

antonio gramsci

hegemony

a brief introduction to

war of position

gramsci's strategic framework

historic bloc

written by **harmony goldberg**



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HARMONY GOLDBERG

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**hegemony,
war of position
& historic bloc:**
a brief introduction to
antonio gramsci's
strategic concepts

Harmony Goldberg
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historical context

Antonio Gramsci was a communist theorist and political leader in Italy in the early part of the twentieth century. Gramsci came of age politically during the high tide of the socialist movement in Europe. He was a theorist, a worker organizer and a leading member of the Communist Party of Italy during the Russian Revolution. Gramsci was active in the upsurge of worker militancy in Turin which culminated in a wave of factory occupations in 1920. After these factory occupations failed to manifest into a full-scale revolution, the working class movement went into a downturn, and the left fractured. At the same time, the Fascist movement began its rapid ascent to power. Gramsci remained a leading member of the Italian Communist Party, and he was arrested in 1926 when the Fascists outlawed all opposition parties. Gramsci spent the rest of his life in prison where he wrote what has come to be known as the Prison Notebooks, twenty-nine notebooks full of his reflections on philosophy, politics and culture. In these notebooks, he reflected on the failure of revolutions in Western Europe, on the rise of fascism and on the implications of these realities for left strategy and practice. In these notebooks, he developed important new theoretical concepts – like ‘hegemony’ - that could help revolutionaries today navigate the complicated realities

of left organizing in advanced capitalist nations.

Gramsci's Engagement with Marxism: Gramsci's relationship with Marxist theory and politics is complicated and often misunderstood. While he is sometimes interpreted as a critic of Marxism, Gramsci was unquestionably rooted in the Marxist political tradition, and that tradition provided the foundation for his theoretical developments and his political work. But Gramsci was a particular kind of Marxist thinker. In contrast to the stereotype (and the all-too-frequent reality) of the rigid and dogmatic Marxist who is more concerned with abstract theory than with concrete reality, Gramsci was an open, dynamic and critical Marxist thinker. Gramsci openly critiqued Marxists who use Marxist theory as a "rigid doctrine of dogmatic utterances" (33). But he did not abandon abstract theory. Instead, he worked to develop new theories that could be applied to help understand "the present as it is" and "the terrain of effective reality."

With this more open approach, Gramsci developed a particularly innovative approach to revolutionary strategy. His Prison Notebooks was a reflection on failed revolutionary efforts in Italy in the 1920s and on the state of the international socialist movement of his times. Although contemporary social struggles differ in many ways from the explicitly socialist, worker-centered struggles of Gramsci's day, his reflections on the challenges and demands facing efforts to transform the social structure still offer many crucial insights for our work today.

- Challenging the idea that was dominant within the

socialist movement of his time - that a single narrative of revolutionary change could apply for all societies - Gramsci argued that there is no "universal" revolutionary strategy that will challenge capitalism in all times and places. Rather, strategy must be developed to reflect the particular historical manifestations of capitalism that develop in different countries. Each nation and each historical moment has unique dynamics that require specific strategic approaches.

- Challenging another dominant tendency within the socialist movement to believe that economic dynamics determined everything about a society and that – therefore – workplace fights trumped all other forms of struggle, Gramsci argued that effective analyses of class relations had to consider economic, political and cultural dynamics. The struggle must incorporate more than narrow struggles to improve working conditions; it must also engage in the battle of ideas. Revolutionary strategy must extend beyond the workplace; it must reach into the home, the neighborhood and the media.
- In societies that have a vibrant civil society, revolutionary strategy cannot be based on an pre-given Marxist formula in which a moment of crisis makes the oppressive nature of the capitalist system clear and sparks an insurrectionary struggle that smashes the capitalist state and establishes socialism. Gramsci argued that crises are important, but that they do not ensure that oppressed people will believe in the need for a new economy or that they will have the power to wage

a successful revolutionary struggle. To Gramsci, an insurrectionary moment would only succeed if it followed a long-term effort to win oppressed people over to a transformative vision and if it built working class power over time.

