

## CHAPTER 2

# Contextualising Civil Society and Social Change in Gramscian Dialectics

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the conceptual and analytical framework of the thesis. The central objectives of the thesis, also set out in chapter 1, are to examine the role played by civil society in Zimbabwe in the maintenance and transformation of hegemony in the context of the struggle for social change and to explore the material and organisational set up of Zimbabwean civil society that reflects its hegemonic and counter-hegemonic role. The central theoretical point of departure for this thesis therefore is the Gramscian dialectics of hegemony and counter-hegemony, which is realised in and within civil society.

Exclusive of this Introduction, the chapter is divided into seven major sections. In order to appreciate the analytic utility of the Gramscian dialectics for this thesis, a review of alternative approaches to conceptualising civil society and social change – their insights and limitations – is first discussed in sections 2.2 and 2.3. This is followed in section 2.4, by an outline of the Gramscian dialectics that is central to understanding the Gramscian theory of civil society. Our understanding of hegemony leads us to ask the crucial question: What can be gleaned about Gramscian theory of civil society from this Gramscian dialectics? The answer constitutes the discussion of section 2.5. In particular it illuminates Gramsci's two organisational basis of civil society – the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic civil society. The limitations of Gramscian dialectics are discussed in section 2.6.

Beyond the conceptual exegesis the chapter also grapples, in section 2.7, with the analytical framework of the thesis. Here the key challenge is how to situate Gramscian dialectics – beyond the original socio-political environment of Italy of 1919 to 1936 – so that it returns the explanatory (analytic) power for the maintenance and transformation of hegemony in Zimbabwe of 2000 to 2008. The analytic framework addresses some of the problems raised in section 2.6. The ‘Mortonian approach’ (Morton 2007), which resonates with Gramsci’s *absolute historicism*, is adopted to guide analytical application of Gramscian dialectics beyond the original context which it addressed. Section 2.8 concludes the chapter.

Overall the chapter aims at assisting us with the objective of thinking in a Gramscian way (the Mortonian approach) about the construction and contestation of hegemony in Zimbabwe. The chapter concludes that contextualising civil society and social change in Gramscian dialectics provides potential explanatory power to answer the thesis’ research questions more comprehensively than alternative approaches to civil society.

## **2.2 Theories of Civil Society: A Conceptual Framework**

The aim of this section is to review alternative approaches to conceptualising civil society and social change. This conceptual framework is divided into four approaches: the liberal, the historicist, the postcolonial and the feminist approaches. The major objective is to show that whilst these theories have limitations for the present thesis, they have insights that can still be imported to further illuminate the preferred Gramscian theory of civil society.

### **2.2.1 Liberal Approaches**

The liberal conception of civil society, according to Bratton (1994:53), marks a significant shift from classical political thought which viewed the state as expressing ‘the “civil” form of society.’ In this conception, civil society and the state were indistinguishable. The idea of the

state separate from civil society was introduced by 18<sup>th</sup> century liberal philosophers such as Adam Ferguson and Alexis de Tocqueville. This distinction, Ferguson (1995) argued, was necessitated by the rise of state despotism. The problem however had begun with transformation processes that took place within civil society, that is, in the market realm. The pursuit of wealth in the market realm because of the surge in industrialism threatened republican virtues that had held society in peace with itself. With society's attention directed at private wealth accumulation, the state was left unchecked as it fortified its power, which it later used to usurp individual sovereignty (rights).

Civil society as distinct from the state was therefore evoked in order to protect citizens from state abuse and therefore permit the realisation of substantial sovereign rights for citizens. According to De Tocqueville (1954:1999), the effectiveness of civil society as an 'independent eye of society' depends upon its organisational form. De Tocqueville argues that a 'pluralist and self-organising civil society independent of the state is an indispensable condition of democracy.' The liberal conception of civil society was challenged by historicists such as Hegel, Marx and Gramsci. Baker (2002:5) argues that Marx's criticism of civil society as a realm of alienation and exploitation led to a negative perception of civil society and a disinterest in the study of the concept altogether. The later revival of the concept of civil society by Antonio Gramsci perpetuated the anti-liberal view. Whilst Gramsci stayed faithful to the historicist school, he however opposed the Hegelian and Marxist interpretation of civil society common within the historicist school (section 2.2.2 below). Despite the historicists' criticism, Young (1994:33) argues, the classical liberal view of civil society continues to be a shadow on contemporary conceptions of civil society in development theory and practice.

In its contemporary hegemonic liberal usage however, the concept of civil society has historical immediacy to our epoch through the struggles against authoritarian regimes of the former Soviet bloc and against military regimes in Latin America, in the 1980s and 1970s respectively. The different liberal definitions of civil society reflect a debt to classical liberal philosophers and the democratisation role of civil society in East and Central Europe, Latin America and most recently in the quest for democracy in sub-Saharan Africa. Thus Alfred Stepan defines civil society as an ‘arena where manifold social movements [...] and civic organisations from all classes [...] attempt to constitute themselves in an ensemble of arrangements so that they can express themselves and advance their interest’ (quoted in Bratton 1989:417). Michael Walzer on the other hand defines civil society as ‘the space of uncoerced human associations and also the set of relational networks – formed for the sake of family, faith, interest and ideology – that fill this space’ (Walzer 1995:7). John Keane defines civil society as ‘an aggregate of institutions whose members are engaged primarily in a complex of non-state activities – economic and cultural production, voluntary associations and household life and who in this way preserve and transform their identity by exercising all sorts of pressures or controls upon the state institutions’ (Keane 1988:14).

In all the above definitions, civil society is separate from the household, the market, and the state. The significance of this midway location is that civil society enjoys autonomy from state control and that membership is voluntary depending on acceptance or recognition of the interests, wishes, values, ideology, and identity that defines a particular group (Carothers 1999:1). The motifs of independence from state control and voluntary action are vital to the function of civil society as agents of social change. As agents for social change civil society limits state power and upholds pluralism (Osaghae 1995:192). The next section discusses the historicist conceptions of civil society.

### 2.2.2 *Historicist Approaches*

The historicist conception of civil society is associated with Hegel, Marx and Gramsci. In this construction civil society is analysed in relation to the nature and development of a capitalist economy. In Hegelian usage, the state and civil society are separate realms. In a marked break from the liberal view of civil society, Hegel argued against the tranquil and humanely portrayal of civil society. As Bratton (1994:54) argues, 'civil society was a modern product of a long historical transformation by which a nascent bourgeoisie established a sphere of market relations by civil law.' The problem, according to Hegel was that this realm left unmonitored by a powerful authority such as the state will advance private interests as opposed to the 'public good'.

Thus, where classical liberal philosophers saw the dearth of republican virtues in society as related to uncontrolled quest for private wealth and simultaneously producing despotic politics and therefore the need for a state to be checked by civil society, Hegel argues that the latter also has no moral or ethical unity to be a positive agent of social change outside state control and moderation. Hegel argues that the umbilical cord of civil society, historically enjoined to capitalism, potentially defines it as a realm of chaos and inequality (Baker 2002:5). The ethical unity of society therefore could only be guaranteed by the universal state that exercises its rule and authority to guide civil society off its propensity for private interests.

Like Hegel, Marx also saw civil society as '[...] a set of commodity production and exchange institutions that tilted contractual relations in favor of capitalist entrepreneurs' (Bratton 1994:54). Marx therefore saw civil society as an illusion of individual freedoms that disguises actual existing class exploitation (Hann 1996:4).