

Antonio Gramsci's Political Thought: An Analysis

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Abstract

This essay intended to demonstrate the greatest Neo-Marxist political theorist Antonio Gramsci's political thought. In the very beginning it discussed about his primary socialization because of every man's thinking depends on his early life and his surrounding environment and then tried to focuses on his political thought. At first I tried to concentrate on his idea of hegemony. According to him, hegemony is a cultural process by which one class dominates the other. Thus the dominators keep on practicing power and the ruled obey them. Simply it means to put something into the ear of the commoners and make them believe in it. After discussing about hegemony it delt with his concept of 'Intellectual class', 'education', 'philosophy and history' and lastly 'philosopher'. All of these cocepts he gave for the sake of subaltern(proletariat) class and their freedom from bourgeois suppression.

Keywords: Hegemony, Bourgeois, Proletariat, Subaltern, Praxis, Dominance, Political Society, Civil Society, Intellectual, Education, Philosophy, History and Philosopher

1. Introduction

The greatest Marxist theorist after Karl Marx, whose life is dedicated for the freedom of the Italian people, is Antonio Gramsci. At the same time, he is a philosopher, a journalist, a politician and the first Italian Marxist. Amongst the leftist western thinkers, he's accredited to be a remarkable Marxist thinker. Gramsci began his discussion on Marxist Philosophy with a methodological question and by regarding Marx as a father of a new worldview. Almost everything that Marx wrote were scattered and unpublished while he had been alive and even many of them were unfinished. Whatever we get as to be the works of Marx are actually edited. In most cases, it was Marx's bosom friend Engels who had been the editor. In common Marxist practice, Marx and Engels are almost inseparable. Thus, Marxism, now, is a wonderful combination of Marx's and Eagles' writings. Gramsci wanted to break it apart³ which had made him a unique Marxist theorist. The objectives of this essay is to find out his concepts that has made him unique Marxist theorist and try to discover its practical notes in context with present day.

2. Early Socialization

The southern Italy is actually a backdated part of this country. In other words, the area is sort of Ghostly where the Sards live. They were mainly farmers cultivating small pieces of lands. It has been the same since the ancient Roman period. Everything of their life- lifestyle, ideas, thoughts, and norms and values were centered with cultivation and religion. They believed in superstitious creatures like ghosts. They as a result did all these things like witch hunting, using magic to cure the sick, and so on. In such environment a modern scholar like Antonio Gramsci was born on 2nd January, 1891 at a church city named Ales in the Italian city Sardinia. His father Francisco was an Albanian and mother Peppina Antonio was a Sards by birth but a tasteful woman by choice. Antonio was the fourth among his seven siblings. He was christened at the sixth day of his birth in a local church. A feast had been followed by that according to the Sardinian trend. But later on he gave up that. At the age of four, an unexpected accident made him half-disabled. Poverty hindered his studies though for not that much of a long time and as a result he worked 10-hours per day at his father's office. Yet, he had a thirst for knowledge and got a scholarship to study in Turin University in 1911 where he studied and befriended with Togliatti. In the year 1913 Gramsci joined Socialist Youth Federation and served as a teacher for the laborers dedicatedly. Later in 1916 he began to work as a co-editor in 'Avanti'. That was followed by his being a member of the Turin branch of Socialist Party where he was gradually promoted to the post of a director. In the same year his first essay 'La Chitta Futura' was also published. Gramsci, with a purpose to imply the outcomes of Russian Revolution in Italian reality, published L'Ordine Nuovo (The New Order) in 1919. This newspaper published more than 200 essays within the next two years which later on in 1st of January, 1921 came out to be a daily. He was also elected in the first committee of Italian National Communist Party. In the month of May, 1922 he visited Russia

¹ Ahmed, Kamal, (1995), "Gramsci o Sharbeshwaratar Dharana(Concept of Dominance and Gramsci)," *Rajneeti Arthaneeti Journal*, ed. 4.

² Vottacharjay, Saureen and Bandhopadday, Sammik, (1993), *Gramsci Parichay (Introducing Gramsci)*, Calcutta, Parl Publishers, p. 19.

