothing other than the processes of hegemony.

In order for the ruling groups to be “hegemonic”—that is, for them to control political society with the consent of the governed—they must allow for a space that is, or appears to be, free of coercion. It is within this space, the sphere of civil society, that ideas circulate and worldviews are formed “freely,” so that when these views and ideas reaffirm or endorse the basic principles underlying the existing social, economic, and political arrangements, they do so (or are seen as doing so) more or less spontaneously and

thus legitimize them. But, of course, the ruling groups and their allies are not passive observers of the goings-on in civil society. Through their presence and participation in various institutions, cultural activities, and many other forms of social interaction, the dominant classes “lead” the society in certain directions. To be sure, dissent—even vigorous, organized dissent—is possible and, within certain limits, protected; if it were not, there would be no credibility to the claim that the consent of the governed is freely given. It is this latter facet of civil society that is stressed by diverse theorists and activists who are committed to the oppositional politics of social movements. Gramsci was neither unaware nor uninterested in the possibilities available in the modern liberal State for the emergence and growth of cultural, social, and political formations that would challenge its hegemony from within. Nevertheless, many of the most compelling pages of the *Prison Notebooks* are devoted to detailed analyses of the manifold aspects of civil society that sustain and reinforce the hegemonic State.

Since the mid-1980s, the discourse on civil society has, for the most part, been much less interested in the operations of hegemony than in a theorization of civil society as an autonomous terrain that, on the one hand, defends itself against the incursions of the State (in the sense of government or political society) and of economic society, and, on the other hand, provides the necessary conditions for the emergence of democratizing social movements that impel political society and the economy in the direction of greater freedom and egalitarianism. Among the most systematic exponents of this current are Cohen and Arato, whose work is strongly influenced by Jürgen Habermas. Because Cohen and Arato’s theory of civil society is normative and, therefore, more concerned with what should be rather than what is, they are severely critical of “the strain in Gramsci’s thought involving the relentless ‘unmasking’ of the role of the institutions and political culture of bourgeois civil society in reproducing capitalist relations of production.” Rather than engaging in a polemical refutation of this reductive version of Gramsci’s work, it would be more fruitful to look at the version of civil society that Cohen and Arato seek to promote:

. . . the norms and organizational principles of modern civil society— from the idea of rights to the principles of autonomous association and free horizontal communication (publicity)—are not simply bourgeois or functional to the reproduction of capitalist or any other hegemony. Rather, they constitute the condition that makes possible the self-organization, influence, and voice of all groups, including the

working class. Accordingly the task of radical reform would be to expand such structures in a direction that reduces the chances of their being functionalized to the purposes of economic or political power.¹²

It is, of course, true that in the modern liberal State, all individuals and groups are free to form organizations, voice their opinions, and work actively to change or preserve virtually any aspect of the existing order. That does not mean, however, that all individuals and groups have an equal chance of being heard, much less of having an impact. In other words, civil society is not a level playing field. Similarly, it is true that in the modern liberal State, radical reformers are free—and, indeed, should be encouraged—to protect the institutions of civil society from “being functionalized to the purposes of economic or political power.” In order for their efforts not to be quixotic, however, they would need to be fully cognizant of, and lay bare for all to see, the overwhelming odds against them, that is to say, the vast array of resources that the economic and political powers that be and their allies have at their disposal (and use with great efficacy) to penetrate and influence every significant component of civil society. Making all of this explicit would not lessen the obligation to strive hard and incessantly resist the incursions of political and economic power, but it would obviate the error of thinking that civil society is or can ever be sealed off from political society and the economic sphere.

Of the many notes that Gramsci wrote on the interaction between political society and civil society, there is an especially pertinent one entitled “Public Opinion” that has been generally ignored. Since it has not been included in any of the Anglophone editions of Gramsci’s writings, it merits to be reproduced in its entirety:

What is called “public opinion” 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. When the State wants to embark on an action that is not popular, it starts to create in advance the public opinion that is required; in other words, it organizes and centralizes certain elements of civil society. History of “public opinion”: naturally, elements of public opinion have always existed, even in the Asiatic satrapies; but public opinion as we think of it today was born on the eve of the collapse of the absolutist State,

12. Cohen and Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, 155.

that is, during the period when the new bourgeois class was engaged in the struggle for political hegemony and the conquest of power.

