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## The Liberal Hegemony: The Rise of Civil Society

There are now roughly two modern theories about the early structuralization of political society in the West. Both are merely groping in the darkness of pre-history, but both are plausible and conform to what is known with a reasonable certainty. One hypothesis holds that in "early times" the function of the king and high priest is found in a state of fusion: the king (or tribal chief, etc.) was an absolutely sacred figure, directly communicating with the deity or the pantheon of gods, at times even as god himself. There are many signs of such a state of affairs in the annals of mankind, from China to the Malabar coastal region of India and to the position of the Inca in ancient Peru. The other hypothesis, rather ill-received in scholarly circles but gaining ground, was proposed and documented in this century by Georges Dumézil who took Indo-European documents (archaeology, sagas, linguistics) to show that political structure in this basic "tribe" of the present-day European peoples was tri-partite: the king and the warriors, the priestly class, and the artisans/peasants/tradesmen, what we call today civil society.

But even if we accept the first theory, historical records tell us that very early the royal and the sacerdotal function must have split up (Egypt, Mesopotamia, Hellas). We should bear in mind that both had their

hands full of tasks in a society where royal authority was the fountainhead and sole possessor of power, and the priests were taken with extreme seriousness, for at least three reasons: through worship as well as through science (astronomy, irrigation) they guaranteed the community's survival and peace with the gods; they served as administrators and scribes at the royal court; and in that same capacity raised taxes, oversaw the depots of food supply, and planned the construction of public buildings and monuments.

Throughout known history, the tripartite division into material, military, and spiritual functions existed in every part of the world, which is a good indication of the structure's validity well beyond the Indo-European tribe and the Middle East. The main theme is compatible with numerous variations: tribal chief and witch-doctor, pharaoh and priestly class, Roman consuls and sacerdotal colleges, and of course Hebrew kings and Levites, Christian kings or emperors and the Catholic Church. It is not the task of this article to examine each of these functions and their relationships of

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dependence or equality, although such an examination would be eminently useful in another writing. It is, however, important to outline very briefly the function of the third entity, the class of lower activities as they were always referred to, the peasants, the artisans, the miners, the sailors, the tradesmen, the personnel of caravans, the shepherds, the merchants, the bankers. If throughout history the king-and-warriors and the priestly castes were understood to form two distinct *institutions*, the third class just mentioned was never known by that name, it never had an internal cohesion or a function other than that of the "service sector." Without the latter, the life of the whole society would have come to a standstill; nevertheless it was not acknowledged as a political entity on its own, with a distinct political weight. In fact, whenever this service sector, or civil society, or parts of it attempted to organize into a coherent whole, a pressure group with recognized and asserted interests, the other two institutions of society moved against it or at least declared its dependence on them, and their supervisory power and authority over it.

The general situation was, however, far from static. A characteristic feature of this tripartite arrangement was its dynamism, at least in the Western world and the world in which the later West had been politically and intellectually prepared. What we described above was valid for the non-Western world also, except that there—in the middle-eastern empires, African tribes, pre-Columbian America, the steppes of Asia—the tripartite system was and remained rigid, particularly with regard to the "third class," civil society. Which leads us to the conclusion that it was the *mobility* of pre-Western and Western, particularly of Christian, society which allowed these historical actors—royal palace, temple, and civil society—to engage in their respective roles and thus create *history* in the Western sense of

the word. The pre-condition of such an evolution may be detected in the clear cleavage between king and pope, the temporal and spiritual power. Such a cleavage is noticeable in the early history of some nations, although there are only indirect evidences. In the Hebrew kingdoms, there appeared, next to the Levites, the individuals called prophets who never ceased castigating the sovereign for his morals and policies. In Hellas, the *basileus*, the early king, is found again in the pre-classical centuries as being entrusted with the priestly function of sacrifice—clearly a power-transfer about which we know little, but one through which political leadership, perhaps the *tyrannus*, accumulated all power in his hands, leaving only the shadow of it to the priestly class. In Rome, too, the function of the *pontifex maximus* was separated after a while from political power, although deep into the Caesarian world the religious label was still assumed by the newly sacralized imperial Caesar.

