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Debate

Revolution and the party in Gramsci's thought

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The central thread of this work is an evaluation of Antonio Gramsci's fundamental contributions to the theory of revolutionary social transformation, particularly incorporating the role of the revolutionary party as the central institution of revolutionary conflict: its position as the "Modern Prince" and the "Collective Intellectual", its relation to different socio-political actors (its allies and opponents, different classes, the state and the civil society).

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/png/200px-Gramsci.png>]

Gramsci

Through this main thread, the prism of social conflict, the social movement and the revolutionary party, I will also evaluate Gramsci's contribution to democratic theory and practice (dealing with the issues of grassroots participation and the concept of "general will", the relation between the ideological "vanguard" and the masses, the tension between the concepts of "democratic centralism" and "direct democracy", the dangers of substitutionism etc.).

Thirdly, I will also try to identify possible peace-building elements implicit in Gramsci's thought, the dialectical relationship between the war of position and the war of movement, the ideological and material hegemony, particularly with regards to the problems of consent and coercion, to material power and force in social change as an element possibly contradictory to a strategy of consciousness transformation and revolutionary nonviolence aimed at establishing a consensual, truly democratic and civilised social order.

PHILOSOPHY OF PRAXIS

Gramsci's work is an unusually anticipatory attempt at developing a politically-strategic Marxism, one devoid of fatalistic reliance on "immutable" historical laws independent of human initiative. Gramsci placed human activity at the centre of the revolutionary process, determined to restore and reintegrate the long neglected elements of totality and the creative subjective dimension of socialist politics, particularly degraded during the official, dogmatic Marxism of the Second International. In his view, political quietism, depoliticisation and passivity of the Second International were also partly a consequence of its positivistic, "objectivist", vulgar materialist understanding of systemic social change. For him, their simplistic materialist epistemology was a form of idealism in reverse. Both are characterised by the same empty, shallow metaphysics - reductionist polarities of subject vs. object, idealism vs. materialism, voluntarism vs. determinism, structure vs. consciousness etc. Both vulgar mechanistic materialism and idealism are hopelessly undialectical in their unsophisticated determinism, enemies to the construction of a viable revolutionary strategy since life manifests a "complex interplay of subjective and objective forces." (1)

As one of the founders of the "modern" Marxist philosophy of praxis, one of the first to grapple with the dynamics between "base" and "superstructure" (without denying the ultimate determination of the economy, which is not always necessarily dominant however), following in the footsteps of such intellectual giants as Benedetto Croce and (probably even more so) Antonio Labriola, Gramsci sought to reach a dialectical, reciprocal unity of theory and practice, thought and action, subject and object. He aspired to build an "open", non-orthodox theory relevant to the masses, able to stimulate and awake its creative potentials. Unthinking, fixed formulas are useless. Capitalist contradictions do not simply "explode" but have to be seized upon through conscious effort.

WORKERS' DIRECT DEMOCRACY

Gramsci's major new philosophy of praxis began to rapidly develop during the Italian mass strikes and factory occupations of the "Biennio Rosso" (or "two red years" of 1919-20), particularly on the pages of the legendary journal *L'Ordine Nuovo* (which he co-founded in May 1919), when he began to articulate the theme of factory councils (*consigli di fabbrica*) and soviets as the central organisational formations of socialist grassroots democracy. The journal was to serve as "the paper of the factory councils", a catalyst for these developments articulating the nascent democratic impulses, contributing to the transformation of mass consciousness and the possible formation of a direct-democratic "Council Republic".

"The existence of the councils gives the workers direct responsibility for production, leads them to improve their work, institutes a conscious and voluntary discipline, and creates the psychology of the producer, the creator of history. (2) (...) the whole mass participates in the life of the council and feels itself to be something through this activity." (3)

Contrary to the empowering, dignifying, rejuvenating character of the councils as historical organs of working-class self-liberation, the often sectional, narrow, reformist trade union consciousness and bureaucratic structure serve as a depoliticising factor. The corporatist attitude based on (short-term) self-interest is antagonistic to the development of working-class unity and solidarity, let alone the construction of multi-class alliances or united fronts.

In themselves, trade unions are grossly inadequate for the task of radical social transformation. Gramsci, however, did not argue for a withdrawal from the labour movement or the trade unions (which could still perform certain unifying and defensive functions), since the possibility for a socialist offensive beyond trade unionism is conjunctural, dependent on a variety of factors not all determined by subjective will. The longer-term perspective, however, was based on the development of working-class self-management, the clear goal being "to create a genuine workers' democracy here and now – a workers' democracy in effective and active opposition to the bourgeois state". (4)

Ordine Nuovo and Gramsci's writings served as the most important theoretical elaborations of Italian council communism.

THE REVOLUTIONARY PARTY AS THE "MODERN PRINCE"

Particularly since the defeat of the workers' councils (which failed to fully break outside the corporate-economic sphere, leaving the political and military authority of the bourgeoisie intact) and the betrayal of the partly ossified, opportunistic Italian Socialist Party (PSI), when most of the *Ordine Nuovo* group entered the newly formed Italian Communist Party (PCI - founded at the Livorno Congress in 1921), one of the crucial revolutionary tasks for Gramsci was the development of a coherent subjective element able to diffuse an alternative socialist perspective, intervene in the broad social movements (the "civil society") with the goal of generalising struggles and aiding the foundation of a new administration (new "political society") and a new social system. The task was the construction of PCI as a tightly-organised, highly-flexible but mass combat organisation, a compact "vanguard party embedded in the masses" (5), the galvaniser of struggles and a central bearer of critical and active consciousness that is to enflame the masses. Its role is instructive and coordinating, a pedagogy of praxis. PCI was to become such an agent of organised change.

