

3. The maintenance of hegemony

ORGANIC CRISES

In the previous chapter hegemony was described mainly in terms of the rise to power of a revolutionary class, and the three historical examples which were mentioned – two from Italy and one from France – concerned the achievement of hegemony by the capitalist class. Of equal importance is the maintenance of hegemony *after* state power has been gained. As Gramsci says in the passage already quoted (p18), even when a social group has become dominant and holds power firmly in its grasp, it must continue to ‘lead’ as well. Hegemony can never be taken for granted, but has to be continually fought for afresh. This requires persistent activities to maintain and strengthen the social authority of the ruling class in all areas of civil society, and the making of such compromises as are needed to adapt the existing system of alliances to changing conditions and to the activities of the opposing forces.

This process can be seen at work most clearly in periods when the hegemony of the ruling political forces is endangered and is tending to disintegrate. There may ensue a fairly prolonged period of instability and transition, during which the system of alliances forming the basis for the hegemony of the ruling groups may have to undergo far-reaching changes and a process of restructuring if it is to survive. Gramsci insists on the importance of distinguishing between organic changes

which are relatively permanent, and those which appear as occasional, immediate and almost accidental:

A crisis occurs, sometimes lasting for decades. This exceptional duration means that incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves (reached maturity) and that, despite this, the political forces which are struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure itself are making every effort to cure them, within certain limits, and to overcome them. These incessant and persistent efforts ... form the terrain of the 'conjunctural' and it is upon this terrain that the forces of opposition organise (SPN 178).

The term *conjuncture* is more widely used on the continent than in Britain; it is what Lenin used to call 'the current situation' or the balance of political forces existing at the present moment to which political tactics have to be applied. What Gramsci wishes to stress is that the current situation is to be understood, not only in terms of the immediate economic and political problems, but also in the 'incessant and persistent efforts' which are made to conserve and defend the existing system. If the crisis is deep – an organic one – these efforts cannot be purely defensive. They will consist in the struggle to create a new balance of political forces, requiring a reshaping of state institutions as well as the formation of new ideologies; and if the forces of opposition are not strong enough to shift the balance of forces decisively in their direction, the conservative forces will succeed in building a new system of alliances which will re-establish their hegemony. Beneath the surface of the day-to-day events, an organic and relatively permanent, structural change will have taken place.

One conclusion that Gramsci draws from these considerations is that 'a social form always has marginal possibilities for further development and organisational improvement, and

in particular can count on the relative weakness of the rival progressive force as a result of its specific character and way of life. It is necessary for the dominant social force to preserve this weakness' (SPN 222).

The organic crisis with which Gramsci was centrally concerned was the crisis in Italy, lasting from about 1910 to 1921, which was eventually resolved by the rise of Mussolini's fascism. In his notes on Italian history Gramsci analyses the shifting system of compromises which had enabled the northern industrialists, in alliance with the southern landowners, to maintain a limited hegemony in the framework of the Italian liberal state from the time of the Risorgimento (SPN 52-120).⁷ Between 1910 and 1912, however, there began a profound upheaval in the structure of Italian society, affecting all classes and the whole of Italian culture; it was marked by a big rise in the militancy of the working class and of sections of the peasantry, by a growth of nationalism and the imperialist adventure in Libya, and by important shifts in the Catholic movement. Under the impact of the First World War and its aftermath, the system of alliances which had ensured the hegemony of the Northern industrialists disintegrated. The much greater strength of the working-class movement, with its revolutionary tendencies, contributed to this disintegration, but the movement was still mainly under reformist leadership, and was unable to build an alliance with the different social forces capable of presenting an effective challenge to the ruling groups. 'There was a crisis of authority' – a crisis of hegemony – consisting in the fact 'that the old is dying and the new cannot be born'.

In these conditions fascism found a mass basis in the urban and rural petty bourgeoisie, which had become much more politically active as a result of the war, and could easily be organised into military-style squads for brutal attacks on the labour movement and its institutions. Mussolini's fascist

movement thus succeeded in replacing the old compromises by reorganising all the bourgeoisie's forces into a single political organism that combined the party, the government and the state, cemented by a reactionary ideology based on aggressive nationalism. The working-class movement was defeated, not only by a resort to violent repression and by the passivity of the reformist leadership, but also by the ability of the capitalist class to reorganise its forces in a new way, in spite of a serious economic crisis.

