

Dominik Smyrgała, Ph.D.
Collegium Civitas

SECURITY STUDIES AND ANTONIO GRAMSCI'S *PRISON NOTEBOOKS*

Introduction

When debating Antonio Gramsci's ideas on international security, it is necessary to notice that the Italian thinker never formalized one consistent theory of the field. His analyses were focused mostly on social and political issues – and in the very specific context of the Marxist revolution. However, it means neither that international affairs were not of interest to Gramsci, nor that his works did not inspire others to create their own models and paradigms.

Therefore, an analysis of Gramsci's impact upon the theories of international relations should be divided into two parts. The first one would then cover known comments and interpretations of international affairs in the works of the Italian with an attempt to generalize them. The second covers models and theories based upon his concepts devised by other authors. This is particularly relevant to his ideas on hegemony and passive revolution. As Giuseppe Cospito noticed (Cospito 2008, pp. 187-191), from the beginning Gramsci treated the first of these two concepts as relevant to international relations.

One has to notice that Gramsci is frequently referred to or credited with inspiration by prominent IR theorists (Malo 2013). From the beginning of the 1980s a global revival of the Gramscian analysis can be noticed. The most recognized names here are Robert Cox and Joseph Nye. The first one introduced methodology based upon the Gramscian concept of hegemony into the critical theory of the international relations (Cox 1983). This was later developed into the idea of *soft power* by Joseph Nye that laid the theoretical foundations for the studies of public diplomacy (Nye 2004).

Stephen Gill analyzed the question of the mutual affinity of international relations and international political economics in Gramsci's thought from the epistemological and ontological perspectives (Gill 1993). Randall D. Germain and Michael Kenny focused on the analytical tools devised by Gramsci that are useful to describe social hegemony in international relations (Germain, Kenny 1998). However, they noticed that

Gramscian heritage is difficult to interpret and criticized its excessive historicism. This led to a critical response by Mark Rupert who defended the neo-Gramscian perspective (Rupert 1998).

Giorgio Carnevali used Gramsci's concepts to analyze global hegemony in the modern world, coming to the conclusion that the United States is the most powerful contemporary state but not a hegemon (Carnevali 2008).

Recently, it is hardly possible to imagine any handbook on the theories of international relations not mentioning Gramsci and his influence. Whether it applies to causation (Kurki 2008); relations between coercion, cooperation and ethics (Lebow 2007, p. 399; Heins and Chandler 2007, p. 3); conceptualization, general theory and metatheory of international relations (Griffiths et al. 2008, pp. 140, 147; O'Hagan 2002, pp. 88, 188; Chernoff 2007, pp. 153, 173; Sylvester 2004, pp. 191-192); ideology, culture and religion in international relations (Cassels 2003, pp. 3, 7; Reeves 2004, p. 19; Hatzopoulos and Petito, 2003, p. 96); or civil society and global governance (Barnett and Duvall 2005, pp. 19, 51-52, 222, 234), Gramsci's impact is recognized, even if it is only a short note. However, it is mostly the issues of hegemony, religion and passive revolution that are considered. And, as it can be seen, although the discussion considers mostly international theories, the security aspect is rather absent. This probably can be explained by the fact that international security as an independent field of studies developed only after the Second World War. Yet, as it is going to be presented below, Gramsci accurately diagnosed some of the future conflicts and their mechanisms and some of his philosophical categories can also be applicable to security studies.

1. International relations in *The prison notebooks*

The main benchmark for the Gramsci's deliberations on the international relations is *The Prince* by Niccolò Machiavelli. His comments on the work of the famous Florentine are so frequent in his *Prison Notebooks*, that they became a reason for publishing them separately as *Note sul Machiavelli, sulla politica e sullo stato moderno* (Gramsci 1971; the title means *notes on Machiavelli, his policy and the modern state*). The first part of this collection is known as *Il Principe Moderno (The Modern Prince)* that demonstrates a clear inspiration by Machiavelli. Curiously enough, the original *Prince* was, in a way, also a "Prison Notebook". Machiavelli wrote his work in exile, having lost his political position in Italy. Gramsci's situation was much more severe, as he served a harsh prison sentence in fascist Italy, yet similar to Machiavelli's. Both were trying to write a treatise that would be

an ultimate guideline on how to conduct an effective policy (philosophy of praxis or practical philosophy – *filosofia della prassi*, as Gramsci himself called his “philosophical system”). According to Gramsci, *The Prince* was not a systematic treatise but a “living book” where political ideology and political science were combined into one – as a myth. Pretty much the same could be said about the *Modern Prince*. Similarly to Machiavelli, Gramsci also thought that morality could be judged only through efficiency and effectiveness since one cannot judge what is just or unjust not knowing the final effect of one’s actions (Machiavelli 2003; Gramsci 1971, pp. 17, 187-188).

