

Chapter 5

Gramsci and Durkheim: Moral Order and the Formation of Complex Identities

Gramsci repeatedly argued that a vital component of both revolution and the preparation for it was an ‘intellectual and moral reform’.¹ He meant by this that a revolution is not simply a seizure of power, but more generally the systematic restructuring of the way that people make their world, both as knowledge and as relationships. Every element of his social analysis and theory of revolution hinges on this problem; and since there was no greater theorist of collective moral phenomena in turn-of-the-century Europe than Emile Durkheim, this is also the general basis for comparison between their conceptual spaces.

Little will be understood of the following discussion if a categorical understanding of morality is not put aside at the outset. Gramsci and Durkheim were not (or were secondarily) interested in ‘ethics’, the classical philosophical problematic of the determination of universally proper action with respect to discoverable standards of good and evil.² They understood moral commitments to be grounded in the particular history of any given society or social group. That humans live together, that they share certain basic conceptions of the world and act accordingly because they feel that they ‘ought’ to, that these conceptions vary over time, space, and social structure — these were their basic premises.³ That

¹This formulation’s direct source was Renan, who was widely read among the intellectual left of Gramsci’s generation in Italy. A short but interesting piece on this relationship, tracing ‘intellectual and moral reform’ further back to Saint-Simon, is Regina Pozzi, “Alle origini del problema gramsciano della ‘riforma intellettuale e morale’ .Sorel, Renan, e le suggestioni della cultura francese,” in Franco Sbarberi, ed., *Teoria politica e società industriale: Ripensare Gramsci* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1988). Roberto Vicini, “Aspetti illuministici del pensiero gramsciano,” *Studium* 4, (1980), 463, traces this ‘origin’ to Proudhon. I would add that this problematic, tied to the idea of a civic religion, is strong in Rousseau, who in turn was indebted to Machiavelli. The need for some source of moral cohesion at the heart of the republic of virtue is an insight as old as republics.

²Weber, I would note, was capable of wresting this term from the essentialism of philosophy in order to apply it to a number of comprehensive and consistent ‘moral orders’ (to come full circle), and 20th-century philosophy has to a great degree been concerned with just this contextualization.

³“But... the notion of ‘structure’ is where classical sociological theory begins, not where it ends.” Jeffrey C. Alexander, *The Antinomies of Classical Thought: Marx and Durkheim (Theoretical*

societies are based on sets of rules of proper perception and action is a *sociologically realistic* presupposition: without some such agreement there would *be* no society, merely an aggregate of unformed individuals completely unable to communicate.⁴ But what these rules are or could be is a question that must be explored in terms of the historical possibilities of any particular developing society. This is not relativism, a concept of license or despair that makes sense only in comparison to the universality that is the baseline of ethics. If a label is needed, perhaps ‘sociological realism’ will do.⁵

I. Durkheim: Moral Order and Social Solidarity

Emile Durkheim was among the throng of European intellectuals at the turn of the century who understood the old world to be in decline; unlike many of them, he also saw a basis for confidence that a new one could be constructed in its place. To his understanding, the period was one of open transition rather than collapse.⁶ He understood the problem to be a breakdown of moral integration and intensity, and saw the solution in a renewal of social solidarity on a different basis.⁷

For Durkheim, societies are moral phenomena. He was concerned primarily with the sources of social integration and cohesion, with what binds humans into functional so-

Logic in Sociology, Vol. Two (Berkeley: U of California P, 1982), 79. This in response to critics of Durkheim’s (and Marx’s) ‘structuralism’, and in the context of an interesting review of the literature on Durkheim’s liberalism or conservatism, exclusive concern with problems of order or change, voluntarism or anti-voluntarism.

⁴This picture of individuals floating free without any externally-derived structure of knowledge or action is the basic presupposition of classical liberalism, a position Durkheim referred to as a ‘monstrosity’. By the way, I recognize that there are still liberal “sociologists” and rational choice theorists out there who would disagree with the assertion of sociological realism I have made here, and with the social constructionism that follows. My compliments for making it this deep into a book that must be irritating you terribly.

⁵I understand the historical-intellectual task of philosophy to be the discovery of *standards that do not move*. When one ceases to seek such standards, the language of philosophy becomes an impediment. This was the recognition behind the formation of Marx’s historical materialism, and both Durkheim’s and Weber’s sociologies. They could not get their work done the old way, and sought a new one.

⁶In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci also noted that ‘the old was dying but the new could not yet be born’.

⁷To modern eyes the characterization of social phenomena in terms of morality may appear charmingly fuzzy at best; but one must place this emphasis in the context of a time when it was still quite legitimate to talk about human affairs in terms of ‘spirit’. Durkheim was interested precisely in providing a social grounding for what had hitherto appeared mysterious and inexplicable; in this sense, his investigation was quite concrete, and his terminology still has something valuable to teach us. ì

cieties. Throughout his career, he saw the source of social cohesion in a fully elaborated moral order. This consists of a complex of rules regulating the interaction of individuals and legitimized at a level higher than the individual so as to have authority over her.⁸ Moral order fundamentally structures both individual and collective knowledge and action. Thus, in healthy societies every individual is bound equally into a shared moral community that limits her range of action and expectation. But far from being negative for the individual, this limitation is essential for her well-being and development according to her nature. “No living being can be happy or even exist unless his needs are sufficiently proportioned to his means.”⁹ Without binding limits on needs beyond the purely physical, those needs become functionally limitless, or infinite: they can never be satisfied. And “to pursue a goal which is by definition unattainable is to condemn oneself to a state of perpetual unhappiness.”¹⁰ Durkheim’s famous analysis of anomic suicide was intended to show that the absence of restraint, far from being the ideal state for the individual, is in fact pathological.¹¹

Durkheim’s fundamental insight was that the source of this restraint could not be the individual herself:

Imagine a being liberated from all external restraint, a despot still more absolute than those of which history tells us, a despot that no external power can restrain or influence. By definition, the desires of such a being are irresistible. Shall we say, then, that he is all-powerful? Certainly not,

⁸My customary use of the general feminine pronoun here may seem especially jarring to readers of Jennifer M. Lehmann’s bold and groundbreaking *Durkheim and Women* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1994). She shows that women are invisible in Durkheim’s theory, and critically reconstructs a deeply antifeminist Durkheim based on his few scattered references to women and his general silence about them. The question remains open: I often would interpret those references differently than she does, and silences can be interpreted any way one chooses.

⁹Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: Free Press, 1951), 246.

¹⁰Durkheim, *Suicide*, 248.

