

HEGEMONY

The idea from Gramsci most influential in the left today is that of “hegemony”. You write that this concept is usually taken to mean that socialist political activity should gear itself to achieving “consent” to socialist ideas from a range of groupings in society, and thus achieving some dominant influence for socialism in “civil society” prior to dealing with the state. It is a sort of “cultural syndicalism”. Where classic syndicalism envisaged achieving socialism directly through building trade-union strength and trade-union control, without the need for a revolutionary political party, this “cultural syndicalism” would see socialism coming directly from building a diffuse but pervasive socialist cultural influence in the various segments of civil society.

With the “Eurocommunist” versions of Gramsci current in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and even more with the “post-Marxist” doctrines derived from them today, “hegemony” pretty much becomes an alternative to class struggle.

Even on the class-struggle left, though, the “cultural syndicalist” interpretation of the concept of hegemony has weight. For example, John McDonnell has recently argued, in response to the closing-down of the channels of working-class politics in the Labour Party, that we should look instead to work with “new social movements [which] have mobilised on a vast array of issues ranging from climate change, asylum rights, to housing and arms sales” to “create a climate of progressive hegemony which no government could immunise itself from no matter how ruthlessly it closes down democracy in its own

party”.

Perry Anderson’s well-known critique of Gramsci in *New Left Review* 100 argued that, although Gramsci himself was plainly committed to building a revolutionary political party based on class struggle, there were real ambiguities in Gramsci’s writing which gave real sustenance to the “cultural syndicalist” version.

You argue differently. You argue that Gramsci advocates the building of a working-class “hegemonic apparatus” which fights to win a working-class majority and working-class political power utilising the principles of the United Front.

Where Gramsci discusses “consent” and “coercion” as aspects of leadership, the Eurocommunists and their successors presented “consent” and “coercion” as mutually-exclusive alternatives. That became licence for arguing that modern capitalist rule rests very largely on “consent”; that therefore that all strategy had to be directed at the question of “consent”; that winning wide “consent” by a sort of diffuse cultural coalition- building was what “hegemony” really meant.

You point out that for Gramsci, “leadership [or, what for him was pretty much a synonym] hegemony and domination are [only] strategically differentiated forms of a unitary political power”. For the workers’ party to win “consent” from the poorer classes is not an alternative to it mobilising class-struggle “coercion” against the wealthy classes. On the contrary: “A class’s ability... to secure the consent of allies... also relies upon its ability to coordinate domination over the opponents of this alliance”.

Or again: “Without an attempt to transform leadership in civil society into a political hegemony or into the nascent forms of a new political society, civil hegemony itself will be disaggregated and subordinated to... the existing political hegemony of the ruling class”..

Seven questions:

One: You define Gramsci’s concept of hegemony succinctly as “a Marxist theory of the constitution of the political”. Can you explain further?

Two: Gramsci was not at all the first Marxist to use the term “hegemony” as a core idea in socialist strategy. The Russian Marxists used it. By it, they meant the Russian working class leading other social layers, especially the peasantry, in the struggle against Tsarism. How did Gramsci further develop the concept? What does his concept of hegemony contain which is more than the Russian usage?

Three: You define “hegemonic apparatus” in the following way. “A class’s hegemonic apparatus is the wide- ranging series of institutions and practices - from newspapers to educational organisations to political parties - by means of which a class and its allies engage their opponents in a struggle for political power”. But it is not just a series, is it? In the sense of a string of things, one after the other? It has to have an internal structure? A working-class “hegemonic apparatus” requires the development at its centre of a revolutionary political party, shaping and leading the other institutions, trade-unions, community organisations, soviets?

Moreover, the general rule for political apparatuses based in the working class is for their class allegiance to be contested - to be the subject of a contest between efforts by activists to hold them to working-class interests and the suction of the dominant and intermediate classes.

In other words, there are political apparatuses. Whether they are "hegemonic", and if so for whom, is something constantly recalculated in the flux of their relations with class struggle. But in political class struggle the working class cannot act "raw", but only through some apparatus or another, even if that apparatus is only, let's say, a minority faction in a supposed "workers' party" which in its majority is in tow to the bourgeoisie.

Four: You identify the united front as the major tactical content of the struggle for hegemony. You define the united front tactic as "the final strategic advice of Lenin to the Western working-class movement before his death" and "the only possible foundation for a realistic and responsible socialist politics", and note that it is something radically different from "the nationalist and non-class-based perspective of a 'popular front'," i.e. the sort of strategic alliance with bourgeois forces enforced by the Stalinist parties in the 1930s and continued today in such aberrations as the now-collapsed Respect coalition in Britain and the participation of supposedly revolutionary socialists in bourgeois government majorities in Brazil and Italy.

Trotsky argued that the united front was not really strategic advice, but an imperative of a much more basic sort.