- Challenging the tendency to see the socialism as a society “by and for workers” alone. Gramsci argued that socialism can neither be won nor maintained if it only has a narrow working class base. Instead, the working class should see itself as the leading force in a broader multi-class alliance (termed a “historic bloc” by Gramsci) which has a united vision for change and which fights in the interests of all its members.

accurate reconnaissance

Gramsci was a socialist leader in Italy in the era of the world's first successful socialist revolution: the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution which established the Soviet Union. Previous to the Revolution, Russia was a poor peasant nation that was ruled by a feudal Czar who led the country into war and famine. These dual crises of war and famine sparked an insurrectionary movement – led by the Bolsheviks - which overthrew first the Czarist aristocracy and then the bourgeois-dominated parliament which had replaced the Czar.

The Russian Revolution challenged the previous orthodox Marxist beliefs about how socialist revolutions would develop. This narrative had said that socialist revolutions would not develop in peasant nations like Russia, but that they could only happen in the most developed capitalist countries where workers' movements had been able to mature and to develop strong national trade unions and workers' political parties. The Russian Revolution that socialist revolution could indeed succeed in nations where capitalism had not fully developed and

highlighted the failure of revolutionary struggle in industrialized nations.

After the Bolshevik victory, many socialists developed a new orthodox formula for revolution that followed the Russian model: crisis-provoked insurrectionary movements to eliminate the capitalist state and establish socialism. Gramsci celebrated the victory of the Russian Revolution (e.g. in his *Revolution Against Capital*), and he specifically held up the willingness of its leaders to step outside of orthodox formulas in order to push history forward. He therefore challenged the construction of the new orthodoxy based on the Russian model and – more broadly - the idea that a single narrative of revolutionary change could apply for all societies.

Gramsci argued that each nation has its own unique dynamics that would require specific strategic approaches.

“The internal relations of any nation are the result of a combination which is “original” and (in a certain sense) unique: these relations must be understood and conceived in their originality and uniqueness if one wishes to dominate them and direct them” (Prison Notebooks 240).

Gramsci’s analysis of the relationship between international and nationally-based struggles is evocative for contemporary organizers who hope to root their work in an internationalist framework. Gramsci’s advocacy for nationally-specific strategies can be read as a challenge to the homogenizing international strategies that were pro-

moted by the Soviet-led Communist International (the Comintern) in his time. International directives from the Comintern (which generally reflected the political needs of the Soviet Union) often dominated over approaches that were more reflective of local and national conditions and which were thus more likely to be politically effective in promoting mass movement. Although Gramsci was clearly aligned with the internationalist vision and movement (and with the Comintern as a structure), he argued for a more open and dynamic approach to the relationship between international revolutionary objectives and nationally-based struggles. “To be sure, the line of development is towards internationalism, but the point of departure is ‘national’—and it is from this point of departure that one must begin” (240). Though socialists in each nation should direct their national struggles “in accordance with the international perspective and directives,” (i.e. those of the Comintern) they had to apply them in ways that were relevant to their specific national conditions in order actually play a leadership role in advancing their particular struggles (240). These nationally-rooted struggles would in turn help to advance the internationalist socialist agenda. “Before the conditions can be created for an economy that follows a world plan, it is necessary to pass through multiple phases in which the regional combinations (of groups of nations) may be of various kinds” (240). This approach to the relationship between the national and international can provide food for thought for organizers today who are seeking to develop effective solidarity between our work in the United States and the struggles of the Global South.

Gramsci advocated that revolutionaries needed an “accurate reconnaissance” of the specific conditions of their societies, and that reconnaissance must include economic (or “structural”) analysis and political, cultural and ideological (or “superstructural”) analyses.¹

To Gramsci, “‘popular beliefs’ and similar ideas are themselves material forces” and must be considered central to the revolutionary process. Ideology and consciousness is the terrain on which struggles over the economy are fought, and that terrain extends far beyond the factory floor. This deep and specific assessment would enable revolutionaries to both determine the actual possibilities for social transformation and to develop grounded strategies for transformation.

