

Gramsci's Idea of Civil Society

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ABSTRACT

Civil society as a concept has always been important but it has gained tremendous momentum and importance in the last decades. It has been viewed differently by different thinkers. Like other concepts, Gramsci's concept of civil society is also very important and unique. He brought few dimensions in the idea of civil society which was never discussed before. He is best known for his concept and theory of cultural hegemony, which describes how states use cultural institutions to maintain power in capitalist societies. This article will try to analyze Gramsci's idea of civil society and the major important elements which constitutes this idea.

Keywords: Civil Society, Gramsci, Hegemony, Intellectuals, State.

INTRODUCTION

The term 'civil society' did not get any special attention during the post-second world war period in the West. The term wasn't taken seriously by the orthodox Marxists as well. They generalized the term with the bourgeoisie society as conceived by Marx in his writings. But, the idea of 'civil society' surfaced in academic world once again during the 1960's and that too with the help of the radicals who were frustrated with the Marxist ideology. Writings of Antonio Gramsci played an important role in the revival of this concept. He came out of the jinx of the traditional idea of Marx and showed a new path to the Marxist thinking which was very much appropriate during his time and to some extent till today. But, we should also take into consideration the idea of civil society as perceived by the classical thinkers because it adds a tremendous depth to the subject matter.

Krishnan Kumar in his article "Civil Society: An Enquiry into the Usefulness of an Historical Term" opines that "Civil Society" was more or less direct translation of Cicero's *societas civilis* and Aristotle's *koinōnia politikē*. Locke could speak of 'civil government' along with, and as an alternative term for, 'civil' or 'political society'. Kant sees *bürgerliche gesellschaft* as the constitutional state towards which political evolution tends. For Rousseau *état civil* is the state."¹

The term Civil Society came into political sphere in the 16th and 17th century Europe. Gurpreet Mahajan is of the view that "At this time theorists of democracy invoked this concept to define a democratic form of government rooted in the rights of citizens."² The theorists of the 17th century brought the idea of civil society in the center of the debate because for them rights of the individual were more important than everything else. The idea's of Hobbes, Locke, Hegel, Marx, Tocqueville and Gramsci played an important role in regard to the concept of civil society.

¹ Krishnan Kumar, "Civil Society: An Inquiry into the usefulness of an Historical Term," *British Journal of Sociology* 44, no.3 (1993) : 376

² Gurpreet Mahajan, "Civil Society and Its Avatars: What happened to Freedom and Democracy?," *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, no.20 (1999) :1188 .

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For Hobbes, state of nature was violent. He was of the view that men are naturally competitive and selfish and they would try to increase their power and in that process they would destroy themselves. There were no laws in the state of nature and men could do whatever they felt like. There was no authority to regulate them. For achieving peace in the state of nature, Hobbes gave a solution. Men would surrender their rights (except the right to life) to a sovereign which according to Hobbes is the Leviathan. Sujit Lahiry in his article “Civil Society Redefined” expresses his view that “Thus in order to secure felicity, peace, happiness and order, human beings through a social contract create a civil society thereby a state.”³

The concept of civil society was further broadened by John Locke. Locke moved away a bit from the Hobbesian idea of the state of nature. For Locke state of nature was absolutely peaceful and people had freedom and perfect equality. Gurpreet Mahajan is of the view that “At a general level Locke maintained that civil society comes into existence when men, possessing the natural right to life, liberty and estate, come together, sign a contract and constitute a common public authority.”⁴ For Locke law was an important factor for the civil society to shape out. When the citizen’s right to life and liberty is guaranteed by law then only a civil society gets a shape. According to Sunil Khilnani “Locke made no separation between civil society, and political society- no sense was civil society conceived of as distant from an entity termed ‘the state’. Rather, a civil society was a term accorded to a benign state, a legitimate political order.”⁵

According to Gurpreet Mahajan Locke’s idea gave birth to the idea of the democratic state. Locke’s civil society basically guarantees individual rights and liberties and it is extremely necessary for a democratic state.⁶