It would be very wrong to equate Gramsci's democratic councilism (primarily of the "biennio rosso" period) with a celebration of anti-organisational spontaneism typical of those who oppose involvement of the political socialist organisations in the revolutionary process. A conception of Gramscian strategy as a crude form of substitutionism (or minoritarian despotism) would be equally so misguided. It was ultimately to be "a party of the masses who, through

their own efforts, are striving to liberate themselves autonomously from political and industrial servitude through the organization of political economy, and not a party which makes use of the masses for its own heroic attempts to imitate the French Jacobins." (6)

The "vanguard" role of the party has to do with its ideological and organisational leadership rather than connoting an "inorganic", parasitical formation imposed on the movement. Gramsci problematised and confronted the notion of "common sense" as a contradictory, ambiguous and primitive form of mainstream consciousness which is easy to manipulate according to the interests of elites. His position, particularly in his earlier, pre-Comintern writings, was somewhere in between naive spontaneism which eschews the role of the organised political entities and Jacobin centralism which reduces the entire problem to the insertion of an "external element".

"This element of 'spontaneity' was not neglected and even less despised. It was educated,

directed, purged of extraneous contaminations; the aim was to bring it into line with modern theory (i.e. Marxism) – but in a living and historically effective manner. (...) This unity between 'spontaneity' and 'conscious leadership' or 'discipline' is precisely the real political action of subaltern classes, insofar as this is mass politics and not merely an adventure by groups claiming to represent the masses." (7)

Following his writings, it would seem entirely plausible to claim that Gramsci's vision was not one of an ultra-centralised oligarchic vanguardist party (although he certainly advocated a high degree of "democratic centralism") but a broad-based mass socialist party consolidating the most combative and critical elements in society (particularly from the working class), "rooted in everyday social reality and linked to a broad network of popular structures (eg. the factory councils and soviets)". (8) This is a conception of a dialectical unity of politics and economics, a working thesis compatible with a democratic political strategy, although Gramsci was insufficiently consistent and clear on the question of the relation between the macro-structural prefigurative struggle and micro-level transformation of human relations – destruction of undemocratic authority structures, hierarchy and rigid division of labour, both inside the revolutionary party and the social and work processes. The entire dominant bureaucratic and technocratic rationality which reduces human beings to obedient automatons has to be actively opposed rather than silently internalised. Rosa Luxemburg's much more unambiguous call for the broadest democratic rights is particularly notable here. Nonetheless, Gramsci was certainly also correct in claiming that measures should be devised to diminish the possibility of inner-party obstruction – freedom of debate should not be misconstrued as a justification for politically paralysing the organisation – a very high level of continuity, of disciplined unity in action, of readiness and combative effectiveness should be maintained at all times.

Gramsci's form of "Leninism" (particularly its early phase around the "biennio rosso" period, when Lenin's April Theses and State and Revolution, as well as the slogan "all power to the Soviets", still loomed large) seems to have been largely determined by his limited knowledge of Soviet reality, which he mostly identified with workers' and citizens' self-government (see for instance his article Workers' Democracy). Gramsci initially saw Leninism almost exclusively as a new ideology of workers' power which went beyond narrow reformism or economism in its dialectical appraisal of the interaction between economics and politics - capable of aiding the construction of the working class as a class for itself, capable of helping the working class to acquire the consciousness of a leading class in society ("the elemental class"), a self-governing, self-actualising historical subject. In this context, his usage of the term "dictatorship of the proletariat" corresponds to the concept of the rule of the producers or workers' democracy, as evident in several of his writings. (9) Obviously, Gramsci's conception of the socialist "state" radically differs from the capitalist or "bureaucratic-collectivist" exploitative state machinery, which Gramsci deemed useless for the new socialist order. Nonetheless, it is quite easy to criticise Gramsci for his semi-emulation of the early Soviet state and the Bolshevik party, and especially his partial lack of critical positioning towards Comintern's theory and practice.

Importantly, for Gramsci, the revolutionary party, as the organisation of the most advanced, most conscious and

coherent elements, of trained and prepared members-organisers, should not be confused with the broad movement in which it must intervene. This does not preclude it from becoming a mass organisation in itself.

From the organisational point of view, to summarise once again, the party should, according to Gramsci, function "organically" (resembling a biological organism), not bureaucratically, on the basis of democratic centralism and mutual interaction of different decision-making levels, through "a continual insertion of elements thrown up from the rank and file into the solid framework of the leadership apparatus which ensures continuity and the regular accumulation of experience." (10). Organicity was seen as a defensive mechanism for the preservation of internal party democracy and democratic public practice. "...the central and local organs must always consider their power not as being super-imposed, but as springing from the party's will(...)." (11)

Furthermore, organs of direct popular power such as strike committees/committees of the base (comitati di base), internal commissions, municipal direct-democratic assemblies, shop-stewards' networks etc. maintain a crucial role in the anti-capitalist movement as the practical formulations of self-organising potentials and as additional correctives and guardians against a possible hierarchical imposition of the political organisations (including possibly well-meaning revolutionaries) above the working masses. In themselves, however, these organisations won't be enough. (12)

Gramsci clearly raised the question of direct-democratic prefiguration, but he nonetheless seemed somewhat less prepared than Rosa Luxemburg for instance to produce a more definite programme dedicated to the revolutionary party's "self-abolition" as a decision-making body progressively substituted by an unhindered system of self-management.

Nonetheless, Gramsci certainly sought to dialectically bring together the organisational and the spontaneous (transcending both extremes), noting in his earlier days that "the revolutionary process can only be identified with a spontaneous movement of the working masses (...) the Socialist Party is indubitably the most important 'agent' in this process of destruction and rebuilding, but it is not and cannot be conceived as the form of this process, a form malleable and plastic to the leaders' will."(13)

Still, Gramsci was never capable of "resolving" the basic tension between the need to preserve party democracy and the necessity of constructing a cohesive, fighting organisation "pervasively implanted in every branch of the bourgeois State apparatus, and capable of wounding and inflicting grave blows on it at the decisive moment of struggle." (14)

THE "COLLECTIVE INTELLECTUAL" AND ORGANICITY

Drawing on George Sorel's concept of the "myth" of the General Strike, Gramsci acknowledged the importance of shared norms, concepts and symbols that the party as the "collective intellectual" or "myth prince" sensitive to the task of creating emotional appeal, merging both the cognitive and the emotive, should be able to provide. The Party is to serve primarily as a herald of an open new ethical and philosophical world-view, not as a closed repository of fixed "scientific" dogmas.