1 This approach opens up space for incorporating the dynamics of race, gender and sexuality into political-economic analyses, rather than treating them as separate systems. If the dynamics of race, gender and sexuality were given this weight in the historically-grounded assessment of conditions described in the last point, they would, in turn, shape the resultant revolutionary strategy.

hegemony

Gramsci's formulation of "hegemony" was an extension of and a reply to Marxist theories on the nature of the capitalist state and of revolution. Although Marxism is best known for its critique of the capitalist economy, analyses of the state have always been central to Marxist thinking because the state is the mechanism which allows the capitalist economy to survive and to grow in the face of constant economic crises and class struggle.

Marx described the state as the "executive committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie" (Manifesto of the Communist Party 475), arguing that the state provided a forum in which capitalists could work out their competitive differences with each other, receive support in stabilizing an inherently unstable economic system and mobilize armed force to put down any challenges to their rule. He argued that ideology also played an important role in maintaining the capitalist system: "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas." (German Ideology 172).

Lenin built on these ideas, writing the *State and Revo-*

lution to clarify the centrality of the state in maintaining class rule. Lenin argued that force and repression were the state's most important tools.

Under capitalism we have the state in the proper sense of the word, that is, a special machine for the suppression of one class by another, and, what is more, of the majority by the minority. Naturally, to be successful, such an undertaking as the systematic suppression of the exploited majority by the exploiting minority calls for the utmost ferocity and savagery in the matter of suppressing, it calls for seas of blood, through which mankind is actually wading its way in slavery, serfdom and wage labor. (Lenin, State and Revolution).

Lenin argued that this force is masked by a thin layer of false democratic rights:

To decide once every few years which members of the ruling class is to repress and crush the people through parliament--this is the real essence of bourgeois parliamentarism, not only in parliamentary- constitutional monarchies, but also in the most democratic republics..... The real business of "state" is performed behind the scenes and is carried on by the departments, chancelleries, and General Staffs. Parliament is given up to talk for the special purpose of fooling the "common people."

While Gramsci agreed with the assertions of Marx and Lenin that the bourgeois state was a mechanism of capitalist domination and that force was central to its meth-

od of rule, he expanded their theories to incorporate the complicated reality of class rule that manifested in the developed capitalism of the “West” (i.e. Europe). He expanded their theories in four crucial ways:

1. Capitalists do not rule through the “state” alone but through a complex interaction between the “state” (typically understood as “the government”) and “civil society” (e.g. non-state institutions like the press, schooling systems and so on).
2. Under advanced capitalism – the capitalist state does not rely on repression alone, but rather combines force with consent.
3. The capitalist class cannot narrowly advance its own interests. It has to give compromises to the working class in order to maintain a stable system and to discourage resistance.
4. The state and civil society function together to convince the oppressed people to consent to their own oppression.
5. The capitalist class does not just dominate oppressed people; it actively leads other classes by giving them a degree of constrained freedoms within the system and by encouraging them to actively participate in moving it forward.

Taken together, these components make up a much deeper and more effective approach to analyzing class

domination, known as “hegemony.”

