

GRAMSCI'S HISTORICAL BLOC: Structure, Hegemony and Dialectical Interactions¹

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Conceptions of the historical bloc in Notebooks 10 and 13.

Among the key notebooks of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* are numbers 10, to a great extent dating to mid- and late 1932 and 13, probably written between from Spring 1932 to some time towards the end of 1933. These two notebooks deal predominantly with Croce and Machiavelli respectively. What we try to do here is indicate the interplay between them regarding the historical bloc and its various elements.

In Notebook 13, for example, we find Gramsci writing that "human nature is the ensemble [*l'insieme*] of historically determined social relationships" (Q13§20, *SPN* p. 133).³ This immediately recalls a passage that he had translated three years earlier, in Notebook 7, of the sixth of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, one of the few texts of Marx available to him in prison: "human reality" [or "human essence" in an alternative gloss of his] "is the ensemble [*das Ensemble* or *l'insieme*] of social relations" (*QdC*, p. 2357). In an extract from his own writings in the same

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³ Reference in the text will be made to Valentino Gerratana's Critical Edition of the *Prison Notebooks* (*Quaderni del Carcere*, Einaudi, Torino, 1975: hereafter *QdC*); in the most complicated cases, a reference such as Q10I§41x means Notebook 10, second part, paragraph 41, sub-section ten. The English translations used are either *SPN* (*Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, Lawrence and Wishart, London 1971), *FSPN* (*Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Derek Boothman, Lawrence and Wishart, London, and Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 1995) or *PN* (*Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg, Columbia University Press, New York, Vol. I 1992, Vol. II 1996, and Vol. III 2007).

notebook, we again read: “‘human nature’ is the ‘complex of social relations’” (Q7§35, *SPN* p. 355, February-November 1931). In a relatively late note of great interest “Nature, against nature, artificial etc.” (Q16§12, after February 1934) he once more emphasizes that “the ‘nature’ of man is the ensemble of social relationships that determine a historically defined consciousness” and that this “‘nature’ of man” is dynamic in that it “is not something homogeneous for all men in all eras”. Social relations condensed in each one of us, in humanity, is then a recurring theme in at least these “middle period” monographic Notebooks.

A particular and original conception of what the historical bloc consists of comes in the tenth notebook. Here we again read in one passage that “man” is “the ensemble [*l'insieme*] of social relations” (Q10II§48II, *SPN* p. 359, December 1932), while in the same paragraph Gramsci goes on to a further definition in saying that: “humanity”, “human nature” or “human kind” (*il genere umano*) is a “historical bloc of purely individual and subjective elements and of mass and objective or material elements”, in other words a crystallization of the bloc of structure and superstructures. The “‘historical bloc’ presupposed by Sorel”⁴ and “events which set “social ‘totality’, the whole conceivable human kind”, the whole ‘spirit’ in motion” are then brought together in another sub-section of the same paragraph 48 (Q10II§41x, *FSPN* pp. 399-401) and it is here that we see one of Gramsci’s great innovations. Marx’s metaphor of the structure (or base) and superstructure of society (see the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, also partially translated by Gramsci in prison: *QdC* p. 2358) had been and often still does tend to be read as representing a static state of affairs. Gramsci in this same note observes however that in Marx “there is contained in a nutshell the ethico-political aspect of politics or theory of hegemony

⁴ Gramsci’s direct source in prison seems to have been a gloss contained in a book by Giovanni Malagodi: “one must not seek to analyze these ‘systems of images’ as one analyzes a scientific theory, breaking it down into its elements. One must ‘take them *en bloc*’ as historical forces” (*Le Ideologie politiche*, Laterza, Bari, 1928, p. 95).

and consent, as well as the aspect of force and of the economy”.⁵ It is the element of hegemony that brings more explicitly into play the dynamic element of the metaphor, although it should be added that Marx’s “economic structure of society, the real base” understood as “the ensemble of these relations of production”, is a much more dynamic entity, even in this “nutshell” formulation, than it has often been given credit for. With his usual insight, Raymond Williams emphasized the dynamic aspect of Marx’s formulation: “we have to say that when we talk of ‘the base’, we are talking of a process, and not a state”.⁶

There, then, is a striking similarity – in Notebooks 10 and 13, and also elsewhere – between the linguistic formulations used for human kind, the historical bloc and the totality, all referring to concepts whose difference is more apparent than real.