¹¹This was in response to liberals and utilitarians in general, and Herbert Spencer in particular. But Durkheim also rejected Kant’s conception of morality, since it was based on a self-regulating individual. As will soon be seen, Durkheim considered this impossible. Note too that Durkheim’s much-criticized efforts to sort out the ‘normal’ and the ‘pathological’ in societies and social action may be less upsetting if the parameters of the sociology of rationality are kept in mind. Societies work only if there is a shared basic set of agreements about how they ought to work, grounded in collective practices. Thus, societies have a deep contextual ‘logic’ (in the dialectical sense) or ‘rationality’ (in the sense I have been developing). Durkheim believed that this could be grasped for any given social order, allowing an assessment of health based on ‘internal’ criteria.

since he himself cannot resist his desires. They are masters of him, as of everything else. He submits to them; he does not dominate them. In a word, when the inclinations are totally liberated, when nothing sets bounds to them, they themselves become tyrannical, and their first slave is precisely the person who experiences them. What a sad picture this presents.¹²

This is not to say that the self-regulation of the individual is impossible — in fact, as societies grow more complex and the range of specific situations that shared morals directly can cover diminishes, the rational (in the technical sense of active, systematically calculating) individual element of moral action becomes more and more important: modern virtue is the *conscious and active* acceptance of collective morality. Indeed, “self-mastery is the first condition of all true power, of all liberty worthy of the name.”¹³ But this self-regulation cannot originate in the individual, by her very nature. It must be internalized from an external source which the individual sees as larger than herself and having authority over her.

The only possible such source is the moral authority of the community. “Either directly and as a whole, or through the agency of one of its organs, society alone can play this moderating role; for it is the only moral power superior to the individual, the authority of which he accepts.”¹⁴ This moral authority is mediated through a complex of collective representations that provide seemingly-concrete referents for the invisible power of the collectivity. Thus, as a large example, Durkheim argued in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* that religion is actually the symbolic representation of society as a whole; religion provides an embodiment for society’s externality and moral authority *vis-à-vis* the individual. In turn, the moral order will be more or less binding upon the individual, the power of the collectivity more or less effectively felt, depending on the prevailing historical form of social solidarity and the degree to which the latter actually corresponds to the evolution of social practices and structures.

¹²Emile Durkheim, *Moral Education: A Study in the Theory and Application of the Sociology of Education*, ed. Everett K. Wilson, trans. Everett K. Wilson and Herman Schnurer (New York: Free Press, 1961), 44.

¹³Durkheim, *Moral Education*, 45. Durkheim has often been taken to be an anti-individualist, but I hope that the last few quotations have dispelled this error. Durkheim was intimately concerned with the individual, but realized that the personality could only be formed within a social context. This is a different notion of the individual from that of his liberal opponents: unfortunately, their view of the matter still largely holds the field.

¹⁴Durkheim, *Suicide*, 249.

II. The Division of Formative Labor

In his first book, *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim argued that the moral order of modern society was in fact in the midst of a critical period of transition due to precisely such a change in the prevailing historical form of social solidarity. In this book he described the evolution as taking place between what he called “mechanical solidarity” and “organic solidarity” (he was later to abandon this terminology as his analysis grew more nuanced). Under mechanical solidarity the collective consciousness — “the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society”¹⁵ — very nearly comprises the whole of the individual consciousness, and exerts very particular control over it. This corresponds to a social order in which the division of labor is not far advanced, and individuals are closely tied into social groups that demand their unreflecting obedience to encompassing rules of conduct. Morally, the community is the focus of sacredness, a fact that Durkheim brought out through an analysis of the nature of criminality.¹⁶ Thus, the moral order that mechanical solidarity embodies socially is characterized by tremendous integration and cohesion, but at the expense of individual development.

The transition to organic solidarity, Durkheim argued, entails precisely the opposite difficulty. As the division of labor increases, it becomes increasingly impossible for any system of moral regulation to be all-encompassing, as social interactions become more varied and complex. A more generalized moral order becomes necessary, characterized by general precepts rather than specific injunctions. It becomes the responsibility of the individual to reflect on these general precepts in each peculiar circumstance to determine how they might be applicable. As a result, the moral persona of the individual is radically enhanced, and in fact the individual comes to be the focus of sacredness. This he called the

¹⁵Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. W.D. Halls (New York: Free Press, 1984), 38-9. I am not sure why the French title, *La division du travail social*, has not been translated “the division of social labor,” which seems a more straightforward rendering and also more accurate to Durkheim’s project. Readers of Marx will immediately understand that the distinction is not trivial.

¹⁶Specifically, Durkheim notes that criminal acts are those that are committed against the collective consciousness. Under mechanical solidarity, the collective consciousness is focused on the community, which as a whole embodies the moral order and is thus sacred. Under organic solidarity, the collective consciousness comes to consider the individual to be its focus; thus, it is the individual who is sacred and crimes are those acts committed against her. In both instances, then, crimes are acts against the collective consciousness, but the focus of this is radically different. For a further discussion of this see also Durkheim’s “Two Laws of Penal Evolution,” in *Emile Durkheim on Institutional Analysis*, ed., trans. Mark Traugott (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978).

“cult of the individual.”¹⁷ But the importance of the general moral order remains critical even as its nature changes, and its influence must remain constant as a curb to destructive anarchic individualism — anomie.

This is the nub of the problem as Durkheim saw it. As the traditional sources of social cohesion and integration, the old corporative groups, break down, the form of social solidarity which they had created is also eroded. This results in the decay of the old moral order, as the groups which had previously served to bind and regulate the individual lose their integrity and thus their power. In the text of *The Division of Labor in Society* Durkheim expressed confidence that the new form of social solidarity that would replace the old is inherent in the nature of the social division of labor. Here his argument was that the advanced division of labor in its pure form would create objective interdependence and a sense of participation in a larger common enterprise among the producers, and would serve as the foundation for a new social solidarity and thus a new moral order. This new moral order would simply consist of general principles of conduct between individuals, for example in the writing of contracts.

In later works, however (including the second preface to *The Division of Labor*), Durkheim came to believe that the solidarity generated by mere interdependence is unsatisfactory as the sole foundation of the new moral order, because the sheer generality of it does not provide individuals with that clear sense of moral obligation to the group essential to moral order — partly because what the group is remains too distant and vague. This argument is fully elaborated in *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* (taken from lectures at the Sorbonne), in which Durkheim expanded and deepened his analysis of moral order to include several distinct subgroups: individual morals, the domestic morals of the family, professional ethics, civic morals, and “the morals that govern the relations of men as human beings.”¹⁸ The latter is the aspect of the modern moral order that Durkheim saw arising from the division of labor. But Durkheim now came to understand that the division of labor has driven modern society beyond the possibility of any single shared moral framework’s being sufficient to provide a secure moral base for every individual. At the same time, the old corporative groups (guilds, etc.) that used to provide a focus for the

¹⁷He intended ‘cult’ in a value-neutral, analytical sense.

¹⁸Emile Durkheim, *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals*, trans. Cornelia Brookfield (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1958), 5.

power of the community over each individual are no longer viable.¹⁹ Hence, the old moral order founded in mechanical solidarity no longer is in force, but modern society has yet to solidify a form of social solidarity that can serve as the foundation for a new moral order. The individual becomes morally sacred, but is left without any relation to a binding moral authority that can moderate her otherwise uncontrollable and unattainable desires. This is a crisis indeed.

Durkheim's response to the moral flux and indeterminacy of the transition from mechanical solidarity (in which the individual is completely subordinated to the community) to organic solidarity (in which the individual has for the first time attained independent value) was to seek a new form of social solidarity based on new groups that may to a degree bind the individual, but that may not overwhelm her. For Durkheim there could be no return to the past: the objective social conditions of mechanical solidarity, most importantly low social density and restricted social complexity, no longer exist and cannot be restored. Nor would he want to return if we could, since he considered the increased importance and development of the individual under organic solidarity to be a great advance. What Durkheim proposed was essentially a system of moral checks and balances, a "polycellular or polysegmental"²⁰ moral order, the effect of which would be to protect the individual from the domination of any one focus of moral authority, while still assuring the necessary socialization and regulation. This could be called a 'division of formative labor'.