A part of Gramsci’s comments was gathered by the publisher in the separate chapter titled *Note di politica internazionale* (*Notes on international politics*), although originally they were scattered across various notebooks (mostly: number 8, 9, 24 and 30). In the fascist Italy prison it could hardly be expected that Gramsci would have ever had comfortable conditions for regular writing, therefore his essays are somewhat chaotic in terms of choice and arrangement of topics. Moreover, as being a frequent subject to censorship, the language of them is full of allusions and “codenames”, devised to deceive unwanted readers.

A significant part of these deliberations was dedicated to various aspects of international security, including political, military and economic aspects of it.

2. International and national security

Gramsci’s notion of important factors of state’s power are rather standard: they are territory (both size and location), economic potential, and military force. However, the last one is only a tool used by the state to strengthen the first two elements. Gramsci also attributes huge significance to the *ideological position* of the state in a given historical moment which represents *the forces of progress of history*. Each of these be assessed from the point of view of a possible war. However, if a state achieves a high level of power in all these fields, it can exert the diplomatic pressure of a superpower and thus achieve the effects of a victorious war without waging it (Gramsci 1971, p. 217). Although the Italian Marxist does not use the word “security”, it is clear that these kind of actions are threats to balance of power and thus can impact the international security. Curiously, a similar notion of winning without resorting to war by persuading the enemy was also devised by the great ancient Chinese strategist Sun Tzu (2003, pp. 15-17).

Furthermore, Gramsci points out that it is important for any state to maintain its internal peace (*tranquillità interna*) in the first place. This can be interpreted as predominance

of internal security of the state over the international one. The factor is dependent on the degree and intensity of the “hegemonic function” of the leading social class. In his view, this was the most important factor of stability of great powers. Social turbulences caused by prolonging armed conflict may in the end bring a total social disaster. Therefore, it was important for the leading class to base upon the working classes as the most numerous ones (Gramsci 1971, pp. 217-220). What is interesting, also here Gramsci’s views are similar to those of Sun Tzu, who warned not to wage prolonging conflicts as well (Sun Tzu 2003, pp. 11-13). This element of Gramsci’s reflections on security probably referred to the situation in Russia during the First World War, and the subsequent revolution. Tsarist Russia was unable to maintain internal peace because the leading classes did not appeal to the working classes. Consequently, the social turbulences that arose due to war exhaustion lead to revolution and the fall of the empire. Of course, as it was already stated, Gramsci had to avoid censorship; therefore his writings on the Soviet Russia are always somewhat cryptic. The most famous example of this is the passage on the discussion between Trotsky and Stalin on the revolution (permanent revolution vs. revolution in one country) wherein Gramsci (1971, pp. 153-155) refers to them as Davidovici (Lev Davidovich Trotsky) and Bessarione (Josif Vissarionovich Stalin).

3. Military security

The Prison Notebooks are full of Gramsci’s remarks and comments on the articles and books that he read while in prison and thus are closely related to security issues. Many of them were related to the First World War and international politics. For example, on 16 October and 1 November 1930 *Nuova Antologia* published an article by Saverio Nasalli–Rocca *La politica tedesca dell’impotenza nella guerra mondiale (The German policy of impotence during the World War)*. The author claimed that political leadership, not the military, is what decides about victory. According to him, although the German army won a lot of battles, the war, as such, was lost. Gramsci did not quite agree with that and stated that Nasalli–Rocca’s conclusion was imperfect. In his view, the technicality of military strategy is beyond a grasp of a civilian government. Nevertheless, it should belong to a wider political strategy, of which the military potential is only a part. Thus, the Great War was a political conflict of national hegemonies not just a military one (Gramsci 1971, pp. 220-221). **This falls well into the pattern of treating military force as “auxilliary” to the economic and political potential that was already mentioned above.**