Gramsci is at pains to defend the unity of the bloc, while recognizing the special position of the economic base, as for example in Q10II§41xii (*FSPN*, p. 397): “the economy is to society what the anatomy is in the biological sciences”, explicitly referenced in this paragraph to Marx’s dictum in the 1859 *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy* that “the anatomy of [...] civil society [...] has to be sought in political economy”. On this, he notes that Croce, the object of a polemic here, had himself given priority to the structure as “the point of reference and of dialectical impetus for the superstructures, in other words the ‘distinct moments of the spirit’”, citing here Croce’s own concepts. Croce’s solution (though perhaps not the phrase) of a “dialectic of distincts” was for Gramsci “the merely verbal solution to a real methodological exigency” (Q10II§41x; *FSPN*, p. 400), which in his case was to demonstrate the interconnections between the elements composing the historical bloc. Gramsci then goes on to ask rhetorically whether

⁵ The *FSPN* translation has “economics” for *l’economia* but, on reflection, “the economy” is more convincing.

⁶ Raymond Williams, *Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory*, “New Left Review” I, 82, 1973, p. 34).

“in considering the non-verbalistic objections that Gentile’s school make of this theory of Croce’s, should one not go back to Hegel?”.⁷ The implicit argument here is that in Hegel there does exist a linkage between all the different spheres of human activity, i.e. there exists a totality that includes all other sub-totalities or, in Gramsci’s concept, there exists a historical bloc comprising the structure and the various levels and facets of the superstructures with, as he wrote earlier (Q8§182; *SPN* p. 366, December 1931) a “necessary reciprocity between structure and superstructure, a reciprocity which is nothing other than the real dialectical process”.

For a long time the equation of historical bloc and the totality was largely ignored. The great exception among the early studies of Gramsci is provided by the philosopher Cesare Luporini,⁸ who clearly and explicitly states that “base and superstructure constitute a totality (in the Hegelian meaning of the term)” before going on to add that the “base-superstructure totum (is) what Gramsci calls the ‘historical bloc’”, within which the reciprocity of action of one on the other has its origin in the base.

Why, then, instead of “historical bloc”, does Gramsci not simply take over the Hegelian-Marxian terminology of “totality” or “social form”, given especially that he does speak on a number of occasions of “social form” or “form of society” (see e.g. Q10II§§15, 25, 27 and 30, *FSPN* pp.167, 165, 168 and 171, all dating to summer 1932, or Q13§§27 and 35, last quarter of 1933 or early ’34) or, indeed, the straightforwardly Marxist one of “social formation”?

Here, two separate things must be borne in mind. The first is that Gramsci had a special regard for the terms used. Common language, as he notes (Q11§36,

⁷ Due to a proof-reading error, on p. 400 of *FSPN* “objections” appears as “objects”.

⁸ Cesare Luporini, “The historical awareness of Marxism”, originally published in *Società*, Vol. XI, nos. 3-4, 1955, now in *Dialettica e Materialismo*, Editori Riuniti, Roma, 1978 reprint, p.16.

FSPN p. 289), may not be sufficient for the description of certain phenomena, and so when he does use a new term, one may be reasonably certain that its meaning differs from previous usages of similar concepts. The second point is that the notion of totality itself was still not well-known in Marxist circles; in fact, as György Lukács wrote in his 1967 preface to the reprint of *History and Class Consciousness*, one of the book's "great achievements [was] to have reinstated the category of totality in the central position it had occupied throughout Marx's works and from which it had been ousted by the 'scientism' of the social democrats". It may be noted that Lukács was unaware "at the time that Lenin was moving in a similar direction".

Conceptually then, the historical bloc has its origins in Sorel, as Gramsci himself says, but, as this reconstruction shows, it is heavily influenced by the Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach and is, in fact, Gramsci's reinterpretation of the Marxian concept of the social totality, with emphasis placed on the bloc's dynamic character, to which we shall now turn our attention.

Hegemony as "cement" and as "driving force"

Apart from the question of reciprocal action between base and superstructure, another feature common both to the historical bloc and to social totality is their property of temporal dynamism (see above). Livio Sichirollo,⁹ however, links the mutual conditioning of structure and ideology within the historical bloc to notions of progress and to the process of becoming (citing for these latter notions a paragraph already cited – Q10II§48II, SPN p. 360 – headed by Gramsci "Progress and Becoming"). Nicola Badaloni,¹⁰ too, in his book on Gramsci's Marxism, draws

⁹ Livio Sichirollo, "Hegel, Gramsci and Marxism" in *Studi Gramsciani*, Editori Riuniti, Roma, 1958, p. 273.