“The tactic of the united front is not something accidental and artificial - a cunning manoeuvre - not at all; it originates, entirely and wholly, in the objective conditions governing the development of the proletariat... It was not Lenin who invented the policy of the united front; like the split within the proletariat, it is imposed by the dialectics of the class struggle... At a certain level, the struggle for unity of action is converted from an elementary fact into a tactical task. The simple formula of the united front solves nothing... The tactical application of the united front is subordinated, every given period, to a definite strategic conception...”

In this context Trotsky identifies the specificity of united-front tactics in the developed bourgeois democracies in these terms: “Under the conditions existing in advanced capitalist countries, the slogan of [united front] ‘only from below’ is a gross anachronism, fostered by memories of the first stages of the revolutionary movement, especially in Tsarist Russia”.

In practice, in the big bourgeois democracies, “united front tactics” - outside the obvious in the trade-union field - have for decades consisted mainly of activities by the small Marxist groups designed to engage with the working-class elements inside the big reformist parties.

Now we see an increasing Americanisation of politics and - in Britain with Blair and Brown, but not only in Britain - the transformation of parliamentary politics into a business mediated almost entirely by the TV and press, the squeezing-out of elements of active working-class

political life in the ex-reformist parties, the shutting-down of the old openings for united-front tactics.

In Workers' Liberty we've discussed the possibilities for new united-front tactics in terms of a drive to relaunch the Labour Representation Committee (previously a Labour/ union left caucus) as a broader Workers' Representation Committee, and a long-term effort to rebuild and reorient Trades Councils as local cross-union political united fronts.

What light can be shed on such discussions by Gramsci's discussion of the united front in terms of the battle to construct a hegemonic apparatus and win hegemony?

Five: At this stage of hindsight, shouldn't we say flatly that Tasca was right against both Bordiga and Gramsci in the early 1920s?

Six: the interpretation of "hegemony" in terms of a sort of "cultural syndicalism" is often linked with the idea that Gramsci saw an orientation to "hegemony" as a tactical imperative specifically for Western Europe, in contrast to Russia where no such orientation had been necessary.

This has to be nonsense, if only because Gramsci actually took the idea of "hegemony" from the Russian Marxists. In fact, in 1924 Gramsci had specifically criticised the view of Amadeo Bordiga, the other main theorist of the early Italian Communist Party, that radically different political conceptions were needed in Western Europe from those used by the Bolsheviks in Russia.

“Amadeo [Bordiga]... thinks that the tactic of the International reflects the Russian situation, i.e. was born on the terrain of a backward and primitive capitalist civilisation. For him, this tactic is extremely voluntaristic and theatrical, because only with an extreme effort of will was it possible to obtain from the Russian masses a revolutionary activity which was not determined by the historical situation.... [In the West] there exists the historical determinism which was lacking in Russia, and therefore the overriding task must be the organisation of the party as an end in itself.

“I think that the situation is quite different. Firstly, because the political conception of the Russian communists was formed on an international and not on a national terrain. Secondly, because in central and western Europe the development of capitalism has not only determined the formation of the broad proletarian strata, but also - and as a consequence - has created the higher stratum, the labour aristocracy, with its appendages in the trade-union bureaucracy and the social-democratic groups.

“The determination, which in Russia was direct and drove the masses onto the streets for a revolutionary uprising, in central and western Europe is complicated by all these political superstructures, created by the greater development of capitalism. This makes the action of the masses slower and more prudent, and therefore requires of the revolutionary party a strategy and tactics altogether more complex and long-term than those which were necessary for the Bolsheviks in the period between March and November 1917...”

In a 1926 article he specified another Western “complication”: the

greater strength of the states and the ruling classes in the West.

What's your view of the key contributions to be got from Gramsci on revolutionary tactics in fairly developed and stable bourgeois democracies as contrasted with Tsarist Russia?

Seven: You conclude your book with a discussion of Gramsci's conception of the role of a working-class political party. Adapting a phrase from Machiavelli, Gramsci called it "The Modern Prince". You describe its role as "an expansive form of dialectical pedagogy", comprehending "the active relation of the 'democratic philosopher'."

You also describe it as "no more than a proposal for the future, not a concrete reality".

Yet Gramsci, in a note of 1933, wrote: "The most important observation to be made about any concrete analysis of the relations of force is the following: that such analyses cannot and must not be ends in themselves (unless the intention is merely to write a chapter of past history), but acquire significance only if they serve to justify a particular practical activity, or initiative of will. They reveal the points of least resistance, at which the force of will can be most fruitfully applied; they suggest immediate tactical operations; they indicate how a campaign of political agitation may best be launched, what language will best be understood by the masses, etc. The decisive element in every situation is the permanently organised and long-prepared force which can be put into the field when it is judged that a situation is favourable (and it can be favourable only in so far as such a force exists, and is full of fighting spirit). Therefore the essential task is that

of systematically and patiently ensuring that this force is formed, developed, and rendered ever more homogeneous, compact, and self-aware...”