George William Friedrich Hegel used to live in Prussia and he was deeply influenced by the French Revolution. Hegel’s idea of civil society was completely different from that of Hobbes and Locke. For Hegel, civil society was an intermediary institution which will ultimately lead to the formation of a democratic state. He clearly states that “Civil Society is the [stage of] difference [Differenz] which intervenes between the family and the state, even if its full development [Ausbildung] occurs later than that of the state; for as difference, it presupposes the state, which it must have before it as a self-sufficient entity in order to subsist [bestehen] itself.”⁷

Sudipta Kaviraj makes a great assessment of the Hegel’s idea and how it is different from Hobbes and Locke “By introducing a tripartite division of forms of sociability in a place of a dualistic one, Hegel brought the narrower dichotomy between the state and civil society into a complex connection with another significant opposition? between the public and the private spheres”.⁸

To understand Hegel’s idea on civil society we need to understand his concept of dialectics. He believed that family, state and civil society are the three forms of ethical life. For him state is the thesis, civil society is the anti-thesis and state is basically the synthesis. State came into being due to the result of a dialectical interaction between family and civil society and as a result of that state contains the best extract of both. Hegel perceived civil society as a sphere where individuals fulfilled their own interests. But people will realize the role of human cooperation. In this regard corporations

³ Sujit Lahiry, “Civil Society Redefined,” *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 66, no.1 (2005):34.

⁴ Mahajan, “Civil Society and Its Avatars: What happened to Freedom and Democracy?,” 1188.

⁵ Sunil Khilnani, “The Development of Civil Society,” in *Civil Society History and Possibilities*, eds., Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2003) ,18.

⁶ For the detailed argument on this topic please consult Mahajan, “Civil Society and Its Avatars: What happened to Freedom and Democracy?,” 1189.

⁷ G.W.F Hegel, “Civil Society,” in *Elements of the Philosophy of Rights*, ed. Allen W.Wood (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 220.

⁸ Sudipta Kaviraj, “In Search of Civil Society,” in *Civil Society History and Possibilities*, ed., Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani (New Delhi: Foundation books, 2002), 51.

will play a very important role. Hegel clearly states that “The family is the first ethical root of the state; the cooperation is the second, and it is based in civil society.”⁹ Sujit Lahiry is of the view that “Through corporations, individuals realize the importance of group membership, a sense of belonging, and most important it is the way of actualizing freedom. The corporation acts as a mediator between the state and civil society, as cooperation provided the basis for membership of civil society. Cooperation in Hegel’s view, symbolizes the spirit of civil society”.¹⁰

Hegel clearly states that civil society is not the extension of family or any other social institution. Man attains its selfish needs through an institution called civil society. But, Hegel gives equal importance to public institutions like law and enforcing authorities. There is an intrinsic biological relationship between the state and civil society and one cannot exist without the help of other.

Karl Marx was influenced by the French Revolution of 1789, Hegel’s philosophy and Industrial Revolution in England. Marx generalized the idea of civil society with the bourgeoisie society where the bourgeoisie class uses the state and its machinery to achieve their own interest. Georgina Blakeley is of the opinion that “Marx saw civil society as a historically determined phenomenon characterized by certain forms of production and certain social relations coterminous with the growth of capitalism and the emergence of the bourgeoisie. Civil society arose as a result of the separation of spheres which depended on the rise of bourgeoisie in a market sphere structurally separate from formal state power. But although distinctions were abolished in political society, the equality of political society masked the inequality of the real world of civil society.”¹¹

For Marx civil society evolved directly out of production and commerce and he regarded it as the ‘true source and theatre of all history’. Marx is also of the view that it ‘forms the basis of the state and of the rest of the idealistic superstructure’. There is no doubt to say that Marx’s approach to reduce every social phenomenon into base-superstructure model and defining it into economic terms narrowed his outlook.