Since the early nineteenth century it is possible to distinguish three main periods of transition which may qualify as organic crises in Gramscian terms, and which will be considered in Chapter 6.

The theme of this chapter is Gramsci's understanding that once a class or social group has achieved hegemony, the system of alliances on which that hegemony is based (historic bloc) has to be continually re-adjusted and re-negotiated. Periodically there may develop an organic crisis in which the historic bloc begins to disintegrate, creating the opportunity for a subordinate class to transcend its corporate limitations and build up a broad movement capable of challenging the existing order and achieving hegemony; but if the opportunity is not taken, the balance of forces will shift back to the dominant class, which will re-establish its hegemony on the basis of a new pattern of alliances.

CAESARISM

A crisis of hegemony may have profound effects on political parties and on the form of the state. As Gramsci says, 'social classes become detached from their traditional parties', and organisational forms and the people who lead them 'are no longer recognised by their class (or fraction of a class) as its

expression'. There is a crisis of representation. When such crises occur, 'the immediate situation becomes delicate and dangerous, because the field is open for violent solutions, for the activities of unknown forces, represented by charismatic "men of destiny"' (SPN 210). Gramsci used the term 'Caesarism' to denote the outcome of 'a situation in which the forces in conflict balance each other in a catastrophic manner, that is to say, in such a way that a continuation of the conflict can only result in their reciprocal destruction' (SPN 219).

Gramsci suggested that Caesarism does not always have the same historical significance. It can take both progressive and reactionary forms. Caesar and Napoleon I are examples of progressive Caesarism; Napoleon III and Bismarck of reactionary Caesarism. Besides the fascist regimes of Mussolini and Hitler, there have been a great variety of exceptional forms of state that qualify as forms of Caesarism, for example the colonels' regime in Greece from 1967 to 1974.

Gramsci also pointed out that a Caesarist solution can arise even without a Caesar, without any great, 'heroic' and representative personality. 'The parliamentary system has also provided a mechanism for such compromise solutions' (SPN 220). In other words, a Caesarist outcome may not be 'catastrophic', in terms of involving the immediate violent repression of one side by the other, the destruction of democratic rights and the creation of an exceptional form of state. Instead, there may be a shift towards a more authoritarian form of parliamentary government through a succession of stages (which might ultimately lead to an exceptional form of state). In Britain since the 1970s there has been developing a situation of stalemate between the opposing classes in which 'the old is dying and the new cannot be born'. A shift to the right in Britain can be seen as starting with the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979. There were significant authoritarian elements in the ideology of Thatcherism and in the measures taken by the Thatcher

government, such as the legislative attacks on the trade unions and local authorities, and the strengthening of the police and the armed forces. The changes in the relations of forces and in the system of representation that were developing in the late 1970s and early 1980s are considered further in Chapter 6.

4. National-popular

In previous chapters it was argued that if a class is to become hegemonic, it has to transcend its economic-corporate phase by taking into account the aims and interests of other classes and social forces, linking these with its own interests so as to become their universal representative. However, the nature of these ‘social forces’ has not yet been discussed. We can now take a crucial further step. A class cannot achieve national leadership, and become a hegemonic class, *if it confines itself only to class interests*; it must also take into account the popular and democratic aspirations and struggles of the people which do not have a necessary class character.

In Gramsci’s important note on the relation of forces quoted in Chapter 2, he says that the development and expansion of a class aspiring to hegemony is ‘conceived of and presented as being the motor force of a universal expansion, of a development of all the national energies’ (SPN 182). And in describing the decisive role played by the Jacobins in the creation of the French nation, he stresses the popular nature of the hegemony they established, ‘which in other nations awakened and organised the national-popular collective will, and founded modern states’ (SPN 131). Thus hegemony has a *national-popular* dimension as well as a class dimension. As Gramsci says, ‘It is in the concept of hegemony that those exigencies which are national in character are knotted together’ (SPN 241).

For example, a nation which is oppressed by another develops traditions of struggle for national liberation, and indeed