

antonio gramsci

hegemony

a brief introduction to

war of position

gramsci's strategic framework

historic bloc

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

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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, strat-

egy 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 a 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 promoted 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 “super-

structural") 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 Revolution* 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." (Lenin, State and Revolution).

While Gramsci agreed with the assertions of Marx and Lenin that the bourgeois state was a mechanism of capitalist domi-

nation and that force was central to its method 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 initiatives 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 Hegemony 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

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.

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 capital-

ism 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 group in order to form a coherent “bloc” that could move history forward) and the term “national-popular collective will” to describe the unifying trans-

formative 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 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 adequately 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.”

the historic bloc

The concept of the historic bloc is a challenge to the misinterpretation of Marxist theory that the socialist revolution is a struggle of and for the working class alone. Gramsci argues that, although one class (the working class) must be the central driving force in a revolutionary movement, a successful strategy requires the building of an alliance of multiple class forces. He describes this cross-class alliance as a “social bloc” or a “historic bloc.” This historic bloc is to be united by a “national-popular” vision that represents the interests and hopes of all of its constituent class forces.

The “historic bloc” strategy is one in which – rather than “dominating” other classes – the principal class “leads” them by incorporating their interests and by providing a unifying vision.

. . . a class is dominant in two ways, i.e. ‘leading’ and ‘dominant’. It leads the classes which are its allies, and dominates those which are its enemies. Therefore, even before attaining power a class can (and must) ‘lead’; . . . there can and must be a ‘political hegemony’ even before the attainment of governmental power.”(57fn)

For Gramsci, the moment when the working class develops the ability to lead other classes is the moment when it moves from marginality to impending victory (55). To Gramsci, this orientation toward multi-class leadership is decisive for both the success of the revolutionary struggle and the success of the future socialist society.

A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise "leadership" before winning governmental power (this indeed is one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power); it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to 'lead' as well" (57).

One should not count solely on the power and material force which such a position gives in order to exercise political leadership or hegemony" (57fn).

Why is the historic bloc necessary? During Gramsci's time, the working class was not an actual majority of society, so it couldn't lead a successful revolutionary movement on its own. It would have to build a broader base for the socialist movement - "opposing a wider target to the blows of the enemy, i.e. of creating a politico-military relation favourable to the revolution" (78-79) – by engaging other classes which also had an interest in ending capitalism if it was going to succeed.

If the working class did not actively engage other classes, the capitalist class was sure to do it instead. Instead of being allies, these other classes would then become enemies of the

working class. So the working class had to work to neutralize the ability of the ruling class to recruit other class forces to fight for its agenda and against socialism (79).

There are four questions that Gramsci's historic bloc approach places before revolutionaries:

- (1) Which class will lead the bloc?
- (2) What other classes will it lead?
- (3) Around what material transformations will it lead?
- (4) With what unifying "national-popular" vision?

Gramsci answered these questions both in his reflections on the last wave of revolutionary struggles in Europe – the struggle to overthrow feudalism and to establish capitalist democracy – and in his reflections on the demands facing the socialist movement in his own time.

Historical background: Gramsci introduces the concept of the historic bloc through his reflections on French and Italian history, primarily through his positive assessment of the political strategy of the Jacobins in the French Revolution and his criticism of the limitations of the Action Party during the Italian Risorgimento. These two parties were their nation's most radically pro-democratic capitalist parties during the movements to end feudalism and to establish capitalism. These struggles resulted in the founding of modern Italian and French states out of disparate municipalities.

Gramsci had a positive assessment of the strategic approach of the Jacobins in the French Revolution. He believed that the Jacobins succeeded because of their ability to lead beyond their immediate capitalist base by winning the support of the urban working class and the peasantry. They did this by promoting a nationally unifying vision that spoke to the workers and peasants (“liberty, equality and fraternity”) and by advocating for issues that met these classes’ material needs (e.g. ending feudal privileges that oppressed peasants, giving workers a minimum wage and the right to organize) (78). This support meant that the Jacobins were able to mobilize workers, peasants and capitalists to achieve significant victories in their struggles against the French aristocracy and to establish capitalist democracy. In the process, they developed the active support of a broad cross-section of its citizens for a strong modern French state (79).

