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Recommended Citation

Holst, John D. (2015). "The Political Independence of the Working Class: Antonio Gramsci's Pedagogical Leitmotif," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2015/papers/27>

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The Political Independence of the Working Class: Antonio Gramsci's Pedagogical Leitmotif

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Keywords: radical adult education, Gramsci, working class

Abstract: This paper argues that the leitmotif of Gramsci's theory and practice was the political independence of the working class. The centrality of pedagogy in this leitmotif is captured by Gramsci's concept of catharsis.

In discussing how to approach a writer's body of work, Antonio Gramsci (1971) famously argued for the importance of finding an author's leitmotif or guiding thread. Gramsci made this remark specifically in reference to his own approach to Marx, and not surprisingly many scholars have found it appropriate to take up Gramsci's methodological suggestions in approaching Gramsci's own body of work. For almost every one of Gramsci's major concepts one can find a Gramscian scholar who identifies it as the leitmotif or core concept running through Gramsci's writings and, in particular, in his *Prison Notebooks*.

I am following Gramscian scholars in identifying a leitmotif, but I am doing so with a few caveats. First, I do not draw on one of Gramsci's key concepts as a leitmotif, but rather on a major political goal of his which, while it is a goal of all Marxist revolutionaries, it also has many affinities with ideas at the heart of social justice-oriented education. The goal that Gramsci shared with all revolutionaries, and which I believe is the leitmotif of his theory and practice, is the political independence of the working class. My second caveat is that I do not pose the political independence of the working class as a leitmotif in opposition to Gramscian scholars who have identified other key concepts as the leitmotif in Gramsci's work. Since I understand Gramsci's key concepts as interrelated and part of a conceptual totality, I think one can identify almost any of his key concepts as foundational or, at least, fundamental to his conceptual totality.

My third caveat is that the goal of working class political independence, while in fact central to Gramsci's theory and practice, also allows me to demonstrate how pedagogy plays a key mediating role in the interrelatedness of his major concepts. Educational action is at the heart of Gramsci's major concepts, it is also the connecting glue between them. For example, Gramsci believed that people's adhesion to prevailing commonsensical notions or hegemonic thinking was the product of a pedagogical process. He said that "every relationship of 'hegemony' is necessarily an educational relationship" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 350). When grassroots protest breaks out in spontaneous ways showing embryonic resistance to prevailing hegemony and social injustices, Gramsci would insist that education was essential for these forms of spontaneous action to lead to lasting change. Reflecting on his own educational and political work in the context of spontaneous working class rebellion in Turin in 1919 and 1920, he said "this element of 'spontaneity' was not neglected and even less despised. It was *educated*, directed" (p. 198). This education of spontaneity was not the individual act of Gramsci, even though he was one of the popular educators involved. Rather, in Gramsci's opinion, this educational work in order to be effective, had to be the work of a political party. For Gramsci (1971), "parties can be considered as schools" (p. 268). It is educational work organized by

political organizations organically rooted to the working class and its communities, work places, and organizations that can build political independence.

The idea and goal of working class political independence share much in common with basic principles held by many educators, and particularly by educators explicitly oriented toward social justice. Most educators hope that students will leave their classes as critical, independent thinkers. Educators strive to provide their students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be able to think for themselves; to be able to assess situations and draw their own conclusions, so that they will not fall victim to the imposition of others' ideas which may not be their own. As educators, we strive to help students see things and people in their broader contexts, in their interrelatedness, and to understand their growth and change overtime. Social justice oriented educators hope that their students will become change agents in their own lives and in the lives of those with whom they live and work. Social justice educators strive to create educational spaces in which students increasingly set the agenda or curriculum for our educational work. We want our teaching and our students' learning to be based in their needs and interests to the greatest extent possible. All of these goals and aspirations align with Gramsci's idea of working class political independence.

Gramsci, however, as a revolutionary communist took this further to understand that the existing educational institutions could provide useful and essential knowledge, skills, and some dispositions for working class independence, but, ultimately, full independence could only come through educational institutions developed and controlled by the working class itself. Moreover, these institutions need to be both educational and political institutions; they have to educate and be vehicles for working-class political struggle and power.

Before continuing, I want to highlight what I mean by working class for this also has direct relevance for educators. In early 20th Century Italy, Gramsci (2007) was concerned for the political independence of the "vast majority of the Italian people, the workers and the peasants" (pp. 784-785). Given my US context, I will just use the term working class, realizing that in some contexts there exist significant peasant populations. I draw my definition of working class from the work of Zweig (2012) and Jonna and Bellamy Foster (2014). All three of these researchers consider the working class to consist of those people who, when they are employed, work for a boss or bosses and have little control over the nature of their job. Zweig calculates that about 63% and Jonna and Bellamy Foster calculate that about 68.9% of the US population belong to the working class. It is also important to highlight that the working class is multiracial and multinational and it is disproportionately made up of women and people of color. These data mean that most educators spend their time in classrooms and other educational settings with mainly working-class people.

