

Ambivalence in Gramsci's historiography of the Risorgimento

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Abstract

Although Gramsci developed his conceptual methodology out of concrete historical analysis, there is a significant tension between his account of the Risorgimento, which plays into a narrative of Italian exceptionalism, and concepts such as historical bloc, hegemony and passive revolution, which point towards European wide convergence in capitalist state dynamics after 1848. This article shows a de-alignment between Gramsci's account of the Risorgimento and Marx's analysis of the meaning of 1848 in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Napoleon Bonaparte*. At the same time, Gramsci's conceptual methodology both re-aligns his argument with Marx and significantly develops Marxist analysis of politics. However, Gramsci's conceptualisation of the role of intellectuals, especially the problematic distinction between traditional and organic intellectuals, does provide support for the kind of exceptionalist argument he offers of the Risorgimento. Therefore, this article reconstructs Gramsci's account of the intellectuals in order to integrate it better into his analysis of a historical bloc composed of both conservatism and liberalism.

Keywords

ambivalence, hegemony, intellectuals, passive revolution, Risorgimento

Introduction

For Antonio Gramsci, accounts of historical episodes were a useful way of reflecting on the criterion for research and generating concepts that could be applicable in other times and geographies (Gramsci, 2021: 11). One of his most extensive and influential accounts

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of history was his discussion of the Italian movement for national unification, the Risorgimento (1848–61) which he refined in *Notebook 19*, compiled between 1934–5 (Francioni, 2019: 76). However, there is a significant tension between his account of the Risorgimento, which plays into a narrative of Italian exceptionalism, and concepts such as historical bloc, hegemony and passive revolution, which point towards European wide convergence in capitalist state dynamics after 1848. As is well known, Gramsci criticises the representatives of liberalism, the Action Party, for failing to be more like the Jacobin revolutionaries of the French revolution era some 60 years earlier. Instead, the Action Party allowed themselves to be dominated by the more traditional conservative forces represented by the Moderates (constitutional monarchists). With the Moderates dominant over the Action Party, Italian unification was achieved on the basis of minimising popular involvement in the new state. Gramsci's damning indictment was that Italy had produced a 'bastard' liberal state more tilted towards force than consent and political contestation (Gramsci, 2003: 90). At the same time, Gramsci's conceptual architecture moves the argument away from a narrative of Italian exceptionalism and towards situating the Risorgimento into European wide convergent trends in the class relations and political cultures shaping 19th-century capitalist state formation. This ambivalence between historical narrative and historical concepts needs to be recognised because it opens up a reading of Gramsci that rehabilitates liberal politics for the future even if it is damned for its timidity in the past.

In outlining Gramsci's historical account, I will argue that it is anachronistic to hold the liberal Action Party against a standard of political action which was no longer historically available to it. I will then compare Gramsci's analysis of the Risorgimento with Marx's analysis of French events between 1848–52 in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Napoleon Bonaparte*. This comparison suggests a de-alignment between Gramsci's analysis of the Risorgimento and Marx's assessment, which has been taken as pointing to a European wide shift in political and class relations after 1848. At the same time, Gramsci's conceptual innovations are re-aligned with Marx's account and deepen and generalise Marx's analysis of the complex relations between politics, cultures and classes. I then turn to Gramsci's conceptual architecture, elucidating the meaning of passive revolution, historical bloc and hegemony and discuss their relationship to the Risorgimento and other historical points of reference. These concepts tend to resituate the Risorgimento and post-Risorgimento Italy in the mainstream of capitalist state formation in the period.

However, there is one part of Gramsci's conceptual architecture that reinforces the exceptionalism thesis, and that is his theorising of the relationship between what he calls traditional intellectuals and organic intellectuals. Gramsci argues *it seems* that the political leadership of 'traditional intellectuals' (associated with conservatism) represented a failure by liberalism to assimilate the remnants of the pre-capitalist order to the rising class of the bourgeoisie. Instead, leadership was delegated to traditional political forces with the effect, not only in Italy but also in Germany and England, of thwarting the development of a modern and more democratic capitalism. This again rests on an implicit exceptionalism thesis where there is a normative conception of what ought to have happened in history. Here there is a political ambivalence where Gramsci is

interpreted through the lens of a surreptitious liberalism apparently thwarted by the weight of the past.

What is the cause of this ambivalence? Three possible reasons come to mind. Firstly, Gramsci's work was unfinished – they are, after all, *notes*. In a manuscript as long and as complex as the *Prison Notebooks*, it is inevitable that there are lines of argument that need to be worked through but which the author did not live to do. Secondly, there are the hard-to-quantify effects of prison censorship on Gramsci's expression. In criticising the Action Party he chose as his point of reference the French Jacobins of the 1790s, but perhaps he was really comparing the Action Party to the Italian Communist Party. In that case his text is ambivalently caught between a historical account and an allegorical account. Thirdly, there is the volume of writing and interpretation that the notebooks have generated. Pierre Macherey famously argued that a 'text' includes its subsequent history of interpretations 'which have been attached to them and which are finally incorporated into them...like shells on a rock by the seashore forming a whole incrustation' (Macherey, 1977: 7). That is why it is often quite impossible to make an absolutely clear-cut distinction between what Gramsci says and what other people say Gramsci says.