State and Civil Society: It can be helpful to begin an exploration of Gramsci’s thinking about the state and civil society by looking at his comparison between the different methods of class rule in Russia and in Western Europe:

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 immediately revealed. The state was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks: more or less numerous from one State to the next. (Prison Notebooks 238)

Before the revolution, Russia was primarily a peasant nation with a weak capitalist economy and feudal state that relied on a deeply repressive military force. The feudal state was quite interventionist in the development of Russia’s small capitalist economy, but the institutions of civil society were still very weak. Therefore, it made sense that Lenin would see state repression as the main aspect of class rule and a direct assault on the state as a primary strategy. However, Gramsci believed that in the West (i.e. Western Europe and the United States), there were much deeper and more complex democratic apparatuses and diversified civil society institutions:

This study also leads to certain determinations of the concept of State, which is usually understood as political society (or dictatorship; or coercive apparatus to bring the mass of the people into conformity with the specific type of production and the specific economy at the given moment) and not as an equilibrium between political society and civil society (or hegemony of a social group over the entire national society exercised through the so-called private organizations like the Church, trade unions, the schools, etc.). (Prison Notebooks 56f)

Gramsci here expanded the definition of the state to incorporate both political society and civil society, naming them together as the “integral state.”

State = political society + civil society, in other words hegemony protected by the armour of coercion.

He described civil society as the “normal continuation, the organic complement” of political society (82). The state and civil society functioned together to produce a new method of capitalist domination that relied on “consent” as much (or more) than it relied on “force.”

Force and Consent: It is important to be clear that Gramsci was expanding on Lenin’s analysis of the fundamentally repressive role of the state rather than contradicting it. Gramsci believed that force remained central to the method of state rule, but he argued that an effective state couldn’t be overly crude in its use of force. Gramsci believed that effective states work to make sure that:

(1) The state relies more on methods of “consent” than on force.

The ‘normal’ exercise of hegemony on the now classical terrain of the parliamentary regime is characterized by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent.

Force remains important as “the apparatus of state coercive power which ‘legally’ enforces discipline on those groups who do not ‘consent’ either actively or passively.” Force should only be used “in anticipation of moments of crisis of command and direction when spontaneous consent has failed.” That is, when masses of people are aware of the problems of the capitalist system and are resisting. This level of mass resistance is, however, not the normal state of affairs under hegemony. Instead, the majority of people generally consent to participate in the daily functionings of capitalism without significant resistance (or, more accurately, without resisting in ways that actually threaten the survival of the system itself). This consent can take a range of forms: We can come to believe that our interests are aligned with the success of capitalism rather than its destructions (e.g. “A rising tide lifts all boats.”); we can believe that there are no alternatives to the system as it is (e.g. socialism has always failed; Margaret Thatcher’s famous phrase TINA slogan “There is No Alternative.”); we can internalize false senses of superiority or inferiority (e.g. white supremacy which encourages poor white people to comfort themselves with their social privileges); and more.

(2) The use of state force appears legitimate to the majority (e.g. understanding the use of violence by the police as part of their responsibility to “protect and serve” the population).

Criminal acts are given negative moral implications and judged as fundamentally wrong, rather than as just unlawful (State and Civil Society 77).

Indeed, the attempt is always made to ensure that force will appear to be based on the consent of the majority, expressed by the so-called organs of public opinion – newspapers and associations – which, therefore, in certain situations are artificially multiplied. (Selections from the Prison Notebooks 80f)

Crude repression might inspire rebellion, but repression with the consent of the majority is likely to be accepted and even celebrated.

Concessions: Gramsci explored how the capitalist state expanded its toolkit beyond repression to incorporate “compromise” as a method of maintaining class rule. Capitalists don’t like giving compromises to workers; it costs them money and limits their ability to maneuver easily. But if capitalists refused to compromise at all with the working class, they weaken their position by provoking resentment and resistance. By giving small economic and political compromises - like the minimum wage, social services, and the right to vote - to the working class, capitalists can undermine rebellion and promote the

belief that capitalism can accommodate the hopes and dreams of working class people.

Government with the Consent of the Governed: Gramsci explored the ways in which civil society - including institutions like the media, schools and religious institutions - actively shapes the consciousness and lives of working class people. In Gramsci's time, Marxists often believed that the challenges of life under capitalism would make the exploitative nature of the system transparent to the working class. But this was not what happened in reality. As capitalism developed, workers did not inevitably develop a radical critique of the system, regardless of the painful conditions it created.