¹⁰ Nicola Badaloni, *Il Marxismo di Gramsci*, Einaudi, Torino 1975, pp.144-5.

attention to this same paragraph, which defines “man” as a historical bloc at the same time as it stresses the dynamic element in the “synthesis of the elements constituting individuality” in being “realized and developed” by “modifying external relations both with nature and, in varying degrees, with other men ... up to the greatest relationship of all, which embraces the whole of human kind”. Elsewhere in his book Badaloni¹¹ again points to the dynamic aspect in describing Sorel’s position that “to accelerate or bring about changes it is necessary that *solid blocs in movement* [my emphasis - D.B.], i.e. groups that are indissolubly linked in economic life, should take the field”; his comment that these blocs are “precisely what Gramsci was later to designate by the term historical blocs (*blocchi storici*)”.

Mario Spinella emphasizes that the Marxian totality (or “man-nature relationship in which man is simultaneously the object of nature and the subject of the transformation of nature itself”) is a “dynamic totality, differentiated according to the various historical epochs”. Hence the effort to define not a totality in general, but “the various historical forms” i.e. socio-economic formations “that the totality has assumed”, “a historically determined totality”.¹² Remembering the link made above between an “ensemble of (social) relations”, the individual and the historical bloc, Gramsci, too, stresses that “the ensemble (*l’insieme*) of relations as they exist at any given time [...] must be known genetically, in their movement of formation, for each individual is not only the synthesis of existing relations but of the history of these relations, that is, he is a *précis* [*riassunto*] of all the past” (Q10II§54, *SPN* p. 353).

The concept of a dynamic totality is also constantly present in Lukács, who merits a few words apart since, in his hands, the notion of totality may have gone through a number of changes with time. The early *History and Class Consciousness* defines different types of the totality that he himself had reintroduced into the

¹¹ Badaloni, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

¹² Mario Spinella, *Lineamenti di antropologia marxista*, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1996, pp. 25-27.

Marxist tradition (see above): in the space of half a dozen pages in the essay *Class Consciousness*, we find him qualifying “totality” as “historical”, “concrete” (twice), “economic”, “objective economic” and “true” (referred to the totality of production).¹³ Towards the end of his life he was to refine this terminology by frequent recourse to the notion of “complexes” for more restricted categories, sometimes extended to unions of complexes, or to “complexes of complexes”¹⁴, in which what we may consider the ‘primitive cell’, in Lukács’s words the “very atom of society” is human labour.¹⁵ When Lukács does use the term “totality” in his last writings, it normally refers to the social totality (viz. the ‘set of all sets’), this being a gloss on Lenin’s “sphere of relationships of all classes and strata to the state and the government, the sphere of the interrelations between all classes”,¹⁶ with stress laid, in a way that recalls his early “Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg”, included in *History and Class Consciousness*, on “society on its historical dynamic” or the “dynamic totality” formed by “the overall socio-historic process”.¹⁷ Thus, via Lenin, Lukács arrives at something very close indeed to the “social totality ... in motion” of Gramsci’s Q10II§41x; however, different from his concept of hegemony, Gramsci does not explicitly link this particular concept to Lenin and neither, in his later writings, does Lukács, with all his knowledge of Italy and decades-long dialogue with prominent Italian Marxists, make explicit reference to this development of Gramsci’s.

What Gramsci, perhaps more than any other Marxist, does is to emphasize the change in, or – as just seen above – the dynamic of social formations and theorize

¹³ Georg (György) Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Merlin Press, London, 1971, pp. 50, 51, 54 and 57

¹⁴ Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being: Labour*, trans. David Fernbach, Merlin Press, London, 1978, pp. 48-50, 54, 65, 75, 78, 85, 89, 115, 136; H.H. Holz, L. Kofler and W. Abendroth, *Conversations with Lukács* (ed. Theo Pinkus), Merlin Press, London, 1974 and MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1975 pp. 17-8, 40, 135; in German Rowohlt, Berlin, 1967.

¹⁵ *Conversations*, op. cit., p. 18.

¹⁶ V.I. Lenin, *What is to be done?*, trans. Joe Fineberg and George Hanna, International Publishers, New York, 1986 reprint, p. 79.