Public opinion is the political content of the public's political will which can be dissentient; therefore, there is a struggle for the monopoly of the organs of public opinion—newspapers, political parties, parliament—so that only one force would mould public opinion and, hence, the political will of the nation, while reducing the dissenters to individual and disconnected specks of dust. (Q7, §83)

The monopolization of the organs of public opinion is impossible in the modern liberal State—but only formally or in principle. Freedom of the press, for example, is sacrosanct; so is the right to establish new political parties; and nobody can stop any elected representative from speaking her or his mind in Parliament or Congress. All this means, however, is that political society (the government, or the State in liberal vocabulary) cannot exercise its coercive power to silence dissenters or ensure conformity. Yet, it is easy to see how effectively noncoercive means can be employed to achieve a near monopoly of the organs of public opinion. I am not alluding to Silvio Berlusconi's ownership and/or control of Italy's six major television channels. Nor am I referring to Tony Blair's effort to bring the BBC to heel. In the United States, both in the aftermath of 9/11 and in the buildup to the Iraq War, the Bush administration did not arrest anyone who opposed its interpretation of events, nor did it shut down any newspaper, television network, or radio station that questioned its views and policies. Instead, it invoked patriotism, national security, and the obligation to support "our troops," and, then, left it to the most influential institutions of civil society to bring the overwhelming majority of the citizenry into line and to marginalize the dissenters through a campaign of vilification. Most local newspapers provided their readers with the Stars and Stripes to paste on their windows; on radio, right-wing talk-show hosts with an audience of millions spewed their venom denouncing anyone who dared question the wisdom of the administration; in churches, fundamentalist preachers informed their minions that love of God, love of country, and support for George Bush were all one and the same thing; television networks did everything they could to display their patriotic spirit and, even so, found themselves publicly accused, not by government officials but by the political commentators of Fox News Channel, of giving comfort to the enemy; and in academia, there were self-appointed watchdogs, such as the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, an organization cofounded by, among others, Lynne Cheney and Senator Joseph Lieberman—it com-

piled and disseminated a dossier of quotations from a broad spectrum of academics whom it considered anti-American.¹³ In addition to all this, one must also take into account another factor (not mentioned by Gramsci) that contributes to the struggle for the monopoly of the organs of public opinion, namely, the concentration of ownership of the mass media. How does one separate the economic sphere from civil society in this case?

There is yet another aspect of what Gramsci called the “dialectical unity” of political society and civil society that needs to be taken into account. For it is not sufficient to show that political society can mold public opinion through the institutions of civil society so as to legitimize and consolidate its rule with the consent of the governed. It is equally important to look at the ways in which institutions and groups within civil society help prepare the ground for and mold the policies of political societies. In one of his earlier notes, entitled “Political Class Leadership Before and After Assuming Government Power,” Gramsci writes, “There can and there must be a ‘political hegemony’ even before assuming government power, and in order to exercise political leadership or hegemony one must not count solely on the power and material force that is given by government” (Q1, §44). This is done, Gramsci goes on to explain, through the work of intellectuals who function as the “vanguard” of the group that aspires to acquire government power. There is a general tendency in the United States to think of intellectuals as either out of touch with political reality or as inveterate leftists. More recently, however, observers have come to appreciate the crucial role that intellectuals have played in preparing the ground for the policies that are now being enacted by the Bush administration. This work of preparation was carried out by groups or clusters of extremely well-educated, technically sophisticated individuals hosted and funded by various think tanks and research institutes. In September 2002, when it was becoming increasingly clear that the United States was determined to launch an attack on Iraq, the Bush administration published *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Upon reading the official document, with its alarming declaration of a doctrine of preemption, political analysts noticed that it was basically a reworking of a document that had been publicly accessible for years but was generally ignored. The urtext, *Rebuilding America's*

13. The dossier is entitled “Defending Civilization: How Our Universities Are Failing America and What Can Be Done About It,” issued by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), written by Jerry I. Martin and Anne D. Neal. The report was published by ACTA in November 2001 and can be found at ACTA's Web site: <http://www.goacta.org/>.

Defenses, was first published in September 2000 by the Project for the New American Century (PNAC). The PNAC was formed in 1997 by a number of well-known conservatives, among them, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, and Elliott Abrams. Though they are now among the most prominent and influential members of the Bush administration, seven years ago they were intellectuals working in civil society.

