

A Critical Evaluation of Gramsci

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STRUGGLESSESSIONS



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of gramsci

by Agustín

“Every more or less “new” question, every more or less unexpected and unforeseen turn of events, even though it change the basic line of development only to an insignificant degree and only for the briefest period, will always inevitably give rise to one variety of revisionism or another.”

– V.I. Lenin [1]

The plethora of revisionist ideas are motivated in part from an alleged opening of a “new question” or problem that necessitates “new ideas.” New approaches to coming with new answers that Marxism allegedly does not address. Sometimes the ideas are not new at all and sometimes revisionism advocates for a retreat or regression into past discarded or outdated ideas. They seek to mechanically apply them to the situation at hand. This is the case of various right opportunists ranging from the Canadian Joshua Moufawad-Paul (JMP) and his “continuity and rupture” concept, to the revisionist Revolutionary Communist Party, USA’s “New Synthesis”. When it comes to the thought of the Italian Antonio Gramsci and the popularization of his ideas we come into much

of the same. That is we come to a re-branding of revisionism to negate the initiation or prolong the possibility of armed struggle to some undetermined date and/or as well as render the Dictatorship of the Proletariat to a realm of impossibility.

To take up the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, particularly his take on cultural hegemony, is to throw out the possibility of initiating People's War or at best indefinitely prolong its initiation. His ideas are an outright negation of Marxism-Leninism, as well as its subsequent stages of development and we should discard his ideas as they are the words of a pessimist who had no faith in revolution as a proactive affair. Gramsci's ideas while he was alive remained obscure in Europe due to his imprisonment by the fascists in Italy. It is only in the 1970s that they begin to gain traction and popularized by the Eurocommunists in the 1970s. His popularity continues to rein in the halls of academia. There is one main reason for this and it is Gramsci's hyper focus on cultural hegemony.

Why are his ideas so popular among this crowd but generally unseen in the practice of the Communist movement outside the West? It is because the academics goaded by their desire to remain relevant seek to engage in intellectual masturbation reducing Communist thought to a mere mental exercise. Why are such ideas met with praise while those of his contemporaries met with scorn? In this we refer to Lenin, Stalin and Mao. It isn't hard to see why. Gramsci has been elevated by eclectic pseudo-revolutionaries because he takes on the role of iconoclast. In their pursuit to remain relevant, academics will provide their own interpretations of his Prison Notebooks, which in total comprise over 3000 pages. He is cited and referenced more than Niccolò Machiavelli in which articles, papers and books written about him run to some 20,000 items. He has written on a variety of topics related to society which also part of his appeal to academia; there is so much material to pull from. As with

the plethora of material related to this figure we can only deal with his most popular ideas.

The State as Everything

The most cited justification of Gramscian ideas lay in their supposed applicability in Western nations. This idea is promoted by Gramsci himself:

“In the East 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.” [2]

Gramsci's cultural hegemony suffers primarily from a subjectivist deviation. For the State IS everything in the so-called West as well. This passage from his prison notebooks would seem to imply that the hardcore of the state rather than forming a backbone for capitalism is rather an invertebrate that is equally “gelatinous” as the civil society in the “East”. Here we see a sharp demarcation in what we now call the oppressed nations and the imperialist nations or the “Third World” or the “First World” as it is colloquially known.

The state is everything in all bourgeois society because it is the guarantor of bourgeois dictatorship. It more than anything else, is the main line of defense for the bourgeois class.