Alexis De Tocqueville in his book “Democracy in America” added a new dimension to the idea of civil society. He not only classified the state-society dichotomy in civil society but also added a new element which is the ‘political society’. Krishnan Kumar is of the view that “Though not spelled out in precise terminology, in Democracy in America (1835-40) and The Ancien Régime and the Revolution (1856) de Tocqueville effectively identified three realms of society. There is the state, the system of formal political representation, with its parliamentary assemblies, courts, bureaucracy, police and army. There is civil society, which is essentially the arena of private interest and economic activity, and which corresponds more or less directly to the capitalist economy that Marx also identifies with civil society. But while Marx makes this the whole of non-state society, de Tocqueville critically adds another dimension, the dimension of ‘political society’.”¹²

Tocqueville has observed the American society very closely and he is of the view that there is a natural relationship between ‘civil associations’ and ‘political association’. He clearly states that “Civil associations, therefore, facilitate political association: but, on the other hand, political association singularly strengthens and improves associations for civil purposes.”¹³

He also adds that politics gives birth to ‘numerous associations’. He is of the view that in countries where the political associations are prohibited there the number of civil associations will be very few and they will not be able to deliver their best because they will be badly managed.¹⁴

⁹ Hegel, “Civil Society,” 272.

¹⁰ Lahiry, “Civil Society Redefined,” 39.

¹¹ Georgina Blakeley, “Civil Society,” in *Contemporary Political Concepts: A Critical Introduction*, eds., Georgina Blakeley and Valerie Bryson (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 93.

¹² Kumar, “Civil Society: An Inquiry into the usefulness of an Historical Term,” 381.

¹³ Alexis De Tocqueville, “Public Associations,” in *Democracy in America*, ed. Henry Steele Commager (London: Oxford University Press, 1965) 386.

¹⁴ For detailed discussion on this topic please see Tocqueville, “Democracy in America,” 389.

Tocqueville rightly observed that if the governments take the place of the associations, people will get more dependent on the governments and that will have a negative effect on society. If we see till now the idea of ‘civil society’ centers around the concept of state, law enforcing authorities and the establishment of peace, law and order. But, Antonio Gramsci added a totally new dimension to this subject matter. He brought in few new elements which enriched the conceptual framework to a large extent. In the coming subsection Antonio Gramsci’s idea of ‘civil society’ will be discussed in details.

ANTONIO GRAMSCI ON INTELLECTUALS

The “Prison Notebooks” was written by Antonio Gramsci between 1929 and 1936. This collection of notes is one of the major work of Antonio Gramsci that is highly debated in academic spheres. It was written during his stay in the prison and it was not written with an intention of publication. For that reason his writings are sometimes discontinuous and they were sometimes intentionally vague just to pass the censorship. This paved the way for various interpretation of Antonio Gramsci’s writing. Few major issues which were discussed in the “Prison Notebooks” are the role of intellectuals, state and civil society and his idea of hegemony. But, it is very difficult to trace the idea of ‘civil society’ in Gramsci’s “Prison Notebooks”. Sometimes it is clear and evident when he is speaking about civil society or state but in many cases he does not mention the word ‘civil society’ exactly but he adds an element of thought to the broader idea.

The role of the intellectuals was the central idea of Gramsci’s thought. Karl Marx used this term on a very basic sense by just making a distinction between manual and mental labour but Gramsci gave a much wider dimension to this idea.

Gramsci was very clear in his view that all men are intellectuals but they are not intellectuals by social function. He clearly stated that ‘All men are intellectuals ... but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals.¹⁵ He is of the view that every man outside the sphere of his professional activity carries on some kind of intellectual endeavor.

According to Gramsci there were two kinds of intellectuals – ‘traditional’ and ‘organic’.

“In the first place there are the “traditional” professional intellectuals, literary, scientific and so on, whose position in the interstices of society has a certain inter-class aura about it but derives ultimately from the past and present class relations and conceals an attachment to various historical class formations. Secondly, there are the “organic” intellectuals, the thinking and organizing element of a particular fundamental social class. These intellectuals are distinguished less by their profession, which may be any job characteristic of their class, than by their function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong.”¹⁶

To understand Gramsci’s idea of intellectuals we need to observe how he made a demarcation between the different position of urban and rural type of intellectuals. He compares the urban intellectuals with the ‘subaltern officers in the army’. They have developed themselves along with industry and they execute the ‘production plan’ which is decided by the ‘industrial general staff’ who is controlling the ‘elementary stages of work’. Antonio Gramsci is of the view that “On the whole the average urban intellectuals are standardized, while the top urban intellectuals are more and more identified with the industrial general staff itself.”¹⁷

According to Gramsci the rural intellectuals are much more “traditional” in nature mainly because they remain close to the “petite bourgeoisie” class. This type of intellectuals performs a socio-political role because they create an organic relationship between the peasant classes and the organs of the state. Gramsci also gave a kind of class character to the rural intellectuals. The rural intellectuals (priest, lawyer, teacher, doctor etc) have a different kind of living standards than the normal peasant community and they become a source of motivation for the peasant class to improve their standards.