We spoke of the cleavage between king and priest, and just saw that it had been adumbrated in Judea, Hellas, and Rome—while in Egypt, for example, nominally at least, the priests remained subordinated to the pharaoh throughout a long and conflictual history. The cleavage became a central reality with the words uttered by Jesus Christ: "Render unto Caesar. . . render unto God" their respective due. The ancient Gordian knot was thus cut, and we may argue that "modern" history began with those words. It is also evident that these words had more than a religious significance, and that the political problem of legitimate rule also received a long-delayed solution. Granted, power has always been sacralized; but there is an essential and enormous difference between a regime which commands the citizen's mind, conscience, and transactions, and one which has competitors in this endeavor and where this endeavor is divided by two equally powerful

institutions. (We shall see below how liberalism and the totalitarian regimes respond to this permanent Western dilemma of divided power.)

The "actors" being now in place, let us examine their reciprocal relationship in Western/Christian history. The words of Christ did not settle the issue of who rules in the practical order. The Constantinian association of State and Church raised new problems. Was the Church to be grateful and submit to the questionable solicitude of the emperors who wanted to restore the health of empire with doses of a vital and dynamic religious faith? Or was the Church to formulate a new relationship, something that Pope Gelasius attempted to do with his doctrine of the Two Swords: acknowledgment of two separate but cooperating areas, the spiritual and the temporal, pope and emperor, but papal supremacy nevertheless since the pope is also responsible for the salvation of the emperor's soul. Indeed, Bishop Ambrose of Milan practiced Gelasius's doctrine a century before the latter's promulgation when he stood up to Emperor Theodosius, forbidding him to enter the church for a massacre he had ordered in Thessalonika.

Ambrose, Gelasius, and subsequent popes were obliged to guard attentively the Church's independence, prompted by the inclination of the State to encroach upon the ecclesiastical domain, as it became so obvious at the Reformation, one thousand years later. The Empire (Eastern-Roman) also had reason to complain about the Church, many of whose leading representatives were not willing to appreciate the imperial interests in a hostile surrounding, with German tribes and an advancing Islam taking the emperor between two mortal perils. The balance in the spirit of Gelasius was temporarily restored in the year 800 when, politically speaking, a new actor appeared on the

stage, the Frankish power of Charlemagne. His crowning by the pope on Christmas night in Rome weakened the pope's dependence on the emperor in Constantinople, but prepared a series of new conflicts between the Church and the European kings, conflicts lasting until the rule of Napoleon, and beyond, to this day.

The point here is not to deplore these conflicts, but to insist that in spite of them the basic cooperation of Church and State continued, since their common interests were at least equal in importance with the built-in conflicts, skirmishes, and, not infrequently, wars. Christ's words lent themselves to more than one interpretation, and the State, too, could argue that, as an institution, it is much older than the Church, derives its power directly from God (St. Paul's teaching), and that there can be only one power within a nation. Starting with the eleventh-century, kings and emperors listened to jurists whose training in Roman (pagan) law pre-dated that of ecclesiastical lawyers. They could argue for the king's temporal power over against the pope's and bishop's theses. (According to some historians, these Roman jurists had laid the foundations of Roman-oriented humanism and Renaissance paganism.) It must be emphasized, however, that these conflicts did not contradict the cooperation, since both Church and State needed a common front *vis-à-vis* the believers' immorality and the citizens' lack of discipline and civic virtue, the ordinary penchant of all men at all ages.

We are speaking here of civil society. Let us state bluntly that while churchmen and state administrators are tempted by their closeness to power and the abuses derived therefrom, members of the civil society are exposed to the temptations that their daily activities offer. Over and against the sacrality of temporal and ecclesiastical institutions, the profane transactions turning around material interests and money also offer a

vast area of abuse. Put in a simplified way, State and Church never quite trusted the agitation on the forum and the marketplace, the myriad intertwined interests, the greed, the occasions for immorality. The all-time consequence was (it still is, read the papal encyclicals) the insistence on the supremacy of Church and State over civil society; while the first two possessed clear institutional outlines and structure, civil society by its very nature could not be called an institution, and its ambition always reached beyond previously set limits. In the non-Western, traditional world, these limits were not allowed to be trespassed; hence, civil society remained dependent on the will and decision of the two other institutions. In the West, State and Church by and large granted civil society a large amount of independence and freedom of movement, and gradually more as commerce went from the periodic markets supplied by Syrian and Jewish tradesmen (in the early half of the Middle Ages) to the large-scale commerce in the Italian and Flemish port cities—Antwerp, Venice, Genoa—beginning with the eleventh century.