³ ihid

⁴Blanc, Paul Le, (1996), From Marx to Gramsci: A Reader in Revolutionary Marxist Politics, New Jersey, Humanities Press, P. 281.



as a representative of Comintern and married a Russian woman named Julia. That was the most pleasant moment of his life. They had two children there. In the meantime, Italy was getting worse and troublesome. Despite of an arrest warrant upon his name, Gramsci travelled to Vienna from Moscow to lead the Communist Party that was severely damaged by the Fascists and was scattered with internal conflicts. In 1924 both Gramsci and Nuevo edited the biweekly L'Unità. He explained the idea of new party and the perspective of the Italian revolution. In such situation he also had to attend the Commintern's executive committee's session held in Russia. He returned from Moscow to organize his party as much as possible. But in 8th of November, 1926, Mussolini's Police force arrested Gramsci although he was a parliamentarian of Italy then. 1 At his trial, Gramsci's prosecutor stated, "For twenty years we must stop this brain from functioning". While taking him as a prisoner to Turi, near Bari, he had been shackled to a cart so that he couldn't lie down or stand up. But nothing of that sort stopped him from writing. His health deteriorated both for torture and lack of treatment. He was hospitalized in January, 1936. Owing to illness his imprisonment came to an end. But just after that he breathed his last even without seeing his wife and children. Thus, a revolutionary soul passed away whose revolution aimed at freeing the oppressed people.

3. Writings

Quaderni del Carcare(Prison Notebooks)

A compilation 32 Notebooks which contain 2848 pages published in between 1948-1951. Understanding these is very difficult as it was written subtly to escape the eye of the prison authority. For example, Marxism is philosophy of Praxis, Proletariat is subaltern, Lenin is Inich and class is social group. Sushovon Sarkar said about this, 'There thoughts are scattered and language is strong and brief.'

Besides this, several other books are also written and published basing on his writings. They are Letters from Prison(1955; Los intellectuals y la organización de la cultura(1971); Selections from political writings (1921-1926)(1978); The Modern Prince and Other Writings(1981); Selections from Cultural Writings(1985); Pre-Prison Writings(1994); The Southern Question (Picas Series)(1995) and Odio Gli Indiferenti(2011).

4. Hegemony

The word Hegemony was originated from the greek word hēgemonia(ἡγεμονία) which means Leadership and Rule.² In ancient Greece the word hegemony was used to denote the political and military superemacy of one city-state over another.3 Hegemony, thus, is used in two contexts: firstly to mean supremacy and secondly to mean leadership with which unanimous support is incorporated.⁴

All the thoughts and ideas of Gramsci are centred around the cotext of hegemony. Marx introduced the context of hegemony in his books "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" and The Class Struggle in France⁶. But it was not clear enough. Mao Zedong also used the term hegemony basically 'To indicate a kind of domination by one country over another which was not imperialism.' While Lenin had the idea of hegemony as one of his prominent ideas and defined it as theoretical leadership in one of his books named What is To Be Done.8 But Gramsci's explanations are deep and far reaching. He used hegemony as a mean to analyse the origin of capitalism. In this context Tom Bottomore said, Gramsci used the word to refer to the system of alliances which working class must create to overthrow the bourgeois state and to serve as the social basis of working state.9

Hegemony is actually a cultural process by which one class dominates the other. Thus the dominators keep on practicing power and the ruled obey them. Simply it means to put something into the ear of the commoners and make them believe in it. According to Gramsci, hegemony is one kind of social authority. Dominating people without using power or threatening the use of it. It is acquired through social institutions. People accept that somehow by being forced or willingly.

For example, while Germay forcefully attacked Polland, a rumour was implanted by them that a group of Polish army attacked a railway station in Germany. Even they published the dead souldiers photographs in that attack. Whole world heard of that evil Polish army. The reason underneath was that all the German

¹ Mitra, Sunil, (1996), "Antinio Gramsci", Kabiraj, Narohari, ed., Gramsci: jibon o Chinta(Gramsci: Life and Thought, Calcutta, Radical Book Club, p. 101.

² Hassig, Ross, (1994), Mexico and the Spanish Conquest, London, Longman, pp. 23–24.

³ Chernow, Barbara A., and Vallasi, George A., eds. (1994), The Columbia Encyclopedia, New York, Columbia University Press, p. 1215.