The Italian counter-parts to the Jacobins – the Action Party – had a much more narrow approach to their struggle. As a result, Italy did not go through the thorough transformation seen in France. This meant (1) that the struggle was unable to fully eliminate feudal privileges and therefore was only able to achieve an incomplete democracy and a weak capitalism, and (2) that the Italian state had a weaker social base than the French state (a weakness that, in Gramsci’s assessment, laid the groundwork for the future emergence of fascism) (119-120).

Composition of the Historic Bloc: Following Gramsci’s commitment to grounding politics in the particular dynamics of specific situations, there is no universal configuration for this multi-class alliance. Instead, the composition of the historic bloc will depend on the particular national location and

historic moment: the objective composition and position of different class forces, their varying levels of consciousness and their level of political organization.

For example, reflecting on the conditions of Italian society, Gramsci wrote, "The relation between city and countryside is the necessary starting point for the study of the fundamental motor forces of Italian history." He concluded that – during his historical moment - the working class was the class that had the potential to play the central leadership role in a multi-class alliance against capitalist hegemony, but that the revolutionary process in Italy would not succeed "unless the great mass of peasant farmers bursts simultaneously into political life" (132). This worker-peasant alliance is the central component of Gramsci's counter-hegemonic Italian social bloc, but one could interpret Gramsci's persistent reflections on the need to integrate traditional intellectuals with the masses of people (15, 418) as an indicator that formal intellectuals – as a sector – would also be a part of the counter-hegemonic bloc.

This is the type of assessment that would be necessary in developing a grounded historic bloc strategic approach for a particular society. Such an assessment would need to consider not only issues of class, but also relations like race, nationality, gender, culture and region.

The Leading Class & The Locomotive Force: The historic bloc is not a flat alliance of different classes. In every historic bloc, there is a single class that plays a leading role and serves as a cohering force. This role is not determined arbitrarily but reflects that - in every society - there is a class whose position gives it the interest, consciousness and capacity to lead

the rest of society in a transformative movement. Again, this assessment must be grounded in the specific conditions of a particular society in a specific historic moment.

Gramsci's analyses of the leadership of the multi-class alliance reflects Marx's conceptualization of the "universal class." According to Marx, every system of class domination creates a class which can lead other classes in transcending that system and moving society forward.

For each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it, is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society, that is, expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones. The class making a revolution appears from the very start, if only because it is opposed to a class, not as a class but as the representative of the whole of society; it appears as the whole mass of society confronting the one ruling class. (German Ideology 174)

The selection of one class as the "universal class" is not determined subjectively based on one's ideological desire to have a particular class be the leading class. Rather, it must be based on a concrete assessment of the objective ability of a particular class to advance, in Gramsci's words, "an integral historical development" (Prison Notebooks 98).

For example, Marx believed that this "universal class" role had belonged to the capitalist class during the democratic strug-

gles against feudalism (e.g. the French Revolution and the Risorgimento described above) because it held the greatest interest in overthrowing feudalism, but that other classes (e.g. peasants) also had an interest in ending feudalism and in winning democratic rights and would thus be willing to follow the capitalists.

Marx argued that, under capitalism, the working class was the “universal class.” Its objective interest in socialist transformation meant that it best represented the interests of all of the other classes that were also oppressed by capitalism. Marx believed that the “universal class” role in the struggle against capitalism belonged to the proletariat for several reasons. First, he argued that the working class had the deepest interest in overthrowing bourgeois domination, and, therefore, that it would most consistently represent the interests of all other oppressed classes in the struggle against capitalism. Second, the fact that the working class had the potential to halt capitalist production through strikes meant that they had sufficient social power to play a leadership role. Finally, while the working class had an interest in overthrowing bourgeois domination, they did not have an interest in setting up a new system of class domination as would, for example, the petit bourgeois who would want to set up a new smaller-scale capitalist system. The liberation of the working class would necessarily be based on the elimination of private property and exploitation, a scenario which would also benefit other (non-bourgeois) classes. The concrete class interests of the working class were therefore also the class interests of other classes. (Manifesto of the Communist Party 472).

Gramsci adopts Marx’s “universal class” framework in his own

work, writing that, "The development and expansion of the particular group are conceived of, and presented, as being the motor force of a universal expansion, of a development of all the 'national' energies" (Prison Notebooks 182). For example, in his assessment of the Jacobins, he writes,

"The Jacobins, consequently, were the only party of the revolution in progress, in as much as they not only represented the immediate needs and aspirations of the actual physical individuals who constituted the French bourgeoisie, but they also represented the revolutionary movement as a whole, as an integral historical development. For they represented future needs as well, and, once again, not only the needs of those particular physical individuals, but also of all the national groups which had to be assimilated to the existing fundamental group" (78).