There is no indication here that the long process of assembling and preparing that organised force should start only when it can immediately become a mass force. In fact, in another note of 1933, Gramsci analyses three elements required to form a party - mass membership, “principal cohesive element”, and intermediate cadres - and writes of the second element, “numerically weak”, that it cannot “form the party alone”, but “it could do so” - i.e. make a start - “more than could the first element”, i.e. that it may be necessary to assemble a nucleus before a mass membership is even possible, and that without such a nucleus, developed in advance, mass membership alone cannot form a party.

Doesn't Gramsci's argument indicate the need to start on the work of party-building now, even if only a small and primitive scale is immediately possible, rather than leave it as a proposal for the future?

'PASSIVE REVOLUTION'

You distinguish three senses, each more general than the previous, in which Gramsci uses the concept “passive revolution”.

First it is used only to analyse the process by which a bourgeois united

Italy was formed in the 19th century without any substantial revolution from below.

Second, it is extended to “other countries that modernise the State by means of a series of reforms or national wars, without passing through the political revolution of the radical Jacobin type” - Germany at least, or arguably all countries other than France.

“In a third moment, he extended the concept to signify the pacifying and incorporating nature assumed by bourgeois hegemony in the epoch of imperialism, particularly in its Western European heartlands... the bourgeois hegemonic project for an entire historical period”.

One: By “epoch of imperialism” here, do you mean the epoch of high imperialism in the sense that Lenin had in mind, from the end of the 19th century up to, say, World War Two? Or do you mean the whole period from when capital began to penetrate the entire globe up to the present day and forward until the overthrow of capitalism? You seem to mean the second: you also describe “passive revolution” as “permanent structural adjustment” (the IMF and World Bank term for their programme) *avant la lettre*.

In that case, “passive revolution” would in fact be a general description of modern bourgeois rule. It would be a way of conceptualising the idea that the bourgeoisie continues to transform and revolutionise society from above long after it has done its classic revolutionary work of clearing away feudalism, and even in eras where “objectively” society is ripe for socialism.

It would then help us escape from the mindset which stretches forward the imprecations of the early Communist International about the bourgeoisie at its last gasp, unable to reconstruct society after World War One to make them a static truth of all subsequent history. It would help us come to terms with the vast expansion of capital in the last 20 years and with “globalisation”.

Yet in other passages you protest against “a dominant interpretation that extends ‘passive revolution’ to the contemporary world”.

What periods do you think the concept of “passive revolution” covers? What sort of concepts do you think we need to describe bourgeois transformation-from-above in other periods?

Two: There does seem to be an element in Gramsci’s thought which identifies “passive revolution” as an aberrant condition of bourgeois society. In the French Revolution, wrote Gramsci, the bourgeoisie “was able to present itself as an integral ‘State’, with all the intellectual and moral forces necessary and sufficient for organising a complete and perfect society”. “Passive revolution” was the appropriate concept for Italy’s bourgeois state-formation because it lacked the full, classic, bourgeois development exemplified by France.

Isn’t there an error of perspective here?

The French Revolution set markers for the whole world; yet it did not create a flexible, expansive form of bourgeois rule in France. In fact, by its radicalism, it created a society in which the bourgeoisie had great difficulty in ruling except in a fragile and nervous way. Already by 1795

government was in the hands of the anxious Directory. It was followed by the First Empire; the Bourbon Restoration; the Orleanist monarchy, which Marx characterised as the rule of a narrow “financial aristocracy”, “the lumpenproletariat reborn at the pinnacle of bourgeoisie society”; then the Second Empire.

In England, another “classic” country of bourgeois rule, the late 18th and early 19th century were marked not by the bourgeoisie confidently establishing itself as the leader of a society of equal citizens, but by bourgeois fear of and horror at “the mob”, a syndrome which we can see symbolised to this day in the architecture of the Bank of England, with its blank windowless outside walls erected to save the whole site from being vandalised by the populace.

Isn't “passive revolution” not only statistically the most common, but also, in the nature of the class relations involved, in principle the most efficacious way for the bourgeoisie to construct a flexible, expansive form of hegemony?

Was the French Revolution the glorious aberration?

Three: Gramsci used the term “hegemony” in analysing different forms of bourgeois rule as well as in discussing working-class strategy.

You write that in the early 19th century, in Western Europe, “hegemony emerges as a new ‘consensual’ political practice distinct from mere coercion (the sole means of previous ruling classes)...”

But isn't that, too, a romanticisation of the “revolutionary

bourgeoisie”? Neither Bourbon nor Orleanist France, nor yet the Britain of the Combination Acts, Lord Liverpool, or the Duke of Wellington, fit that picture.

Moreover, previous ruling classes, for all their brutality, had had very flimsy machines of coercion compared with even half-modern bourgeois states, and enormous machines for manufacturing consent, notably religion and entrenched systems of mutual obligation.