¹⁵ Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 9.

¹⁶ Hoare and Smith, eds., *Selections From The Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 3.

¹⁷ Ibid., 14.

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While speaking about intellectuals, Antonio Gramsci also mentions about party and its role. David McLellan is of the view that “The Party was the organisation of intellectuals that was the most organically linked to its class: it was the ‘collective intellectual’, an expression first coined by Togliatti.”¹⁸

Party performs the same role as the State in civil society. Here by the term “party” Gramsci obviously means the role of the revolutionary party. It acts as a binding force to hold together organic intellectuals of the dominant group with the traditional intellectuals and in this process they form a tight link among themselves. Gramsci was of the view that the working class should produce its own group of organic intellectuals which will play a crucial role in revolution.¹⁹

Gramsci’s idea of intellectuals was the result of observation of various contemporary state systems. Gramsci was of the view that “The formation of traditional intellectuals is the most interesting problem historically”.²⁰

In this regard he mentions about the role of intellectuals in Rome in Republican and Imperial times. He also mentions how Caesar created a “permanent category of intellectuals” just to attract the best intellectuals from the Roman Empire and they left a trace of “cosmopolitanism” character in Italian intellectuals upto 18th century.²¹

In England, the organic intellectuals came into existence side by side as the economic group. But, the land owning class maintained its monopoly.

The role of the intellectuals was the central thought of Gramsci’s idea. He wanted the subaltern class to realize the socio-economic structure of the society. By doing so it can create its own class of intellectuals and that will be a crucial factor in overthrowing the capitalist hegemony.

But it must be taken into note that consciously or unconsciously Gramsci created a class division among intellectuals. All men are intellectuals according to him but that does not mean that they play a same role in the revolutionary process. On the one hand he is acknowledging different qualities and different capabilities of individual. In this process he creates a divide between the classes of intellectuals according to their role in the process of social change.

GRAMSCI ON HEGEMONY

Antonio Gramsci was not the first person to speak about hegemony. But, he was the one who broadened the idea of hegemony. Earlier it was understood how hegemony was established to gain the political power but Gramsci was undoubtedly the first person to say that hegemony is an essential element for a ruling class of people to maintain its authority and power. According to Roger Simon “The starting point of hegemony is that a class and its representatives exercise power over subordinate classes by means of a combination of coercion and persuasion.”²²

Perry Anderson is of the view that the term “hegemony” was first used by Plekhanov and other Russian Marxists in the 1880s. For Lenin hegemony is working class gaining the access to power with the support of the majority. But for Gramsci the idea was much broadened. Hegemony was not only about gaining the power but it also meant maintaining that power.²³

State establishes this hegemony through other institutions which propagates the ideology of the State.

¹⁸ David McLellan, ed., *Marxism after Marx* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 198.

¹⁹ For details argument on this topic please consult McLellan,ed., *Marxism After Marx*, 197.

²⁰ Hoare and Smith, eds., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 17.

²¹ For details on this argument please see Hoare and Smith, eds., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 17.

²² Roger Simon, *Gramsci’s Political Thought An introduction* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1991), 22.

²³ For detailed discussion please see Simon, *Gramsci’s Political Thought*, 23.

In this regard Gramsci also speaks about the role of the party which help to propagate the ‘counter-culture’ before an attempt was made on state power. Unlike Marx, hegemony was more of a strategy to Gramsci.