The two key segments of this moral order are to be professional ethics and civic morals. Professional ethics are the domain of the professional organizations, which are to be mostly responsible for the socialization of the individual. This is to be the level at which the moral authority of the group is to be embodied tangibly enough to have a deep effect on her. The professional groups also are to serve as a buffer between the naked individual and the power of the state, here defined as the instrument of government.²¹ In

¹⁹See Durkheim, *Professional Ethics*, 34-37.

²⁰Durkheim, *Professional Ethics*, 47.

²¹Durkheim, *Professional Ethics*, 47-8. Durkheim thus differentiated between the state as apparatus and as embodiment of the collective consciousness — the latter, he said, "goes beyond the State at every point... the State is at the centre only of a particular kind of consciousness, of one that is limited but higher, clearer and with a more vivid sense of itself," 50. This notion clearly owes a great deal to Rousseau, but that is another discussion.

contrast, civic morals are to govern the duties of the citizen to the state and equally importantly, of the state to the citizen. Thus the state is to serve as a second focus of moral commitment and as a guarantee against the domination of the individual by the professional group (what could be called excessive integration).

This solution does not rely on the reasoned actions of individuals. They are to be the beneficiaries of the new moral order, which beyond the necessary restraint of individual desires will make possible ever more conscious participation in social and moral life. But the moral order can only be transformed at the level of the community, never at that of the individual; only a new form of social solidarity can give the moral order the power it needs to be effective. And the authority of the moral order, mediated by collective representations, must always be unquestioned, even as details of its application are debated. Thus, beneath the increasingly rational (conscious, calculating, active) surface of human interactions is the necessary foundation of the moral order that is necessarily obeyed pre-rationally.

III. Knowledge and Action in Society

The nature of this deep structure of collective knowledge is the subject of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.²² In his last major work, Durkheim developed a sweeping analysis of religion as the foundational element of moral order of any kind, containing the basic premises that structure social knowledge and action. Durkheim's definition of religion arrives as the result of the systematic logical exclusion of any restricted definition, but is still deceptively precise: "*A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden — beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere*

²²Durkheim's method was to work backward to discover the most primitive manifestation of religion, which he found in Australian totemism, and then to use this most elementary form of religious life to unpack the basic features of modern social order. From an anthropological standpoint this method, his empirical data, and his specific conclusions are highly questionable (as has repeatedly been remarked), but this makes little difference for my purposes. In seeking the 'origin' of religion Durkheim was not committed to discovering the particular primacy of the aborigines, but to revealing the basic social foundations of all human life. This theoretical project benefits from an empirical basis, and must make sense of particular social phenomena, but is independent of specific details. See his discussion at the beginning of his Conclusion, 418-9. In this connection, it is helpful throughout *The Elementary Forms* to read 'origin' as 'continuous source'.

to them.”²³ But as it turns out, this definition is a heuristic space-maintainer that in Durkheim’s analytical complex encompasses any manifestation of comprehensive collective solidarity based on deeply shared premises — because in each instance it is the *community* (or the individual who is its focus) that is sacred.²⁴ For Durkheim, religion is the chief form of the symbolic representation of the community to itself; through it, the world is conceived of and acted in, and individuals are tied into and empowered by society. Totemism and science are located squarely on this same social/ moral continuum, separated only by degree of systematic conceptual elaboration.²⁵

Social knowledge and action are bound up and structured in collective beliefs and practices, and social energy is released and channeled through intense involvement in this collective life. Durkheim pointed out that it is only in the midst of collective activity, mediated by collective representations, that “moral remaking” can occur.²⁶ These situations create an “effervescence,” a moral ardor that is the key to collective transformation.²⁷ Through participation in religious rites and practices, individuals are swept up into an intensely moving and motivating surge of feeling; their capacities are elevated beyond what could be achieved by any person alone.²⁸ The periodic collective reaffirmations of the power of society renew and refresh moral order, and create the opening for its change.²⁹

23Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 44.

24“For the principal features of collective life to have begun as none other than various features of religious life, it is evident that religious life must necessarily have been the eminent form and, as it were, the epitome of collective life. If religion gave birth to all that is essential in society, that is so because the idea of society is the soul of religion.” Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 421.

25In the study of the history of science, this type of insight is very much on the cutting edge: modern science is a ‘local knowledge system’, producing effective but not unique ‘situated knowledge’. I owe this particular statement of the issues to a talk by Sandra Harding (Spring 1995). The anthropology of science as a cultural system (what *are* these natives thinking), influenced in part by Clifford Geertz, would seem to provide a traceable lineage back to Durkheim himself; but Durkheim requires a little too much ‘mining’ to be immediately useful, nowadays. And even people who understand that a certain amount of pre-rational ‘faith’ is intermixed with their knowledge tend to balk at the terminology of ‘religion’.

26Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 429. Here, by the way, is Durkheim’s most explicit statement that “we are going through a period of transition and moral mediocrity.”

27Comparison with Bergson, Sorel, Peguy, and others reveals how deeply rooted in French conceptual space this type of insight was at the turn of the century.

28This vision is in stark contrast to the picture of collective action as an inevitable plunge toward the least common denominator articulated shortly after the war by Freud, especially in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921).

29These may be revolutions, reformations, paradigm shifts, or extra-good parties.

The process is not a ‘dispassionately’ rational one, and cannot be predicted by science:

But as important as these borrowings from the established sciences may be, they are in no way sufficient; faith is above all a spur to action, whereas science, no matter how advanced, always remains at a distance from action. Science is fragmentary and incomplete; it advances but slowly and is never finished; but life — that cannot wait. Theories whose calling is to make people live and make them act, must therefore rush ahead of science and complete it prematurely. They are possible only if the demands of practicality and vital necessities, such as we feel without distinctly conceiving them, push thought beyond what science permits us to affirm.³⁰

We cannot individually ‘think through’ the deepest presuppositions that structure our knowledge; these are constructed and transformed collectively, and receive their authority or ‘truth’ at that level. What we can do is become active, conscious participants in this collective moral order. “We can understand very well that it is in our nature to be limited by forces outside us; accordingly, we accept this limitation freely, because it is natural and good without being any the less real. Only through the fact of our informed consent it is no longer a humiliation and a bondage.”³¹

Thus, the healthy life of society has at its core a collective element of regulation and integration that is inherently pre-rational for any individual, and that must be constantly renewed. In return for this limitation of the individual’s abstract freedom (a notion possible itself only within the modern moral order based on the sacredness of the in-

30Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 432-3. This presents a striking parallel to Sorel’s notion of the social myth, precisely a theory destined to make men live and act:

1 A knowledge of what the myths contain in the way of details which will actually form part of the history of the future is then of small importance; they are not astrological almanacs; it is even possible that nothing which they contain will ever come to pass... the myth must be judged as a means of acting on the present; any attempt to discuss how far it can be taken literally as future history is devoid of sense.