In Gramsci's revolutionary theory the Party, as the most conscious organ of revolutionary praxis (of determined political, economic and cultural initiative), is also obligated to constitute its own critical "organic" intellectuals, combative democratic tribunes of the people engaged with the life of the masses and committed to the ideals of freedom, equality and human solidarity. These critical intellectuals, seeking to create an organic, egalitarian unity with

the lower classes and all the oppressed, are to serve the revolutionary cause as the harbingers of hope and progress, demystifiers of the dominant ideology, organisers of counter-hegemony helping to empower the masses and lead them, as well as the entire human kind crippled by the capitalist order, "to a higher conception of life". (15)

Gramsci himself was a prototypical organic intellectual and a passionate advocate for the rights of the oppressed. Perhaps his hunchback condition, feeling of emotional pain and rejection, helped him develop a deep sympathy with the lowly, the outcast and oppressed, a sympathy which would earn him periods of terrible disappointment, as well as 11 years in a brutal fascist prison, leading to his untimely death.

A truly revolutionary party has to establish a real, organic connection with popular consciousness, placing itself at the head of the anti-capitalist movement without attempting to undemocratically dominate it. The reformism of the Second International wasn't just a symptom of "leadership betrayal" or a lack of sufficient economic crises; it was also the failure of non-directed, "spontaneous" class struggle – as well as sclerotic and lifeless party dogma - to affect a substantial change in the conditions of workers' everyday existence and to produce a truly internalised counter-hegemonic socialist consciousness.

The tragedy of the Left in the 20th century may have had a lot to do with its "failure to create a "mass psychology" that would permit it to "speak the language of the masses" with imagination and emotional appeal. Marxism tended to be too schematic and abstract (...)." (16) By ignoring most of human psychology and neglecting the strategic and ideological factors affecting change, many Marxists proved time after time again how little connection to reality and popular consciousness they actually had. In a fashion resembling Gramsci's, Wilhelm Reich remarked brilliantly:

"While we presented the masses with superb historical analyses and economic treatises on the contradictions of imperialism, Hitler stirred the deepest roots of the emotional being. As Marx would have put it, we left the praxis of the subjective factor to the idealists; we acted like mechanistic economic materialists." (17) Marxists failed to respond to the preoccupations, needs, fears, and desires of the masses and therefore remained isolated. "A global economic and political policy, if it means to create and secure international socialism, must find a point of contact with trivial, banal, primitive, simple every-day life, with the desires of the broadest masses..." (18) Gramsci stands in that undervalued tradition of revolutionaries aiming to penetrate the core of popular consciousness, and the Italian socialist movement has often managed to gain from the theoretical and practical itinerary he has laid down. (19)

Gramsci's democratisation of the concept of the intellectual injects a particular vitality in Gramscian theory and practice, an integral vision beyond the confines of official classifications:

"Each man, finally, outside his professional activity, carries on some form of intellectual activity, that is, he is a 'philosopher', an artist, a man of taste, he participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or modify it, that is, to bring to being new modes of thought ." (20) The new intellectuals therefore aren't simply the carriers of an elite, highly specialised mental and social function – they are "an organic part of the community; they must articulate new values within the shared language and symbols of the larger culture." (21) Indeed:

"The mode of being of the new intellectuals can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feeling and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, 'permanent persuader', and not just a simple orator." (22) As such, the new intellectuals, as an internalised rather than a superimposed force, have to engage the masses in their liberatory philosophy, avoiding an elitist, obscure and alienating mode of communication which breeds anti-intellectual passivity in the wider population. The new liberatory consciousness has to be organically connected, integrated within the very fabric of social and cultural life of the working class, expressed in the words that belong to the historical moment.

Although Gramsci understood the importance of “conquering”/assimilating traditional intellectuals (by pointing, among other things, to the possibility of greater professional autonomy, personal security and respect), a new strata of working-class intellectuals capable of elaborating a truly organic, democratic relationship with the working masses is absolutely indispensable (in the longer run) for the development of an integrated new popular consciousness embedded in the reality of the masses. Sometimes traditional intellectuals themselves can be “re-socialised”, developing a new democratic relationship with the masses.

Moreover, freedom of factions (notably – and controversially- however, Gramsci was opposed to the formation of permanent factions), of open debate, is a necessity for the democratisation of intellectual activity and politics in general. No one should become irreplaceable. The revolutionary party, as the “collective intellectual” (with a substantial degree of homogeneity and collective will) that must not lose touch with the masses and become bureaucratic, has to become a school of democracy and free-thinking, educating its cadres (in fact, every party member should become an organic intellectual) and also the wide segments of the working class and the labour and social movements. Theory itself has to be democratised; the “professional”, corporate mentality of intellectuals has to be challenged, and Gramsci is among those rare, egalitarian thinkers and political organisers who attempted (although not always consistently) to break down the historic division of labour between intellectuals and masses (or “footsoldiers”) within the revolutionary movement and society as a whole.

’’NATIONAL-POPULAR’’

Contrary to some claims, Gramsci kept his reserve towards the universal applicability of the Russian example, especially since his aim always remained the explication and development of an organic, specifically Italian Marxism rooted in Italian conditions: the culture, customs, socio-economic context, needs and aspirations of the Italian people. Indeed, the struggle for a new hegemony cannot be confined solely to issues of class but has to engage with the totality of social life, be “the motor force of a universal expansion, of a development of all the national energies.” (23) As Lenin realistically noted: “Whoever expects a “pure” revolution will never live to see it.” (24) The socialist party has to place itself at the helm of the many non-class social movements and social currents as well, which is unlikely to be democratically achievable if the autonomy of other organisations and tendencies is being forcefully (or sneakily) compromised.