In describing the evolution of the state in human society Friedrich Engels in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* says:

“The state is therefore by no means a power imposed on society from without... Rather, it is a product of society at a particular stage of development; it is the admission that this society has involved itself in insoluble self-contradiction and is cleft into irreconcilable antagonisms which it is powerless to exorcise. But in order that these antagonisms, classes with conflicting economic interests, shall not consume themselves and society in fruitless struggle, a power, apparently standing above society, has become necessary to moderate the conflict and keep it within the bounds of ‘order’; and this power, arisen out of society, but placing itself above it and increasingly alienating itself from it, is the state.” [3]

He furthermore states that the tendency of the state overtime actually tends to consolidate and expand:

“[I]t becomes stronger in proportion as the class antagonisms within the state become sharper and as adjoining states grow larger and more populous. It is enough to look at Europe today, where class struggle and rivalry in conquest have brought the public power to a pitch that it threatens to devour the whole of society and even the state itself.” [5]

This tendency to consolidate and expand its dictatorship as states grow that much larger and more complex is fully in line with the position put forward by Chairman Gonzalo and the Communist Party of Peru in the call for the Communist parties of the world to militarize as the imperialists are militarizing themselves all over the globe. In describing this, the Communist Party of Peru characterizes it as follows:

“[A] time marked by violence in which all kinds of wars take place. We see how reaction is militarizing itself more and more, militarizing the old States, their economies, developing wars of aggression, trafficking with the struggles of the peoples and aiming toward a world war[.]” [6]

The reality here renders Gramsci's arguments of an undeveloped civil society in the “East” as fundamentally outdated. In fact “civil society” is more dominant as a counterrevolutionary force in the oppressed nations and being frequently defunded in the “West”. The growth of prisons and the carceral state in the United States since the 90s and the militarization of a police force, the drafting of Blue Lives Matter laws and draconian laws against protest, the targeting of militants etc. shows that the repressive and hardcore of the state is being that much more buffered and emphasized by the bourgeoisie more than ever before. This is sometimes referred to as the reactionization of the bourgeois democratic state. It would not need to do this if its rule was primarily through consent rather than coercion. This overall militarization of the bourgeois states is not limited to the US alone we observe this manifesting in Brazil especially during the 2013 World Cup demonstrations, In Germany through the founding of the BFE+, and Mexico's new national police the Gendarmería.

If we are to compare the “East” to the oppressed nations and the “West” to those imperialist nations of today we actually see a contradiction in what Gramsci was describing as the case for these nations as it relates to civil society and the state. For today especially after 1991 comes the restructuring of the economy including the gutting of many state owned enterprises, public utilities and public services in imperialist nations and nations oppressed by imperialism alike. To stifle the class antagonisms the imperialist nations render social services to continue under the auspices of non-governmental organizations

(NGOs), again in imperialist nations and nations oppressed by imperialism alike. It would stand to say that the “civil society” is actually much stronger in nations oppressed by imperialism. For example, in the country of Haiti 80% of the country’s basic services are not ran by the state itself but through NGOs, with Haiti containing the most NGOs per capita on Earth. [5]

While we do not view civil society and NGOs as synonymous; we argue that the growth of NGOs in the oppressed nations an indicator of a greater role that civil society plays in the exercising of bourgeois dictatorship. The growth of NGOs has become dominant in the oppressed nations as well as in the imperialist nations. The year 1993 was a pivotal year in their growth for both. These institutions grew from 1,600 NGOs to nearly 3,000 from 1980 – 1993 in the imperialist nations, nearly double than what they were prior. However, during the same period there were an estimated 29,000 NGOs worldwide with approximately 20,000 of these in the so-called Third World. [7]

Furthermore in 1997, approved World Bank projects in Third World countries involving NGOs were directly funded by the World Bank by a margin of 84 percent in South Asia, 61 percent in Africa, and 60 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The NGOs, as they exist in the US and in most of the world are of course counter-insurgency institutions backed financially by imperialism. They are the state’s response to a potentially militant populace and follow in the wake of pillaging armies. They seek to make “resistance” into a paid career and channel the otherwise righteous anger and militancy of would be revolutionaries into reformism meant to prop up the state. Laws which stipulate funding explicitly

dissuade many from overt revolutionary politics. Making their overall function that of life-support for a decomposing system—a prolonging of the inevitable.