The bourgeoisie in its early years of rule in fact had huge difficulties in “manufacturing consent”, because its rise had involved stripping the majority of the population, as Marx put it, “of all the guarantees of existence afforded by the old feudal arrangements”; “pitilessly tearing asunder the motley feudal ties that man to his ‘natural superiors’”; and that at the same time as, in Marx’s words again, its most basic economic mechanisms compelled it to give “the notion of human equality... the fixity of a popular prejudice”.

Four: We saw that consent and coercion are inseparably linked in the battle for “hegemony”.

Isn’t the imbrication of consent and coercion even closer than that? It is not just winning the consent of some depends on effectively coercing of others. For strike leaders to win the support of workers, for example, is not just a question of “consent” as if the workers were pondering alternatives in a vacuum, but also of “coercion” in forms ranging from moral pressure from workmates to physical force on a picket line being strong enough to outweigh the rival “coercion” of economic worries about losing pay or their jobs.

Doesn't it follow that different forms of state cannot be classified in terms of different percentages of "consent" and "coercion" in a supposed fixed quantum of rule? One form of state may organise both a higher degree of consent and a higher degree of coercion than another.

There are also forms of hegemony which are neither quite coercion nor quite consent.

The "dull compulsion of economic relations" and the influence of commodity fetishism are neither political coercion, nor a matter of effective persuasion, yet important in bourgeois hegemony.

Gramsci writes of the Italian peasants' "effective subordination to the [local, rural] intellectuals" - "priest, lawyer, notary, teacher, doctor, etc." Those intellectuals had no large powers of coercion, nor did they enjoy unequivocal consent (rather, the peasants viewed them with "elements of envy and impassioned anger"). However, they enjoyed hegemony because they "represented a social model" - "the peasants always thinks one of his sons could become an intellectual (especially a priest)" - and because they monopolised professional mediation between the peasants and civil administration.

Gramsci also writes of "the peasant masses" in 19th century Italy, through the Action Party's absorption into the "Moderates", being "decapitated [politically], not absorbed into the ambit of the state".

Is there not an analogy in the current "hegemony" of neo-liberal social

democracy (Brown, Blair, Veltroni, etc.) and its associated corps of think-tank and NGO "intellectuals" over the working classes of the old industrial countries? This is hegemony through "decapitation" and monopoly of "mediation"; to read it in terms of "consent/ coercion" would make us suppose much more positive "consent" to such neo-liberalism than there actually is in the working class.

Five: What does Gramsci have to offer us in terms of understanding the specificity of bourgeois democracy as a form of rule?

In the years before World War One, revolutionary Marxists generally argued that the bourgeoisie was moving organically towards more authoritarian modes of rule, on the basis that bourgeois democracy was proper to a society with a large number of independent capitalists - something like Andrew Jackson's USA, minus the Native Americans and the slaves - and the economically contrasting society of huge capitalist corporations, cartels, and finance-industry conglomerates must contrast politically, too.

In fact what happened, generally, was the expansion of the formal desiderata of bourgeois democracy, along with a certain emptying-out of those forms as the state machine became more elaborate and bureaucratic. We need to correct the "grid" for classifying state-forms which those Marxists used.

You seem to suggest that bourgeois democracy is characterised by a large development of "capillary power" - wide-rooted forms of bourgeois leadership. However, many forms of authoritarian bourgeois rule have had extensive systems of "capillary power" - from Nazism in

Germany, at least up the point where war losses discredited it, to PRI-ism in Mexico.

Trotsky offers a complex dialectical definition.

“Democracy as well as fascism is bourgeois in character... The ruling class, however, does not inhabit a vacuum. It stands in definite relations to other classes.

“In a developed capitalist society, during a ‘democratic’ regime, the bourgeoisie leans for support primarily upon the working classes, which are held in check by the reformists... In a fascist regime, at least during its first phase, capital leans on the petty bourgeoisie, which destroys the organisations of the proletariat. Italy, for instance!...

“In the course of many decades, the workers have built up within the bourgeois democracy, by utilising, by fighting against it, their own strongholds and bases of proletarian democracy: the trade unions, the political parties, the educational and sports clubs, the cooperatives, etc... These bulwarks of workers’ democracy within the bourgeois state are absolutely essential for taking the revolutionary road...”

What can we learn from Gramsci on this question?

Six: Discussing hegemony, “passive revolution”, consent and coercion, Gramsci puts much emphasis on making a register of the specificities of each particular bourgeois society, in the same way as the Russian Marxists had analysed Russia.

He seems, however, to have been curiously unsuccessful - for example in his Lyons Theses of 1926 - in making that register for his own Italy in his own day.

In those Theses, he argues:

“Capitalism is the predominant element in Italian society”. However, “Industrialism, which is the essential part of capitalism, is very weak in Italy. Its possibilities for development are limited, both because of the geographical situation and because of the lack of raw materials...

“The intrinsic weakness of capitalism compels the industrial class to adopt expedients to guarantee its control... a system of economic compromises between a part of the industrialists... and the big landowners...”