Gramsci watched as the Italian working class came close to achieving socialism and then handed its power back to the capitalist class. Many Italian workers then proceeded to support the rise of fascism. How did this come to pass? Gramsci argued that the web of institutions in civil society creates a culture that legitimates and upholds capitalist domination, even amongst the working class. He described this as the "educative and formative role of the state" (State and Civil Society 75), that shaped the culture and the "morality of the broadest popular masses to the necessities of the continuous development of the apparatus of production" (76).

The school as a positive, educative function, and the courts as a repressive and negative functions, are the most important State activities in this sense: but in reality, a multitude of other so-called private initia-

tives and activities tend to the same end – initiatives and activities which form the apparatus of the political and cultural hegemony of the ruling classes.

The lessons taught in schools, the messages portrayed in the media and the sermons delivered in the churches all worked together to promote support for and investment in the capitalist system, even among the people whom it exploits: “the “spontaneous” consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group.”

Leadership, not Just Domination: These processes do not merely result in working class people being “tricked” into accepting their exploitation; it actually engages them as active participants who have a significant degree of agency and who actively participate in maintaining the system. These educative processes “obtain [our] consent, turning necessity and coercion into “freedom” (76). Gramsci’s educative state “create[s] and maintain[s] a certain type of civilization and of citizen” (77). As long as they do not challenge the system, individuals are given a degree of self-governance. Gramsci described these educative functions as “positive” in contrast the “negative” functions of repression (78). We become invested in those messages and actively take them on as our own. For example, we believe that “anyone can succeed if they work hard enough” and thus we work harder. We participate in opinion polls and vote in elections and see where “our vote makes a difference.” This method of class rule – that actively engages its subjects in a limited

way in the political process – is far more effective than one which denies its subjects all agency because it is actually able to shape their agency to remain within certain safe boundaries. In this way, the capitalists actually “lead” other classes to actively buy into their system.

It is important to note that – according to Gramsci - the capitalist class does not attempt to lead all other classes in the same way. It approaches some (often more privileged) classes with more consent-based approaches designed to win them over to its leadership while it uses more forceful methods to dominant other classes which are more antagonistic.

The supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as “domination” and as “intellectual and moral leadership”. A social group dominates antagonistic groups, which it tends to “liquidate”, or to subjugate perhaps even by armed force; it leads kindred and allied groups.

An accurate analysis of capitalist class rule would have to include an analysis of which classes the capitalists are trying to win over and which they are attempting to subjugate.²

Hegemony: Gramsci named this method of class rule “hegemony.” It is important to be clear that Hegemo-

2 This has important implications for an analysis of the racialized class structure in the United States since the white capitalist class has tended to deploy more consent-based approaches with the white working class and more force-based approaches with Black, Native, Latino, Arab and Asian working class people.

ny is not primarily about “domination,” but that it is also about “leadership.” In his analysis of capitalism, Gramsci described a capitalist hegemony in which capitalists exercise class leadership over all other classes (including the working class). Gramsci’s description of capitalist hegemony as ‘ethico-political’ leadership shows that hegemony is more complex than simple domination. Hegemony is a dynamic and ever-changing method of rule, basing itself on force but always working to promote the participation of oppressed people in order to build their investment in the system. “One should not count solely on the power and material force which such a position gives in order to exercise political leadership or hegemony.” Gramsci believed that this method of class rule was more powerful than outright coercion because it provided a buffer realm to contain the class struggle within acceptable parameters.

With this approach, the capitalist class can incorporate resistance (within certain limits) rather than just suppressing it. Gramsci wrote, “The bourgeois class poses itself as an organism in continuous movement, capable of absorbing the entire society, assimilating it to its own cultural and economic level” (State and Civil Society 79).