2 Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 135-6. Durkheim and Sorel were both rationalists and moralists committed to science and aware of its limitations. Weber could also be described in this way, as the famous juxtaposition of the essays on science and politics as vocations reveals. The comparison of Durkheim to Sorel (and Renan, Rolland, Bergson, and Peguy) suggests a torturous but interesting chain of linkages between Gramsci and Durkheim, but without going through those contortions it is already revealing that such deep conceptual overlaps existed. Gramsci himself flirted with such a reconstruction: see, e.g., *SPN*, 395; *FSPN*, 25-6.

31Durkheim, *Moral Education*, 118.

dividual) comes the support and power of the group, forces that can certainly be channeled through the correct structuring institutions.³²

Durkheim's central conception was that the existential outlines of human life are bound up in society. We are shaped as beings by our society. Our knowledge is cognitively grounded by categories of thought that receive their plausibility from their collective historical elaboration; and through science we reach the highest pinnacle of our social and individual existence by recognizing this and making it conscious.³³ As individuals, we are incapable of self-mastery, let alone mastery of our environment. But collectively, we are part of an organism of enormous power, and we can share in that power by becoming active participants in it. This is the collective mastery of contingency characteristic of republican thought, but within that conceptual space Durkheim was to date the most sensitive to the multiple levels of conscious and unconscious formation of collective will. For Durkheim, we *always* live in a republic. This republic becomes political to the extent that humans become conscious of and fully embrace social life as a collective creation.

IV. Gramsci: Common Sense, Good Sense, Philosophy

Every social stratum has its own 'common sense' and 'good sense', which are basically the most widespread conception of life and man. Every philosophical current leaves a sedimentation of 'common sense': this is the document of its historical reality. Common sense is not something rigid and stationary, but is in continuous transformation, becoming enriched with scientific notions and philosophical opinions that have entered into common circulation. 'Common sense' is the folklore of philosophy and always stands midway between folklore proper (folklore as it is normally understood) and the philosophy, science and economics of the scientists. Common sense creates the folklore of the future, a relatively rigidified phase of popular knowledge in a given time and place.³⁴

³²As outlined in the earlier discussion on *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals*. Here, by the way, Durkheim came closest to the constitutionalist variant of republicanism mentioned in Chapter 4, at the boundaries of the divide with liberalism.

³³This consciousness includes a reflective awareness of the locality of science, too. "If bearing the seal of science is usually enough today to gain a sort of privileged credibility, that is because we have faith in science. But that faith is not essentially different from religious faith. The value we attribute to science depends, in the last analysis, upon the idea we collectively have of its nature and role in life, which is to say that it expresses a state of opinion. The reason is that everything in social life rests on opinion, including science itself." Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 439.

³⁴SCW, 420-1. I have altered their rendition of *strato* as 'class' in the first sentence, because while Gramsci sometimes made this substitution for reasons of prison censorship, this was not always true; and in a case like this, there is little sense in prejudging the issue.

The contextualization of reason is a powerful conceptual instrument, because it re-locates the construction of the world firmly into human hands. But the local solidity of collective representations cannot be taken lightly; this is one practical distinction between a sociology of rationality and philosophical idealism. The world is not something we just ‘dreamed up’, nor is changing it as simple as ‘changing our minds’. Historical structures of knowledge have a weight of years and aggregate numbers that gives them an enormous inertial reality.³⁵ They act like material forces because they are the material from which each new generation receives a basic conception of the world. Further, as Durkheim recognized, this collective historical elaboration gives these structures an existential objectivity: they are ‘tried and true’.³⁶ They *work*.³⁷

Gramsci appreciated the existential objectivity of collective representations; he called them “common sense.” He did not expect to be able to explain them away as ‘ideology’, dismiss them as ‘false consciousness’, or work around them by going ahead with the revolution and hoping they would be transformed ‘automatically’. The revolution required an ‘intellectual and moral reform’ — common sense had to be transformed into ‘good sense’ — because of the existential objectivity of the basic categories that structure social

³⁵“A collective representation, because it is collective, already presents assurances of objectivity. Not without reason has it been able to generalize and maintain itself with such persistence. If it was in disagreement with the nature of things, it would not have succeeded in acquiring broad and prolonged dominion over minds.” Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 439.

³⁶The most concentrated discussion of this is in Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 434ff. and especially 438-9. Perhaps Gramsci’s most succinct observation in this connection was tossed off in an early letter from prison to his sister-in-law Tania: “I always believed that two masterpieces (I say this very seriously) summarized the thousand-year-old experience of mankind in the field of mass organization: the corporal’s manual and the Catholic catechism. I’ve become convinced that it is necessary to add, though in a field that is much more restricted and of an exceptional nature, prison regulations, which contain true treasures of psychological introspection.” *LPI*, 97. The concentration of effective knowledge in historically-elaborated (that is, non-intentional or authorial) artifacts fascinated Gramsci.

³⁷It has not escaped me that the conceptual space I am calling the sociology of rationality significantly overlaps with pragmatism and existentialism, both responses to the same fundamental conceptual shift marked by differences of place and time, and neither typically as sensitive to either history or social structure. On the issue of pragmatism, see Gramsci’s note in *SPN*, 372-3.

knowledge and consequently humans' construction of the world.³⁸ Marxist political culture could only emerge out of an active critique of the old culture on its own terrain.

For the marxist Gramsci, these categories had their roots 'in the last analysis' in the relations of production.³⁹ But he knew that within complex history this link has often become so intermediated as to be *practically useless*.⁴⁰ Revolutionary practice has to treat common sense as historically real in order to reestablish its class linkages politically. In Gramsci, class ceased to be an *a priori* principle of political compression and became the contingent goal of political practice:⁴¹

It always happens that single persons belong to more than one society and often to societies that are in contrast. A totalizing politics tends therefore: 1.) to obtain that the members of a particular [*determinato*] party should find in this party alone all of the satisfactions that previously they found in a multiplicity of organizations, that is, to break all of the strings that tie these members to extraneous cultural organisms; 2.) to destroy all

38It would be possible to structure a comparison of Gramsci and Durkheim with Croce and Sorel as the conceptual intermediaries, a strategy that I will adopt to a degree in Chapter 6, on Weber. Gramsci toyed with crocean or sorelian language in many instances when his insights were closest to Durkheim's, e.g.: "In crocean language: when the introduction of a new morality in conformity with a new conception of the world is achieved, this finishes by also introducing that conception; that is, an entire philosophical reformation is determined." *Q 10 II*, §12, 1250. But there is an abstract dimension to Croce's thinking that works against the point I am making here about the historical solidity of moral phenomena. 1

39For the dialectical solidity of 'ideology' (and Gramsci's estimation of Marx on the subject), see *SPN*, 376-7.