The War of Position and the War of Maneuver

Why does Gramsci here differentiate between the state in the “East” and that of the “West”? It is because, according to him, the alleged underdevelopment in civil society in the East as compared to the West necessitates a different approach to revolution. What follows is that the terrain of struggle in the superstructure must occur first within the Western nations. The base is primary in the final instance for Marxists but for Gramsci it is the superstructure which is primary in the final instance. This plays out in his description of the War of the Position and War of maneuver. Gramsci argues against the universality of revolution not from the Left but from the Right. Here the proletariat will wage a protracted legal struggle (War of Position) which will then lead to insurrection (War of Maneuver) where the terrain of struggle are the “trade unions, parliaments, governments” with the purpose of “interacting with the working class.”

The struggle that Gramsci discusses as characterizing the Bolshevik Revolution as a “War of Maneuver” is an open attack between the state and revolutionary forces. Gramsci predicates that the success of this hinged on the relative strength of civil society. Because of the lack of this element in the “East” a war of position was not necessary:

“A crisis cannot give the attacking forces the ability to organize with lightning speed in time and space; still less can it endow them with fighting spirit. Similarly, the defenders are not demoralized, nor do they abandon their positions, even among the ruins, nor do they lose faith in their own strength or their own future.”[8]

For Gramsci these positions were the counter-hegemony in the superstructure of the capitalist state and for him it was the “the only viable possibility in the West.”[9] His differentiation between the strategy for the “East” and the “West” mistakenly asserts the October Revolution as an insurrectionary moment rather than an untheorized People’s War which began in 1905 and did not conclude until after the civil war. The positional war here means more or less what our movement has dealt with in criticizing the “base building” tendency of “building dual power” that is the supposed creation of “independent institutions” which will supposedly constitute a dual power. The “Building power” renders the bourgeois state unchallenged in any meaningful sense. The revisionists who adhere to this theory end up rendering their “institutions” to becoming ridden with narrow economism.

These theories on revolution are hampered by their own focus on conquering the superstructure to create counter-hegemony. They present an unfeasible strategy for revolution and thus render revolution impossible.

Why is it impossible? This is due to the fact that the superstructure of any given society is dependent, in the final instance, on its substructure or economic base. For every supposed opening and organization in the superstructure, the bourgeois state regenerates itself through education, mass media, the NGOs etc. The consolidation of mass media through television and

the internet and its backing by the state means that all counter hegemony will remain delegated to the margins in relation to bourgeois society. We must state that we are not opposed to the creation of counter hegemony nor do we necessarily disagree with Gramsci's analysis of ideology and its hold on the workers. However, with that said, what we disagree emphatically and what we find revisionist is the centrality and overemphasis of the superstructure and its alienation from a base area. Furthermore, any real construction of a counter hegemony is dependent first on the conquest of power. The protracted "war of position" with the bourgeoisie over the hearts and minds of the workers lends itself to the conquest of positions for the proletariat being synonymous to "winning" people over through "out organizing" the opposition and "coalition building". This is the essential revisionism of the base building tendency in the United States. It is the default opportunism that is symptomatic of all of the legal-left in the US.

The so-called "accumulation of forces" is a revisionist thesis that imbues elements of entryism unfitting for the situation at hand. Correct lines cannot be determined through the accumulation of forces in "democratic spaces", they can only be determined through the course of struggle, through rebellion. Indeed, the masses are politicized through their mobilization in rebellion in a quest to seize power by arming themselves. No hegemony can be attained without organized physical, political, and ideological confrontations against recognized class enemies. This demarcates between the theory of "building dual power" through strictly legal means, and conquering support for the initiation of people's war which alone can conquer dual power, leading up to state power.