⁴ Bottomore, Tom, (1988), A Dictionary of Marxist Thought, Padstow, T.J Press Ltd, P. 201.

⁵ Marxs, Karl, (1852), "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte", Barlin, *Die Revolution*.

⁶ Karl Marxs, (1969), The Class Struggle in France, Moscow, Progress Publishers.

⁷ Bottomore, Tom, *op.cit*.

⁸ Lenin, V. I., (1902), What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement, Moscow, Iskra.

⁹ Bottomore, Tom, op. cit.



newspapers published the photographs of the Polish soldiars. But the real thing was that all the soldiers were the infamous German criminals sentenced to death. They were skapegoated and murderd brutally to stage the Polish attack in Germany instead of hanging them. But the pre-world war Germans, with few exceptions, believed that the Polishes were the apple of discord.

In case of Bangladesh, lately it is noticed that people are fond of Indian cinema or Soap Operas. Especially the houswives are fond of serials in Star-plus or Star-Jalsha which is renderig a far reaching impact upon their family life and also upon their little kids who follow a certain character all the time. Earlier Bengali music had been the medium of entertainment in music which is now replaced by Indian music like 'Lungi Dance'. That means we are getting hegemonized towards Indian culture.

Gramsci also said that hegemony is an act of accepting the supremacy of one class upon another instead of using force and this supremacy is gained through the institutions located with the civil society's acceptance. G. A. Williams told about hegemony in his 1960's book Journal of the History of Ideals, 'A system where a defined life style or thought is the key factor, where one concept of reality is accepted all across the society... the principles of which denote taste, morality, custom, religious ideology and all the social relations.' At this stage Gramsci's context of Hegemony and Dominance took two different meaings. Any class imply force by any mean to grab power and then by force remain the leading class; the power that is attained by force is defined as dominance by Gramsci. But if this dominance is to be effectively attained, then there'll have to be the struggle of establishing hegemony before ascending to dominance and even after that. All the norms and values, and even whole ways of thoughts and ideas of the dominating class should be deeply rooted among the dominated people. The expedetion of the proleteriat in Socialism or Communism doesn't only believe in grabbing the state's power, or to establish dominance over state or the govt. but also to ensure complete development of them by establishing hegemony in everywhere like mass education, culture, morals and intellectual practice. Dominance and Hegemony are complementary to one another. Actually the class whose domiance is being defeated and replaced by another, their Hegemony doesn't collapse automatically, rather if it is not checked and controlled, it might weaken the new class's dominance.

From ideological point of view Gramsci talked about Hegemony that a social group might struggle in different ways and ideological struggle is perhaps one of them. While one group, by fascinating others, may dominate their thougts and practices; this is Hegemony. That is, a Hegemonic leader brings about a revolutionary change in the cultural and ideological sphere and thus as an ethical basis of his rule gets the support of the subaltern class. He also said that Hegemonic leadership is related to the the dimensions of rising intellectual, philosophical, moral and emotional activities. So, a hegemonic leader must have proper knowlege about all sorts of peopele.

4.1. Super structure

In explaining the context of Hegemony, Gramsci divided the social super structure into two sections. For example-

- Political Society or, State
- Civil Society

4.1.1. Political Society or, State

According to him, state is the defence of a fixed territory and the collective form of bureaucracy where bureaucrates, law, state fund, social security, army and educational institutions exist in a body. He also said that state is a machine of repression and persecution which constitutionally controls those group of people who do not agree either actively or inactively(Yet, it is formed for the whole society). Whenever spontaneous support decreases and the fear of a crisis situation arises, a state as a machine of punishment and persecution is formed.

4.1.2. Civil Society

According to him, Civil Societies are private institutions. These are other organizations in society those are neither related with economy or with any state department. For instance- religious institutions, medeium of communication, films etc. He defined civil society as the international citizen. According to him, it is the sphere of Hegemonic leadership.

The distinctions between these two societies are fundamental. But Gramsci didn't explain the possible infiltrations of the two's own functions. As complementary to inhibitory authority state may try gaining trust like public explanation to any act, appeal for patriotism and obedience etc. On the other hand, civil society may force its followers. According to him, the source of defence power is Hegemonic leadership. Because, Hegemonic leadership governs through educative films, advertisement and publications and broadcasting news. In this regard, he used Integral State to express both state and civil society together. This is, Integral State is the summation of Political and Civil Society where Hegemony is secured by the use of force.