What are hints in a line of argument about the triumph of 'traditional' intellectuals in Gramsci were elaborated into a full-scale historiography, famously in a British context, by Perry Anderson (1992) and Tom Nairn (1981). From an international relations perspective, Adam Morton reads Gramsci's account of the Risorgimento as one in which the old feudal classes seize the political initiative and that the 'weakness' of the resulting state 'then became the analogue to state-building attempts elsewhere marking the history of Europe across the nineteenth century' (Morton, 2007: 68). Other versions of this argument coming from the neoliberal right can also be found in Weiner's fascinating account of British historical development that refused to enthusiastically embrace the industrial capitalist spirit (Weiner, 2004). Here there is an ambivalence in how we position Gramsci in relation to liberalism. I offer a different account that situates liberalism as part of the power bloc that must make use of the political and cultural resources offered by conservatism as wielded by its intellectuals who, I will argue, are both traditional and organic. The problems of capitalism cannot be resolved by a different more 'progressive' political cultural leadership. In those moments when a real democratic expansion based on workers autonomy is on the cards, the contradiction between capitalist interests and democratic spaces is resolved by siding with the forces that suspend the latter to protect the former (as in France after 1848 and in Italy in the 1920s).

The Jacobins and the Risorgimento

The dominant political force of the Risorgimento was the Moderate Party, led principally by the Prime Minister, Camillo Benso, the aristocratic Count of Cavour and King Victor Emmanuel, who ruled over Piedmont (in the northwest of Italy) and Sardinia. They are equivalent to the 'traditional'/heritage/conservative forces consolidating themselves as modern political traditions in the context of 19th-century capitalism. Emmanuel represented the prospect of uniting Italy under a constitutional monarchy and securing the aid

of Austria's enemies under this 'moderate' project (Romani, 2012: 596–7). Cavour meanwhile was 'liberal' enough to promote Rome as the capital of the new Italy (against the institution of the Papacy) with a separation of church and state but with the church guaranteed full freedom (Cavour, 2010). The Moderates were, Gramsci argues, 'naturally "condensed"' as representatives of the social groups they represented. They 'were intellectuals and political organisers, and at the same time company bosses, rich farmers or estate managers, commercial and industrial entrepreneurs, etc' (Gramsci, 2003: 60). By contrast the more liberal Action Party 'did not base itself specifically on any historical class' (Gramsci, 2003: 57) other than their own middle-class composition. The Action Party, whose leaders included Mazzini and Garibaldi, represented liberal political traditions with a fairly weak practical Republican orientation (whatever the personal beliefs of its leaders). The lack of a firm class basis meant that in the turbulent period of the struggle for national unification, the 'oscillations' they underwent were 'resolved, in the last analysis, according to the interests of the Moderates' (Gramsci, 2003: 57). Gramsci's assessment of the Action Party is perceptive but his reasoning for their lack of independent action is problematic.

Against the hegemonic leadership of the Moderates, the Action Party would have had to have met the 'essential demands of the popular masses, and in the first place of the peasantry', in order to have stamped 'the movement of the Risorgimento with a more markedly popular and democratic character (more than that perhaps it could not have achieved, given the fundamental premises of the movement itself)' (Gramsci, 2003: 61). The question is whether basing itself on the 'essential demands of the popular masses' was a historically available option for the Action Party. To have promulgated a more vigorous programme of agrarian reform would have set the Action Party on a collision course with Southern landowners and required an alliance with the revolutionary activity of those sections of the peasantry prepared to take up arms against the landowners. Given the weight of that dominant class and their integration with the other commercial classes of the Northern towns, to have achieved the kind of popular programme Gramsci is calling for would have been a significant breach and intensification of the class struggle while, at the same time, Italians were fighting foreign invaders and required allies abroad against Austria that would have been unforthcoming had the Italians tried to reinvent the French revolution of 60-odd years previous. Gramsci seems to contradict himself regarding the possibility of organising a popular revolutionary army independent of the Moderates when he notes that Garibaldi's 'Thousand' campaign 'was made possible' by an alliance with Piedmont and the help the English fleet gave in his landing – a help that would have been presumably withheld (from both Piedmont and the English) if Garibaldi had announced he was fighting for agrarian land reform and a republic (Gramsci, 2003: 112)!

The Jacobins of the 1789 revolution, like the Action Party, came from the professional middle class but, unlike the Action Party, they 'imposed' themselves on the French bourgeoisie, pushing them into positions much more radical than they themselves would have taken up. The Jacobins were able to drive 'the bourgeoisie forward with kicks in the backside' (Gramsci, 2003: 77). They sealed a compact with the peasants because they offered a social and economic transformation of their conditions of life that would tear them away from the clutches of the feudal landlords. They thus could unite town and

country, dissolve ‘the binding together of the various rural classes . . . in a reactionary bloc’ (Gramsci, 2003: 74) and make it more difficult, from a military perspective, for the countryside to become a zone of reaction that could besiege Paris. A hint that such a bloc between town and country was not going to be available indefinitely comes when Gramsci notes that the Jacobins adopted positions ‘even more advanced than that which the historical premises should have permitted – hence the various forms of backlash and the function of Napoleon I’ (Gramsci, 2003: 77). But if there were class driven corrections to Jacobinism during the French revolution (represented by the rise of Napoleon for example), how much truer is that the case across Europe by the mid-19th century? Yet Gramsci notes that compared to the Jacobin alliance with the peasantry, in the case of the Action Party ‘there was nothing to be found which resembled this Jacobin approach’ (Gramsci, 2003: 80). This absence, at least in parts of Gramsci’s text, is not due to a change in the historical circumstances but an absence of political will or leadership strategy. This violates Gramsci’s own historicist methodology, especially the need to integrate conjunctural moments with ‘organic’ (structural) conditions. As Gramsci argues, a failure to integrate the conjunctural into the structural leads to voluntarism in political analysis and practice (Gramsci, 2003: 178).