40Gramsci was not a very good economist, although he was capable of striking insights in the field. Derek Boothman has collected Gramsci's more comprehensive notes on economics in *FSPN*, and they are a spotty bunch, barely adequate to sustain Gramsci's claims to marxism. (Boothman's General Introduction surveys these notes and calls attention to Gramsci's important relationship to Piero Sraffa, the brilliant economist.) In general, Gramsci treated 'production' in the broad sense discussed above in the Introduction and treated economic issues as aspects of a more inclusive, flexible understanding of social order in which the production of social life is almost infinitely mediated. Bobbio's famous and oft-emulated characterization of Gramsci as the 'theorist of the superstructures' is thus a peculiar imposition of economic categories, when Gramsci's conception clearly was based on a practical rejection of this causal dualism (i.e. structure causes superstructure). It should be noted that this deemphasis of hard economics was characteristic of Italian marxism, but most of Gramsci's peers substituted a simplistic *a priori* economic determinism for it by default — resulting in satisfaction with class compression as the catch-all motor of history.

41This and what follows may be taken in a general sense as a rebuttal of the criticisms of Gramsci as ultimately hamstrung by the marxist class compression advanced by Laclau and Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and Sue Golding in *Gramsci's Democratic Theory* (see my Appendix) — insightful and fruitful though I think these criticisms are. In both cases, appreciation for Gramsci's practical political and conceptual flexibility is blocked by the critics' intellectual commitment to the same sort of essentialist thinking they believe themselves to be overcoming.

of the other organizations or incorporate them into a system of which the party is the sole regulator.⁴²

Class consciousness cannot simply be ‘awakened’ or ‘discovered’ — it has to be built, through struggle.

Durkheim focused primarily on the widely shared conceptual artifacts that structure large-scale social interaction, but Gramsci went on to explore the murky depths of particular local rationalities — fragmentary and contradictory conceptions of the world left behind by the passage of history, locally effective conceptual structures, contingent realities. He understood common sense to be a densely articulated mixture of often disparate and contradictory elements ranging from the general to the specific. Its historical elaborations and conservative biases had required an incredible intricacy of “molecular” propagation over a very long period of time; to change it would require intricate efforts of re-formation at all of its levels.

In describing what would be required to *study* the formation of a movement capable of carrying out a revolution, Gramsci revealed the parameters of adequate political action as a problem of the formation of a collective will:

It would be possible to study concretely the formation of a collective historical movement, analysing it in all its molecular phases — a thing which is rarely done, since it would weigh every treatment down. Instead, currents of opinion are normally taken as already constituted around a group or a dominant personality. This is the problem which in modern times is expressed in terms of the party, or coalition of related parties: how a party is first set up, how its organisational strength and social influence are developed, etc. It requires an extremely minute, molecular process of extreme, capillary analysis, the documentation for which is made up of an immense quantity of books, pamphlets, review and newspaper articles, conversations and oral debates repeated countless times, and which in their gigantic aggregation represent this long labour which gives birth to a collective will with a certain degree of homogeneity — with the degree necessary and sufficient to achieve an action which is coordinated and simultaneous in the time and the geographical space in which the historical event takes place.⁴³

42Q 6, §136, 800. The brutality of the articulated method is in direct proportion to the contingency of the outcome.

43Q 8, 195. This is a very rich note, but its importance is easy to miss precisely because it is framed as a speculative plan of study rather than an account of revolutionary preparation. But there is no doubt that Gramsci was discussing the formation of a revolutionary party and the conditions for a revolution (the ‘historical event’). Clear too is his rejection of the idea that class consciousness (collective will) can be taken to be “already constituted,” without the mediation of the

The molecular formation of a revolutionary collective will is the intricate disassembly of centuries of accumulated knowledge embedded in common sense, and the equally intricate reassembly of a new comprehensive conception of the world, in which the collective power of humans is consciously and coherently affirmed — for Gramsci, marxism, the highest development of humanism. This is the deep level of revolution, undergirding politics as it is generally conceived.

Common sense, for Gramsci, is the most basic level of conceptual structuring of the world, and operates almost entirely unconsciously. Yet, its success in providing everyone with a basic approach to life in society reveals that even at this level there is a dense, substantive rationality.⁴⁴ It would be ludicrous to think that people could simply be ‘talked out’ of this ‘false consciousness’ — the role of argument and reasoning is consequently very limited in Gramsci’s theory of revolutionary practice.⁴⁵ The utility of argumentation only emerges through flexible repetition (it is not therefore ‘persuasive’ in the rationalist sense of this term); argument must be tailored to communicate within common sense, and then must be absorbed by becoming part of accepted normalcy. “Patient and systematic ‘repetition’ is a fundamental methodological principle. But this must not be a mechanical, ‘obsessive’, material repetition, but an adaptation of each concept to the different peculiarities and cultural traditions.”⁴⁶ The blinding light of intellectual awakening is entirely absent here: instead, effective common sense must be replaced bit by bit, by repeated demonstrations to people living in the world of the superior effectiveness of a new conception that offers a recognizably better world (marxism, of course).

immense and lengthy political acculturation described.

44“‘The popular public does not think that a problem such as whether the external world exists objectively can even be asked. One just has to enunciate the problem in these terms to provoke an irresistible and gargantuan outburst of laughter. The public ‘believes’ that the external world is objectively real, but it is precisely here that the question arises: what is the origin of this ‘belief’ and what critical value does it ‘objectively’ have? In fact the belief is of religious origin, even if the man who shares it is indifferent to religion.” *SPN*, 441. The theological-guarantee approach to reality is thus a central component of common sense, giving it much of its solidity (although I might add that people get a pretty solid existential sense of objectivity by bumping into table corners as well, a factor that Gramsci undervalues precisely because it has historically always been superimposed with a theological validation of the experience as somehow ‘meaningful’ — Weber’s ‘theodicy’).

45See, e.g., *SPN*, 439-40.

46*SCW*, 417.

Indeed, common sense theorizes the world, and by absorbing it and by participating in its execution and elaboration every single person is revealed to be a philosopher. In Gramsci's sense, in frank opposition to the familiar elite conception of the term, philosophy is not a matter of speculative abstraction from the grimy world of things to the pure world of essences:

It is essential to destroy the widespread prejudice that philosophy is a strange and difficult thing just because it is the specific intellectual activity of a particular category of specialists or of professional and systematic philosophers. It must first be shown that all men are 'philosophers', by defining the limits and characteristics of the 'spontaneous philosophy' which is proper to everybody. This philosophy is contained in: 1. language itself, which is a totality of determined notions and concepts and not just of words grammatically devoid of content; 2. 'common sense' and 'good sense'; 3. popular religion and, therefore, also in the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting, which are collectively bundled together under the name of 'folklore' ⁴⁷.

For Gramsci, philosophy is any integral or encompassing conception of the world, and a philosopher is someone who acts intelligibly in a world she conceives. Common sense imposes a conception of the world and, consequently, standards of rational action within it; as such, it is the foundation of a collectively elaborated and shared moral order, a primitive but intricate structure of social formation, resistant to criticism because of its *success* in making the world intelligible.⁴⁸

From the revolutionary standpoint, Gramsci realized, the problem with common sense is that it is unconscious, so that its adherents experience their own conception of the world as an external contingency. Furthermore, there is not just one common sense but an enormous variety of common senses (or local rationalities), developed and validated within contexts bounded by class, geography, religion, language, education, and other historical variables. For humans to remake the world, they must take control of the conceptual apparatus that structures the world, by building a new collective consciousness that is both widely shared and fully conscious — effective in an ordered, thought-out as well as existential fashion. This requires an intellectual and moral reform in which common sense is transformed into good sense, then philosophy.