¹⁷ Lukács, *L’Uomo e la Democrazia*, Ital. trans. by Alberto Scarponi of Lukács’s *Demokratisierung Heute und Morgen*, Lucarini, Roma, 1987, pp. 146 and 150; *Ontology*, cit., pp. 85-6 and 97.

it in the “historical bloc”, viz. his attempt to supersede the too often rather static image created by the metaphor of the base/structure and superstructure. As Pasquale Voza observes, “through the concept of historical bloc, connected with that of ideology, Gramsci critically renew[ed] the current Marxist concept of the structure-superstructure relationship”.¹⁸ Nowhere is this best expressed than in what amounts to an explicit definition: “concept of ‘historical bloc’, i. e. unity between nature and spirit (structure and superstructure), unity of opposites and distincts” (Q13§10; *SPN* p. 137).

Under the aspect of change and dynamism, for Gramsci everything is subject to change, even the philosophy of praxis itself:

That the philosophy of praxis thinks of itself in a historicist manner, that is as a transitory phase of philosophical thought ... is made quite explicit in the well-known thesis that historical development will at a certain point be characterized by the passage from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom. ... The philosophy of praxis is an expression of historical contradictions ... If therefore it is demonstrated that contradictions will disappear, it is also demonstrated implicitly that the philosophy of praxis too will disappear or be superseded (Q11§62; *SPN* pp. 404-5).

To put this in Gramscian terms, Marxism is an “absolute historicism”: as a superstructure, it will itself wither away with the advent of the regulated society, i.e. when civil society reabsorbs political society and the superstructures actually do correspond to their base, so that Marx’s dictum that human kind’s acquisition of consciousness on the ideological and superstructural plane is no longer in contraposition to a consciousness stemming directly from the base.

¹⁸ Pasquale Voza, “Blocco storico”, in *Dizionario Gramsciano*, ed. Guido Liguori and Pasquale Voza, Carocci, Roma, 2009, p. 72.

How, however, does one move forward in society, to go from current conditions towards this regulated society? Not only the “solid blocs in movement” of Sorel but a whole line of Marxist analysis, indicated above, puts the emphasis on the dynamic aspect of totality. Hugues Portelli,¹⁹ in observing that an examination of the concept of the historical bloc “cannot be considered separately from that of hegemony”, singles out two aspects. Dominance over one’s adversaries holds the bloc together but so does a hegemonic relationship with one’s allies. Hegemony is a “cement” that holds the bloc together. The metaphor springs readily to mind and is in fact used by Gramsci in Q10II§41IV, *FSPN* p. 474, where he defines hegemony as the “regulator (*ordinatore*) of the ideology which provides civil society and thus the State with its most intimate cement”. But hegemony is also an important mechanism for giving a society its dynamism and direction. As he notes, from the times of the Enlightenment, society has been permeated with “the idea of progress” corresponding to “a widespread consciousness that [...] human kind as such [...] can conceive ‘rationally’ of plans through which to govern its entire life”, with there being “no doubt that progress has been a democratic ideology”, and, through the notion of “becoming”, there has been an attempt to save “the most concrete aspect of ‘progress’ - movement, indeed dialectical movement” (Q10II§48II; *SPN* pp. 358-60).

It must be emphasized, against various misreadings of Gramsci, that hegemony has an economic component. The place where Gramsci probably makes this point most explicitly is in the thirteenth notebook: “if hegemony is ethico-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of the economy” (Q13§18, *SPN* pp. 160-1).²⁰ Its sphere of action, therefore, is not limited just to the

¹⁹ Hugues Portelli, *Il blocco storico*, Laterza, Bari 1976 (trans. Maria Novella Pierini), p. xii.

²⁰ The “ethico-political” nature of hegemony appears in this note chronologically after the extended critique of Croce in Notebook 10. For comparison purposes, the first draft, dating to October 1930, reads simply that “hegemony is political”; Gramsci then continues that it is “also and above all

superstructures but must include, among other things, the place where “economic activity belongs”, namely civil society. The classical position for the exercise of hegemony is civil society (cf. Q6 §§10, 81, and 137, *SPN*, pp. 270-272, 245-246 and 261 respectively, also translated in *PN*, Vol. III, pp. 9-10, 64-65 and 108-109, together with the later Q10II§41xII, *FSPN*, p. 397). Similar to Gramsci, Lukács notes that under certain conditions, the “economic process is objectively effective as a ‘second nature’”,²¹ yet again coming close to Gramsci in singling out the spontaneous acceptance of a structure, an acceptance that forms part and parcel of Gramsci’s elaboration of the concept of “hegemony”. For both thinkers, economic structures (now or in a future socialist society) establish a basis of development by arriving from below, and not by a process imposed from above, at the stage of the “collective man” or “social conformism” (cf. Q13§7).