This is the kind of universal leadership role that Gramsci believes is latent in the working class under capitalism. At one point, he describes the working class as the "locomotive" force in the "'train' to move forward through history" (98). He argues that "if this force has attained a certain level of unity and combativity, it quite automatically exercises an 'indirect' directive function over the others" (98).

The Development of the Leading Force: Even though Gramsci believes that the social structure determines which class has the potential to lead this broad multi-class alliance, he does not believe that this role is inevitable or automatic. A class can have the potential to lead but never develop the consciousness or capacity to actually play that role.

Therefore, revolutionaries (specifically members of revolutionary parties) must work to develop this orientation towards broad “national-popular” leadership within the working class. Without this intentional development, the working class would likely remain restricted to struggling for reforms to meet its own immediate needs rather than building a broader political struggle to fundamentally transform society in the interests of all oppressed classes.

Gramsci argues that the leading class must pass through a series of stages of development, starting with what Gramsci terms the “economic-corporate” stage and moving later to the stage of “national-popular” consciousness.

The first and most elementary of these is the economic-corporate level: a tradesman feels obliged to stand by another tradesman, a manufacturer by another manufacturer, etc., but the tradesman does not yet feel solidarity with the manufacturer; in other words, the members of the professional group are conscious of its unity and homogeneity, and of the need to organize it, but in the case of the wider social group this is not yet so. (181)

Here the working class has only developed a consciousness of the need to organize itself in each industry, but it has yet developed consciousness of itself as a class. For example, workers in an auto factory understand that they have an interest in uniting with other autoworkers to build a union and fight the factory owners, but they do not see the need to build unity with bus drivers or waitresses. Lenin had a similar assessment, and he called this stage of development “trade-union

consciousness” because workers consciousness tended to be restricted to their particular unions.

A second moment is that in which consciousness is reached of the solidarity of interests among all the members of a social class — but still in the purely economic field. Already at this juncture the problem of the State is posed — but only in terms of winning politico-juridical equality with the ruling groups: the right is claimed to participate in legislation and administration, even to reform these — but within the existing fundamental structures. (181)

At this point, the working class has transcended narrow “trade-union” consciousness and attained a level of “economic class consciousness.” Now the auto worker understands that he has an interest in uniting with bus drivers and waitresses. As a result, the working class begins to organize around its own issues in the political arena (e.g. by forming a workers party or by weighing in on the electoral process). But their class consciousness has not yet become what Lenin termed “revolutionary class consciousness.” It remains within the given bounds of capitalist hegemony. The working class advocates narrowly around its own economic interests and for limited reforms within the system. For example, the autoworkers, waitresses and bus drivers may have formed a workers party that is organizing to win a living wage, but they don’t think they have an interest in organizing around immigrant rights or LGBT liberation. They don’t believe in socialism because they believe that they can win sufficient gains within the system to meet their needs. But how can the working class adopt a broader counter-hegemonic approach?

A third moment is that in which one becomes aware that one's own corporate interests, in their present and future development, transcend the corporate limits of the purely economic class, and can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups, too. This is the most purely political phase (181).

Here the working class develops revolutionary class consciousness, realizing that its interests lie in overthrowing the capitalist system and in establishing a socialist system. The working class also becomes aware that its struggle must go beyond the fight for its class liberation alone, recognizing its interest in uniting in a shared political struggle with other oppressed classes. Put crudely, the autoworkers, the bus drivers and the waitresses now see the need to unite with the immigrant rights movement and the LGBT movement in a more transformative anti-capitalist struggle.

The Method of Leadership: Gramsci repeatedly emphasizes that the leadership of the working class does not manifest as "domination" over the other classes in the historic bloc; rather, it consists of providing "direction" to those classes.

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" (57).

The working class must lead other oppressed classes both in the realms of political and economic struggle and in the

realms of culture, ethics and philosophy (i.e. the realms of civil society). The working class must present a unifying “national-popular” vision, and it must take account of the interest of the other classes in the historic bloc.