International solidarity, cooperation and coordination mustn’t be mistaken with the imposition of a monolithic “revolutionary” model insensitive to national specificities. It is important to mention that his concept of the “national-popular”, the national character of the movement for change, although it might include a patriotic sentiment, has nothing in common with petty nationalism – it is an expression of his political instinct firmly established in social reality (“the concrete analysis of concrete conditions”), and his dialectical position never allowed for the abandonment of the simultaneous active, energetically internationalist position. (25)

’’REVOLUTIONARY HISTORICAL BLOC’’

Gramsci was adamant that serious revolutionary politics had to be based on the strategy of the united front and socialist pluralism as a product of “a national consensus around the initiatives and actions of the working-class power.” (26) It is not a conception of class collaboration (like the one that was pursued by the dominant current in *Rifondazione Comunista* so far), short-term electoral alliances or elite coalitions (“popular fronts” etc.) substituting broad movements but of a durable historical bloc, a system of alliances cemented by a common general outlook and able to counteract the growing complexity of the civil society and the centrifugal tendencies of working-class (as well as “middle-class”) differentiation in developed capitalism. It is impossible to seriously challenge the ruling class

without challenging the tendencies towards fragmentation of the oppressed and progressive sectors of society, without a certain ideological and organisational cohesion, mass mobilisation and support. However, the general thrust of this approach is based on "unity in multiplicity" (Virginia Woolf) - a plurality of possible identities - rather than some sort of forced uniformity.

The leading role, nevertheless, should belong to the working class, which has no viable option of exploiting or parasitising over other groups in society. This also implies the need for a degree of compromise and (principled) concessions by the working class to its allies if it is serious about the united front strategy. "Force can be employed against enemies, but not against a part of one's own side which one wants to assimilate rapidly, and whose "goodwill" and enthusiasm one needs." (27) Of course, this process is not without its contradictions – the issue is not how to completely avoid them, but how to simultaneously minimise elements of opportunism and disempowering antagonism. In this sense, the existence of a tension between "revolutionary" and "reformist" strategies within the anti-systemic socialist party can actually prove to be more creative.

The united front strategy (amalgamating previously often antagonistic social strata) is a necessity both for the conquest of power and the foundation of a new order based on collective will. In *What is to be Done*, Lenin also called for revolutionaries to "go among all classes of the population" to organise "special auxiliary detachments" for the working class from these elements.(28) Dissidence cannot be simply determined on the basis of class or social status. Catastrophically, the contemporary labour movement generally continues to present workers' interests in a narrow economic, corporatist manner, as if the working class is simply a "special interest group". This isn't the basis on which a political offensive and lasting hegemony can be built.

Through the organisation of counter-power the socialist party and the united front are also trying to exert disciplinary influence on the non-allied elements (which often include the "intermediary" classes), to contain them and neutralise their possible reactionary influence (although passive subordination is, in the long run, generally less sustainable than active consent) if it is not possible to secure their participation under the workers' revolutionary leadership.

"...the dominant group is coordinated concretely with the general interests of the subordinate groups, and the life of the state is conceived of as a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria (on the juridical plane) between the interests of the fundamental group and those of the subordinate groups – equilibria in which the interests of the dominant group prevail, but only up to a certain point, i.e., stopping short of narrowly corporate economic interest." (29)

The party has to consistently oppose sectarianism and maintain roots in the mass movement at all times. Throughout Gramsci's pre-prison life, he had to cross swords with the maximalist, "ultra-leftist" yet authoritarian faction led by Amadeo Bordiga, characterised by political sterility and a marked tendency towards self-marginalisation through ideological sectarian intransigence. Bordiga was reluctant to deal with the unavoidable imperatives of consent. At a time when the fascists were consolidating their dictatorship, the marginalising, irresponsible purism of organisations and factions determined to preserve their political "virginity" destroyed the possibilities for an effective united front, a broad alliance of social forces around the working class organised against the terrible enemy. It was already too late when Gramsci's pragmatic position was finally adopted by the central committee of the PCI at the Lyons Congress in 1926. That same year both Bordiga and Gramsci were arrested and sent to the confinement in the isle of Ustica.

It is largely because of this continued differentiation within the working class, as well as the diversification of new social movements (ecology, sexual and gender issues, community-based movements etc.) why the united front strategy – as well as (we would argue) the need for a universalising but non-monolithic anti-systemic party - enjoys continued historical actuality, especially in the more developed countries.

IDEOLOGICAL HEGEMONY

The development of counter-hegemony is tied with the project of constructing a long-term, sustainable united front. One of the most significant developments in the modern capitalist practice of exercising class domination is the changing relationship between the State and civil society, the increased and increasingly sophisticated role of ideological hegemony, often subtle but pervasive ideological control and manipulation, popular "consensus" realised not simply through physical coercion or threat of it (though this element certainly continues to play its part), but also through the mass culture, the largely refined "industry of consciousness" (Hans Magnus Enzensberger) encompassing education, the media, entertainment, popular social practices and beliefs, the law etc. It cannot be fought successfully on a purely institutional level; a socialist "counterhegemony" (Gramsci would call it a new "integrated culture") must be constructed if the struggle is to be sustained through a long period. Capitalism is an "ensemble of relations"; therefore it cannot be opposed in a partial, particularistic way. Indeed, "civil society has become a very complex structure and one which is resistant to the catastrophic 'incursions' of the immediate economic element (crises, depressions, etc.)." (30)

Anticipating those themes which were to become central to Critical Theory and the Frankfurt School, Gramsci has been qualified as "perhaps (...) the earliest revolutionary theorist of advanced capitalism." (31) He has been portrayed as a keen observer of modern life and a versatile political strategist, as well as being interpreted as a precursor to "new social movements" and the harbinger of allhuman emancipation which was to become a notable impulse in the 1960s. Those who make this link (like Carl Boggs) are likely to argue that it is necessary to reject the "line of least resistance" and oppose the socio-cultural logic of contemporary capitalism, a logic which is criticised for blocking the development of a deeper and more consequential anti-capitalist consciousness, anti-capitalist politics of everyday life.