Needless to say, the members of the civil society were just as devoted (or dissimulating) Christians, and just as loyal citizens as the members of the two leading institutions. And it is merely a sign of the universality of Church and State in the general environment that the two cooperated in the setting up of "bourgeois" institutions like guilds and corporations, whether for artisanship or learning. The proverbial butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers belonged to religious corporations with their chaplains, like the corporation called University of Paris, Oxford, or Bologna. In no sense a despotic way, State and Church had a hand (light or heavy, depending on the circumstances) in the professional life of the citizenry, creating thereby a certain equilibrium—the absence of which we deplore today, without

concealing, of course, the numerous drawbacks of that balanced structure.

From the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries, and then increasingly beyond, we witness the incredible growth of civil society, unthinkable in other civilizations. The measure of its growth is its increasing articulation and, naturally, its power. Civil society intelligently exploited the conflicts between Church and State, taking generally the side of the king who was struggling against his own rivals, the anti-burgher feudal lords and the similarly feudal lord-bishops. His jurists, a reliable rampart around his power, were mostly of burgher origin themselves, and so were the personnel of his administration, blocking whenever possible the power of the nobility. The growing bourgeois power can be ascertained even today in every old European city and its architecture. Next to beautiful churches (Prague, Florence, Ghent, etc.), one finds magnificent city halls, the private palaces of merchants meant to compete (in Brussels, Florence, Bruges, Frankfurt) with the noble families' chateaux, the feudal fortresses, even the royal and episcopal residences. And what was true of buildings was also true of a whole branch of art, what could be called "bourgeois" or "third-estate" art: the burgher joined the courtier in having his portrait painted, in purchasing relics and having them encased in precious stone, in having magnificent prayer books, organizing splendid burials in churches to which they financially contributed.

These are only the outward manifestations of growing power and wealth. There was more. The vast network of commerce, industry, and banking increased the burghers' influence on policies. They lent money to the papal court, to the imperial court, they financed huge overseas operations and possessed entire fleets to carry them out with handsome profits. They endowed monasteries, sponsored book pub-

lishing, and had a hand in new religious movements, wars, and crusades against the Turks. They even had the beginnings of an ideology, starting with the fourteenth-century, not surprisingly at a time when the Church was going through a series of crises as a consequence of new battles against the growing royal power. And when royal power proved finally to be the winner in these conflicts with the Church, the burgher class is found on the side of the former. The ideas of a Marsilius of Padua, whom we may call a disciple of William of Ockham (the nominalist philosopher), display daring novelties about bourgeois power, still dissimulated, of course, in the rhetoric of faith and doctrine, but revolutionary for the times, the middle of the fourteenth-century. The burghers' cause was to derive enormous as yet theoretical benefits from these ideas: burgher participation at Councils, increase of imperial power at the expense of the Church, the pope's demotion to the rank of an imperial civil servant! The Gelasian doctrine was all but forgotten.

The ideology of civil society was still far from its later formulation, yet we should understand in advance the decisive role it was to play inside the still-Christian commonwealth of a Europe at least nominally united in its faith. This is a culminating moment, with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a first zenith. It is evident that both Church and State had a well-articulated and deepened "ideology." For the first, it was the admirable edifice of the Christian dogmatic and corpus of doctrine, jurisprudence, and moral teaching—which had assimilated the best of Hellenic philosophy and Roman law. There is no need here to enter into the details. The State similarly rested on natural and Roman law, on the old tribal custom, and ancient philosophy. Again, the details are documented in the huge literature of statecraft, law, financial

policies, and the "wisdom of nations."