*The groups that are out of power in this kind of state are allowed to aspire to power, but the prevailing *forma mentis* will induce them to pursue their goals in a manner that does not threaten the basic order or orderliness as such; in other words, they will not aim to overthrow the state and establish a new kind of state but instead will compete for a greater share*

of influence and power according to the established rules of the game. (Buttegieg, Gramsci on Civil Society 13)

Hegemony makes the struggle for socialism immeasurably more difficult. If workers were transparently exploited and repressed, the need for rebellion would be obvious. The primary question facing revolutionaries would be "How to win?" But if exploitation and repression are hidden or seen as legitimate, much more groundwork must be laid before the question of direct struggle against the state can be put on the table.

war of position

Gramsci's conception of the method of class rule led him to develop a particular approach to revolutionary struggle that could effectively respond to capitalist hegemony. He called this approach the "war of position."

Similarly to the way in which Gramsci's analysis of the state built upon and expanded previous Marxist conceptions, his conception of the revolutionary process and revolutionary strategy were built upon the foundation provided by historical Marxist and Leninist approaches, specifically:

(1) Because the state under capitalism is inherently a capitalist-dominated state, it could not be transformed through reforms and elections. Socialists would have to build a revolutionary movement to overthrow the capitalist state in order to build a socialist society.

(2) The revolutionary movement must be led by the working class. Because of their daily experiences of

exploitation, workers were the only group in capitalist society who would clearly understand the need to eliminate capitalism and to establish socialism. And because of their power to halt production, they were the only class with the potential power to carry out that vision.

(3) Although reform struggles are inherently limited, they are the terrain on which the working class develops its consciousness and capacity to fight for more fundamental transformation. Socialists must root themselves in the daily struggles of the oppressed and build deeper consciousness from there.

(4) Because force is the state's most important tool, the socialist movement would be forced to respond in kind or face destruction. The revolutionary struggle would ultimately have to incorporate an armed struggle against the state.

(5) Crisis is inherent to capitalism. These inevitable crises will create the conditions for the organized working class to build an insurrectionary movement and overthrow the capitalist state (e.g. crises will clarify the inherently exploitative nature of capitalism, they will increase working class anger against the system, and they will put the capitalist class and state in a vulnerable position).

Gramsci made several important innovations on this model in order to adapt it to the conditions of advanced capitalist societies.

(1) Gramsci upheld the assertion that a successful revolution would ultimately require the overthrow of the bourgeois state, describing that type of armed insurrectionary movement as a “war of maneuver” because it was a moment in which the working class actively moved against the state. However, because the capitalist hegemony does not function through state violence alone but that it also mobilizes civil society in order to promote oppressed peoples consent to and participation in the system, a successful revolutionary movement would first have to engage in a long-term effort to undermine that consent through a struggle within civil society. These efforts must go beyond participation in trade union struggles and political reform; revolutionaries must root their struggles in all arenas of social life and – centrally – must engage in the battle for ideas. Gramsci described this as a “war of position” that would precede the “war of maneuver” against the state.

(2) Recognizing that the capitalist class does not just dominate oppressed people through state violence but that it is also actively leading other classes politically, Gramsci argued that the working class could not narrowly focus on its own struggles and issues. Instead, the working class must also strive to lead a broad multi-class alliance for fundamental transformation by (a) engaging in fights that speak to the needs and interests of other groups in society and (b) by advancing a broader transformative vision that

would help these disparate social forces to develop a shared identity. Gramsci used the term “historic bloc” to describe this multi-class alliance (because it would build sufficient unity between these different groups in order to form a coherent “bloc” that could move history forward) and the term “national-popular collective will” to describe the unifying transformative vision (because its aim was to help these different groups to see themselves as a part of a new “people” or a new “nation”).