An alliance with the peasantry would have required one part of the dominant class who had integrated themselves into the now consolidated relations of capitalism in the North of Italy to declare war on another part of the dominant class, the still quasi-feudal landowners predominating in the South. Such an alliance would have been far more dangerous and unpredictable for the dominant classes in the North, transforming the situation in the South and risking catalysing urban day labourers in ways that might directly threaten ruling interests. Under the hegemony of the Moderates, the Action Party ‘considered as “national” the aristocracy and the landowners, and not the millions of peasants’ (Gramsci, 2003: 101). But, from the perspective of the Action Party, to have expanded their conception of the national in practical terms to have included the peasants would have meant leading a national liberation struggle against *both* the internal ruling bloc of capitalists (the Moderates, the Southern landowners) and the Austrian empire. While radical liberalism could in France in the late 18th century mobilise against the ruling bloc of feudal aristocracy and external foes, it could not do the same against capitalism itself. Historically, that task had passed over to Marxism, or would do so.

Gramsci acknowledges that the ‘historical climate’ was different after 1815 but argues that the ‘spectre’ of the rising working class was more a political fear skilfully exploited by representatives of conservatism, such as the Austrian empire and Cavour. He argues that the bourgeoisie could not secure a wider popular base for its project of national unification ‘for subjective rather than objective reasons’ and he argues that ‘action directed at the peasantry was certainly always possible’ (Gramsci, 2003: 82) without giving any indication of what that might substantively be. At this point Gramsci’s assessment seems radically non-aligned with the Marxist analysis of European history in which the 1848 revolts mark a decisive turning point in class relations.

Marx on the French state, 1848–52

For the Hungarian philosopher and literary critic Georg Lukács, Marx's analysis of the June 1848 revolution in Paris and its repression marked a decisive turning point in the political, intellectual and cultural life of the bourgeoisie internationally:

... it is the June battle of the Paris proletariat which produces a decisive change in the bourgeois camp, accelerating to an extraordinary degree the inner process of differentiation which is to transform revolutionary democracy into compromising liberalism. (Lukács, 1989: 171)

Marx's contemporaneous analysis of the events in France between 1848 and 1852 in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* is of interest to us for three main reasons. Firstly, his analysis shows that the political cultures at work, their alliances and antagonisms and their relations to classes, were similar to the political cultures and class relations that could be found in Italy in the period immediately after 1848 and indeed these were the political cultures that would dominate European politics at least up until the First World War. Thus, Italy's late unification takes place in a European wide formation of modern capitalist states and their political cultures (whatever national differences and peculiarities of historical development there may also have been, such as the sharp geographical divides one finds in the Italian case). Here there are differences between Marx's analysis and Gramsci's exceptionalism thesis as outlined above. Secondly, Marx's analysis demonstrates the emerging complexity of political rule in a context of the mass involvement of politics which modern conditions such as urbanisation and the printing press had produced. This complexity of political rule means investigating the relationships between political cultures and class interests and weighing how contradictory both can be. Thirdly, Marx's analysis of events reveals the emerging problem for the bourgeoisie of how to rule in relation to the democratic aspirations of the working classes and peasants. In the 1848–52 moment, the only answer appeared to be to install a dictator, a new emperor figure. But this model has not been the norm for modern Western capitalism. A more secure and stable form of political rule based on consent blended with domination would be developed, and it was this development that Gramsci's work theorises, as we shall see. At the same time, and as the history of Italy in Gramsci's time was to show, the contradictions between capitalism and democracy could always be once again, if temporarily, resolved in favour of dictatorship.

Gramsci had a French edition of Marx's text with him in prison (Gramsci, 2021: 203) and when Gramsci perused Marx's analysis of the French events, this is what he would have found. In February 1848 the constitutional monarchy of Louis Philippe was overthrown, opening up an unstable space in which different class forces vied. The bourgeois monarchy of Louis Philippe is replaced with the bourgeois republic: 'that is to say, whereas a limited section of the bourgeoisie ruled in the name of the king, the whole of the bourgeoisie will now rule on behalf of the people' (Marx, 1984: 17). But against this is set the demands of the Parisian working class, that are in advance of what any other class grouping would tolerate. In June the Parisian working class mounted an insurrection that failed. Against them stood 'the finance aristocracy, the industrial bourgeoisie, the middle class, the petty

bourgeoisie, the army, the lumpenproletariat . . . the intellectuals, the clergy and the rural population' (Marx, 1984: 17–18). A total of 3000 were killed and 15,000 deported. This defeat sets in motion the gradual defeat of all the forces to the right of the Parisian working class, culminating in the new emperor of France, Napoleon III.