The bourgeoisie faced the uncomfortable situation of not resting on a political theory of its own, of not being able to justify its power and interests. Political philosophy of past ages passed quickly over such chapters, such issues, attributing them to *alien* thought, that of State and Church. Aristotle's *Politics* begins typically with the household, but only to establish the truth that the life of the *polis* obeys altogether different rules and considerations. Even the contemporary political literature took no notice of bourgeois interests, and speculated (Machiavelli, Jean Bodin, the English jurists) on the place that the new Prince must occupy at the head of a well-constructed commonwealth. There was only an indirectly orientated literature that took bourgeois interests into account, with writers hiding their preoccupations in a humanistic garb. Only Protestantism was to produce a political literature wherein civil society's interests and ideological make-up were frankly displayed, and even there we must separate particles of the new political doctrine from philosophical considerations, as in the case of Hobbes and Spinoza.

In retrospect, it is important to note the need of civil society to formulate an ideology of its own, an indispensable instrument to bring about first, its *prise de conscience*; then, its equality with its age-old rivals, State and Church; and finally, its (at the time unexpected) hegemony. The last four centuries appear then as the gradual acquisition of political hegemony by civil society, a historical first which still leaves all concerned open-mouthed. Let's spell it out: modern history is the history of the growth of civil society's hegemonic position within the framework of Western nations.

What is suggested here is not what Ranke believed historiography to be: "telling it as it actually happened." We are no longer claiming to be masters of all the parameters

of events. Every day, new disciplines are born which become auxiliaries of the study of history: archeology, anthropology, the exploration of myths, beliefs, of archaic industry, and so on. What we offer here is a hypothesis: it *seems* that a new intelligibility may be acquired about the present if we arrange phenomena in a certain way. Society's tripartite division saves these phenomena (as Hellenic wisdom claimed science was about), makes them rational and plausible. There are, of course, those who contradict the hypothesis at its roots. The anthropologist Pierre Clastres, who studied Brazilian indigenous people, claimed that the tribe itself (in our terms, "civil society") decided about public matters, imposed its decisions on the chief, and sent into battle the warriors who by no means formed a class and did not depend on the chief (our "king"). Needless to say, this description is contrary, for example, to things as we find them in the *Iliad*.

We learned from Marx, and also from pre-Marxian thinkers, that a social class becomes conscious of itself, its interests, cohesion, and power, and mounts an offensive against other classes which, in its own view, block its progress. Marx finds a correlation between the self-awareness of a class and the economic system at a certain stage. This is only one view of things, although it is part of social dynamics. We claim, on the other hand, that self-awareness by a vast ensemble like civil society evolves as a result of literature, psychological reactions, for example, to humiliation by upper classes—the desire to imitate (*mimesis*), wealth seeking power, and many other factors. Among these factors there is envy and resentment, at any rate, a long tradition of subordination. It was natural for civil society—as it witnessed the Reformation-caused split in the Church, the consequent fragility of the monarch "by divine right," and, last but not least, the conquest

of science and industry—to interpret these epoch-shaking events as its own success and future domination. It was not a conscious decision to reverse the course of history, since large masses of people are above all conservative and cannot envision things contrary to their habits and habits of thought. Rather, there were signs of changing times which ultimately coalesced in a philosophy and proved to be an extremely powerful battering ram against the rival forces, Church and State. Some of these signs: If God is found to be bound by scientific laws, why shouldn't the king be, and, more generally, power? If the Bible is a mere moral tale (Spinoza), why hold that a moral society cannot exist without a religious superstructure, when newly discovered distant people live a normal life without a Church, whether in civilized China or in the forests of Brazil? (This observation was based on ignorance, since all people had religion, even if it was very different from Christianity.) If there are such great differences between ways of organizing collective existence, why not look for the "natural man" ("noble savage") who must be virtuous since civilization and institutions have not yet spoiled him? In other words, there is a possibility of building a new world, without kings and noblemen, prelates and religious authorities, a world founded on the burghers' simple virtues.

These were some of the signs which strengthened civil society's self-confidence, and prompted philosophers like Mandeville, Montesquieu, Adam Smith, and a legion of others in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to systematize these thoughts. They become the leading thoughts (ideology) of modernity, justifications of the belief in progress and the conscious vision that civil society can and will emancipate itself from the shackles imposed on its natural dynamism and industry by two parasitical insti-

tutions. The central idea, the fuel of the social motor, was victory over Church and State, their neutralization (the radicals said abolition) through separation. As it was later expressed, "the alliance of throne and altar" must be terminated.