Gramsci’s strategic orientation thus reflects a new approach to revolutionary struggle, adapted to meet the particularities of the way in which the capitalist class actually rules in advanced capitalist societies.

the war of position: It is important to be clear that Gramsci did not question the need for a “war of maneuver,” that is, an armed struggle against the state. Before he was imprisoned, Gramsci wrote explicitly in support of the need for armed insurrection in the Lyon Theses, and in the Prison Notebooks he wrote that the struggle must ultimately advance to the level of “military relation which is decisive.” (SPN 183) In the Prison Notebooks he wrote that,

Even military experts...do not maintain that the [war of maneuver] should be considered as expunged from military science. They merely maintained that, in wars among the more industrially and socially advanced states, the war of maneuver must be considered as reduced to more of a tactical than a strategic function. (SPN 234-235)

Gramsci does, however, question the traditional interpretations of Marx's and Lenin's strategies for achieving successful socialist revolutions. First, he critiques the idea belief that – due to the transparently exploitative nature of capitalism - workers struggles for reforms will inevitably develop into revolutionary struggles. Gramsci believed in the importance of trade union struggle; he was himself a workers organizer and educator. But – given his experiences in the Turin factory occupation movement, in which the workers ultimately conceded the factories back to the bourgeoisie - he did not believe that the trade union struggle would easily progress into a revolutionary insurrection against the state. Without other efforts on the part of revolutionaries, trade union demands around immediate economic issues would merely function as concessions given by the bourgeoisie that would buy the working class into its hegemonic rule while the powerful ideological apparatus of the ruling class would convince workers that they had a stake in preserving capitalism. Revolutionaries would themselves have to engage in the long-term battle of ideas in order to clarify the need for revolutionary transformation.

Gramsci also critiqued the belief that capitalism's inherent economic crises would inevitably lead to successful socialist struggle. He wrote: "It may be ruled out that immediate economic crises of themselves produce fundamental historical events; they can simply create a terrain more favourable to the dissemination of certain modes of thought, and certain ways of posing and resolving questions involving the entire subsequent development of national life" (184). If progressive forces have not ad-

equately prepared for these moments of crisis, they are likely to be outstripped by the well-resourced and practiced ruling class who can “reabsorb the control that was slipping from its grasp” (210). Thus, the preparation of progressive forces in the periods preceding a crisis is potentially even more decisive than the political decisions made in the moment of crisis itself. Because “a crisis cannot give the attacking forces the ability to organise with lightning speed in time and in space” (235), the work to “prepare for it [i.e. political struggle during a crisis] minutely and technically in peacetime” (243) is the most likely determinate of victory.

If this preparation is not done, it would be unlikely that the revolution could gather sufficient forces to win the struggle and that, even if revolutionary forces did experience initial victories, its achievements would be rolled back as bourgeois ideology reasserted itself through the institutions of civil society.

In war it would sometimes happen that a fierce artillery attack seemed to have destroyed the enemy's entire defensive system, whereas in fact it had only destroyed the outer perimeter; and at the moment of their advance and attack the assailants would find themselves confronted by a line of defence which was still effective. (SPN 234 - 235)

Gramsci described the war of position as a form of trench warfare, in which the “superstructures of civil society are like the trench-systems of modern warfare.” (SPN 234)

The massive structures of the modern democracies, both as State organisations, and as complexes of associations in civil society, constitute for the art of politics as it were the “trenches” and the permanent fortifications of the front in the war of position: they render merely “partial” the element of movement which before used to be “the whole” of war, etc. This question is posed for the modern states. (SPN 243)

These institutions of civil society provided a “powerful system of earthworks and fortresses” in support of the bourgeois system. To fight the war of position, revolutionaries must build their own “trenches,” that is, work from within the existent institutions of civil society and build its own independent institutions that function in the interests of the working class and serve to promote a revolutionary worldview. This would enable the revolutionary forces to build a strong and deep base amongst oppressed classes that would allow the revolution to proceed to the level of a frontal assault on the state.

The most basic understanding of the “war of position” is that it is a long-term struggle, which centrally engages in the “war of ideas” within the institutions of civil society. Its central strategy is the “historic bloc.”

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