A new Renaissance, intellectual and moral renewal - an explosion of creative counter-cultural energy - is an indispensable ingredient for radical social change. The emphasis Gramsci placed on the importance of the "war of position" and the construction of a new culture reveals his commitment to the notion of a "total" (political, social and cultural) revolution, a transformation affecting not just formal political institutions, but also everyday ways of living and conceptions of life (civiltÃ). He longed for the "liberation of spirit, the establishment of a new moral awareness". (32) The long-term goal could be nothing less than the flowering of a new, humane culture. To neglect or discard this crucial element of the revolutionary process, rooted in creative subjectivity, would constitute the betrayal of the anti-capitalist social revolution itself. Granted this is a correct claim, it should still be possible to choose one's battles wisely. The anti-systemic socialist party is generally a totalising/universalising entity but specific "front-groups", or associations not directly linked with the party, could be set up or indirectly supported in cases where more controversial issues are concerned. Nonetheless, many of the older inconsistencies typical of radical organisations (such as the unwillingness and inability to challenge dominant sexual patterns) will have to be transcended (in a tactically wise manner) by the revolutionary organisations of the future. "(E)very revolution has been preceded by an intense labour of social criticism, of cultural penetration and diffusion".(33)

While the new integral cultural hegemony is probably impossible before the attainment of material power, since it advances in a torturous spiral highly dependent on the actual material existence of the masses (because of the particularly deep entrenchment of the capitalist socio-cultural logic), the achievement of a more direct but limited political hegemony (particularly including the few key concepts crucial to the preservation of the dominant "common sense") cannot be postponed, as it is one of the decisive factors for evaluating the possibility of immediate political takeover itself. It would probably be imprudent to expect or attempt to bring about a total, integral ideological change before the ascendancy of a new material reality (Gramsci certainly held this view). It is perhaps more often necessary to find a way to neutralise or subvert the reactionary effects of dominant moral, cultural or social norms (liberation theology is a good example of this approach) instead of directly confronting them before the birth of a new political and economic system. This proposition widens our options offering a non-frontal approach that is often more conducive to a successful engagement with the masses as they temporarily are. It would often be a more

constructive approach to strategise about ideological change through the lens of the current society in motion rather than a static idealist structure we often place the contemporary world against. Like Gramsci, we have to appreciate and build on the appropriate elements of continuity, just like we have to radicalise and capitalise on the appropriate elements of discontinuity with the past and the present. Both perspectives can be useful when used dialectically. Both should still leave plenty of space for the widening of popular horizons and offering viable alternatives to the dominant modes of living (as well as assimilating the past achievements into the fabric of the future); therefore it is not unprincipled opportunism but a call for a thoughtful and sensitive approach towards the dominant beliefs and customs. I believe an application of a Gramscian "ideological war of position" could move along the general lines I have just outlined.

Continuing to exist in moments of crisis and a socialist offensive, capitalist ideological hegemony is likely to continue to exert a lot of its previous influence, even to the extent of inducing "the oppressed to accept or 'consent' to their own exploitation and daily misery." (34) Nonetheless, a revolutionary transformation is impossible without an erosion and ideological crisis of the old order accompanied by the construction of a new culture sustained by real material changes. "...every new comedy of Voltaire, every new pamphlet was like a spark passing over a network of lines extended from nation to nation, from region to region.(...)The bayonets of Napoleon's armies found the way already leveled by an invisible army of books and pamphlets and an army which had been swarming out of Paris...and had prepared men and institutions for the necessary renovation." (35)

Attempting to create a new society without the prior partial achievement of a new mass legitimacy would be a fantasy of catastrophic proportions. Structural and ideological change are interconnected, and the ability of the revolutionary Left to replace the old bourgeois ideology of lies, exploitation and obedience will largely depend on its historical inventiveness, cohesiveness and organisational and cultural preparation.

THE DIALECTICS OF CONSENT AND COERCION

A lot of Gramsci's Prison Notebooks writing deals with the idea of gradually building working-class hegemony, laying stress on the supposedly underappreciated "war of position" (or "siege warfare").

"In Russia the state was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between state and civil society, and when the state trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The state was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks (...)" (36)

This notion of a protracted accumulation of support and "revolution in stages" or "war of position" (probably an overly schematic reaction to the adventurist "theory of the revolutionary offensive" and a series of anti-establishmentarian "partial actions"/armed attacks) should not be mythologised, however. The development of grassroots dual power networks within the civil society is a critical aspect of the "war of position", which must precede the direct conquest of power/political society. Both the "organic" and the "conjunctural" sides of political life have a place within a dialectical totality. Position and maneuver possess a certain complementarity. We should not reduce the turbulent, capricious life force of history to a perfectly linear, predictable accumulation of forces until hegemony is secured. Many uprisings, including partly the Spanish revolution and the Portuguese revolution of 1974-75 for instance, point to the mistake of lacking decisiveness in extending and seizing power at critical points in the conflict, thus leaving the counter-revolutionaries with sufficient time and energy to consolidate their forces and mount a counter-offensive. There is a considerable danger of reluctance and demoralisation in such a scenario, especially if it is coupled with a rejection of the strategy of "permanent revolution".