The internal articulation of the bloc

As with the emphasis placed on the “totality”, stress is also laid on another neglected aspect of the Hegelian-Marxist line, viz. the nature of the dialectic and the questions of synthesis and mediation, mediacy and immediacy.

Various different senses emerge from the Notebooks of the way in which the notion of the dialectic is used. Gramsci himself had a very open mind on this and, as well as striving for an authentic Marxist interpretation and use of the dialectic, also showed interest in other concepts of the dialectic.

The most orthodox concept of the dialectic in Gramsci is the one that comes directly from the Hegelian-Marxist line of the “unity of opposites”, conceived as

economic, it has its material basis in the decisive function exercised by the hegemonic group in the decisive core of the economy” (Q4§38, *PN* Vol. II, p. 183).

²¹ Lukács, *Ontology, cit.*, p. 92.

he says “not in the sense of a static and mystical *coincidentia oppositorum* but in that of a dynamic *concordia discors* (Q10II§4, *FSPN* p. 371). Gramsci’s theorization seems influenced by the Sorelian concept of “cleavage” or “scission”, but avoids the dangers of a barren and purely moralistic political extremism stemming from a rigid separation of two “extremes” of a contradiction, which could, for example, lead to a sterile workerism that accorded an exclusive position to the struggle between industrial proletariat and capitalists, or to Sorelian syndicalism or to economism (cf. Q13§23, *SPN* in part on pp. 167-8 and the rest on pp.210-8). On this subject, Gramsci comments that, in any struggle, it is “a dialectical necessity, not an aprioristic method” that one of the “historical forces” involved “should assume the role of ‘synthesis’, superseding the opposed extremes” (Q15§60, summer 1933).

While Gramsci certainly does speak of the “thesis-antithesis-synthesis” triad of the Hegelian-Marxist vulgate, it is in the knowledge, first, that the final synthesis, as one sees from the above comments, is a complex one that must contain the outcome of a whole number of dialectical clashes taking place in the various sub-totalities. Secondly, “in history as it really is the antithesis tends to destroy the thesis, the synthesis that emerges being a supersession, without one being able to tell in advance what of the thesis will be ‘preserved’ in the synthesis” (Q10I§6, *FSPN*, p. 342). A corollary of this is, as Henri Lefebvre observed in a book published the year after Gramsci’s death, that the changed situation resulting from the dialectical clash “transforms the content of the contradiction”²² as motive force of historical development; a similar point is also made by Lukács.²³ This open-endedness of Gramsci’s dialectic is perhaps influenced by and certainly closer to the concept of the dialectic that in general characterized on the one hand Croce, and on the other Marxists such as Lefebvre and Lukács, rather than an

²² Henri Lefebvre, *Dialectical Materialism*, Cape Editions, London, 1968 (trans. by John Sturrock of the original 1938 French edition), p. 113.

²³ Lukács, *Conversations*, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

alternative “closed” version of the dialectic, also stemming from Hegel but tending towards the realization of the “absolute idea”.

Perhaps one of Gramsci’s most original notions of dialectical synthesis is to be found in his discussion of “the culture represented by classical German philosophy, classical English economics, and French literature and political practice” as the three principal sources of Marxism. The combination of these three within Marxism is not for Gramsci a simple addition, but a dialectical operation to be understood in the sense that Marxism “synthesized the three movements, that is the entire culture of the age, and that in the new synthesis, whichever ‘moment’ one is examining, the theoretical, the economic or the political, one will find each of the three movements present as a preparatory ‘moment’” (Q10II§9, *SPN* pp. 399-402; cf. also Q11§§47-49, *FSPN* pp. 307-13).

A short digression is necessary to understand the nature of Gramsci’s operation here. In Q13§10 Gramsci attempts a translation of Croce’s “distincts” into a historical materialist paradigm (or, from “speculative language into historicist language” in the task indicated explicitly in Q10I§7, April-May 1932; *FSPN* p.344), so that the Crocean distinctions are no longer “between the moments of the absolute Spirit, but between the levels of the superstructure”. Gramsci then goes on to pose the question “how is the concept of a circle joining the levels of the superstructure to be understood? Concept of ‘historical bloc’, i.e. unity between nature and spirit (structure and superstructure), unity of opposites²⁴ and distincts” and asking whether one can “introduce the criterion of distinction into the structure, too” in categories like “‘technique’, ‘labour’, ‘class’” (Q13§10, *SPN* p. 137). Subsequently, he then indicates examples of the type of levels of the structure and superstructure. Here, for example, he differentiates between social, political and military moments or aspects, each sub-divided into other levels: the

²⁴ The original reads *contrari* (“contraries”) rather than the more usual *opposti* (“opposites”) of the English translation.