⁴⁷*SPN*, 323.

⁴⁸This created the problem discussed in *SPN*, 31, of the primary socialization of the child in the family as an obstacle to her reception of the systematic moral education of the school.

Philosophy is intellectual order, which neither religion nor common sense can be. It is to be observed that religion and common sense do not coincide either, but that religion is an element of fragmented common sense. Moreover common sense is a collective noun, like religion: there is not just one common sense, for that too is a product of history and a part of the historical process. Philosophy is criticism and the superseding of religion and 'common sense'. In this sense it coincides with 'good' as opposed to 'common sense'.⁴⁹

The movement from common sense to good sense to philosophy is the movement from local, fragmentary rationalities to a single orderly, coherent, comprehensive one that has been thought through and agreed upon collectively.

V. The Division of Formative Labor

In Chapter 3 I outlined Gramsci's early theorization of what I called a revolutionary division of labor, involving the factory councils, unions, and party as 'polycellular or polysegmental' (these, it will be recalled, are Durkheim's terms) foci of revolutionary consciousness-building. By the time of his imprisonment, Gramsci had become far more focused on the party as the single source of *direction* in this process, but his sense of its *elements* had become correspondingly more vast and inclusive. The *Prison Notebooks* collect the materials for an analysis of social formation that is breathtaking in its complexity.

Since the very first Italian publication of the *Notebooks* it has been customary to organize the notes thematically, a practice continued in the selections in English; and there are obvious heuristic advantages to this that will be exploited below.⁵⁰ But one should not proceed without acknowledging that much is lost of the fundamentally unsystematic richness of Gramsci's procedure, the juxtaposition of the most disparate elements of practical knowledge, which strain the limits of any conceivable synthesis. The *Notebooks* are actually a chronicle of Gramsci intending to be systematic and getting sidetracked at almost every step — both by the circumstances of his imprisonment and by his own intellectual and practical commitment to anti-dogmatism. As a result, the text as a

⁴⁹*SPN*, 325-6. See *SPN*'s footnote for a question of translation.

⁵⁰The three collections that together provide the most comprehensive picture are *SPN*, *SCW*, and *FSPN*. See the Appendix for a more detailed discussion. The proper first response to any particular interpretive formulation of Gramsci's 'theory' is a wince; the complete *Notebooks* teach this better than do the selections.

whole reveals the limitations of systematic procedure altogether, something that in most large *oeuvres* gets hidden with a fictive overlay of coherence.

Gramsci's ambition was nothing less than to understand the world in all of its complexity without taking shortcuts, as the essential prerequisite to changing it: a spectacular and illustrative failure, mirrored in all subsequent attempts to capture the essence of his effort. What this means in practice is that the depth of nuance in the *Notebooks* is unrepresentable, except by itself.⁵¹ Either one proceeds monographically, giving up before starting; or one simply translates the full text into new languages.⁵² Comparison of Gramsci with his contemporaries is a local attempt to do the latter, supplying one possible fictive overlay of coherence (and principle of selection) from 'outside'.

The discussion of common sense has only sketched the broad outlines of the multitude of elements included in Gramsci's investigation of the formation of consciousness. Among the materials he was collecting were notes more or less easily categorized into the topical sections of the selections in translation: on the formation of intellectuals; the organization of education and culture; the history of Italy; the political party; the state and civil society; the organization of the workplace ('Americanism and Fordism'); the study of philosophy; and problems of marxism.⁵³ Also: literary criticism, including Dante, Manzoni, and Pirandello; language, linguistics, and folklore; national culture; intellectual mediocrities ('Father Bresciani's progeny'); popular literature; and journalism.⁵⁴ And finally: religion; economics; science, logic, and translatability; and the philosophy of Benedetto Croce.⁵⁵

51 "We cannot describe the individual phenomenon as it really was, because we cannot describe the whole." Georg Simmel, *The Problems of the Philosophy of History*, trans. and ed. Guy Oakes (New York: Free Press, 1977), 82f.; quoted in Wolfgang Schluchter, *The Rise of Western Rationalism: Max Weber's Developmental History*, trans. Guenther Roth (Berkeley: U of California P, 1981 [1979]), 176.

52 This is admitted with admirable candor by Sue Golding at the outset of *Gramsci's Democratic Theory*, although she does not then escape the temptation to essentialize the text in order to ground a critique of its limitations. This is probably unavoidable, but such efforts can never achieve closure in the rich openness of this text, so that the variety of alternative essentializations (aggressive interpretive strategies) is potentially infinite. Recall that Cammett's *Bibliografia gramsciana* lists more than 10,000 works about Gramsci and counting; how is this possible?

53 Headings from *SPN*.

54 Headings from *SCW*.

55 Headings from *FSPN*.

Gramsci's concrete attention to large-scale institutions and minute details alike can begin to make sense if we think of these lists, provisionally, not as isolated analyses but as markers of the dimensions of the intersecting social spaces within which the formation of persons (and ultimately, political personae) occurs. On this basis Gramsci's conceptual space can be appreciated as fundamentally open and 'modular', allowing various locally important or even decisive modes of social formation to be 'plugged in' as they become specifically relevant to the concrete revolutionary project. Running down the main entries from these lists, even at the more general conceptual level, provides a particular snapshot of this flexible, inclusive approach, frozen in time and space at Gramsci's death into the particular toolbox that the *Notebooks* became at that moment.

As a starting point, the formation of intellectuals is especially revealing. Far from being simply a question of an important subset of society, this turns out to be a question of comprehensive social formation as soon as Gramsci points out that "all men are intellectuals." "There is no human activity from which every form of intellectual participation can be excluded: *homo faber* cannot be separated from *homo sapiens*." Social life is *essentially theorized*, and all humans participate in the intellectual absorption, elaboration, and execution of theory with each action, as they conform their theories (received from common sense, religion, political consciousness, or some more local set of techniques) to the conditions that confront them and vice-versa. "Indeed the worker or proletarian, for example, is not specifically characterised by his manual or instrumental work, but by performing this work in specific conditions and in specific social relations," which require (his) application of theory, and sometimes even an active intellectual adjustment.⁵⁶ Life in society is formative of intellectual and conceptual capacities suited to that society and to one's role in it; under the proper conditions these capacities are already the necessary substrate of self-determination, since all social work is the basis for humans' mastery of their environment.