The Political Independence of the Working Class

We can identify two interrelated ways in which Gramsci and revolutionaries have conceptualized political independence. Political independence is a question of consciousness and thinking, and is developed and educated through organization. Moreover, one expands the other. If working-class people are going to think independently of the social, political, and economic institutions of a given society, they must have their own organizations within each of those spheres. Working-class political parties, worker-run and controlled economic institutions such as cooperatives or workplace councils, and working-class social and cultural organizations are all foundational to and necessary for working class political independence. An interesting example of this can be found in the occupied and worker-run factories which emerged in

Argentina after the economic crisis of the early 2000s. With no work and no wages, workers began returning to their workplaces which had been abandoned by their owners. The workers, on their own, restarted production and distribution of products without any owners or supervisors. As one worker recounted, one of the hardest hurdles to overcome in the beginning was to convince fellow workers that they could actually run their workplaces without bosses; in other words, that they could think and act independently as workers (The Lavaca Collective, 2007). A very similar situation arose at the Republic Windows factory in Chicago, Illinois during the US financial crisis beginning in 2008. As the workers succinctly put it on the website of their now worker-run factory: “In 2008, the boss decided to close our windows factory...and fire everyone. In 2012, we decided to buy the factory for ourselves and fire the boss. We now own the plant together and run it democratically” (New Era Windows Cooperative, n.d.).

In Gramscian scholarship there is not a lot of sustained discussion of his emphasis on the political independence of the working class. I think that one reason for this may be the serious pedagogical and organizing implications involved in achieving political independence. I would argue that Gramscian scholarship, with its emphasis on the *Prison Notebooks* written when Gramsci's activist work was over, tends to focus on Gramsci the theorist and thinker to the detriment of Gramsci the pedagogue of revolution (Freire, in Freire & Macedo, 1987) and political party activist and leader. On the other hand, the educational scholarship on Gramsci which does focus on his pedagogy tends to downplay Gramsci as revolutionary, as Italian Socialist Party and Italian Communist Party militant. Therefore, between these two bodies of scholarship, not only is there little two-way dialogue, there is also a gap in terms of understanding the pedagogy of revolutionary party militancy, which has as its goal the political independence of the working class.

Catharsis as Gramsci's Pedagogical Conceptualization of Political Independence

If Gramsci's leitmotif was the political independence of the working class, the Gramscian concept most clearly aligned with this leitmotif would be “Catharsis”.

The term “catharsis” can be employed to indicate the passage from the purely economic (or egoistic-passional) to the ethico-political moment that is the superior elaboration of the structure into the superstructure in the minds of men. This also means the passage from “objective to subjective” and from “necessity to freedom”. Structure ceases to be an external force which crushes man, assimilates him to itself and makes him passive; and is transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethico-political form and a source of new initiatives. To establish the “cathartic” moment becomes therefore, it seems to me, the starting-point for all the philosophy of praxis, and the cathartic process coincides with the chain of syntheses which have resulted from the evolution of the dialectic. (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 366-367)

This is a rather typical quote from the *Prison Notebooks* in that it is packed full of rather difficult concepts implying multiple layers and avenues of analysis. Next, I will provide a pedagogically-oriented “translation,” or interpretation, of this quote relating it to major Gramscian concepts.

If we begin at the end of Gramsci's definition of catharsis, we can see the significance of the concept for him. He says that to establish the cathartic moment is the starting-point for all the philosophy of praxis. If we consider that Gramsci used the phrase “philosophy of praxis” to label the form of Marxism he was developing in the *Prison Notebooks* then catharsis is the starting-point for Marxism itself. Moreover, when Gramsci says “to establish the cathartic moment,” he is referring to the point in political struggle when a class becomes hegemonic in a

given society. So, for the purposes of this paper, this means when a class has not only become politically independent in its own thinking but has also consensually established its goals and aspirations as those of the society as a whole; in other words, when a social class has taken political power and become both subjectively (in its own consciousness) and objectively (in terms of holding political power) independent. To understand how Gramsci conceives of this process taking place, and to consider how pedagogy is at the center of it, we should now return to the beginning of the quote.

For Gramsci, the passage from the purely economic to the ethico-political is in large part a pedagogical act because he links this passage with the elaboration of the structure into the superstructure in the minds of men [sic]. Here Gramsci is referring to the pedagogical process of making working-class people understand that what are commonsensically considered merely economic (structure) demands for safe jobs, living wages, decent and affordable housing and healthcare, etc. are actually political demands as well; that they cannot be resolved without a transformation of the political institutions, relations, and ideas (superstructure) which help maintain the unjust socio-political economic relations. In significant and hard fought labor or union struggles, there often comes a time when striking or protesting workers come up against not only their employers but also politicians, government agencies, and the police, National Guard, or military. I would argue, along with Gramsci, that these moments are teachable and must be so; what I mean, and what Gramsci insisted upon, is that these are not just learning moments, but require teachers or revolutionaries to work pedagogically with people collectively so that they can come to see and understand the interconnectedness of the economic, the social, and the political.