Conservatives discovered long ago the efficacy of working within civil society through self-organized institutions to fashion government policy prior to assuming the reins of power. In 1980, the Council for Inter-American Security, a think tank based in Washington, D.C., that had come into existence in 1976, formed a research group that came to be known as the Committee of Santa Fe and enjoined it to formulate a new U.S. strategy for dealing with Latin America. The resulting document, *A New Inter-American Policy for the Eighties*, was published only in mimeographed form. By the following year, the committee's document had become the blueprint for Ronald Reagan's Latin American policy, and subsequently all five members of the committee served the Reagan administration in some aspect or another of Latin American affairs. In 1989, the same think tank brought out *Santa Fe II: A Strategy for Latin America in the Nineties*, obviously with a view to preparing in advance a Latin American policy for George Bush Sr.'s administration. Much of it was rendered irrelevant by the geopolitical seismic shift occasioned by the unanticipated end of the cold war. Nevertheless, *Santa Fe II* had some interesting ripple effects. It contains a section entitled "The Marxist Cultural Offensive," which is devoted to exposing the menace presented by the influence of Gramsci among Latin American leftist intellectuals. According to the report, Gramsci's analysis of culture showed "that it was possible to control or shape the regime [sic] through the democratic process if Marxists were able to create the nation's dominant cultural values."¹⁴

This demonizing of Gramsci attracted—and continues to attract—the attention of conservative intellectuals and polemicists. That same year, Michael Novak wrote about the danger of "Gramscism" being embraced by incorrigibly leftist American intellectuals; it supposedly threatens to undercut American values and achieve on the cultural front what the failed theories of Marxism had so dismally failed to do in the economic sphere.¹⁵ This later inspired Rush Limbaugh to inform and warn his fellow Americans that

14. L. Frances Bouchey et al., *Santa Fe II: A Strategy for the Nineties* (Washington, D.C.: Council for Inter-American Security, 1989), 10–11.

15. Michael Novak, "The Gramscists Are Coming" *Forbes*, March 20, 1989, 54.

“Gramsci’s name and theories are well known and understood throughout intellectual leftist circles. Leftist think tanks worship at Gramsci’s altar. Gramsci succeeded in defining a strategy for waging cultural warfare—a tactic that has been adopted by the modern left, and which remains the last great hope for chronic America-bashers.”¹⁶ Augusto Pinochet probably read the *Santa Fe II* report, too, for in an interview he gave to a Russian newspaper in 1992, he spoke about Gramsci as a Marxist wolf in sheep’s clothing who had great seductive powers over intellectuals.¹⁷ More recently, in *The Death of the West*, Pat Buchanan has argued that “in his *Prison Notebooks* [Gramsci] left behind the blueprints for a successful Marxist revolution. Our own cultural revolution could have come straight from its pages. . . . Gramsci’s idea on how to make a revolution in a Western society has been proven correct . . . the Gramscian revolution rolls on, and to this day, it continues to make converts.”¹⁸ Hundreds upon hundreds of pages of similar alarms and excoriations can be culled from conservative periodicals and the Web sites of fringe right-wing groups. Buchanan’s primary source of information on Gramsci, however, is not some crackpot conspiracy theorist or fanatical cultural warrior, but John Fonte, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, whose essay “Why There Is a Culture War: Gramsci and Tocqueville in America” appeared in the Heritage Foundation’s journal, *Policy Review*. In it, he argues that “beneath the surface of American politics an intense ideological struggle is being waged between two competing worldviews. I will call these ‘Gramscian’ and ‘Tocquevillian’ after the intellectuals who authored the warring ideas. . . . The stakes in the battle between the intellectual heirs of these two men are no less than what kind of country the United States will be in decades to come.”¹⁹ In another article, “Gramsci’s Revenge: Reconstructing American Democracy,” Fonte asserts that “the academy is unwittingly fulfilling the role of the modern prince outlined by Antonio Gramsci.”²⁰

A common thread runs through the conservative representations of Gramsci, namely, the conviction—whether feigned or real does not matter

16. Rush Limbaugh, *See, I Told You So* (New York: Pocket Books, 1993), 87.

17. The interview was published in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* in September 1992 and reproduced in Italian translation in *L’Unità*, October 1, 1992.

18. Patrick J. Buchanan, *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002), 76, 78.

19. John Fonte, “Why There Is a Culture War: Gramsci and Tocqueville in America,” *Policy Review*, no. 104 (December 2000 and January 2001): 15–16.