Its national-popular vision must transcend narrow economic issues, “bringing about not only a unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity.” By “posing all the questions around which the struggle rages not on a corporate but on a ‘universal’ plane,” the working class would be able to provide a broader and deeper vision to unite a wide array of social forces, “thus creating the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate groups” (101). In other words, it creates a unified identity or a new “we” that transcends the current hegemonic framework. Gramsci provides a clear example of this aspect of counter-hegemonic leadership in his importance of vision in French Jacobinism. In challenging aristocratic rule, they promoted a powerful vision that united broad social forces behind a fundamentally new idea of what it meant to be “French.” They argued that the true French identity should be that of an equal “citizens” with inherent democratic rights who could live in equality and solidarity with their fellow citizens rather than to be the “subjects” of the French aristocracy with incredibly restricted rights.

They were convinced of the absolute truth of their slogans about equality, fraternity and liberty, and, what is more important, the great popular masses whom the Jacobins stirred up and drew into the struggle were also convinced of their truth (78).

This was not a false vision; it contained a basic truth about democratic rights that appealed to broad cross-sections of the population, even as it restricted those democratic rights to what would be allowed under capitalism (e.g. private property rights would take precedence over social equality).

But vision alone is not enough; the leading force must actually address the concrete material interests of the other class forces in the historic bloc. If the working class wants to build a successful movement for socialist transformation, it cannot only fight for its own interests. It must be aware of the material interests of other classes, and it must be willing to make compromises to incorporate those interests into its agenda. It is only through this approach that the working class can actually actively engage these class forces in the struggle and provide true leadership.

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.

While these compromises might diverge from the ideal material outcome for the working class (i.e. “the sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind”), they must not go so far as to prevent the fundamental reorganization of the capitalist economy through the establishment of a socialist state and economy.

But there is also no doubt that such sacrifices and such a compromise cannot touch the essential; for though hegemony is ethical-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity (161).

Gramsci gives a clear example of how to appeal to the interests of other classes in his assessment of the Action Party during the Risorgimento. In his assessment, the Action Party could only have succeeded in advancing a more radical agenda if it had built a historic bloc with the peasantry and the lower and middle intellectuals. The Action Party could have won the support of the peasants by “accepting their elementary demands and making these an integral part of the new programme of government” and the support of the intellectuals by “concentrating them and stressing the themes most capable of interesting them (and the prospect of a new apparatus of government being formed, with the possibilities of employment which it offered, would already have been a formidable element of attraction for them—if that prospect had appeared concrete, because based on the aspirations of the peasantry)” (74). These demands would have advanced the interests of the peasants and the intellectuals without undermining the fundamental interests of the bourgeoisie. Gramsci uses this example to argue that the modern working class must make similar concessions to the peasantry and intellectuals of its time.

The national-popular approach to leadership thus combines both material and ideological aspects to place the “locomotive force” in leadership of a multi-class alliance for fundamental transformation.

the modern prince & organic intellectuals: In Gramsci's view, this process of developing the nation-popular consciousness and capacity of the working class would not happen spontaneously; it would require the active efforts of a revolutionary party. Like his communist contemporaries, Gramsci believed that the existence of a revolutionary party rooted in the working class was an essential component in a revolutionary struggle. Unlike a trade union which will focus narrowly on the issues facing workers in a particular industry (their "economic corporate" interests, in Gramsci's terms), the political party is the space in which members of an "economic social group" (or class) can "become agents of more general activities of a national and international character" (16) and "qualified political intellectuals, leaders [dirigenti] and organisers of all the activities and functions inherent in the organic development of an integral society, both civil and political" (16). The political party plays an essential role in developing the ability of the working class to lead in both the revolutionary struggle and in the future socialist state (146, 191, 335, 268). Gramsci often uses the term "organic intellectual" to describe people who play a leading, organizing role in mass struggles. While they are not professional focused on intellectual activities (as are "traditional intellectuals," in Gramsci's terms), they do exercise tremendous intellectual capacities in their political work: articulating the hopes and interests of their class, constructing and promoting new world-views and developing effective strategies and tactics for the struggle (10, 330, 350). These organic intellectuals who "arise directly out of the masses" and who must necessarily remain closely connected with the broader working class "to become, as it were, the whalebone in the corset"(340).

Gramsci is not only describing the standard party model of his times; he also elaborates many points that were previously under-developed and challenges other points of that model. Gramsci repeatedly insists that the party must be deeply rooted in the working class, drawing its members from the class and serving as an instrument of its expression (15 – 16, 150 – 151, 191). Taken together with his critique of “commando” style parties which are alienated from the mass (149-150, 204, 231), these points registers as a critique of the “vanguardist” interpretations of the Leninist party model.