The passage from the economic to the ethico-political went beyond single struggles, although single cases can highlight elements of it. For Gramsci, the cathartic moment, the achievement of hegemony, was a part of longer-term historical transformations. This is only clear when we consider the parenthetical note he wrote at the end of his definition of catharsis, which also sheds light on his comment about the “evolution of the dialectic”.

One must keep permanently in mind the two points between which this process oscillates: that no society poses for itself problems the necessary and sufficient conditions for whose solution do not already exist or are coming into being; and that no society comes to an end before it has expressed all its potential content. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 367)

When Gramsci says that structures cease to be external forces which crush people and instead become instruments of freedom, he is referring to the idea that when people gain economic and political power, institutions such as workplaces and state agencies can be transformed into instruments which liberate rather than oppress them. Gramsci witnessed this himself in the Turin factory councils when workers occupied the factories and began to democratically run them without the bosses. Gramsci saw how he, his comrades, and the workers together made workplaces sites of production, learning, and liberation.

The process of catharsis is educational and also requires research and analysis of prevailing conditions, or what Gramsci calls relations of forces. For Gramsci (1971) there were three main levels of analysis in determining the conditions for social change in concrete contexts: the economic, the political, and the military. First, Gramsci uses the term relation of social forces to describe the level of economic development of a given society. Second, Gramsci uses the term relation of political forces to describe the level of cohesiveness and social awareness or consciousness of social classes and groups. Here Gramsci breaks this into sub-levels of analysis which correspond very closely to the levels or phases he identified in the process of catharsis.

This is what can also be called the subjective conditions because they have to do with people's level of awareness and consciousness. The last level of analysis Gramsci identified was that of the relations of military force. Here he is highlighting the definitive role that military force has generally played in deciding the outcome of revolutionary change.

If we draw on Gramsci's initial level of analysis of the relation of social force, we can come to some preliminary assessments of the prospects for social change today. First, let's look at how Gramsci himself did this during the revolutionary upsurge of the Italian working class in the 1919-1920 "Red Biennium". For Gramsci (1994), revolution was not about fiery declarations of self-proclaimed radicals, but rather "an extremely long-term historical process that manifests itself in the emergence and development of...new productive forces [that] are no longer able to develop...within the official framework" (p. 163). Gramsci felt that the revolutionary upsurge of that period was a result of, and a response to, the emergence of mass industrial productive forces and relations transforming the Italian economy and society at that time. The working class was taking over and running factories on its own and was developing neighborhood-based political institutions parallel to, and in direct opposition, to official municipal government institutions. At the economic, and increasingly at the ethico-political level, the working class and the peasantry in the countryside were creating institutions of their own which expressed the cathartic moment and their growing political independence. Gramsci (1977) understood that one had to analyze the relation of social forces in tandem with the relation of political forces. He argued that the working class was creating these new institutions of economic and political power because "the traditional institutions for the government of human masses" (p. 175) were becoming increasingly moribund and dysfunctional. The new mass industrial technology was at odds with the prevailing institutions in the realm of the economy and in the integral state. For this new technology to fully develop, new institutions needed to be created. These insights could only be found, however, through an engaged scholarship, an ongoing participatory research project based wholly in the lived realities of a society's majority. Gramsci believed that "the masses of workers and peasants are the only genuine and authentic expression of...historical development.... If one becomes estranged from the inner life of the working class, then one becomes estranged from the historical process that is unfolding" (pp. 173-174).

So today, if we follow Gramsci, I think starting points for an analysis of the relation of social and political force would have to be the emergence of computer or microchip-based productive forces and the corresponding growing class of economically dispossessed and precariously employed working people. The introduction of these fundamentally new technologies are at one and the same time producing marvelous innovations and enormous social disruption when one considers the growing economic polarization we see all around us, domestically and globally. Prevailing institutions of production and distribution of goods and services necessary for human life are based on relations which no longer correspond to new technologies. With microchip-based technologies, increasing amounts of production take place without the need for the presence of human labor precisely because of the growing ability of the new technologies to replicate human movement. Nevertheless, we still continue to distribute the necessities of life based on the idea that people have paid employment from which they receive wages to buy what they need. As Gramsci indicated above, the prevailing institutions no longer correspond to the nature of the new forces of production increasingly prevalent across all sectors of the economy. We are witnessing, as Gonzalez and Katz-Fishman (2010) argue, a growing sector of society which cannot survive without a distribution based on need rather than the ability

to pay. They make the argument that this is a new class and that it draws its ranks from nearly all sectors of current society; it is a class whose basic needs are in direct conflict with prevailing economic and political institutions. Gramsci (2007) said that “a revolution can only be based on a new class” (p. 789). The tasks, then, of revolutionary pedagogy today are to undertake an ongoing participatory analysis of the living realities of this new class, and to outline the steps forward to resolve the growing problem that “the old is dying and the new cannot be born” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 276). In other words, the objective conditions for fundamental transformation are increasingly in place, and it is time for a revolutionary pedagogy of the moment of catharsis.

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