The National Assembly as the centre of bourgeois republicanism

Marx notes that republicanism's core personnel were not a 'specific faction of the bourgeoisie held together by great common interests' (Marx, 1984: 21) but middle-class professionals (writers, lawyers, officials of the state) who were sustained by a cluster of political values including a mild antipathy towards the monarchists, a French nationalism (that Bonaparte could tap) and a very hostile fear of working-class revolt. In short, the republicans of the National Assembly were comparable to the liberals of the Italian situation. As with the Action Party, the French middle-class liberals such as the Montagne, who sided against the working class in the June revolt, underwent similar 'oscillations' in a turbulent situation (Gramsci, 2003: 57) that aligned them with the conservative-liberal bloc. The Jacobin moment of the French revolution often blots out that 'correction' which Gramsci alluded to. The subsequent history of France saw a rowing back from a radical bourgeois programme of social and political rights while also maintaining the economic framework of capitalist social relations against any return to feudalism. The Directory (1795–9), the Consulate (1799–1804), empire building under Napoleon (1804–14), the restored Bourbon Monarchy (1815–30), the Constitutional Monarchy (1830–48) the Republic (1848–51) and the Empire again under Napoleon III (1852–70) mark the oscillations between these poles (Hobsbawm, 1996: 72). The elevation of the 1789–94 moment above subsequent history seriously distorts the way French history subsequently converged with other European capitalist states.

The conservative forces in the French context combine the distinctive history of France with the emerging European pattern. It is, in the mid-19th century, a political culture still caught half-way between the old monarchical sympathies and culture inherited from pre-revolutionary France and the consolidated realities of a capitalist economy from which there could be no turning the clock back. This combination of aristocratic culture and bourgeois economics has caused confusion, although Marx himself is clear. For him the bourgeoisie is itself split between two Royalist camps: the Legitimists and the Orleanists, with the former close to the big landowners and the latter attempting to unite the financiers and the big industrialists. Various institutions, what Gramsci would later call civil society (academia, the church, the law, the press), were split across these political traditions 'in various proportions' (Marx, 1984: 29) as was the army. Despite this political and institutional dominance which made the liberal republicans a subordinate part of the political bloc, the Royalists 'adjourned the restoration of the monarchy *ad infinitum*' (Marx, 1984: 40). Even a constitutional monarchy was too divisive given their rival claims (and here there is a difference with the aristocracy in Italy where Emmanuel Victor had no rival). The French Royalists acted as 'representatives of the bourgeois world-order, not as knights of errant princesses' (Marx, 1984:

40). It was only under the political form of the republic that ‘the two great divisions of the French bourgeoisie’ (Marx, 1984: 40) could be united. The contradiction was that the republic as a political form of rule was not sufficiently robust in this period and in this moment of crisis. Nor could they go back to the recently overthrown constitutional monarchy. In the interregnum ‘all classes, equally impotent and equally mute, fall on their knees before the rifle butt’ (Marx, 1984: 106).

The bourgeoisie was caught between an older form of class rule (monarchism, constitutional or otherwise) and a more modern form of class rule (the republic). The older and more familiar form of class rule had the advantage of tradition and esteem with which it could mobilise considerable support and authority. But it was also a destabilising source of intra-class antagonism within the dominant bloc (Orleanist vs Legitimist) and not adequately responsive to the other classes in society in the age of mass politics. The republic as the political form of class rule was the ‘unavoidable condition of their *common* rule, the sole form of state in which their general class interest subjected to itself at the same time both the claims of their particular factions and all the remaining classes of society’ (Marx, 1984: 84).

Here we see Marx formulate embryonically the principle that would be elaborated later as hegemony by Gramsci (uniting the different factions of the ruling class and ‘the claims’ of the remaining classes in society). Note how what Marx says here again implies the centrality of politics that Gramsci would also develop, indeed politics as constitutive of class interests, since these interests have to be interpreted, negotiated, debated and ‘the claims’ have to be pressed by the different factions of the same ruling class and ‘the rest’. The republic was the better form of political rule to do this than the constitutional monarchy given the particular history of France. But the republic also widened the space in which ‘the claims of . . . all the remaining classes of society’ could also be pressed, and after the February revolution, after the June insurrection, the bourgeoisie were not confident that they could manage these claims ‘from below’ and contain them within boundaries that did not threaten their vital interests. These were still the early days of bourgeois democracy of course and, in time, the political leadership groups of capitalism would learn the art and craft of managing a limited democratic dispensation within capitalism.

Gramsci’s concepts of rule

In the Italian case, culminating a decade later, a constitutional monarchy combined with the liberals was a possible solution for the project of national unification. It was of course on a very narrow electoral franchise and it was not until 1912 that near-universal suffrage was achieved. Gramsci famously diagnosed the Risorgimento as a passive revolution, a concept that emerges from his account of its limited basis. A passive revolution is a state-led transformation of the state rather than one in which the people are widely mobilised (Gramsci, 2003: 105). It applies also to Bismarck’s Prussian-led unification of Germany. In developing this concept, Gramsci widens his optic and, viewing European history more broadly, brings his own analysis into alignment with Marx’s but also into contradiction with the already outlined critique of the Italian case. Passive revolution is the model that sees the:

birth of the modern European states by successive waves of reform rather than by revolutionary explosions like the original French one . . . the bourgeoisie . . . gain power without dramatic upheavals, without the French machinery of terror. (Gramsci, 2003: 115)