4.2 Hegemony and Counter Hegemony

There's differences between Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony which is not explained clealry in Gramsci's writings. Generally Counter-Hegemony is the application of the opposite process of Hegemony in efforting to



establish acceptance while Hegemony is supposed to be used to gain acceptance of the ruled portion of a society. Those among us love Hollywood films, think that the quality and thoughts of films of a developing country like ours are low with nothing new to learn compared with those of Hollywood. This idea is Hegemony. On the other hand, those beleive the opposite that our films are not that low, rather there are films like 'Pother Panchali' (Ballad of the Street) and 'Hirok Rajar Deshe' (At the Palace of the Diamond King) by prominent film maker like Satyajit Roy those are internationally acknowledged is Counter-Hegemony. In this regard Gramsci said that, for logical reasons the Bourgeois are the dominating group and the proletariat are the dominated in capitalist societies. In Feudal societies, they had been the growing and financially strong class. At a historical moment, it was, somehow, possible for capitalism to be born in the womb of feudalism. For this reason, Bourgeois gained hegemony in Feudalism. But for the working class, it is not possible to repeat the same before an end of Capitalism. The reason behind this is that they are Proletariat. It is not possible for social production system to reside with capitalist society. The reason behind this is social ownership of production metarials in socialism. Bourgeois' Hegemony and Proletariat's Counter Hegemony are two different contexts.¹

5. Concept on Intellectual Class

With an understanding of the importance of establishing Hegemony, Gramsci clarified intellectuals in a newer aspect. The way intellectuals' place, beyond the history or out of strain, had been indicated was a great mistake for which the acceptance of intellectuals was at a stake. In such a circumstance, Gramsci defined intellectuals a new for which he's been remembered still now. It's actually a part of his written thoughts while he was imprisoned for a long time from 1926-1937.

According to him, 'All men are intellectuals, in that all have intellectual and rational faculties, but not all men have the social function of intellectuals.' Every man is an intellectual but everyone mustn't serve the purpose of an intellectual. As we don't call everyone is either a cook or a tailor for any person can fry two eggs at any moment or can sew a hole on a piece of cloth.

He classified Intellectuals into two types-

- > Organic or Biological Intellectuals
- Orthodox or Traditional Intellectuals

5.1. Organic or Biological Intellectuals

This type of intellectuals establishes themselves in performing the act of indicating their own identity, role, similarity etc. They are a natural part of this type of intellectuals and are related to this closely.

5.2. Orthodox or Traditional Intellectuals

Apparently this type of intellectuals didn't evolve with the support of any special class's growth. Rather they evolved as the shadow of any older tradition. Gramsci observed the history of the ecclesiastic class and showed that traditional intellectuals are not a distinguished class; rather their class allegiance is simply kept hidden.

The chief motive behind Gramsci's Intellectual Class's classification was to indicate the revolutionary role of the working class. This is why he said, in order to bring about the definite and overall social change that the working class people have pledged to bring about, they must create a new class of Biological Intellectuals who'd at first lead the process of directing tasks using the day to day experiences at work, and then gradually will perform the leading role of moderator that is the role of political adviser of the working class by historical notion of humanity. The working class, along with their biological intellectuals' co-operation and through their revolutionary activities, will try to attract the Traditional Intellectuals towards supporting their case. Through these intellectuals the belief of the working class will be spread among the mass, earn their support and thus pave the way to social changes.

6. Concept on Education

In the year 1923, the Minister of Education, Jentil, in order to create a group of favorable intellectuals for Mussolini's government, brought about a change in the sixty-year-old education system of Casatti Canun. Actually Jentil completed the policy of Mussolini's ancestor Jolitti who introduced it to Crotch as the Minister of Education in 1921. Jentil by altering the two clauses of Casatti Canun's education policy, Jinasio and Licheo', emphasized on classical and vocational school's divination, and also talked about religious education along with this. Gramsci actually criticized this education policy by giving his own concept of education. He criticized it by saying, 'It was right to struggle against the old school, but reforming it was not so simple as it seemed. The problem was not one of model curricula but of men, and not just of the men who are actually teachers themselves

¹ Gramsci, Antonio, (1971), Selections from the Prison NoteBooks, London, Lawrence and Wishart, p.163.