Gramsci Is Incompatible with Maoism

There are various opportunists in Italy such as the (new) Italian Communist Party and Party of the Committees to Support Resistance – for Communism (CARC) which seek to try to reconcile Maoism with Gramscism. They have even went as far as to attribute the “accumulation of forces” as an element in the phases of Protracted People’s War. They also openly participate in bourgeois elections. [10] In this they stand closer to the Communist Party of the Philippines than any Maoist Party or organization. The Canadian Revolutionary Initiative (Another pseudo-Maoist organization in Canada) even laughingly published a piece by a non-organized lone American, in which he compares Chairman Gonzalo to Gramsci [11] This article of course quotes anti-communist Senderologists at large to prove his underlying point of the so-called importance of the accumulation of forces. At no point does he actually quote the Communist Party of Peru (PCP) or Chairman Gonzalo at all for if he did he would come to learn that the PCP explicitly opposes all which would come to be phrased word for word by Gramsci:

“He [Chairman Gonzalo] differentiates from those positions that today are based on ‘the accumulation of forces,’ which propose parsimoniously accumulating the masses by way of the so-called ‘democratic spaces’ or the use of legality.” [12]

The comrades in Peru while not explicitly denouncing Gramsci certainly denounce his strategy and tactics followed by his modern day acolytes which restrict the development of the subjective forces in the imperialist nations. They denounce the very words of Gramsci’s word for word.

It takes a certain amount of bending of Gramsci to the Left to make him compatible with Maoism, but the question of armed struggle not merely as a

tactic but strategy for revolution is something also rejected by the Italian revisionist in his prison notebooks about the subject:

“One should refrain from facile rhetoric about direct attacks against the State and concentrate instead on the difficult and immensely complicated tasks that a ‘war of position’ within civil society entails.”

Furthermore:

“The class factor leads to a fundamental difference: a class which has to work fixed hours every day cannot have permanent and specialized assault organizations — as can a class which has ample financial resources and all of whose members are not tied down by fixed work. At any hour of day or night, these by now professional organizations are able to strike decisive blows, and strike them unawares. Commando tactics cannot therefore have the same importance for some classes as for others. For certain classes a war of movement and maneuver is necessary — because it is the form of war which belongs to them; and this, in the case of political struggle, may include a valuable and perhaps indispensable use of commando tactics. But 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, and only politics creates the possibility for maneuver and movement.”

“Permanent and specialized assault organizations” means precisely opposition to the whole conception of a Red Army for the proletariat, led by a militarized

CP. It is furthermore a complete denunciation of Mao's famous dictum "Without a People's Army the People have nothing."

It would be alien to Gramscites to conceive how Maoists seek to organize the proletariat apart from their conception of the "war of position". As Chairman Gonzalo instructs us we are to go among the lowest, deepest and most profound section of the masses and educate them in revolutionary violence. By this we mean those most oppressed by capitalism and imperialism, in the most strategic and important sectors of the proletariat and in the greatest number. This section of the masses is not present in the "trade unions, parliaments, governments" which Gramsci holds as central to "interacting with the working class." The masses in these sectors are the least likely to believe in bourgeois propaganda, they are not loyal to capitalism nor need to be "educated" about what they experience every single day. What they need to see is that they are not alone and that the enemy can be hit and the enemy is not as strong as it sometimes appears.

Maoism's response to Gramscite hegemony is the Conquest of Power. The conquest of positions for the proletariat in the superstructure lends itself to "winning" people over but without a measure of enforcement to consolidate gains. In Contrast, the Conquest of Power seeks to physically transform the political terrain utilizing the four aspects of war: 1) assaults and ambushes 2) sabotage 3) selective annihilation and 4) Propaganda and armed agitation. The Conquest of Power of course is the development of revolutionary violence that takes place even before the actual initiation of People's War, as dress rehearsal for revolution in which the masses and the Communists educate themselves in combat, reaffirming Mao's lesson of learning war by waging war, and learning by doing more generally.

After the subsequent Conquest of the Base Area in people's war, then can begin the construction of the New Power in which not only is the political realm transformed but the economic and ideological realm as well. It rids the hegemonic force of the bourgeoisie physically and ideologically through enforcement of the New Power, the transformation of the old society. Even in pre-war conditions legality only serves to strengthen and give cover to revolutionary work which is not legal.

In a BBC interview, Commandante Luis of the PCP/EGP expressed this principle succinctly:

“We are aware that violence will bring about transformation, revolutionary violence is a necessity it's a Maoist's law. Without violence there is no transformation...The old society is thoroughly corrupt. We have to destroy it and plant something new.”