Lenin made an apparently logical hypothesis that the turning point when the accumulation of forces should give way to a direct assault on state power constitutes that moment when the organisational activity of the popular vanguard is at its highest level, while the ruling class is at its most divided, and its possible supporters are at their weakest and most indecisive.(37) Furthermore, a "blitzkrieg" tactic might prove far more effective when the accumulated forces of the revolution are put into full action. (38)

For external and internal reasons that we cannot deal with here, Gramsci's faith in the positive power of the Russian experience proved to have partly been misguided. Nonetheless, it would be hard to negate the general need for the construction of powerful revolutionary institutions and organised structures, able to preserve stability and continuity even in times of socialist stagnation and retreat. In that sense, Gramsci was correct in stressing that "(t)he dictatorship of the proletariat has to resolve the same problems as the bourgeois state: internal and external state.(...) The proletariat is little trained in the art of governing and leading; the bourgeoisie will put up a bitter resistance to the socialist state, whether overt or concealed, violent or passive...Revolution is a great and terrible thing, and not a game for dilettantes or a romantic adventure."(39) Ideology and civil society might be the dominant mode of capitalist power in developed capitalist societies, but coercion remains the ultimately determinant one. Unlike certain modern "libertarians", Gramsci would have clearly agreed with Mao's statement that the "revolution is not a tea party" because the capitalist state is an "integral state": "political society plus civil society, in other words, hegemony protected by the armour of coercion." (40) A question of the actual form which that coercive element is to take, however, is too rarely posed.

This strategy which acknowledges the politically constitutive, crucial role of coercion and the "political society" (the state, armed forces and police, courts, prisons etc. under capitalism) would appear to be acceptable as long as the "Gramscian" equilibrium between political and civil society is looked for, and the forms of the new institutions and their activities do not blindly replicate the repressively anti-human nature of capitalist and state coercion which erodes the organisation of consent and long-term potentials for organising a democratic, participatory new social order based on popular power and the exercising of a pluralistically conceptualised "general will". Gramsci himself granted the possibility of "the coercive element of the state withering away by degrees, as ever more conspicuous elements of civil society make their appearance." (41) Bold attempts at employing those "naively" humane insights of radical nonviolence should also be made in the construction of a socialist counter-hegemony which implies a higher new morality, an ethos poetically anticipated long ago:

"...If your enemy is hungry, give him to eat...In so doing, you will heap coals of fire upon his head, that is to say, you will kindle the fire of love in him." (42) Instead of the "shallow" approach inflexibly focused on administrative, punitive and police measures to invent and preserve the new order, the movement and the new order have to build broad-based popularity and consent, which is impossible without the ability to forgive and reach out to the better instincts in humanity (43), as well as the ability to make compromises, the willingness to take into account the interests of other social forces and combine them with the interests of the working class. A revolutionary vanguard which takes the task of building a consensual counter-hegemony seriously has to conduct its activities (in the social movements and civil society as well as in the sphere of public administration) in the spirit of genuine humanism, democratic camaraderie, inclusiveness and anti-sectarianism. Gramsci's strategy of alliances presupposes the rejection of any kind of "working-class corporatism", since the unified movement against capitalism has to take up the objective interests of all the allied social strata and classes. This strategy based on legitimacy is the only way to build a sustainable, stable and democratic social hegemony. A pluralist new order based on a tolerant (yet sufficiently coherent, directed) alliance of progressive social forces should be able to reduce the danger of violent counterrevolution.

The early American Marxist who significantly influenced Gramsci - Daniel De Leon - hoped that working class parliamentary majority might allow for a relatively "peaceful" (i.e. bloodless) revolution, with the working class exerting its extra-parliamentary power as a back-up to the parliamentary victory. Engels also pointed to the instructive nature of elections as a useful (although imperfect) barometer of forces, guarding against an untimely insurrectionary

attempt.(44) Gramsci, unlike his political PCI rival Bordiga, rejected abstentionism, seeing electoral politics as a tactical and strategic necessity. The parliament is a critical element in which the struggle for hegemony and mass legitimacy is carried out. Yet the party must resist any danger of becoming incorporated into a status-quo, top-down, reformist accommodation to the dominant system ("passive revolution" in Gramsci's vocabulary). The pre-World War I German Social Democratic Party's "war of position" points to the catastrophic consequences of opportunism. Gramsci bitterly opposed any conception of the party which would have it reduced to a merely electoral society, comparing opportunistic, class-collaborationist parliamentarians to "a swarm of coachman flies on hunt for a bowl of blancmange in which they get stuck and perish ingloriously."(45) Gramsci's concept of democracy could not be simply equated with the quasi-"democratic" institutional frameworks of capitalist society. Unfortunately, his critique of PSI's electoral, parliamentary politics and bureaucratic trade unionism remained perfectly applicable to the critique of the Stalinised, post-World War II PCI.

Although Gramsci's pluri-centered conception of power certainly doesn't automatically liquidate the possible role of armed insurrection, it puts it into a wider socio-cultural and political context of complex interplay that involves alternating factors, exposing the limited nature of traditional revolutionary strategies.

Engels stated in 1895 that already "there have been very many (...) changes, and all in favour of the military."(...) all the conditions on the insurgents' side have grown worse. (46) He wrote of workers' military struggle having "more of a moral than a material effect", noting the military's "superiority of better equipment and training, of uniform leadership, of the planned employment of the military forces and of discipline."(47)

"(O)ne should not ape the methods of the ruling classes, or one will fall into easy ambushes." (48) The strategy of "consciousness transformation" is a critical aspect of deep, sustainable social change. Gramsci was particularly keen on restoring the consensual factor in politics, and it is here that one of Gramscian contributions to nonviolence theory might also be possible to develop.(49) Never before has the need for ideological hegemony and support of the masses been greater and more indispensable, considering not just the sophisticated methods of capitalist ideological control but also the unprecedented destructive, murderous power of the capitalist state and private armies. The crass militarist approach, just like the simplistic Gandhian conceptualisation, fails to fully take these dangers – or alternative possibilities - into account. "(...) to fix one's mind on the military model is the mark of a fool: politics, here too, must have priority over its military aspect."(50)