Gramsci’s elaboration of the different elements of party organization offer an antidote to the vanguardist approach which suggests a binary relationship between elite party and mass following. He suggests that there are, in fact three levels of participation: the “mass element” who participate in the party but do not lead, the “principal cohesive element” which leads the organization and provides overall direction and the “intermediate element” which links the mass element and the leadership in a dialogical political relationship and which plays the primary “organizing” role (152-153). Gramsci repeatedly stresses the dialogic and mutually educative relationship between the leadership and led; for example,

The relationship between teacher and pupil is active and reciprocal so that every teacher is always a pupil and every pupil a teacher...This form of relationship exists throughout society as a whole and for every individual relative to other individuals. It exists between intellectual and nonintellectual sections of the population, between the rulers and the ruled, élites and their followers, leaders [dirigenti] and led,

the vanguard and the body of the army. Every relationship of "hegemony" is necessarily an educational relationship (350).

This conceptualization provides a more complicated and democratically-oriented approach to revolutionary organization. Arguing that a party must do more than lead in moments of spontaneous insurrection, Gramsci argues that the key tasks which a revolutionary party should undertake include "the formation of a national-popular collective will, of which the modern Prince is at one and the same time the organiser and the active, operative expression" and "intellectual and moral reform" (133), two central aspects of Gramsci's "War of Position" strategy.

conclusion

Gramsci's writings give us the tools to engage in deeper and more systematic reflections on strategies and tactics by encouraging us to do an "accurate reconnaissance" in order to root our strategies in our specific time, place and condition. His analysis of "hegemony" expands our understanding of the ways in which the ruling class rules: through force but also through consent, through domination but also through leadership, using the state but also drawing on civil society. This understanding, in turn, expands our conception of revolutionary strategy, clarifying the need to engage in long-term preparatory work and in the battle over ideas, captured in the concept of the "war of position." He further expands our conception of revolutionary strategy by arguing that the oppressed must build a multi-class historic bloc if they wish to build the power and cohesion necessary to secure fundamental transformation and a liberatory "counter-hegemony."

These concepts leave us with many valuable insights, for example about the role that our reform struggles can play in laying the groundwork for a longer-term revolutionary struggle. But – more significantly - they leave us with a number of questions.

- What is the current state of class relations in this society, and where do the constituencies engaged in our movements fit into those class relations? This analysis would necessarily need to consider the historical and national particularities of race, gender, nationality region and so on, reflecting Gramsci's commitment to an accurate reconnaissance. This analysis must not only consider the "objective" structure of class relations but must also incorporate an analysis of the state of political consciousness and organization of different classes.
- What are the economic, political and social – cultural – ideological aspects of contemporary struggles and crises? How do each of these aspects inter-relate and influence each other? This would speak to Gramsci's sophisticated analysis of the intertwined relationship between the economy, the state and civil society, reminding the analyst not to restrict her analysis to an one level or to ignore the dynamic relationship between them.
- Given the nature of the struggles and crises and the dynamics of class relations, what is objectively possible in this political moment? This question would reflect Gramsci's challenge to idealistic assessments of the politically possible and his commitment to developing materially grounded political objectives.
- What forces are leading the current hegemonic bloc(s)? What is their vision for society? What social forces are they trying to win over? Based on what material appeals and with what unifying visions?

- What would be the likely composition of a counter-hegemonic historic bloc in this conjuncture? This assessment would need to acknowledge that “class” forces are never just “classed” but are shaped by national and historical particularities of gender, race, sexuality and so on.
- Which specific forces would play the leading role in the historic bloc? Can the “working class” still play a leadership role in contemporary struggle in the United States, or have the dynamics of the current moment shifted that leading role to another group or groups?
- What forces could be won over to the historic bloc, based on what concrete issues and what unifying vision? What is the current state of the relationships between the leading force and the other forces?
- What is the actual state of organization and consciousness within the leading group? Does its struggle currently reflect an “economic-corporate” consciousness, a “class-corporate” consciousness or a “national-popular” consciousness? What is the vision being advanced? How does the leading see its role vis-à-vis other classes?

Again, Gramsci gives us questions, not answers. He believed that the answers developed by revolutionaries to solve the problems of their specific time and place could not be mechanically applied in a different context. Instead of giving us answers, he leaves us with a most relevant set of questions, questions that we will have to take up answering for ourselves if we are serious about the work of revolutionary societal transformation.

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