² Ahmed, Kamal, *op.cit.*,pp. 39-40.

³ Gramsci, Antonio, *op.cit*, p.9.



but of the entire social complex which they express."1

He also criticized Jentil's policy by telling that students of vocational schools are neither learning to govern a state nor are they acquiring information which will help them to learn democracy in order to govern a state. As a result power will be centered in the hand of some biological intellectuals or a special branch of elite and thus fascist power may widen their dominance. For this fear, Gramsci proposed a new education policy where there will be a scope of learning 'responsibilities and rights' along with 'practical efficiency' so that fundamental values of 'humanity' can be created at the final stage of general school. Besides, 'intellectual feelings of discipline and moral freedom' will be included in this.

According to him, the only way to overcome the educational crisis is to ensure primary education for all so that people are taught about a humanitarian and structural culture. It will result in equality between the power of developing physical labor and the necessary strength in performing intellectual tasks. From these general schools, students will be promoted to specialized training schools by being judged on their own potentials from time to time or will directly join productive work. The goal of a general school or humanities knowledge learning school or a general culture learning institution might be to help the young generation entering into social interactional activities and with this vision to ensure their mental growth, to increase their creativity in intellectual and realistic activities and to inspire their enthusiasm towards working and bona fides. The government will bear the expenses of these general schools. According to him, school buildings, scientific instruments and unprecedented expansion of the teachers' knowledge are the prerequisites of such education. The education period of such schools should be the same as of present time primary and secondary educational institution's time. Of course, it should be re-arranged from the perspectives of subject matter, method and learning process. According to him, the first stratum shouldn't be longer than 3-4 years. Practical subjects like reading, writing, mathematics, geography, history, rights and responsibilities, state and society should be the subject, primary knowledge of these will form newer thoughts and ideas about the world. The remaining part of the coursework need to be completed within six years so all the stages of general school is possible to complete within fifteen-sixteen years.

He also said that general schools should be like colleges where there will always be a socially organized life; studies will be done in an organized way. Even the so called practice of education must be carried out with the helping hands of the teachers and meritorious students. The final stage of general education should be designed and structured in such a way that it'll convince one to feel like that's the ending part of one's education, and thus it should aim at creating the fundamental values of humanity and also should raise the feelings of intellectual discipline and moral freedom which will facilitate one in gathering specialized knowledge.

The end of vocational education is creative school. The primary goal of it is discipline. It is a stage and method of research and wisdom, not a creative school for innovators and inventors. However, it is also not a predestined event of motivating new inventions. Rather, the technique of learning in this method is the students' self-dependent spontaneous effort. The main responsibility of the teacher should be a friendly instructor like in the universities. In this stage, learning should be carried out in seminars, libraries, and by examining and experimenting in laboratories. In this stage, for the professional intern, biological information shall be collected from the core.

He finally said that, the spreading of general school, if done in a successive way, it will bridge between intellectual work and art-work in both school territory and everywhere in social life. This overall formula will be reflected in all the limbs of culture and thus there'll be change in its subject matter and thus there will be change.

7. Philosophy and History

One of the important matters of discussion of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* is the definition of philosophy and history as well as determining their relationships. In this respect he took Crotch's definition of religion as a standard to say that religion is any sort of universalism which is accepted as general standard of life. In this regard, almost every man is a philosopher. The reason behind this is that everyone is busy with the realistic task of life and this realistic task is one sort of universalism which can be defined as philosophy. History of philosophy means the history of the efforts of a particular social class and their beginning of ideological revolution. The general standard of manner and behavior gets into this changing process. He also said that, the philosophy of one particular age is neither the philosophy of a special group of intellectuals nor the philosophy of a broader portion. Rather it is the combination of them all in which the overall trend finds its outcome. This outcome turns out to be a general standard of united actions which at last becomes visible and a complete history. The philosophy of a historical age is absolutely the history of that particular era.

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¹ Sarker, Susovon, (2 November, 1968), "The Thought of Gramsci", *Mainstream*, New Delhi, Perspective Publications Private ltd.