As an upper level of this general intellectuality, there is a stratum whose specific social function has been to elaborate the (local) technical knowledge of a particular historical period and class to the highest level of systematic consistency. The political form of this leadership is the party, as discussed in Chapter 4; its function is to lead while devel-

⁵⁶*SPN*, 8-9.

oping the political capacity of its members. But this division of labor is not essential: it is historically relational and fluid. Intellectuals of this specialized type are ‘produced’ organically within the general needs of social production, which implicates them in the dynamics of historical class relations — although this relationship is “‘mediated’ by the whole fabric of society and by the complex of superstructures, of which the intellectuals are, precisely, the ‘functionaries’” (or ‘staff’) ⁵⁷. These intellectual functionaries in turn mediate the technical knowledge and philosophy of the class to its members and to the subaltern classes that depend on it. The conditions of this social production of knowledge and intellectuality are part of the target of the revolution’s intellectual and moral reform. ⁵⁸

“School is the instrument through which intellectuals of various levels are elaborated.” The school is the social structure specifically devoted to shaping intellectuality; as such, it is the foundation of the institutional division of formative labor. ⁵⁹ Gramsci was fascinated by the fascist education reform devised by Giovanni Gentile, and used it as a foil for his own suggestions. “The common school, or school of humanistic formation (taking the term ‘humanism’ in a broad sense rather than simply in the traditional one) or general culture, should aim to insert young men and women into social activity after bringing them to a certain level of maturity, of capacity for intellectual and practical creativity, and of autonomy of orientation and initiative.” ⁶⁰ In its first phase, the school installs (or should install) a basis of discipline and general culture — universal moral regulation, serving as the basic substrate of shared skill (sitting still, paying attention, systematic study) and knowledge (civic values) that makes integrated social life possible. ⁶¹ This can only be accomplished initially through indoctrination and repetition — the child

⁵⁷*SPN*, 12.

⁵⁸An amusing, though ‘naturalistic’ analogy would be honey bees’ production at need of new queen bees by feeding ordinary worker bee larvae royal jelly exclusively.

⁵⁹Gramsci also understood that an even more fundamental orientation occurred in the family, which had to be either fought or reinforced but basically evened out once the child was in the grips of the school. *SPN*, 31.

⁶⁰*SPN*, 29.

⁶¹Essentially, children have to learn how to think in an orderly, systematic fashion, something they could not be expected to do on their own. In this connection, Gramsci understood the value of teaching dead languages (Greek, Latin) as a way of dissecting and understanding the history of a civilization, and of honing abstract reasoning skills in a way that makes them readily applicable to specific analytical needs. *SPN*, 37-8.

is incapable of reproducing through her own creativity a basic conception of the world laboriously worked out historically and collectively.⁶²

The initial training or ‘molding’ of the new generations later must give way to a creative individual development of the basic tools learned earlier and to active acceptance of their authority. “In the first phase the aim is to discipline, hence also to level out — to obtain a certain kind of ‘conformism’ which may be called ‘dynamic’. In the creative phase, on the basis that has been achieved of ‘collectivisation’ of the social type, the aim is to expand the personality — by now autonomous and responsible, but with a solid and homogeneous moral and social conscience.”⁶³ Students are led to understand the creative power of humans working together, and thus the social basis of the mastery of the world.⁶⁴ With this realization and conscious acceptance of the responsibility of participating in collective effort, the student achieves the basic capacities, not just of a member of society, but of an active, effective, freely participating citizen thereof, “capable of thinking, studying, and ruling — or controlling those who rule.”⁶⁵

Gramsci was sensitive to the very uneven and limited (“medieval”) political culture of Italy in general and of its working classes in particular, and saw this as perhaps the greatest impediment to active revolutionary politics. His notes on Italian history generally concern aspects of the failure of any of the historically ruling groups to include the masses in the political life of the nation, a situation in which change was never the product of an active, organized collective will but was always ‘passive’. The development and entrenchment of this dynamic produced a weak political and cultural elite, completely detached from the popular masses and relying for its strength on outside support (Spain, France, Austria in different times and contexts) and a politically powerless and infantile

⁶²In a letter to his wife about the education of their children, Gramsci rejected the notion that the purpose of education is to draw out qualities that are latent and spontaneous in the child. “I instead think that man as a whole is an historical formation, obtained by coercion (understood not only in its sense of brutality and external violence) and I think only this: for otherwise I would fall into a form of transcendentalism or immanentism.” *LPI*, 302. This emphasis on discipline was very characteristic. Harold Entwistle argues a point well-represented by his title, capturing very nicely the multiple levels of formation of the capacities of the citizen in Gramsci’s educational theory. *Antonio Gramsci. Conservative Schooling for Radical Politics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979).

⁶³*SPN*, 33.

⁶⁴*SPN*, 34.

⁶⁵*SPN*, 40.

mass capable only of spasmodic, eruptive tantrums.⁶⁶ The lack of any unifying force allowed tremendous local fragmentation to occur. The radical geographical and cultural disunity of the peninsula further contributed to the failure to emerge of a comprehensive civic culture.

In specific notes, Gramsci analyzed the array of political and cultural forces that had interacted to block the formation of a 'national-popular will', suggesting the sorts of areas to which the revolutionary politics organized by the party would have to be attentive. He examined the impotence of the radical republicans represented by Mazzini and the Action Party during the Risorgimento because of their reliance on a small class base and their ultimate dependence on the Moderate mainstream elite; compared the spectacular popular content of France's national revolutions to Italy's 'passive revolution'; and considered the later susceptibility of the leaders of the socialist movement to recruitment into the ruling elite. These are just a few major examples.⁶⁷ In each instance, he identified problems for successful collective political action in the lack of a relationship of continuity, communication and mutual exchange, between leaders and led and between the social levels of intellectual and moral formation. Furthermore, Italians did not become integrated into a comprehensive moral community that could serve as a permanent focus for collective sentiment and action; there was no formation of a national religion, ultimately a void to be filled spastically by fascism. This and other consequences of the failures of the Risorgimento were the inheritance of Gramsci's PCI in the 20th century. The intellectual and moral structures of social life had to be completely reworked.

For Gramsci, the general site of this pre-political politics was 'civil society', the locus of structured but unintentional social life — as such, the intermediate sphere between the economy and the state. Indeed, if the conceptual content of the moral and intellectual reform was to drag common sense toward good sense and then philosophy, its political content (and thus the task of the party) was to drag the material of civil society toward a level of overt contestation in 'political society' and ultimately to use the resulting revolutionary consensus to build an integral state (in the sense of willed community), based on a new comprehensive moral order.

⁶⁶This is the situation the elite theorists described so well as the 'natural' state of affairs.

⁶⁷*SPN* 52-90; *Q* 3, §137, 396-7.

The structures of civil society are very resistant to movement, however, as the earlier discussion of common sense has shown.

Hence it is a matter of studying ‘in depth’ which elements of civil society correspond to the defensive systems in the war of position. The use of the phrase ‘in depth’ is intentional, because these elements have been studied; but either from superficial and banal viewpoints, as when certain historians of manners study the vagaries of women’s fashions, or from a ‘rationalistic’ viewpoint — that is, with the conviction that certain phenomena are destroyed as soon as they are ‘realistically’ explained, as if they were popular superstitions (which anyway are not destroyed either merely by being explained).⁶⁸

The traditional revolutionary target, the state, is surrounded in modern Western Europe by ‘superstructural’ structures of tremendous solidity, the ‘forts and pillboxes’ of civil society. It is here that the historical domination of class spreads out from the overt coercion of the class state into a vast array of institutions, beliefs, and practices, the class character of which is so thoroughly mediated that it is often discernible only in their conservative functionality. These produce a generalized consent, abetted by the sedimentary but still effective remnants of older social forms.⁶⁹ The *class* element of this intertwining network is captured in Gramsci’s usage of the term ‘hegemony’.