That system of compromises tends “to halt economic development in entire regions (South, Islands); to block the emergence and development of an economy better fitted to the structure and resources of the country... The toiling masses of the South [have] a position analogous to that of a colonial population. The big industry of the North fulfills the function vis-à-vis them of the capitalist metropolises....”

And the system of compromises generates “a heterogeneity and weakness of the entire social structure, and of the State which its expression”.

“In the face of this heterogeneity, the proletariat appears as the only

element which by its nature has a unificatory function, capable of coordinating the whole of society...”

In fact a few figures tell us a lot about the differences between Italy and Russia.

In 1910, cotton consumption was 3.0 kg per head in Russia, 5.4 kg per head in Italy. Steel production was 38 kg per head in Russia, 28 kg per head in Italy. Coal consumption was 300 kg per head in Russia, 270 kg per head in Italy.

Overall, Italy was not much more industrialised than Russia. On average, too, its agriculture was not notably more productive than Russia's.

However, cities were much more developed in Italy than in Russia. In 1910 Russia had two big cities, and they contained about 2% of the country's population. Italy had six, and they contained 9%. 86% of Russia's workforce was in agriculture, and only 60% of Italy's.

In other words, Italy had vastly more small-scale urban crafts, petty industry, petty trade, and services than Russia. Gramsci himself notes that Italy's "agglomeration of the population in non-rural centres [was] almost twice as great as in France".

Its agriculture was different, too. The people were day-labourers or insecure tenants for large absentee landowners in most of the South; labourers for more modern capitalist farms in richer parts of the South; relatively secure sharecroppers with smaller, resident landlords in the

centre and some parts of the north; landless labourers in the rest of the North.

Documents like the Lyons Theses are strikingly deficient even in description of these different categories of rural population, let alone in the elaboration of policies capable of winning them to alliance with the working class.

Gramsci does mention “a fairly extensive urban petty bourgeoisie, which is of very great significance”. But he does not seem to have settled on a stable attitude to it. In some articles, he is more hostile to that petty bourgeoisie than to the bourgeoisie proper.

“The unpaid hours of the workers’ labour are no longer used to increase the wealth of the capitalists. They are used to satisfy the hunger and rapacity of the multitude of agents, functionaries and idlers... this crowd of useless parasites...”

But his talk elsewhere of class alliances must surely at times have the urban petty bourgeoisie, or at least sections of it (which ones?), in mind.

“The proletariat appears as the only element which by its nature has a unificatory function, capable of coordinating the whole of society...”
But how? And was coordinating the different elements in Italy, as such, actually the historic role of the working class - rather than participating in the development of a (necessarily “heterogeneous”: but why not?) European socialist economy? Has Gramsci here been dissuaded by post-1924 Comintern pressure from the “Trotskyist” idea of European-

scale socialist reconstruction, towards a vaguely- sketched Italian “socialism in one country”?

Italian capitalism before World War One had been characterised by high taxation and tariffs, and heavy state indebtedment, in order to nurture certain heavy industries thought by the government to be essential for capitalist national development: railways, shipping, armaments. Fascism largely continued this policy of the liberals.

Is this what Gramsci considers to demonstrate the blocking of “an economy better fitted to the structure and resources of the country”? What “economy better fitted to the structure and resources of the country” does he have in mind?

Socialism in one Italian country? But in that case to charge the ruling class with blocking it tells us nothing: under what circumstances would capitalists and landowners not block socialism? Does he mean that the industrial/ agrarian compromise has blocked a different capitalist development, as, for example, Tsarism in Russia blocked an “American” development there? But what different development?

Gramsci’s discussion of the relation between industrialists and landowners also lacks coherence. First, he says that there is a compromise because the industrialists are weak.

Then, in another passage, he writes: “One does not... find here the traditional economic struggle between industrialists and landowners... The industrial-agrarian agreement is based on a solidarity of interests between certain privileged groups..” So now there is a community of

interest, which would explain compromise without any need for reference to the “weakness” of the industrialists.

Another passage presents the industrialists as very strong compared to the landowners. “The big landowners and even the middle bourgeoisie of the South... take on the role of those categories in the colonies which ally themselves to the metropolises in order to keep the mass of the working people subjugated”. They are subordinated to the industrialists of the North (which stands to the South as the capitalist metropolises do to the colonies) as the maharajahs of India are to the British bourgeoisie. (In fact, didn't the cities of the USA play the role of capitalist metropolises to the Italian South about as much as those of the Italian North did? But not of a high-imperialist colonial sort?)

Gramsci's dominant conclusion from these mixed thoughts seems to be that (as in at least his first version of “passive revolution”) Italy has an aberrant, distorted capitalist development. It is like an echo-in-advance of the descriptions by the “dependency theorists” of the distorted, blocked, etc. development of, for example, the countries of Latin America - of their measuring the actual development against an illusory measuring-rod of ideal “organic” capitalist development. Or an echo-afterwards of some of the Russian populist ideas about inescapable “limits” of capitalist development in Russia.