Here it is the French revolution that begins to look more like the exception rather than a norm against which to measure the development of bourgeois states generally. Such managed consolidations of bourgeois economic relations mean that they ‘avoid the popular masses going through a period of political experience such as occurred in France in the years of Jacobinism’ (Gramsci, 2003: 119). Other passages where Gramsci contradicts his thesis of Italian exceptionalism are not hard to find:

All history from 1815 onwards shows the efforts of the traditional classes to prevent the formation of a collective will of this kind [Jacobinism] and to maintain ‘economic-corporative’ power in an international system of passive equilibrium. (Gramsci, 2003: 132)

This rich mixture of historical observation and conceptual power is worth unpacking. Usually, Gramsci uses the notion of ‘economic-corporative’ in relation to working-class subordination to the dominant class, their state institutions and culture. Trade union consciousness, for example, with its narrow ‘economic’ demands is essential to its incorporation into the dominant framework of the dominant class. Here, however, the concept is ‘rotated’ round to describe the action of the dominant classes, in an example of Gramsci’s extremely flexible and dialectical use of conceptual constellations. *Dominant* economic-corporative strategies do not have the political ambition to lead other classes but, in a programme of minimal concessions, is content to dominate them.

The concept of passive revolution can be linked to the concept of the historical bloc. The historical bloc is an epoch defining organisation of the terms of settlement by which the ruling class rule all the classes who do not own the means of production from which flows rent (land and real estate), profit (industry) or interest (finance) (Marx, 1991). The historical bloc is a political achievement by which politics is united with the social relations of the economic base. This is indeed what makes politics historically significant (Gramsci, 2003: 137). The fusion of ‘base and superstructure’ may be united largely by force, by domination and very often – since passive revolution means a top-down transformation of the state – passive revolution operates more at the coercion end of the spectrum of political rule. The concept of passive revolution has been applied in many other contexts, starting with Gramsci himself in his ‘hypothesis’ that Italy under fascism represents another example of passive revolution where ‘far reaching modifications are being introduced into the country’s economic structure . . . without however touching . . . individual and group appropriation of profit’ (Gramsci, 2003: 120). Callinicos (2010) has worried that the concept of passive revolution may have been stretched to too many contexts and there is certainly a danger of that, but his own preference to limit the concept to changes from one mode of production to another is overly restrictive and probably would not even be applicable in the original case of the Risorgimento, which was largely the creation of a national state rather than a transformation from feudalism to capitalism.

Callinicos's concerns do raise a broader methodological question. When generating concepts out of specific historical circumstances, how far should we define them in relation to the original circumstances the concepts were applied to? Which elements of a definition are core (large-scale change initiated from above) and which are secondary characteristics of a historical situation? For example, Gramsci associates passive revolution with change that absorbs and contains pressures from below while still retaining an element of reforms emanating from the popular classes. There is a 'partial fulfilment and displacement' of subaltern demands (Roccu, 2017: 539). This certainly can be made to fit with the Risorgimento where, Gramsci argues, the aristocracy and bourgeoisie were frightened of the prospect of a properly national uprising and did all they could to minimise the involvement of the people (Gramsci, 2021: 54–5, 68). Therefore, when extending the category of passive revolution to Italian fascist rule, Gramsci stresses an element that seems to have been absorbed from the left. The modifications in the economic structure he refers to 'accentuate the "plan of production" element; in other words, that socialisation and co-operation in the sphere of production are being increased' (Gramsci, 2003: 120).

Yet why insist that the 'reform' element is an absorption of ideas from below (that is, that the reforms have some progressive quality)? If the core of the concept of passive revolution is state transformation from above, on a scale significant enough to establish a new historical bloc, then it seems passive revolution can just as easily absorb and carry out, from above, 'revolutionary' ideas from the right. Pinochet's extraordinarily violent military-state revolution that overthrew Chilean Marxist president Salvador Allende in 1973 was not merely a counter-revolution that returned to the status quo ante. Instead, it pioneered the implementation of the experimental theories of neoliberalism fresh from the Chicago School of economics at the point of a gun (Klein, 2007). Margaret Thatcher's governments of the 1980s in the United Kingdom may also be classified as a passive revolution, a state-led top-down dismantling of social democracy that established a new neoliberal historical bloc in Western Europe. It is possible to argue, as Stuart Hall did, that Thatcherism tapped into popular discontent against the social democratic settlement (Hall, 1979), but its solutions radically recast those discontents into its own terms. In the new historical situation of a passage from social democracy to neoliberalism it would seem better to alter the 'reform' element of the definition to something neutral (without the moral-political implications of 'reform'), such as 'change', and keep open where the pressures for change might be coming from.

In the case of the Risorgimento, the narrow social basis of the passive revolution and the new historical bloc, combined with the deep regional inequalities along the North/South axis, meant that the state under Prime Minister Crispi violently suppressed challenges to its rule in the poor South. However, after a ten-year period of bloody struggles, including the 1894 insurrection of Sicilian peasants and workers' uprisings in Milan in 1898, 'the bourgeoisie', Gramsci wrote in his last pre-arrest essay, *The Southern Question*,

had to renounce its over-exclusive, over-violent, over-direct dictatorship . . . In the new century the ruling class began a new policy, that of class alliances, of political *blocs* of classes, i.e. of bourgeois democracy. (Gramsci, 1967: 37)