Marx acknowledged a theoretical possibility of "peaceful" revolutions. "We know that the institutions, customs and traditions in the different countries must be taken into account; and we do not deny the existence of countries like America, England, and if I knew your institutions better I might add Holland, where the workers may achieve their aims by peaceful means." (51) Of course, the Bolshevik takeover of power was also relatively bloodless, but even relatively nonviolent radical anti-capitalist rebellions have so far usually been followed by violent counterrevolutions. Not to be ignored, Lenin used the perspective of a peaceful transition to socialism in 1917 as a powerful – probably indispensable - propaganda weapon. (52) Still, the continual existence of "the irreducible core of counter-revolutionary" forces - both domestic and from abroad, state and private, legal, semi-legal and illegal, as well as the role of the "power of example" on ordinary soldiers – should serve as an indication of the limitations of verbal persuasion in dividing and disintegrating the state's and capitalist coercive apparatus, and the necessity of "concrete class audacity and combat" (53) in anti-capitalist rebellion. Again, a creative rethinking regarding the application of this principle is necessary.

The task of undermining internal capitalist and state cohesion is absolutely critical. The Portuguese and Venezuelan revolutions in particular (both characterised by junior officers' and soldiers' movements, though not of the same level) point to the continuing relevance of "the bursting asunder of militarism from within". (54)

An attempt at a relatively bloodless revolution without sustained, focused work within the armed forces is a fatal

fantasy. The development and preservation of good relations with the military forces (who should be clearly distinguished from the politics which often throw them into bloody conflict) is one of the absolute priorities of preparatory revolutionary work. Through methods of fraternisation and covert internal organising, armed forces should be supported as people that are hyper-exploited for the benefit of the elites, they should be transformed into our strongest allies - the likely alternative is that they will become our most terrible adversaries. Revolution needs the support of the armed forces precisely in order to minimise violence, to sabotage, to paralyse the militarist system from within. The "peaceful but armed" approach recently popularised (in an imperfect manner) by Chavez in Venezuela probably remains the most realistic and productive one. It does seem to make sense to avoid excessively alienating your opponents, and to engage with the commonly underestimated potentials of noncooperation and relatively nonviolent intervention. A need for a higher dialectical synthesis in place of the old "violence-nonviolence" dichotomy has never been greater, which is where a refined concept of "armed revolutionary nonviolence" might be helpful.

"This is the heart of my argument: We can put more pressure on the antagonist for whom we show human concern. It is precisely solicitude for his person in combination with a stubborn interference with his actions that can give us a special degree of control (precisely in our acting both with love, if you will - in the sense that we respect his human rights – and truthfulness, in the sense that we act out fully our objections to his violating our rights). We put upon him two pressures – the pressure of our defiance of him and the pressure of our respect for his life – and it happens that in combination these two pressures are uniquely effective.(...) The more the real issues are dramatized, and the struggle raised above the personal, the more control those in nonviolent rebellion begin to gain over their adversary(...)The most effective action both resorts to power and engages conscience." (55)

Gramsci's monumental work rightly earned him the reputation of one of the great dialecticians of the 20th century. One of the most definite lessons it could teach us lies in the general lucidity of his methodological example. The construction of material and ideological counter-hegemony, of material dual power and a "revolution of consciousness" - the transformation to socialism - will require an unprecedented level of historical creativity. Despite certain ambiguities and mistakes, as well as numerous misappropriations, he enriched the tradition of socialism from below committed to the creation of a democratic Republic of workers' and citizens' councils, an association of self-governing producers. Throughout his suffering life, the early battles and disappointments, the terrible anguish and uncertain work in a fascist dungeon, with an unbeatable optimism of will, Gramsci has always stood behind that red banner on which the motto "Never Slaves, Never Masters" has been inscribed, ushering a new democratic socialist civilisation. Notes

- 1) Carl Boggs, Gramsci's Marxism, Pluto Press, London, 1976, p.30.
- 2) Antonio Gramsci, *Sindacato e consigli 1919* in *ibid.*, p.92.
- 3) A. Gramsci, *Sindacati e consigli, 1920* in Carl Boggs, *ibid.*, p.93.
- 4) Antonio Gramsci, *Workers Democracy*, in *Political Writings-I*, p.65 in Carl Boggs, *The Two Revolutions: Gramsci and the Dilemmas of Western Marxism*, South End Press, Boston, 1982, p.82.
- 5) Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1980, p.157.

- 6) Antonio Gramsci, Two Revolutions, 1920 in PWI, p.309 in Carl Boggs, The Two Revolutions, 1982, pp. 106-107.
- 7) Antonio Gramsci, The Modern Prince, Prison Notebooks, p.198 in Carl Boggs, Gramsci's Marxism, Pluto Press, London, 1976, pp.74-75.
- 8) Carl Boggs, *ibid.*, 1976, p.18.
- 9) Eg. Antonio Gramsci, Collected Works, vol.28, pp. 455-6.
- 10) A. Gramsci in Hoare and Nowell-Smith (ed.), Selections from The Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci (PN), p. 188 in Roger Simon, Gramsci's Political Thought, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1991, p.103.
- 11) A. Gramsci, Political Writings, 1921-1926, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1978 in Anne Showstack Sason, Gramsci's Politics, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987, p.364.
- 12) For further elaboration on this issue, see A. Gramsci, The Occupation, 1920 in PWI, p.327 in Carl Boggs, 1982, *op.cit.*, p.64.
- 13) A. Gramsci, Il partito e la Rivoluzione in Carl Boggs, *op.cit.*, 1976, p.96.
- 14) Rinascita, 12 December 1964, pp.17-21 in Perry Anderson, The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci, New Left Review Issue 100, p.72. This historically included such dramatic motifs like judges supportive of the Communist Party in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia having to pass death sentences on other communists in order to conceal their subversive affiliations, as they were supposedly bound to be executed anyway.
- 15) A. Gramsci, PN, pp.332-333 in Carl Boggs, 1976, *op.cit.*, p.34.
- 16) Carl Boggs, 1976, *op.cit.*, pp. 56-7.
- 17) Wilhelm Reich, What is Class Consciousness in Carl Boggs, *ibid.*, p. 57.
- 18) Wilhelm Reich, *ibid.*, in Carl Boggs, *ibid.*, p. 59.
- 19) See for instance on the "Gramscian" model of municipal politics Max Jaggi, Roger Muller & Sil Schmid, Red Bologna, Writers and Readers, London, 1977. Also, see Let us Take the City by Lotta Continua.
- 20) A. Gramsci, The Intellectuals, PN,, p.9 in Carl Boggs, 1976, *op.cit.*, p.76.
- 21) Carl Boggs, *ibid.*, p. 76.
- 22) The Intellectuals in Hoare and Nowell-Smith (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.10.
- 23) Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.182 in Roger Simon, Gramsci's Political Thought: An Introduction, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1991, p.43.