Thus: “heterogeneity and weakness of the social structure and the State”. (In other words, there is an “economic struggle between industrialists and landowners”, and the industrialists have to compromise in that struggle!) But the idea that “weakness” automatically goes with “heterogeneity” is surely a mistake. A ruling

alliance between industrialists and landowners was not peculiar to Italy. Britain and Germany had it. That “heterogeneity” (successful “passive revolution”) produced not weak, but strong, bourgeois states.

Gramsci argues that in the USA “hegemony is born in the factory and doesn’t need many political and ideological intermediaries”. As if the USA was a capitalist society without heterogeneity? Actually bourgeois hegemony in the USA is mediated by an extraordinarily complex network of client relations, alliances, combinations of interest groups, etc., reaching, of necessity, not only into the big factory cities but also into “Main Street” of the USA’s very numerous small cities and towns, and into many and varied “ethnic” groups.

Isn’t this an example of thought being half-haunted by an image of “ideal” capitalist development, by contrast to which the actual processes of “passive revolution” always produce something distorted? Of measuring capitalist development against a mythical measuring rod instead of soberly registering it for what it is, in its actual horrors, contradictions, and possibilities?

THE INTEGRAL STATE

Gramsci’s usage of the terms “State” and “civil society” is sometimes confusing. He seems sometimes to argue as if bourgeois development requires a “proper balance” between State and civil society, sometimes that the State is a defensive shell around civil society, sometimes that civil society is a defensive shell around the State,

sometimes that the State and civil society become fused.

You argue that these ambiguities are resolved in Gramsci's concept of "the integral State". "Political society" and "civil society" are both superstructures in bourgeois society, and both "attributes" of the "integral State".

"Political society is the 'idea' of civil society... power in political society is a particular... institutional organisation of the social forces in civil society".

One: How does the "state machine" in the narrow sense fit into this categorisation?

Two: How do these concepts relate to the idea of "passive revolution"? What is the agency of "passive revolution"? Political society? What is the result, at any particular point, of the process of "passive revolution"? The "integral State"?

Three: In his critical discussion of Gramsci, Perry Anderson complained that Gramsci tended to blur the boundaries between the State and the rest of society. You argue against Anderson that "the concept of the State as a discrete location in the social formation... is a classical tenet of liberalism", and even that Anderson veers into not a Marxist but a Weberian definition of the state as the monopoly of the legal means of violence.

What Anderson was concerned about was the effort of the Eurocommunists, citing Gramsci as authority, to portray the state in

modern capitalist society as diffuse and virtually all-pervasive. Marx's and Lenin's idea of "smashing the State", said the Eurocommunists, might have made sense in Russia, where the State was relatively separated-off from society; it could make no sense in modern capitalist societies.

How would you respond to those Eurocommunists?

PHILOSOPHY

You argue that Gramsci's famous term "philosophy of praxis" is not just a euphemism which he used in his Prison Notebooks, for fear of censorship, in place of writing bluntly "Marxism".

Gramsci, you write, offers a new conception of philosophy - "as a relationship of hegemony"; as a "conception of the world" developed in dialogue with the "senso comune" (roughly, common sense) of a definite social class; "a conception of the world which tends to raise the level of awareness of historical determination and to increase the capacity to act of an entire social class"; "an historical, political achievement of a class".

"The older 'form' of philosophy" is "superannuated" and must be "replaced by new practices of the socialist movement".

This conception stands in stark contrast to Hegel's idea of metaphysics as the "holy of holies" in the temple of culture, a special science

compared to which all others are subordinate sciences.

It is in contrast, too, to the cod-Marxist idea, based on the authority of an unpublished text by Engels, that dialectics consists of three laws discovered by some unexplained process to be absolute truths for all times and circumstances.

It stands against the idea of Lukacs and others that there is some “method” standing above all actual investigations, and that it is compulsory to be absolutely “orthodox” about the “method”, although “Marxism” is compatible with any results whatever in the actual investigations.

And it runs counter to the once-influential idea of the French Communist Party ideologue Louis Althusser, according to which Marxism has two parts, “historical materialism” and “dialectical materialism”, with “dialectical materialism” playing the role of a sort of intellectual secret police force to protect “historical materialism” against alien influences.

It is, so to speak, a democratic and republican conception of philosophy rather than the absolute-monarch conception of it of earlier ages, and the constitutional-monarch conception which arises when scientific development has quelled some of the pretensions of speculation.

One: This account echoes the formulation by the 1920s German communist writer Karl Korsch that “German idealist philosophy is the theoretical expression of the revolutionary movement of the bourgeoisie”. What relation do you see between Gramsci’s idea and

Korsch's? Korsch had the slogan: "abolish philosophy". How does Gramsci differ? Or does he really?