Gramscite war of position lends itself to an inherent pessimism which we find no shortage of when it comes to “burn out” among activists in the stale pasteurized “Left”. Indeed, Gramsci's theories are in the context of the rise of fascism in Central and Eastern Europe. Already it starts from a point of failure and starts from the point of attempting to weather the storm. This is because it views the “War of maneuver” or the actual war coming only after the success of the phony war of position. Gramsci reduces revolutionary violence to that of “commando actions” which “ape” the violence of fascism and one that is devoid of politics.

The Centrality of Violence Present at All Stages of Organizations

We must do away with the aversion of violence that is pervasive among the revisionists posing as Communists. First off we emphatically reject the notion that a permanent armed apparatus cannot be used in service of the proletariat (i.e. a People's Army) as Gramsci is quoted in opposing earlier above. Secondly, we oppose the notion that violence is something that is *only* present once someone has initiated the People's War with a People's Army led by its CP. Third; we reject the lumpen fetishization of violence as being synonymous with the Communist conception of violence. For this we turn to Lenin who describes violence in contrast to thuggery:

“Dictatorship is state power based directly on violence. And in the twentieth century – as in the age of civilization generally – violence means neither fist nor a club, but *troops*.” [13]

When we view violence as organized and encompassing the question of an armed body of people then we begin to cast away the caricature of revolutionaries as sociopathic mad-men.

In reality revolutionary violence seeks to carve space as a scalpel not a hammer. The violence must be seen among the masses as justified and is not indiscriminate or ill-thought out. Indiscriminate violence is seen among the masses as random and irrational and when practiced by revolutionaries it alienates them from the masses. When it is practiced by the enemy it swells the ranks of the revolutionaries. As mentioned even annihilation is selective—precise and specific, weighed and measured.

The Lessons of Revolutionary Violence

Opponents of the Maoist movement in the United States seek to paint it as sociopaths craving blood. In reality despite their denunciations they are precisely guilty of this neuroticism. They love the aesthetics of violent revolution. Besides quoting Gramsci, they name drop Fanon and adulate over the armed Black Panthers. They enjoy the slogans of resistance, especially when they can be tied back to popular culture. They will go as far as to take the imagery of the guillotine while simultaneously calling for electoral opportunism. They may even use the language of “anti-revisionism” but when it comes to putting it into action they shrivel into cowardice. We bring this up because the pessimism of Gramsci translates into a context of the militant struggles that were taking place against fascism by this we mean the Italian anti-fascist Arditi del Popolo (The People’s Daring Ones). Gramsci’s denunciation of “commando tactics” and an armed force of workers is precisely the masses in the Arditi combatting fascism, while being condemned by the social-fascists and ultra-left Bordigists. Lenin in contrast praised these fighters.

While the aspect of the armed struggle must be led by the Communist Party, we find Gramsci’s criticisms to be that of an opportunist. The same aversion to violence is found among today’s pessimists who state “We aren’t at the moment” of revolutionary violence. Certainly the cycle of mass rebellion, especially among colonies internal to the US proves otherwise. Furthermore, selective violence at every level of struggle serves as a lesson for the proletariat, its Party and in the concentric construction of the three instruments of revolution.

Politics of Compromise

The politics which seek to limit themselves to taking up positions in “civil society” as a starting point limit themselves to the politics of compromise and in fact negate the necessity of Communist leadership even if it is led by “Communists.” By their very nature, legalist parties, trade unions etc. operate under social-democratic structures. It positions Communists at the point of seeking to contend parallel to rivals and outright enemies of revolution. With the attitude that they are concerned with “winning people over” they must consistently engage in a protracted cycle of compromise setting the necessity of revolution to the backburner. In a ruse to win hegemony of the proletariat over its class allies Gramsci would emphasize the need for “concessions” and “sacrifices” by the proletariat as a precursor to their hegemony. What he called “compromise equilibrium”:

“Undoubtedly the fact of hegemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain compromise equilibrium should be formed – in other words, that the leading group should make sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind.” (Prison Notebooks)

Furthermore:

“If the union of two forces is necessary in order to defeat a third, a recourse in arms and coercion (even supposing that these are available) can be nothing more than a methodological hypothesis. The only concrete possibility is compromise. 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.”