“political” may be divided into the “economic-corporative” level, where there is a “solidarity of interests among all the members of a social class” and a level when one’s interests “can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups too”, which “marks the decisive passage from the structure to the complex sphere of the superstructures” (Q13§17, *SPN* p.181). He then notes that “historical development oscillates continually between the first [social] and third [military] moment, with the mediation of the second [political]” (Q13§17, *SPN* p. 183).

In other words what we have, then, is a base-superstructure totality articulated in different sub-totalities (complexes or sub-sets). Surface features in the superstructure may not necessarily be directly linked among themselves in having elements in common, where the Crocean “distincts” form, in effect, a “set” or “complex of complexes”, or where there may be no immediate apparent link between French politics, German philosophy and English classical economics. In other words they may not be in a direct dialectical relation one with another, but each is linked (possibly through a whole chain of cascading sub-sets) to the base. Thus, one may “descend” from one complex towards the base and then “ascend” again towards another complex, independent of the first only apparently. It is in this way that there can exist a dialectical relationship between what, on the surface (superstructurally), seem unconnected complexes or sets and it is in this way that we can then understand Gramsci’s comment that, taking the example of the three components of Marxism “in the new synthesis, whichever ‘moment’ one is examining, the theoretical, the economic or the political, one will find each of the three movements present as a preparatory ‘moment’” because each is linked to (“determined in the last analysis by”) the base. Here Gramsci fits into a whole tradition that rejects as too mechanical the simple thesis-antithesis-synthesis “triad”. It is true that the words as such are there but the elements themselves are always complex, to the point that, in the situation where history proceeds by a leap, we have a case (to borrow a metaphor from optics) of the ‘constructive interference’, or superposition, of waves, i.e. here of the various complexes (sub-

totalities or sub-sets); thus, on this occasion at least, Gramsci is at one with Althusser on what the latter describes as “overdetermination”.

When there is a “leap”, this is due to the full deployment of its “resources” by “each member of the dialectical opposition”, leading, in Gramsci’s words, to a “real supersession” (Q15§11, rendered as a “genuine dialectical transcendence” on pp. 109 of the *SPN* translation). The process of historical development, even in a period of what Gramsci calls passive revolution remains dialectical, as in different ways is asserted in Q15§11, Q10I§6 and, explicitly (as “the revolution-restoration dialectic”), in Q16§16 (*SPN* p. 416). A Hegelian clash of opposites has taken place but what we often see in the “passive revolution” phase are the “ripples” from the big wave, the reformist breaking up of the dialectical process (Q10II§41^{xvi}, *FSPN* p. 377) with the ripples sometimes cancelling each other out, again using the metaphor from optics, through a process this time of ‘destructive interference’, so that the antithesis is defused, the forces potentially comprising it not realizing they may have common interests and goals. However, over a long period, the ripples may change: expressed in terms of another metaphor, forces may mature within the womb of a society; as Gramsci notes (*loc. cit.*) this may often be a Vichian “ruse of nature” in which “a social impetus, directed towards one goal, achieves its opposite” (Q6§168; *PN* p. 126) and in which (Q15§11 again) a “war of position” turns into a “war of manoeuvre”. Marx’s phrase on this subject (“well grubbed, old mole”) confirms that he – most of all – appreciated the long, patient working-out of the dialectical process of reality.

Some structural elements of Gramsci’s discourse

Gramsci has enriched the language of politics through a number of terms, to which he gives a specific use and meaning. To mention only the ones that have been brought into play in this contribution, we have: historical bloc, hegemony,