8. Philosopher

In this respect he took Crotch's definition of religion as a standard to say that every human being is a philosopher. According to him, the differences between philosophers and the rest of human kind, from professional or a definite perspective, is not based on quality, rather it is quantity based. But even if this formula is established, it is imperative to look the root of the differences. A philosopher can be defined as a specialized worker if he is compared to an inexpert worker. A professional philosopher is someone who thinks logically and unlike the others has a deep and disciplined sphere of thoughts. He also knows the history of thoughts. All the causalities of thoughts are known to him. There is a difference among specialized philosophers and the other philosophers and that difference is that the specialized philosophers are much more alike the other people than the other philosophers are. Alike the specialists of other divisions of science, a specialized philosopher has been molded and thus, for this reason, perverted image of philosophers is created.

9. Estimation

If we consider all of the concepts of Gramsci's thought in critical sense with present day, then we can find some practicably notes. **Firstly,** The idea of Hegemony, provided in *Prison Notebooks* by Gramsci, is still partly in practice. This is because, in capitalist social system, ruler-elites depend on democracy and in order to safeguard the throne take help from different cultural processes. The implementation of which is done by several groups or party co-organizations. They, if considered a part of the civil society, run on some campaigns which help the rulers keep on ruling and they take help from their own mass-media. On the other hand, the ruled class accepts this normally in their day to day life and thus passes their whole life by being the same ruled class as always. It results in no change in the chain of the rulers. If, somehow, there comes any change in the government, the most common thing that it follows is, the same as the government, another bourgeois class that comes up and takes over the responsibility to safeguard the government. Just like the rulers, there is change in power and authority and yet the ruled class remains still unchanged. It goes on like a chained circle. It so happens due to the hegemonic public campaigns. So, Gramsci's concept of Hegemony is still in practice now.

Secondly, In explaining intellectual class concept, he talked of two types of intellectuals. First of them are biological and the second is the orthodox. The existence of these two can still be found in our societies. The reason is that the ruler class or the orthodox intellectuals mitigate revolutions by means of hegemonic campaign. As a result, the ideology of the labor class doesn't get spread among the mass population through the biological intellectuals and thus it hinders social reform amidst the common people.

Thirdly, His concept regarding contemporary education is also very fairly well. Because, welfare state refers to a state where people are encouraged to attain vocational education. It perfects them for job sectors and yet keeps them ignorant about the structure of the state. The practical example of which are those who are certified in technical education. They are completely unaware of the state structure and are more concentrated on works. This is why they remain totally ignorant about the democratic ways to govern a state. Hegemonic campaign, here, plays a very vital role. Thus the rulers are capable of governing a state. So, the effectiveness of hegemony is clearly noticeable in education

Fourthly, In his concept of religion and history, he took Croch's concept of religion as a standard and said that religion is the universal belief as a general standard of life. The reality of which can be found in different religion, in every religion there are some fundamental context the theme of which is understanding of life. Again, when these are implemented, they become accepted philosophy. On the other hand, the evolution of one religion into another from the ancient time to the present time shows that, the comparatively modern ones accept the ancient ones to be their philosophy and this evolution history is regarded philosophic history. For example: Jainism is accepted by many as a philosophic context. So, his idea of philosophy and religion is also blameless.

Finally, In the conceptualization of philosophy, he regarded every man as a philosopher. This is not adequate. If everyone becomes a philosopher, it will contradict with the instances of history. Socrates might be named as an example. If everyone of his time were a philosopher, then Plato would name others as heroes instead of him in his book. So, his context of philosophy is untrue.

It is overall found out that, except for some faults in the context of philosopher, other sectors, especially hegemony, education and philosophy, are pretty sound. This will immortalize him as a Marxist philosopher. Here lie his potentials which are perhaps impossible for others to attain. That is why in recent times, Gramsci is introduced as a theorist of revolution of the west. The most important reason behind this is his scientific thoughts. The most important of them all is the concept of Hegemony and thus by this he taught of the freedom of the working class. It is certainly true that no other Marxist did so excellently effort in this developed capitalist circumstance. Accepting his thoughts and ideas without criticism in a new and changing circumstance would go against his intention. Yet, the unity and depth of Marxism in him, the absence of transfixed definition and active and realistic outlook can be taken as a fresh source of spreading Marxism. And this is the way how socialist revolution may rebirth now.