This shift to a form of political rule that blends force with a greater space for democratic debate, representation and consent is framed by Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Gramsci credited Lenin with developing the concept of hegemony, yet Lenin used it exclusively as part of a critique of economism and trade union consciousness within the working-class movement and contrasted it with building working-class or proletarian moral and political leadership for society as a whole (Shando, 2007). Yet the novelty of Gramsci's expansion of the concept was that he applied it to the bourgeois state as it was developing in the late 19th century in the advanced sectors of Western capitalism. Here Gramsci transforms the Marxist analysis of the bourgeois state

which is usually understood as political society (or dictatorship; or coercive apparatus to bring the mass of the people in conformity with the specific type of production and the specific economy at a 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 organisations, like the Church, the trade unions, the schools, etc). (Gramsci, 2003: 56)

Leadership is mediated not just between politics and economy, but (in a tripartite conception of the social order that breaks with the dichotomy of base and superstructure) also through civil society institutions. In a hegemonic situation, the ruling group's projection of itself is as a 'universal' force of 'national energies' (rather than a narrow self-interested group). This can and must be developed, argued for, elaborated and won, day by day, week by week, year by year in a dynamic mediation (an 'unstable equilibria') between politics, economics and civil society (Gramsci, 2003: 182).

Yet in Gramsci's use of the term there is an ambivalence in the modality of the hegemony he has in mind. When is he thinking of a genuine orchestration of the 'popular' classes achieved by the bourgeoisie in its more heroic historical phase and exemplified by the French revolutionaries? When is he thinking of the kind of proletarian hegemony in the Leninist fashion, which is a major concern of *The Southern Question*, where Gramsci lays out the terms of an alliance between the workers of the industrial North (still a minority class) and the peasants in the impoverished South (Gramsci, 1967: 28–9)? Or when is he thinking of the kind of hegemony which actually started to become part of the ruling political elite's statecraft in western Europe? This kind of hegemony is very different from that practised by the French Jacobins or envisaged by Lenin or Gramsci. It is not always clear, given the conditions under which the *Prison Notebooks* were produced. As Peter Thomas notes, there are different modalities of leadership implied within the term 'hegemony'. Gramsci

distinguished between at least two different types of leadership: in the case of bourgeois politics, the type of leadership that structurally maintains a distance between leaders and the led, which ultimately constitutes the 'logic' of passive revolution; and in the case of proletarian politics, the type of leadership that aims to help the masses to express, deepen and strengthen their self-engagement for socio-political transformation. (Thomas, 2013: 26)

So we should distinguish between the elite modality of hegemony the bourgeoisie will develop (unevenly) after 1848 and the *emancipatory* modality of hegemony that should

constitute the philosophy of praxis. As far as the latter goes, in Gramsci's Italy hegemony requires a material base on which to win the 'consent of the large peasant masses' (Gramsci, 1967: 31). Gramsci rejects any generic positing of the worker and peasant question; it has to be grounded in the concrete analysis of Italian history and the specifics of its configuration around geography (the Southern question) as well as the role of the church (the Vatican question). To become the leading class in Italy, the working class must pose these two questions from its point of view and forge answers to those questions that establish the basis for mutuality between the workers and the peasants.

As far as elite hegemony goes, its introduction into Italy is symbolised by the leading bourgeois politician of the period (before Mussolini's rise to power), Giovanni Giolitti. He forged a bloc between the industrial workers ('a reformist policy in wages and freedom for trade unions' (Gramsci, 1967: 37) and industrial capital at the expense of the South (tariff protection meant that the South could not sell its agricultural products abroad). When this produced a reaction in the form of Southern originated syndicalism led by Salvemini, Giolitti 'changed his rifle to the other shoulder' (Gramsci, 1967: 39) and constructed an alliance between industrial capital and the Catholic peasant masses of the North and central Italy.

The Southern Question is important because here Gramsci gives a detailed account of the hegemonic struggle between the cross-cutting dominant political cultures in the early decades of the 20th century. The essay is unfinished so we do not know if Gramsci would have turned his attention to the rise of fascism (which is otherwise oddly absent) but he would not be in a position again to write so openly about recent Italian politics. This absence has led some to read Gramsci's account of the Risorgimento as establishing a seamless path towards the fascist victory with only the corrupt politics of *trasformismo* (incorporation of opposition leaders with ministerial posts) being added to the post-Risorgimento settlement (see, for example, Adamson, 1980: 198). Yet *The Southern Question* makes it clear that the new century brought a new conjuncture and the art of elite hegemony in Italy had begun. Once again Italy's capitalist state formation was comparable rather than exceptional. Fascism came to power in Italy not because a 'modern' democratic state had not been founded, but because the particular historical conditions of Italian capitalism could not be reconciled with the space for autonomous working-class power that had opened up in the *biennio rosso* (1919–20).

Intellectuals and ambivalence

The tension between some of the more generalising implications of European capitalist state formation in his concepts and his historical account of Italian exceptionalism in the Risorgimento also interacts with Gramsci's remarks on the intellectuals. What his argument seems to endorse is that in the Italian case (and implied in other cases as well) the liberal intellectuals inexplicably failed to become hegemonic over the conservative traditional intellectuals, with the result that traditional/conservative politics blocked and thwarted a more democratic entry into modernity. Had the professional classes, brought into existence on the basis of the industrial capitalist economy, seized the political agenda the implication is that a more democratic capitalism could have been developed. As Schwarzmantel puts this widespread interpretation of Gramsci:

... in a sense the intellectuals in Italy had failed to become truly organic, to put themselves at the head of the productive elements of Italian society, so there was a big separation or gulf between Italian intellectuals and the mass of the nation. (Schwarzmantel, 2015: 80)

While rich and fascinating, Gramsci's conceptualisation of the intellectuals also requires further systematisation in order to clarify ambivalences in the role of intellectuals and the role of political cultures within the historical bloc.