civil society, economic-corporative, absolute historicism, collective man and its synonym social conformism (an equivalence made in Q13§7, *SPN* p. 242). A “collective man” then implies a “collective will”, for which Gramsci equates one form of the modern prince to the political party “in which a collective will ... has to some extent asserted itself in action ... [and is] tending to become universal and total” (Q13§1, *SPN* pp. 125-33; here p. 129). His lexis is however not neutral. One cannot tear a term out of its context and use it, as it were, against the others or in ignorance of the others: the full understanding of the terms comes only from their use in context, i.e. the context of social reality and the ‘co-text’ of the rest of the discourse that interprets it. One might here refer to Wittgenstein’s famous dictum that the meaning of a piece is its role in the game – perhaps a notion, though not the words themselves, borrowed by Wittgenstein from Gramsci through the mediation of their common friend Piero Sraffa. Again, a generation after Gramsci we have Thomas Kuhn’s notion of paradigm, in which any particular concept is interpretable only in terms of the other terms of an overall discourse. Gramsci would however probably have had in mind an earlier formulation of this principle, due to Hegel, that an individual “fact” by itself is abstract and only takes on a meaning in the context of a totality (cf. Marx’s “the concrete is concrete because it is a synthesis of many particular determinants”²⁵ or Lukács’s Hegelo-Marxist “methodological supremacy of the totality over the individual parts”²⁶). Such is the case of Gramsci’s concepts.

If, as a starting point, we take the historical bloc, which, as a philological analysis indicates, has one important source in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, and not just the explicitly acknowledged one in Sorel, this particular concept may be considered as standing at the top of the hierarchy, providing a governing context for the other

²⁵ Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. N.I. Stone, New York, 1904, p. 293. A very similar phrase “the concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse” is also used by Marx in the *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973, p. 101.

²⁶ Lukács, “What is Orthodox Marxism?” in *History and Class Consciousness*, *cit.*, p. 9.

terms. Using Gramsci's ideas regarding the translatability of scientific and philosophical languages, the description of the articulation of the bloc is in terms of a reinterpretation of Croce's distincts, taking account of the different levels of the structure and superstructure (cf. Q13§10, SPN pp.136-8, especially p. 137). The unity of the bloc is interpreted by Cesare Luporini as being mediated for Gramsci "through the moments of history, culture, ideology, etc."²⁷ Luporini also makes the comment that levels included in the structure-superstructure nexus include "the economy, politics, classes, ideology, hegemony etc."²⁸ What holds the bloc together is hegemony, as the regulator of ideology, intimately linked with the spontaneous acceptance of the structures themselves. Elsewhere Gramsci considers "ideology in the sense used in the philosophy of praxis" to be "the whole ensemble of the superstructures" (Q10II§41I, *FSPN* p. 413; August 1932), so it might be questioned whether it is reasonable to think that the stability of the base should be guaranteed by the superstructure. This point is, I think, adequately answered by G.A. Cohen's extension of Marx's base-superstructure metaphor. Four stilts are driven into the ground but sway in the wind until a roof (the superstructure) is put on them; the roof is supported by the struts but at the same time it renders the base more stable.²⁹

However, another all-important role of hegemony, when linked to the notion used by Gramsci of the intellectual and moral reform of society, is that of providing a key superstructural factor that gives the bloc its temporal dynamism (which does not exclude other, perhaps more classical factors, linked more closely to the base, such as the various types of struggle, capitalism's drive to increase surplus value etc., dealt with by Gramsci in Notebook 22 on *Americanism and Fordism*).

²⁷ C. Luporini, "The Methodology of Marxism in Gramsci's Thought" now in *Dialettica e Materialismo, cit.*, p. 68.

²⁸ C. Luporini, "Notes on Some Internal Nexuses in Gramsci's Thought", now in *Dialettica e Materialismo, cit.*, p. 47.

²⁹ G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1978 edition (corrected), p. 231.

Looked at in this way the bloc (structure and superstructure, with the component of hegemony) is very much the zone where, to put it very succinctly and schematically, historicism and structuralism intersect and as such might be fruitfully compared with Lucien Goldmann's dialectical "*genetic structuralist*" concept, which, in polemic with interpretations of Marx stemming from French structuralism, lays emphasis on relations "produced on the basis of previous historical situations" not only on "the relations of production that create historical situations".³⁰ Again returning to Lukács's discussion of social "complexes": "society must be conceived, from the start, as a complex made up of complexes" and the task before us is to "comprehend genetically the rise and formation of these complexes".³¹

When we consider how hegemony is formed and exercised, the role of civil society emerges as the locus for the resolution of conflict through one type or other of dialectical action. One type is a conservative tempered reformism, a type of "passive revolution", but the other consists of a mediation carried out by one of the forces which acts as a springboard for the next move forward in a set of shifting equilibria. This latter process of mediation, in the words of Nicola Badaloni, "may 'incorporate' within itself greater elements appropriate to the development of civilization, which after all is the theme of hegemony";³² for him, this is one aspect of Gramsci's "absolute historicism". While having certain reservations on historicism in general, Cesare Luporini defends Gramsci's historicism against the "speculative idealist" brand "generically founded on the metaphysical notion of becoming, and tending to superpose the ideal synthesis on the real movement of history, i.e. to mystify the dialectic, to 'force the world

³⁰ Lucien Goldmann, *Lukács and Heidegger* (trans. W. Q. Boelhower), London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977, p. 89.