What the philosophers of the bourgeoisie had theorized about, civil society proceeded to carry out through policies and concrete events. *Not* as a conspiracy—history is not a series of complots, except in the eyes of those too lazy to think—but as a network of theoretical and practical considerations, the way mankind moves in history. Briefly: there were the Huguenots, the free thinkers, the neo-European materialists, etc., who, by no means agreeing between themselves, agreed that the old regime was rotten. The new moralists, Mandeville (of Huguenot origin) chief among them, wrote of the private vices turned into publicly useful social behavior. Montesquieu and Kant believed that bourgeois industry contradicts royal power, and that bourgeois republics, financially sober and anti-war, will establish public order inside the State and peace among nations. Adam Smith, fearful of the economic competition he foresaw and theoretically endorsed, preached the necessity of moral sentiments and of an internal censor against excesses. Thomas Hobbes, denying the classical and Christian teaching about man's social nature, based his philosophy on man's fear of his fellows, and wanted public order based on the social contract of property holders, guaranteed by the king's religion, whether it is the religion of the Stuarts or of Cromwell. Pierre Bayle, Spinoza, Locke, Lessing believed in a "natural religion," shorn of dogma, liturgy, and myth, corresponding to beliefs that can be shared by all mankind, a rational creed. These were the slowly emerging contents of what we called "bourgeois ideology," summarized, systematized, and promoted by thinkers, propa-

gandists, politicians, and very often pastors and priests, all spokesmen for the new moral order.

Events seemed to prove correct the writings of the new theorists. Under Oliver Cromwell between 1640 and 1660, and under Robespierre two centuries ago, the bulk of the transformation took place, each time in the favor of the burghers, the moneyed and industrial class. Even though these were not complete victories since royal restorations followed, after Cromwell, then under Napoleon, the bourgeois claims were consolidated and bourgeois views prevailed in such areas as economic structure, the activation of commerce and industry, education, political reforms—and the disconnection of religion, at least in its doctrinal expression, from the life of the State and from decisively large sections of civil society. Without its uncomfortable but indispensable ally, religion, the State itself started to drift, partly because it was now completely desacralized, partly because it was now called upon to arbitrate, but without authority or power, among the religious substitutes we call ideologies. Without its uncomfortable but indispensable ally, state-power, the Church sank to the level of a mere pressure group inside civil society, and had no recourse against the new hegemony since it had also signed the "social contract," together with the other, myriad interest groups.

Thus a valid point may be made that civil society achieved its century-long, if not historical, objective of neutralizing its two great rivals, and placing its own ideology—liberalism and/or socialism (or various combinations)—at the center of the commonwealth. The separation of State and Church has become a veritable *civil dogma*, at the pinnacle of the social contract and civil religion. Conservatives especially (but are they other than decently talking liberals and

justifiers of the *status quo* as long as it favors them?) complain about the power of the State. Yet, we wonder if a very large number of phenomena we deplore, from abortion, sex education, drug addiction, sexual violence, and so on, are not the inventions and whims of civil society, inventions and whims that the State, under pressure, erects into laws. As Lorenz von Stein wrote: "The first practical application of the rule of capital [civil society] over the organs of the State consists in the formation of institutions by which society controls the State: this is the Chamber of Deputies." We are warned that what the State promulgates as law may be under pressure by civil society, not the other way around.

The Church is, of course, even more strictly controlled. In our age, the competition between State and civil society has not yet ended in the decisive victory of either. We see indeed a kind of rivalry-and-cooperation between the organs of the State and the semi-private bureaucracies and corporations of civil society—as it used to be the case between State and Church in the Middle Ages. However, there is no such rivalry-and-cooperation between civil society and the Church. The latter is inaudibly but clearly warned that it is a parasitic organization, a myth-engendered institution, and that there are other myths to take its place, from ethical humanism, to psychoanalysis, to intergalactic communications, to sects. The Church behaves according to these tacit instructions, and in the process takes on a "protective coloration": it declares for religious pluralism, curbs its mission to convert, it retreats on educational matters, democratizes itself, and its members begin to wear civilian garb, making them indistinguishable from professionals of civil society.