Such attitudes find themselves among the opportunists indeed, in Gramsci's writings his peppering of "united front" in his criticisms of Trotsky and Luxemburg are veiled criticisms of the Soviet Union's policy of viewing the social-democratic parties as twins of fascism, the correct view. His insistence on the use of "dominant class", "hegemony" and "compromise equilibrium" negate the theory of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. The Maoist conception of New Democracy which is a bloc of classes led by the leadership of the Proletariat is; a) a historical necessity for oppressed nations to combat imperialism, and only oppressed nations and to develop away from semi-feudal economy. b) Discarded once the democratic aims are achieved. For this to be transposed on an imperialist nation, as Gramsci's theories are regularly argued are applicable to is to resort to the same corporativism of the social-democrats and historically the Eurocommunists who are students of Gramsci.

The pseudo-Communist aversion to confront actual class enemies in the form of revisionism and social-fascism views these antagonistic contradictions as merely "mistaken ideas" or of a "civil difference of opinion" among colleagues or even friends. They may even superficially agree with the texts of Lenin, Stalin and Mao against revisionism and its dangers except when it comes into applying it into practice.

We should turn to Chairman Gonzalo not Gramsci in terms of how to expand work in the imperialist nations, as Gonzalo's methods of organizing serve as a call for the concentric construction of the three instruments and the militarization of all Communist Parties to wage people's war, which he extols as universal to all nations, including the imperialist nations. We seek to implement the conquest of a base area by pushing out the "non-decisive" arms of the State through the four methods of warfare even prior to the initiation of People's War

and the formal establishment of the People's Army (albeit in adaptation). Maoists seek to do this rather than simply co-opt them and fill the power vacuum in their wake.

Where there is oppression there is rebellion. Among the lowest, deepest and most profound sections of the masses, even without their vanguard they rebel at every turn from major points in protests and riots to sabotage at the point of production. They are not swayed by the ideological grips that shun violence in which the pasteurized revisionists are shackled by. They only require the Leadership of the Communist Party guided by Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, principally Maoism to guide them to the conquest of power. The popularization of Gramsci even among "Maoist" circles and the low circulation of Gonzalo is a nefarious conspiracy to shackle the revolutionary potential of the proletariat who reside in the bellies of the beast. It is a cynical ploy to castrate Communism and segregate it to the halls of academia and have pompous armchair bookworms pontificate and distort what revolution actually means in the political sense.

Notes

[1] V.I. Lenin. "Marxism and Revisionism". Collected Works Vol. 15. 1908.

[2] Antonio Gramsci. "War of Position and War of Manoeuvre or Frontal War". A Gramsci Reader. 1988.

- [3] Friedrich Engels. "Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State". Marxists.org.
- [4] *ibid.*
- [5] Communist Party of Peru. General Political Line of the Communist Party of Peru. p. 130. Fourth Swords Publications. 2017.
- [6] Kevin Edmonds. "NGOs and the Business of Poverty in Haiti". Nacla.org. April 5, 2010.
- [7] J. Wagona Makoba. "Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOS) and Third World Development: An Alternative Approach to Development". Journal of Third World Studies. Globalpolicy.org. 2002.
- [8] Antonio Gramsci. "State and Civil Society" from Selections from the Prison Notebooks.
- [9] Antonio Gramsci. *Prison Notebooks, Volume 3*. p. 168. 2007
- [10] CARC. "On Elections". Published by Revolutionary Initiative (RI).
- [11] Kenny Lake. "Gramsci & Gonzalo: Considerations in Conquering Combat Positions Within the Inner Walls of Hegemony."
- [12] Communist Party of Peru p. 154.
- [13] V.I. Lenin. "The 'Disarmament' Slogan. Marxists.org
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