“The intellectuals of the historically (and concretely) progressive class (he wrote), in the given conditions, exercise such a power of attraction that, in the last analysis, they end up by subjugating the intellectuals of the other social groups; they thereby create a system of solidarity between all the intellectuals, with bonds of a psychological nature (vanity, etc.) and often of a cast character (technical-juridical, corporate, etc.).”²⁴

Gramsci was of the view that the revolution by the proletariat was impossible when the ruling class had its own hegemony. The intellectuals of the working class should actively participate to establish a counter hegemony. The working class should also come out of its narrow class interest and if necessary they need to make compromise to form a unity with other social forces to create a larger counter hegemony. The nobility of Gramsci’s idea of civil society is in his understanding of power relations. Typical Marxist understanding of the state denotes that the power lies in the hands of the state. But, Gramsci had a very different understanding of this. He observed various institutions in the state which helps the state to propagate its idea and directly helps it to maintain its hegemony. So, the understanding of the relationship between state and its institutions are very important to understand Gramsci’s idea of hegemony.

GRAMSCI ON STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The idea of hegemony was the central theme of Antonio Gramsci’s thought. Antonio Gramsci mentions about state and civil society in parts of the “Prison Notebooks”. Practically his idea on state, civil society is scattered everywhere in his theoretical work.

David McLellan is of the view that “Although both Gramsci and Marx claimed to be getting their concept of civil society from Hegel, their use of the term was, in fact, very different. Whereas Marx used the expression civil society to mean the totality of economic relationships, Gramsci used civil society to refer to the superstructure.”²⁵ In this context Joseph Femia is of the view that “For the classical Marxist tradition, civil society refers to the infrastructure, the totality of material conditions and relationships. But civil society in Gramsci’s writings belongs to the superstructure, since it comprises ideological/cultural relations”²⁶

Gramsci got influenced by the work of Croce and he imagined the state as an ‘ethical state’ or ‘cultural state’ whose role will be to raise the population to a particular cultural level. Gramsci is of the view that the school will play a very important role in this regard and on the other hand courts will play a very negative role. State according to Gramsci was not only the apparatus of the government but also the “private” apparatus of “hegemony” or civil society.²⁷

It must be taken into note that there is a close relationship between Gramsci’s idea of state, civil society and hegemony. Gramsci is of the view that “For it should be remarked that the general notion of State includes elements which need to be referred back to the notion of civil society (in the sense that one might say that State = political society + civil society, in other words hegemony protected by the armour of coercion).”²⁸

So, in Gramsci’s idea civil society and the state are interrelated but it is very confusing sometimes because in some other writings he also makes a clear distinction between the state and civil society.

²⁴ Cited in McLellan, *Marxism After Marx*, 201.

²⁵ McLellan, *Marxism After Marx*, 204.

²⁶ Joseph Femia, “Civil Society and the Marxist Tradition,” in *Civil Society History and Possibilities*, ed., Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani (New Delhi: Foundation books, 2002), 140-141.

²⁷ Hoare and Smith, eds., *Selections From The Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 261.

²⁸ Ibid., 263.

“And in his letter of 7 September 1931, he refers to civil society as compromising ‘the so-called private’ organizations like the church, the trade unions, the schools, etc., and adds ‘it is precisely in civil society that intellectuals operate specially...’”²⁹

Krishnan Kumar is of the view that “Civil Society for Gramsci is indeed not to be found in the sphere of production or economic organization but in the State.”³⁰

But, Antonio Gramsci did not generalize the idea of civil society and state. He knew that it clearly varies from situation to situation and from state to state. He makes a clear distinction between the relationship of state and civil society in East and West. The context of state civil-society relationship was totally different in England when it is compared with Russia. And for this reason only the revolutionary strategy is also different in these two cases. He relates the idea of modern warfare with political struggle in this regard to explain the revolutionary strategy. Gramsci got influenced from Rosa Luxemburg's book “The Generale Strike” to develop his ideas on ‘war of movement’ and ‘war of position’. Gramsci integrates the concept of ‘war of movement’ and ‘war of position’ to explain the strategies for the political struggle. In case of war of movement a system is directly replaced by a revolutionary force. It happened in case of Russia where there no existence of civil society. “It seems to me that Ilitch understood that a change was necessary from the war of manoeuvre applied victoriously in the East in 1917, to a war of position which was the only form possible in the West—where, as Krasnov observes, armies could rapidly accumulate endless quantities of munitions, and where the social structure were of themselves still capable of becoming heavily-armed fortifications.”³¹ But this formula is not applicable in the West where the civil society is strong and vigilant and goes hand in hand with the state.