Two: It also echoes an argument made by Ludwig Feuerbach in 1843, in a book which greatly influenced Marx and Engels, against Hegel: "Truth does not exist in thought, nor in cognition confined to itself. Truth is only the totality of man's life and being... The absolute philosopher said, or at least thought of himself - naturally as a thinker and not as a man - 'la vérité c'est moi', in a way analogous to the absolute monarch claiming, 'L'État c'est moi', or the absolute God claiming, 'L'être c'est moi'. The human philosopher, on the other hand, says: Even in thought, even as a philosopher, I am a man in togetherness with men... The true dialectic is not a monologue of the solitary thinker with himself. It is a dialogue between 'I' and 'You'."

What relation do you see between Gramsci's idea and Feuerbach's?

Three: Could it not, however, be argued that the "democratic" and "class" character of philosophy, the fusion of philosophy with "politics" and "history", is overstated here? "German idealist philosophy is the theoretical expression of the revolutionary movement of the bourgeoisie". A gross oversimplification, surely? And Marxist "philosophy of praxis" would be "the theoretical expression of the revolutionary movement of the working class", the "historical achievement of a class"?

But then it would follow that it must have been unavailable to Marx, since there was no large, stable revolutionary movement of the working class until his very last years.

In your book you rate the philosophy of the Second International, even in its best years, very low.

Was the early Third International a higher expression of “the revolutionary movement of the working class”, able to “achieve” more philosophy? Actually, in the short time available to it before the dead hand of Stalinism came down, it did not. In his own educational work in the Italian Communist Party, so you note, Gramsci had used as the best short Third-Internationalist exposition of a Marxist “world view” Bukharin’s book “Historical Materialism”.

But when Gramsci came to develop his own idea of philosophy - in a fascist prison, cut off from any possibility of dialogue with a lively working-class movement - one of the main ways he did it was by a comprehensive criticism of Bukharin’s text, which he showed to be philosophically well below the level of the best of the Second International.

Four: In his prison notebooks, Gramsci argued that everyone is a philosopher - “since even in the slightest manifestation of any intellectual activity... there is contained a specific conception of the world”. Then the question is:

“Is it better to ‘think’, without having a critical awareness, in a disjointed and episodic way, to take part in a conception of the world mechanically imposed by the external environment... Or is it better to work out consciously and critically one’s own conception of the world and thus, in connection with the labours of one’s own brain, choose

one's sphere of activity, take an active part in the creation of the history of the world, be one's own guide, refusing to accept passively and supinely from outside the moulding of one's personality?"

Elsewhere in the notebooks he argues that seeing society "clearly as movement" - i.e. seeing it so as to be able to change it - is inseparable from passion, will, and activism.

"Prediction only means seeing the present and the past clearly as movement. Seeing them clearly: in other words, accurately identifying the fundamental and permanent elements of the process. But it is absurd to think of a purely 'objective' prediction. Anybody who makes a prediction has in fact a 'programme' for whose victory he is working, and his prediction is precisely an element contributing to that victory.

"This does not mean that prediction need always be arbitrary and gratuitous, or simply tendentious. Indeed one might say that only to the extent to which the objective aspect of prediction is linked to a programme does it acquire its objectivity: 1. because strong passions are necessary to sharpen the intellect and help make intuition more penetrating; 2. because reality is a product of the application of human will to the society of things... therefore if one excludes all voluntarist elements, or if it is only other people's wills whose intervention one reckons as an objective element in the general interplay of forces, one mutilates reality itself. Only the man who wills something strongly can identify the elements which are necessary to the realisation of his will...

"When a particular programme has to be realised, it is only the

existence of somebody to 'predict' it which will ensure that it deals with what is essential – with those elements which, being 'organisable' and susceptible of being directed or deflected, are in reality alone predictable".

Or again: "The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence... but in active participation... as constructor, organiser, 'permanent persuader'..."

In other words, philosophy-of-praxis is inseparable from consistent, purposeful political activism. But this is not all-or-nothing. A preliminary conception of the world can be worked out by an active minority even before the majority of the working class moves into revolutionary politics.

Isn't this the only way out of a double-bind in which no Marxist world-view can develop before a mass revolutionary working-class movement develops, but no mass revolutionary working-class movement can develop before a Marxist world-view is developed?

In other words, don't we come back here to the question of initiative now, even if only small groups are available to take it, towards building a revolutionary party, rather than leaving that as "a proposal for the future" which only "the energies and initiatives of a reviving [mass] working-class movement" can "confirm"?

Five: Isn't your book itself, as a philosophical contribution, structured somewhat at odds with the dialogic conception of philosophy which it argues?

Rather than engaging with the interactions, fruitful or botched, of the revolutionary Marxists with the “senso comune” (common sense) of the working class, it takes its markers from the debates in “Marxist, post-Marxist, and Marxist” academia and within the old official Communist Parties.

Incongruously, it calls the official Communist Parties even after the full consolidation of Stalinism, and into the phase of their social-democratic softening, “the international Communist movement”, and appears to consider their doctrine to have been some form of “Marxism”. As well call the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea a form of democracy.