Gramsci's discussion of intellectuals has three important dimensions: a social dimension, a historical dimension and an ideological dimension. The social dimension is that intellectuals are not free-floating groups that transcend classes, but rather that 'every social group has its own stratum of intellectuals, or tends to form one' (Gramsci, 2003: 60). Gramsci considerably expands the concept of 'intellectuals', transforming its common-sense definition as a group who works with ideas into something much more practical: the intellectual is above all an organiser and a strata that develops the self-awareness of the class as a whole, giving it 'homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields' (Gramsci, 2003: 5). So Gramsci distributes intellectuals much more widely than is customarily thought. They do important work in the field of economic production, in politics and in civil society. 'The capitalist entrepreneur creates alongside himself the industrial technician, the specialist in political economy, the organisers of a new culture, of a new legal system, etc.' (Gramsci, 2003: 5).

The historical dimension to intellectuals means that their social position and function can change over the course of time. The dominant intellectuals of the feudal era are the aristocracy and their circle of advisors (the court) as well as the religious orders. This obviously changes under capitalism, with the social functions of these class groups transformed without being eliminated altogether. The historical dimension of the intellectual is closely connected to a specific type of intellectual that Gramsci calls 'traditional'. In his introduction to the concept of the traditional intellectual, Gramsci is talking about how a rising class (he has in mind the capitalist class rising out of feudalism) must confront the intellectuals of the dominant class. Traditional here then means *historically prior*, such as the religious intellectuals of the feudal order who must be (and were) assimilated into the new order and made to function for that order (God becomes congruent with capital, even though earlier religious discourses had viewed capitalist activity, such as lending money at interest, with great suspicion). There is, though, an additional characteristic of the traditional intellectual assimilated into the new social order, which is that their social function *appears* more distant from the day-to-day needs of the dominant class. In this appearance the traditional intellectual has an ideological role as they 'put themselves forward as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group' (Gramsci, 2003: 7).

We may say that this promotion of the autonomous intellectual, with its 'social utopia' (Gramsci, 2003: 8) of ideas transcending their historical and social contexts, has powerful examples in the sphere of culture and education in civil society, through the promotion of the arts, humanities and philosophy as well as religion. Here the criterion of distance becomes the basis of an ideological myth, with the more distant intellectuals more readily able to project their apparent autonomy from bourgeois class interests,

which is of assistance to universalising bourgeois values, to non-bourgeois constituencies. This mythological or ideological *neutralisation* of the class content and interests which the intellectuals articulate also connects back to the criterion of historical longevity implied by the very term *traditional*. In the field of civil society the traditional intellectual has at their disposal a discourse grounded in *heritage* which uses the temporal dimension to effectively universalise the specific class content of the cultural resources being worked up. A related term to this neutralisation effect is that of *esteem* (a keyword for Gramsci), the regard with which social groups are held within the broader population, the degree of honour accorded to them by others in which historical pedigree is important.

Gramsci contrasts the traditional intellectual with the organic intellectual. Organic intellectuals are those intellectuals that have a close and evident proximity with the daily needs of the classes to which they are attached. The engineer, the manager, the corporate scientist, the accountant clearly have a close proximity towards the everyday needs of the capitalist class, and to the extent that senior figures within these groups develop strategic visions for that class and make important innovations in production practices they play an important role in organising its productive life. The implication (see Schwarzmantel, 2015) is that such organic intellectuals are very important in building hegemony, compared with traditional intellectuals who are more distant from such tasks. But how stable is this distinction? Although their role is more mediated in terms of their relations to the dominant social group, and crucially they can be more open to currents of thought outside the dominant bloc, traditional intellectuals play a key role in shaping broader values and cultures within the parameters of the dominant bloc. Remembering Gramsci's critique of a 'economic-corporative' posture and the need to think more widely than immediate interests, in many ways the function of organic intellectuals as organisers of a social group's ability to understand itself seems better played by traditional intellectuals. As Trotsky noted in terms that likely influenced Gramsci's own thinking when he lived in the Soviet Union for around 18 months, the bourgeoisie as a rising class had to:

consciously study its life. To do this, it must know this life. Before the bourgeoisie came to power, it had fulfilled this task to a wide extent through its intellectuals. When the bourgeoisie was still an oppositional class, there were poets, painters, and writers *already thinking for it*. (Trotsky, 2009: 32, emphasis added)

If traditional intellectuals are as 'organic' in the role they play in thinking for the dominant class as the so-called 'organic' intellectuals, we can also destabilise the distinction between the categories of intellectuals in another way. The ideological dimension of traditional intellectuals (the 'utopia' of their autonomy from class interests) is also to be found amongst the organic intellectuals. For they also draw on and promote their own version of autonomy from specific social interests, their own discourses that *neutralise the class content of their activities*. One thinks of the way technocratic and rationalistic discourses are developed in close proximity to economic production (and then reproduced in an educational field closely integrated into the labour market), providing a certain cover of class neutrality in the work of technologists, scientists, industrial organisation specialists, lawyers and the professions more generally

(Boggs, 1993). The denial of the class roots and interests at play in the production of ideas is in fact a generalised feature of intellectual life in advanced capitalism even with organic intellectuals, tied to the everyday practical business of production and the organisation of opinion and ideas that touch in quite immediate ways on the class interests of the property-owning classes. For example, news journalism is certainly organically linked to dominant class interests but it represses these links with its discourse on codes of professionalised journalistic conduct and practice (McChesney, 2004: 57–67).