Additional sites of the formation of collective consciousness within civil society that received Gramsci’s attention include the factory, Catholicism, high and low literature, and journalism. Each of these sites operates according to particular historical modes of local rationality, and each requires an appropriately tailored response to elevate unspoken consensus to the overt level of political contestation, ultimately to break down the legitimacy of the locally effective knowledge system. The press in particular struck Gramsci as an especially effective “material organization aimed at maintaining, defending and developing the theoretical or ideological ‘front’” of a dominant class (whether ruling or in opposition). Yet,

⁶⁸Q 13, §24, 1616; *SPN*, 235. The translation in *SPN* is incorrect, and I have modified it. The sense is very substantially altered. ‘War of position’ is Gramsci’s term for the ‘cold revolutionary’ preparation for the ‘hot’ seizure of power.

⁶⁹Gramsci believed that a decisive distinction between the United States and Europe was the proliferation in the older continent of sedimentary layers of ‘parasitical’ remnants of the old feudal nobility, honored functionaries of former regimes, and so on.

[t]he press is the most dynamic part of this ideological structure, but not the only one. Everything which influences or is able to influence public opinion, directly or indirectly, belongs to it: libraries, schools, associations and clubs of various kinds, even architecture and the layout and names of streets. It would be impossible to explain the position retained by the Church in modern society if one were unaware of the constant and patient efforts it makes to develop continuously its particular section of this material structure of ideology.⁷⁰

The materiality of the fragmented sociological consciousness that issues from this multiplicity of sites of formation is perversely solidified by its uncoordinated multi-locality. Without a monolithic target, opposition becomes intricately difficult and must be similarly multi-local.⁷¹

VI. Preliminary Conclusions: Gramsci and Durkheim on the Localities of Moral and Intellectual Formation

The central issue of this chapter is moral and intellectual formation, and the pre-rational, conformist character of the basic conceptions of the world that make knowledge and action in society possible. Durkheim identified this basic structuring feature of social life as religion, an emergent and self-reproducing conception of the world that represents to the community and its members their own collective power. Gramsci's terminology was different, but his conception was the same: social order, knowledge and action is structured by conceptual structures collected in 'common sense' that receive their power from society itself in its historical development.

The multi-dimensionality or multi-locality of this formation was a further insight that placed them together at the conceptual boundary of their time. For both of them, the problem could be posed from the standpoint of a single encompassing rationality, but the solution could not be, without a labor of *construction*. Intellectual and moral formation can be altered — it *has* altered, historically. But to do this on a willed basis required the

⁷⁰SCW, 389. This is a very rich note. The statement on the special qualities of the press, and many others like it, provide suggestive material for those seeking to extend Gramsci's analysis into a world pervaded with a far greater variety of media. See also Q 6, §126, 795 for a very focused note on providing little readers' guides, resources of critical interpretation for readers of the press, as a way of elevating their general cultural literacy. This is characteristic of the practical aspect of Gramsci's approach.

⁷¹This strikes me as an apt enough description of Foucault's sense of the 'microphysics of power', an analysis that he extended to even more deeply submerged structures of knowledge. It is certainly not clear that the hard, long work Gramsci had in mind would be anything but Sisyphean.

conscious construction of something that has always happened unconsciously. Durkheim recognized the necessity of structuring the alteration as a divided labor between new, more general rationalities at different sites: the school, civic and professional organizations, the state. Gramsci's ambitions were greater, so he was not able to take for granted the tremendously more varied localities of rationality on top of which Durkheim's proposed unifying structures floated, and within which lurk resistances to a more comprehensive alteration.

Gramsci understood that together, all of the sites of formation of collective consciousness guarantee that sociological consciousness will be layered and disparate. This was a situation he was prepared to face:

The unitary national elaboration of a homogeneous collective consciousness demands a wide range of conditions and initiatives. Diffusion from a homogeneous centre of a homogeneous way of thinking and acting is the principle condition, but it must not and cannot be the only one. A very common error is that of thinking that every social stratum elaborates its consciousness and its culture in the same way, with the same methods, namely the methods of the professional intellectuals.... It is childish to think that a 'clear concept', suitably circulated, is inserted in various consciousnesses with the same 'organizing' effects of diffused clarity: this is an 'enlightenment' error.... When a ray of light passes through different prisms it is refracted differently: if you want the same refraction, you need to make a whole series of rectifications of each prism.⁷²

The fractionation and localization of consciousness produced by the uncoordinated division of formative labor in society must be opposed with dynamical homogeneity, a comprehensive conception of the world reframed in different languages and at different levels to accommodate the local conceptual tools of particularized audiences. The objective is the construction of a new collective rationality.

The political revolution as carried out by the Bolsheviks is a simple thing compared to the enormity of this task. Yet, this distinction did not hold, for Gramsci: the formation of 'sociological consciousness', common sense, is every bit as political as the re-formation of 'socialist consciousness', the 'philosophy of praxis'. The action of 'the Modern Prince' in acting as leader of cultural reform is thus *part of* the revolution, which is not complete without success on this ground too:

⁷²SCW, 416-7.

An important part of *The Modern Prince* will have to be devoted to the question of intellectual and moral reform, that is to the question of religion or world-view.... The modern Prince must be and cannot but be the proclaimer and organiser of an intellectual and moral reform, which also means creating the terrain for a subsequent development of the national-popular collective will towards the realisation of a superior, total form of modern civilisation.⁷³

The divided multi-locality of local rationalities that I have also called sociological consciousness will have to be pushed, pulled, and maneuvered into the shape of a single, comprehensive political rationality — socialist consciousness, the philosophy of praxis. This is to extend politics into the very depths of the fragmented modern psyche.

But Gramsci's attention to these dimensions of the formation of sociological consciousness was unique only within marxism; Durkheim, for one, had rejected political socialism in part on just this basis.⁷⁴ Durkheim is often seen as a conservative because of his appreciation for the intricate functionality of the world, but this was simply sociological realism at its highest development. As I have shown, he was very interested in change, but understood how *hard* it would be to get it right. In the face of this uncertainty Gramsci forged on, armed with the motto he had absorbed from Romain Rolland: "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will."⁷⁵

⁷³*SPN*, 132-3.

⁷⁴Some sense of this can be gotten from "Marxism and Sociology: The Materialist Conception of History" (1897) in *The Rules of Sociological Method*, 167-174. A more extensive set of discussions is in *Durkheim on Politics and the State*, ed. Anthony Giddens, trans. W.D. Halls (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1986), Chapters Three and Four (the above selection is reproduced in Chapter Four). Durkheim and Gramsci each walked a difficult line between knowledge and action: Durkheim stated the problem succinctly: "Yet in order to know what can and should become [of] the family, property and the organization, whether political, moral, juridical or economic, of the peoples of Europe, even in the near future, it is indispensable to have studied that host of institutions and practices as they were in the past, to have sought out how they have varied throughout history, and the principal conditions that have determined these variations. Only then will it be possible to ask oneself rationally what they should become today, given the present conditions of our collective existence." *Durkheim on Politics and the State*, 98.

⁷⁵See *SPN*, 175f. Since Descartes and Pascal, the French intellectual tradition has always balanced between optimism and the fatalistic gamble, although the former has tended to dominate overtly. Lucien Goldmann's *The Hidden God* (1955) remains one of the best explorations of this dynamic.