- 24) V. I. Lenin, [The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up](#), Sbornik Sotsial-Demokrata No. 1., 1916.
- 25) See for instance A.Gramsci, State and Civil Society, PN, p.240 in Boggs, 1982, op.cit., p.140.
- 26) Antonio Gramsci, Escrits politiques, Gallimard, Paris, 1975, p.366 in Christine Buci-Glucksmann, op.cit., p.166.
- 27) Valentino Gerratana (ed.), Antonio Gramsci, Quaderni del Carcere, III, Turin 1975, pp.1612-13 in Perry Anderson, The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci, New Left Review Issue 100, p.19.
- 28) Lenin, What is to be Done, in Perry Anderson, ibid., p.16.
- 29) A.Gramsci, PN, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1971, pp.181-182 in Roger Simon, 1991, op.cit., p.32.
- 30) Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (ed.), State and Civil Society, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, p.235 in Carl Boggs, 1982, op.cit., p.188.
- 31) Carl Boggs, 1976, op.cit., p.18.
- 32) Antonio Gramsci, PWI, op.cit., p.30.
- 33) Antonio Gramsci, Il Grido, 1916 in Carl Boggs, 1976, op.cit., p.59.
- 34) Carl Boggs, 1976, ibid., p.40.
- 35) Antonio Gramsci, Socialism and Culture in History, Philosophy and Culture, 1916, pp.20-21 in Carl Boggs, 1984, op.cit., p.45.
- 36) A. Gramsci, State and Civil Society, PN, p.238 in Boggs, 1984, ibid., p.48.
- 37) V.I.Lenin, Marxism and Insurrection: A Letter to the Central Committee of the R.S.D.L.P., Lenin's Collected Works, Progress Publishers, Moscow, Volume 26, 1972, pp. 22-27.
- 38) I further explore these issues in the article Time Factor in Insurrections, Strategic Analysis, Vol. 32, No. 3, May 2008.
- 39) A. Gramsci, Ordine Nuovo, Lo Stato e il Socialismo in Christine Buci-Glucksmann, op.cit., pp. 380-382.
- 40) A. Gramsci in PN, op.cit., p. 262.
- 41) A. Gramsci in ibid., p. 263.
- 42) Reuven Kimelman, Nonviolence in the Talmud, in Robert L. Holmes (ed.), Nonviolence in Theory and Practice, Waveland Press, Prospect Heights, 2001, p. 24.

43) Rosa Luxemburg expressed this humane, progressive vision brilliantly:

"During the four years of this slaughter of the peoples, blood has flowed in torrents. Today, each drop of that precious fluid ought to be preserved devotedly in crystal urns. Revolutionary activity and profound humanitarianism - they alone are the true breath of socialism. A world must be turned upside down. But each tear that flows, when it could have been spared, is an accusation, and he commits a crime who with brutal inadvertency crushes a poor earthworm."

(Rosa Luxemburg, [Against Capital Punishment](#), Die Rote Fahne, No. 3, 18 November 1918)

44) Friedrich Engels, [Introduction](#) to Karl Marx's The Class Struggles in France 1848 to 1850, MECW, Volume 27, p. 506-24.

45) A.Gramsci, in Chris Harman, Gramsci versus Reformism, Socialist Workers' Party, London, 1977, p.8.

46) Friedrich Engels, [Introduction](#) to Karl Marx's The Class Struggles in France 1848 to 1850, MECW, Volume 27, p. 506-24.

47) Ibid.

48) Antonio Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, State and Civil Society in Paul Le Blanc (ed.), From Marx to Gramsci: A Reader in Revolutionary Politics, Humanity Books, New York, 1996, p.317.

49) Although Gramsci quite certainly didn't express interest in nonviolence as such, the "elasticity" or open nature of his theory offers many divergent and possibly creative paths of theoretical and practical development.

50) Antonio Gramsci, *ibid.*, p.317.

51) [On The Hague Congress](#), in K Marx, F Engels CW, Vol 23, London 1988, p.255

52) VI Lenin CW Vol. 24, Moscow 1977, p.120; VI Lenin CW Vol. 25, Moscow, p.23; VI Lenin CW Vol. 25, Moscow 1977, p.55 in *ibid.*

53) Perry Anderson, *op.cit.*, p.77.

54) Friedrich Engels, The Force Theory in Bernard Semmel (ed.), Marxism and the Science of War, Oxford University Press, 1981, p.54 in Martin Shaw, Dialectics of War, Pluto Press, London, 1988, p.51.

55) Barbara Deming, On Revolution and Equilibrium, in Robert L. Holmes, *op.cit.*, Waveland Press, Prospect Heights, 2001, pp.100-102.

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