In Gramsci's words “The superstructures of civil society are like the trench system of modern warfare. In war it would sometimes happen that a fierce artillery attack seemed to have destroyed the enemy's entire defensive system, whereas in fact it had only destroyed the outer perimeter ; and at the moment their advance and attack the assailants would find themselves confronted by a line of defense which was still effective.”³² In western societies even if the state is destroyed, the revolutionary forces will face a challenge from the civil society and in that case war of position is the only option. The results of the ‘war of position’ are not fast like the ‘war of movement’. In case of the former the change takes place from within and it takes a longer time.

In Gramsci's words “The war of position demands enormous sacrifices by infinite masses of people.”³³ In this situation government will play an important role in organizing all political and administrative forces and it will reinforce the “hegemonic” positions of all dominant groups.

Joseph A. Buttigieg is of the view that “His purpose is not to repress civil society or to restrict its space but rather develop a revolutionary strategy (a “war of position”) that would be employed in the arena of civil society, with the aim of disabling the coercive apparatus of the state, gaining access to political power, and creating the conditions that could give rise to a consensual society wherein no individual or group is reduced to a subaltern status.”³⁴

Gramsci is clearly of the view that the subaltern classes will realize their identity in the sphere of civil society and they transform into a leading force. But, it must be noted that the sphere of civil society is not without strife or competition. There are clash of ideas between various groups within this sphere

²⁹ Simon, *Gramsci's Political Thought*, 69.

³⁰ Kumar, “Civil Society: An Inquiry into the usefulness of an Historical Term,” 382.

³¹ Hoare and Smith, eds., *Selections From The Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 237.

³² Ibid.,235.

³³ Ibid.,239.

³⁴ Joseph A.Buttigieg, “Gramsci on Civil Society,” *Boundary 2* 22, no. 3 (1995):7.

and the political reality is established through that dialectical process. Fontana is of the view that “Civil Society is the sphere in which a continual process of conflict and community, dissent and consent, is generated. It is here that the dialectic between conflict and consensus, factional strife over particularistic ends and the generation of common goals, is conducted.”³⁵

CONCLUSION

So, Gramsci’s civil society performs a democratic role. Consensus and support is generated with debates and discussion. In Fontana’s view this can be related with the ‘war of position’. He says that “In other words, it is here, in the sphere defined by civil society, that the war of position takes place. As the term implies, the war of position presupposes consensus within the cultural/political and organizational body of the protagonists, but conflict and strife among and between them.”³⁶

It can be said without any doubt that Antonio Gramsci came out of the Marxist jinx of class relationships. It must be kept in mind the time in which Antonio Gramsci was writing. The rise of Fascism shook his understanding of the world and he started perceiving things in a different way.

Many scholars give too much focus on his writings during his stay in the prison. But, to understand the grandeur of his ideas we must take a look into his early writings also. Then only we can understand his process of ideological transformation. Both Marx and Lenin mentioned about the role of the Party in revolution but he gave totally a new dimension to this idea. He understood well the Fascist strategy of manipulating the working class and how to gain popular support from them. In that situation the revolutionary party should play a role to educate people culturally which will create a counter hegemony and finally topple the existing domination.

Gramsci’s ideas gave a hope for the working class that they can also climb up the societal ladder with their intellectual capability. But, to make them organized party will play a very important role.

So, we can say that Gramsci conceived civil society as the safety valve of the state. If we see the present world order we will see that how the states are extending its area of influence through civil society organizations. This is what Gramsci perceived during his time. But, Gramsci prefers ‘civil society’ more than state because civil society is characterized by ideological hegemony, while state uses force to establish its own authority.

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³⁵ Bendetto Fontana, “Hegemony and Power in Gramsci,” in *Hegemony Studies in Consensus and Coercion*, ed. Richard Hawson and Kylie Smith (New York: Routledge, 2008), 94.

³⁶ Ibid., 96.

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