³¹ Lukács, *Conversations*, op. cit., p. 18.

³² Badaloni, op. cit., p. 138.

into line”³³. Gramsci’s dialectic was however different in stressing that the outcome of the dialectical process is not foreseeable in advance but depends on the nature of the forces in conflict. This was stated (see above) in explicit terms: one cannot “tell in advance what of the thesis will be ‘preserved’ in the synthesis” (Q10I§6, *FSPN* p. 342), in other words of his “one cannot – without being arbitrary – assert what will be conserved [...] without falling into ideologism” (Q10II§41 xvi, *FSPN* p. 376). Here his position is again close to both Goldmann and to Lefebvre, whose aphorism reads: “The game has not yet been won; men may lose everything”.³⁴ He is however, I think, further away from at least the early Lukács’s more “closed” concept of the dialectic which maintains “that – ultimately – the proletariat will be victorious”, this being “guaranteed methodologically – by the dialectical method”.³⁵

A brief point remains to be stated in summing up what has here been written. If the comments in this contribution interpret anywhere near accurately Gramsci’s approach, then, as a dialectical thinker it would be a fruitful exercise to continue a comparison of his thought with those, not only of the Marxists cited in this paper, but also of others – Benjamin, Bloch and Brecht of Gramsci’s time spring readily to mind, not to mention contemporary authors – in the dialectical tradition against whom he has been measured by, for example, Renate Holub.³⁶ Gramsci certainly finds his place in that line of dialectical thinkers praised by Goldmann in an early polemic of his with French structuralists: “even within the stream of what can be called orthodoxy there are perpetual oscillations between those currents which stress the acts of men, their chance of transforming the world, and, conversely,

³³ Luporini, “Notes on Some Internal Nexuses in Gramsci’s Thought”, *cit.*, p.49. “Forcing the world into line” is Luporini’s quotation from Q10I§6, in English *FSPN*, p. 342, viz. Gramsci’s metaphor “mettere le brache al mondo” (literally: “stuff the world into breeches”).

³⁴ Lefebvre, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

³⁵ Lukács, “The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg” in *History and Class Consciousness*, *cit.*, p. 43.

³⁶ Renate Holub, *Antonio Gramsci: Beyond Marxism and Post-modernism*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992.

those which stress social inertia, the resistance of the environment, and the material forces”.³⁷

What we see in Gramsci is an exploration of the dialectic, rather than its attempted codification. The concept of totality, which has been emphasized in this reconstruction of Gramsci, began to disappear very soon after its rediscovery, or to have its importance downgraded in popularizations of Marxism. One may cite the opinion expressed in Henri Lefebvre’s 1961 Preface to his *Dialectical Materialism* booklet: “At the precise moment [i.e. from the publication in 1932 of Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts* – D.B.] when hitherto disregarded concepts were being rediscovered (praxis, alienation, the total man and social totality, etc.) and when those who had read the young Marx were clearing the way for the rediscovery of Hegel, the dogmatists were moving in the opposite direction”.³⁸ Contrary to this tendency criticized by Lefebvre, the *Prison Notebooks* are shot through with Gramsci’s constant attempts, just like Marx’s procession “by way of successive extensions or integrations to wholes, or (partial) totalities”,³⁹ to incorporate the findings of the accurate reconnaissance of various structural and superstructural aspects, varying over time, into wider social totalities in order to construct an adequate description of the historical bloc that gives them their full meaning and (through the unity of theory and practice) prepare the conditions for a new historical bloc, in contraposition to the currently reigning one. And in conclusion, as Gramsci observes on this point in Q13§23 (*SPN*, p. 168), the task is to “liberate the economic thrust from the dead weight of traditional policies – i.e. to change the political direction of certain forces which have to be absorbed if a new, homogeneous politico-economic historical bloc, without internal contradictions, is to be successfully formed”.

³⁷ Goldmann, *The Human Sciences and Philosophy* (trans. H. V. White and R. Anchor), Cape Editions, London, 1969, p. 80.

³⁸ Lefebvre, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

³⁹ Lefebvre, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

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