In the political sphere, it is quite typical that the political class across the historical bloc will synthesise the class-neutralisation discourses of *heritage* extensively developed in civil society with the discourses of *modernisation*, extensively developed in the sphere of direct economic production. Schematically we can say that conservatism is the political culture of heritage and liberalism the political culture of modernisation, but in practice there are various forms of hybridity between them since they form the political cultures, in alliance and conflict, of the historical bloc. By definition, the political class are also organic intellectuals, in whatever political culture they swim in.

Conservatism is the political culture that has its strongest reserves of class neutralisation discourses around the heritage state as representative of the nation, conceived in romantic and often exclusivist/nativist terms and able to draw on traditional values of obedience to ‘law and order’. Gramsci suggests, in some extremely compressed remarks, that the English bourgeoisie as a rising class developed ‘a very extensive category of organic intellectuals’ on the same economic terrain as the capitalist class (one thinks of the pioneering engineers of the 18th and 19th century), but in the ‘higher sphere’ of politics the land-owning class retain a ‘virtual monopoly’ (Gramsci, 2003: 18). The landowners are, Gramsci argues somewhat ambiguously, both ‘assimilated’ to the needs of the capitalist class and become ‘directive [*dirigente*]’ of that group by their control of the policy agenda and state apparatus. This formulation makes it difficult to know whether the land-owning class have assimilated the industrial bourgeoisie or vice-versa. If the aristocratic and land-owning class are then understood as ‘traditional’ in the historically and socially distanced sense, then it is easy to read developments as a thwarting of a more ‘authentic’ capitalist modernity. This is the basis of Anderson’s excoriating critique of England which saw in the 19th century the

secretion of a deeply conformist and conservative cult of countryside and club, tradition and constitution, as a predominant outlook among the intelligentsia, repudiating bourgeois origins and miming seigneurial postures in a synthetic gentility and ruralism extending far into the twentieth century. (Anderson, 1992: 148)

Yet the aristocratic political class’s commitment to *laissez-faire*, which encouraged a certain tolerance towards an amateur ethos in the running of the state apparatus, was also the core philosophical principle of economic liberalism embraced by the owners of land, finance and industrial means of production. There was an elective affinity between the political leadership class and the interests of British capitalism in its three streams (land, finance, industry) within the historical bloc of the 19th century (Wayne, 2018). The traditional political leadership class were organically connected to the broader class interests of liberalism when its class base was industrial capital, just as liberalism was

connected to the class interests of the dominant classes when its class base had shifted to the rising professional middle classes towards the latter half of the 19th century.

Gramsci formulates the ‘fusion between the old and the new’ (Gramsci, 2003: 83) in the state development of England, Germany – and, by inference, Italy – more successfully elsewhere:

the class relations created by industrial development, with the limits of bourgeois hegemony reached and the position of the progressive classes reversed, have induced the bourgeoisie not to struggle with all its strength against the old regime, but to allow a part of the latter’s façade to subsist, behind which it can disguise its own real domination. (Gramsci, 2003: 83)

Once more Gramsci seems to contradict his argument about what the Risorgimento could have achieved and now speaks – in relation to Germany and England – of the ‘limits of bourgeois hegemony’ encouraging the bourgeoisie into an alliance with the traditional intellectuals (the political organisers) whose roots can be traced back to the previous feudal mode of production. That class is not described as feudal but as allowing a part of its old feudal ‘façade to subsist’ as a means of disguising the domination of capital interests with a particular heritage discourse. Once we produce a more ‘integral’ (that is dialectical) reading of Gramsci’s traditional and organic intellectuals we are less likely to use what threatens to become an antinomy (traditional/organic) to buttress that strand in his reading of the Risorgimento which speaks of Italian exceptionalism instead of European capitalist state formation. The limits of democracy within capitalism had been reached and the partnerships between liberalism and conservatism (an old form with a new social content) reflected certain necessities that flowed from that.

Conclusion

There is a tension between Gramsci’s historical account of the Risorgimento and his more generalising conceptual architecture which suggests that, far from being peculiarly flawed or failing, the leaders of the Italian Risorgimento were working within the historical limitations of their class and political cultures after 1848. The ambivalence between historical account and conceptualisation of history also plays into some ambivalences in Gramsci’s discussion of hegemony (which modality of hegemony is still possible under a consolidated capitalism?) and his discussion of the intellectuals (did a traditional, conservative, more ideological culture overwhelm a more dynamic, transparent, productive, democratic culture?). My argument in both cases is that only an elite form of hegemony is possible under a consolidated capitalism from the mid-19th century onwards and that the functions of traditional and organic intellectuals are meshed and overlapping within the historical bloc. We cannot pick out a liberal/organic culture that could democratise capitalism because of the limits of democracy within capitalism. Bearing in mind Macherey’s point about texts and their history of interpretations, resolving these ambivalences aims to protect Gramsci from liberal ‘incrustations’.

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