20. John Fonte, “Gramsci’s Revenge: Reconstructing American Democracy,” *Academic Questions* 13, no 2 (Spring 2000): 50.

much—that the Italian communist bequeathed the Left an effective strategy for radically transforming American society from within by stealthily corrupting or taking over the major institutions of civil society. This would be risible were it not for the fact that it obscures a preoccupying paradox. There is a tendency among progressive and self-styled leftist intellectuals to think of civil society solely as some kind of benign space beyond the reach of government control wherein ideas are freely exchanged, promoted, and contested, and where nongovernmental organizations and social movements of all kinds are formed to promote justice, peace, human rights, environmental protection, and so forth, and to hold the government accountable for its actions. This view of civil society has been reinforced by right-wing intellectuals, politicians, and propagandists, who never tire of complaining that the Left has been engaged in a “long march through the institutions”²¹—a kind of Gramsci-inspired cultural warfare aimed at undermining traditional values, religious belief, and everything wholesome that “America” stands for. In reality, though, it has been the conservative movement that, since the time of Reagan’s first run for the presidency, has assiduously and methodically marched through the institutions. Research institutes such as the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute, which were set up with a blatantly right-wing agenda and which now play a major role in formulating political, social, and economic strategy for the Republican Party, have no progressive, much less leftist, equivalents. Philanthropies have sprung up for the exclusive purpose of funding conservative initiatives, such as the formation of student organizations (with their own campus newspapers) at some of the most prestigious and influential universities. Religious leaders of large Christian fundamentalist congregations have formed close strategic alliances with conservative politicians. Radio stations all across the country transmit extreme right-wing talk shows run by personalities who have acquired national prominence. The Fox TV network, established by Rupert Murdoch, is so overtly conservative that it has become, to all intents and purposes, the mouthpiece of the Republican Party. Right-wing periodicals abound, and they not only exercise a strong influence on an increasingly large readership, they also help shape government policy. (By reading the *Weekly Standard*, for example, one can know in advance what the Republican congressional leadership and the Bush administration are going to say and do next.) One could pile example upon example, but there is no need to, for it should be obvious that the strong, active, and well-organized presence

21. This phrase is not Gramsci’s, even though it is ubiquitously attributed to him.

of conservatives in many spheres of civil society has moved the country decidedly rightward. Furthermore, the strident populist rhetoric employed by many exponents of the Right—not just polemicists of the Rush Limbaugh ilk but congressional leaders such as Tom DeLay and Senators Rick Santorum and James Inhofe—has been making it increasingly difficult for thoughtful, critical voices to get a fair hearing.

Far from being radicalized by progressive social movements, U.S. civil society is suffused with conservative social, political, cultural, and economic values that have been promoted and disseminated relentlessly for well over two decades by a broad-based movement whose goal is to move beyond hegemony—that is, to acquire a “monopoly of the organs of public opinion . . . while reducing the dissenters to individual and disconnected specks of dust.” Civil society has turned out to be George Bush’s major source of strength; but it would be more accurate to say that the strength of the Bush administration is the outward manifestation of the extent of the conservative movement’s penetration—and impoverishment—of civil society.

Roy ends her article on an upbeat note:

Despite the pall of gloom that hangs over us today, I’d like to file a cautious plea for hope: in times of war, one wants one’s weakest enemy at the helm of his forces. And President George W. Bush is certainly that. Any other even averagely intelligent U.S. president would have probably done the very same things, but would have managed to smoke-up the glass and confuse the opposition. Perhaps even carry the UN with him. Bush’s tactless imprudence and his brazen belief that he can run the world with his riot squad has done the opposite. He has achieved what writers, activists and scholars have striven to achieve for decades. He has exposed the ducts. He has placed on full public view the working parts, the nuts and bolts of the apocalyptic apparatus of the American empire.

Now that the blueprint (*The Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire*) has been put into mass circulation, it could be disabled quicker than the pundits predicted.

One could only hope that she is right, but pessimism of the intelligence cautions otherwise. Bush is no Einstein, but he is surrounded by formidable intellectuals, and they have been elaborating their ideas and strategies for decades. Furthermore, the conservative movement has spread its roots deeply and wide in civil society. This does not mean that the conserva-

tive movement is invincible or irresistible. It does mean, however, that the coercive apparatus of political society is not its main source of power; civil society is. Of course, optimism of the will is also called for, but in order for the optimism of the will not to be sheer folly, it must be based on a thorough and sober assessment of the adversary's strengths. Those strengths are embedded, primarily, in civil society, which is where the ethos of the prevailing hegemony has been internalized as "common sense"—and that, as Gramsci knew too well, is the hardest thing to transform.²²

22. Some of the ideas elaborated in this essay were first sketched in a short article, "Per la patria e la bandiera," which was published in the Italian monthly *La Rivista del Manifesto*, no. 39 (May 2003): 24–27.

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