For example, it refers to the argument between disciples of the French Communist Party ideologue Louis Althusser and those who defended Gramsci against Althusser’s criticisms as “the last great theoretical debate of Marxism”.

But unless one wants to reckon hard-Maoist groups such as the UJCML and Gauche Proletarienne in France as “Marxist”, the influence of Althusser in the Marxist movement - as distinct from in some corners of the Communist Parties and in academia - was almost zero. Exceptions? Maybe the Left Tendency in the Communist Party of Australia in 1974-5, but that was a very marginal and short-lived exception. In England, for example, New Left Review had a brief “Althusserian” phase, but that was very brief. It was terminated in 1971 by the departure of Ben Brewster and others - citing the doctrine of “socialism in one country” as their banner - to found the short-lived journal Theoretical Practice. Ex-Althusserians influential after that, like Paul

Hirst, made no claim to be Marxists.

When, from the late 1960s, the Marxist movement revived a bit from its extreme isolation and poverty of resources since the Stalinist counter-revolution, one of the first books on current philosophical debates which was able to produce was entitled flatly “Against Althusser” (by writers associated with the LCR, in 1974). In the foreword to the new edition of that book, Daniel Bensaid recounts how he and Antoine Artous, as teenagers in the mid-1960s, spent a summer studying Althusser and confirming their instinctive rejection of his doctrine.

The Marxist movement, in all its varied and often aberrant strands, almost all defended Gramsci against Althusserian attack, and struggled valiantly to extricate Gramsci’s revolutionary contribution from the misuse of his terms and phrases made by the Eurocommunists. There is much more to do there. But surely it should be done in connection with the political and theoretical problems and dialogues of the actual Marxist movement, not of the debates of “Marxist, post-Marxist, and Marxisant” academia?

GRAMSCI AND TROTSKY

In his prison notebooks Gramsci sometimes comments with some hostility on Trotsky and on the theory of permanent revolution. But he also notes that the Bolsheviks “applied it in practice” in 1917. He never positively endorsed the Stalin faction against the Left Opposition, and he certainly rejected the ultra-left Stalinist policy of the Third Period

(about 1929-34).

The Left Opposition's fight did not penetrate into the Italian Communist Party in the same way as into the other big Communist Parties, for two reasons. In the first place, the Italian Communist Party was only semi-legal after the victory of Italian fascism in 1922, and completely illegal after 1926 (when Gramsci was jailed). Its internal debates were fragmentary and in exile.

In the second place, the Left Opposition's closest ally in the Italian party - though one who made it clear that he rejected political ideas which the Left Opposition considered indispensable, such as the united front tactic - was Amadeo Bordiga, the first leader of the party. Gramsci replaced Bordiga as leader in a fight against his ultra-left conceptions.

Isaac Deutscher, surely exaggerating, presents the rallying to the International Left Opposition in 1930 of three of Gramsci's closest comrades, Tresso, Ravazzoli, and Leonetti, as a sort of vicarious adherence to Trotsky by Gramsci himself.

At first, in 1921, Gramsci deferred to Bordiga's opposition to the united front. He sided with Bordiga against Tasca, who advocated a workers' united front against fascism.

In your book, you suggest that Gramsci was won over to the united front tactic personally by Trotsky, around the time of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in 1922, and that some of Gramsci's hostile comments on Trotsky arise from hurt at the bruising

process in which Trotsky demolished Gramsci's position.

One: Did Gramsci ever comment on "socialism in one country"?

Two: You argue that Gramsci kept a distance from the theses of the Fifth Congress of the Comintern, in 1924. However, he certainly deferred to the Fifth Congress in adopting and defending its idea that factions should be banned in all Communist Parties. Do you think he ever reconsidered that, or thought through and clarified what he disagreed with in the Fifth Congress?

Three: You refer to the "last Lenin" - to Lenin's last writings - as paralleling Gramsci's thoughts about the proper forms of elastic and responsive hegemony for a workers' government.

As Moshe Lewin showed in his book *Lenin's Last Struggle*, Lenin did sound the alarm against emergent Stalinism. However, Lenin's thinking remained boxed in - as all the Bolsheviks' was - by grimly realistic assessments. The whole of Russian society had been traumatised and brutalised by terrible experiences: 14.5 million dead in the World War and civil war, huge famines in 1921, millions of abandoned children.

Since early 1921 at the latest the Bolsheviks no longer commanded majority assent, and for the sake of international revolution had no option but to "hold on" as best they could until working-class victories in other countries, and a gradual placating of the peasantry in Russia through NEP and economic improvement, created new possibilities.

Lenin's thinking did not go as far as Trotsky and the Left Opposition

would go in 1923 (and Trotsky did not go as far in 1923 as he was able to do later, with hindsight). Isn't it incongruous to refer to that "last Lenin", and to a Gramsci who never achieved any clarity on the bureaucratic counter-revolution in the USSR and the processes which incubated it, as presenting a model for the proper forms of hegemony of a future workers' government?