Let us emphasize that neither State nor Church have ceremonially, at one point, converted to civil society's ideology, habits, mentality, and way of dressing—the last

example being important since people follow fashion at all times and adjust, in externals, too, to prevailing anonymous injunctions. It is thus not a coincidence that simultaneous to civil society's hegemony, heads of state, monarchs included, abandoned the military uniform, that is the externalia of the "warrior class," and appear in civilian clothing, including on their official portraits. In this, they were followed by the Bolshevik rulers who no longer wore the worker's cap and overalls, but business suit and necktie. The last in bourgeois liberal accommodations were the prelates of the Catholic Church, after Rome officially signed the "social contract" at the sessions and in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. These are admittedly symbolic acts; nevertheless, symbols merely translate deeper changes of loyalty and function.

As we said above, there has not been any kind of ceremonial transfer of power from State and Church to civil society, although there was undeniably such a transfer and ceremony when Charles I and Louis XVI were beheaded. Nor has there been any solemn declaration on the part of civil society to assume power and sovereignty. What did happen was that civil society, after centuries and millennia of presence in history, chose, as it were, *liberalism* as its best-furnished arsenal with which to fight its battles—and win the war. This does not mean at all that civil society necessarily opts for liberalism; we may indeed find other options in the future or in other geographical areas. In the case circumscribed by the last four centuries and in the north/west of Europe (by extension in the United States), liberalism was demonstrably the winning ideology, the organizing principle of civil society and the modern community. The future indeed is unknown. It may well happen that the triangular situation so typical of the West—State, Church, and civil soci-

ety—takes other turns, hegemony assumed by one of those that have lost it. The sign of ideological rigidity (reification) is when the powerful assumes that with his victory things become permanent and unchangeable. Western history is a long demonstration that it is not so. In our days, too, there are many writers (Francis Fukuyama, Michael Novak, George Gilder) who like to dogmatize about the present shape of things and to build further programs on this, according to them, unilinear direction. More liberalism, its worldwide permanent conquest, the minimal State, the forever privatized Church, and so on. All we can say is that none of this is certain.

In fact, our century has witnessed gigantic efforts at combating liberal society and its ideology. The Marxist undertaking may be interpreted in the following way: State and Church tried to recuperate the old, pre-liberal power, not for the benefit of either of them, but in favor of a new political entity, the Party. The Party indeed confiscated the entire power of the State, and that of the Church also—not in the form of the old religion, but as an ideology. In a way, we see in the totalitarian Party—and I emphasize its newness—the renewed but caricatured “alliance of throne and altar.” It logically followed that the third element, civil society, be reduced to a caricature of itself, and that even this caricature be absorbed by the omnipotent Party—once again, “omnipotent” because it possessed the respective powers of the three institutions.

Facing the Marxist enterprise, the liberal ideology tries to recuperate the entire civil society, and consequently to marginalize State and Church. Not just marginalize, but, to be exact, partly to absorb them. The State becomes an economic agent of this enlarged and power-gorged civil society, and the Church is warned each time it ventures to make morally motivated statements when

such statements contradict civil society’s own religion/ideology, for example, on the family, education, abortion, public ethos.

Marxism and liberalism thus occupy similar areas in the triangular relationship and institutional network congenial to the West. Both are expressions of hegemonic aspirations, thriving on the weakened structures of State and Church; both intend to occupy the whole territory and unify it under their philosophical and political hegemony. The likelihood is that they will not succeed in the long run. The plurality of institutionalized power is typical of the West, and this situation presupposes functional differentiation and the rotation of hegemony. The ideal would be an equilibrium of State, Church, and civil society, but this remains a paradigm, with no translation into reality. Yet, even paradigms are useful—they serve as thermometers for things gone wrong. Man, Western man at least, needs life under the power, discipline, and loyalty we associate with the State; he also needs the moral insight and limitations that we associate with religion and institutional Church; and he needs the wide area of material and intellectual transactions that are provided by civil society—not only manual or mechanical work, but also education, the press, the associations, the public debate. But man cannot give himself the law, the State can; he cannot be morally autonomous, outside religion; he cannot organize trade and other activities without help and endorsement by civil society.

In short, the individual is not as strong and independent as liberalism claims, and the collectivity is not as bold, unified, and forward-looking as Marxism asserts. The paradigm points at the historical balance discussed on these pages. It also points at the risk involved in the hegemony of any one component.