Gramsci emphasized the U.S. expansion in Latin America as an example of use of military power in international relations. To him, the most visible examples of that were the Spanish–American war of 1898, the independence of Cuba and its later economic dependence on the United States, the establishment of the Guantanamo base, American intervention in Haiti (1914–1915), U.S. economic hegemony over Dominica since 1907 and the later military presence (1914–1924), and the purchase of the Virgin Islands from Denmark which were crucial for the control of the Caribbean Sea. Still, he considered this expansion to be a part of a wider scheme of economic objectives (Gramsci 1971, pp. 235–236).

4. Cultural security

In *Notebook 8* Gramsci asked some serious questions about the possibility of achieving a cultural hegemony (*egemonia culturale*) of one state over another one. And, although there is no direct answer to the questions raised, their very form tells a lot about the Italian's perception of the world. He considered it unified from the socio–economic structure point of view (by which he understood the class order as it was defined by Karl Marx). Then, the question was, whether in such a world, it was possible (thanks to early innovation) to establish a political monopoly and maintain it as a basis for hegemony? Apart from financial and economic hegemonies, was it also possible to establish one on social or political–intellectual grounds? And if yes, is the culture also a field of revolution and conflict in both national and international dimensions (Gramsci 1971, p. 218)?

This is the point when the concept of the *ideological position* that was mentioned before comes to play an important role. Gramsci illustrates it with the case of the British–Russian (Soviet) relations before and after the First World War. Tsarist Russia did not pose the threat to the United Kingdom in terms of spreading the revolution and exercising the hegemonic position towards the working classes in the same manner as the Soviet Russia did. Again, Gramsci seems to appreciate factors other than just pure military power as important to state's security. It can also be considered a manifestation of the Gramscian concept of the passive revolution (i.e. not the kind aiming at the direct confrontation, but rather gradual metamorphosis of society or any other social structure).

The inspiration for this kind of thinking was Gramsci's analysis of the First World War, as well as the history of the revolutionary movements in Italy in the 19th century. The Italian philosopher compared an active revolution to the *war of maneuver*, and the

passive revolution to the *war of positions*. The first one, typical for the East, was also the mechanism of the October Revolution in Russia. The other, which is more relevant to the West, described the *war of trenches*. Gramsci thought that the active revolution was impossible in the institutionalized West. Therefore, he focused more on devising the methods of conducting the passive one, though in a longer time, in the manner of the Risorgimento (the unification of Italy) in the 19th century. Gramsci assumed that no social class would ever disappear before its development potential, resulting from its economic potential, is exhausted. In other words, the ruling classes of capitalism could not be forcefully overthrown until they decayed economically. Therefore, some other means had to be adopted. Soviet influence in the industrialized societies could be a good example of such a passive revolution. Thus, operating from the revolutionary *ideological position*, the Soviet Union posed an important threat to the Great Britain, as capable of overthrowing its internal social order (Gramsci 1971, pp. 96-103, 229-231).

Another passage related to cultural hegemony can be found in Gramsci's analysis of the expansion of great powers in Latin America, to a point where he even questioned the Iberian character of the region. According to him, the United States was trying to colonize religious life in the region by promoting the expansion of Protestantism; and there existed a very strong influence of French freemasonry resulting from the Mexican Revolution (Gramsci 1971, pp. 457-459).

5. Economic security

Important comments on economy and its role in foreign policy can be found in Gramsci's notes to an article written by one "Junius" titled *Le prospettive del l'Impero britannico dopo l'ultima conferenza imperiale* (*The prospects of the British Empire after the last imperial conference*), and published on 16 September 1927 by *Nuova Antologia*. Gramsci wrote an essay *Costituzione dell'Impero inglese* (*The Constitution of the English Empire*) dedicated to it. In his comment, Gramsci states that Britain has the greatest political importance due to her industrial and financial power, its navy, colonies and dominions (specifically mentioning India, Gibraltar, Suez, Malta, Singapore, and Hong Kong), as well as its great political experience.

However, he already notices the threats to the British Empire after the First World War. According to him, the most prominent ones were the rising power of the United States, national movements in colonies and dominions and the resistance of working classes against capitalism. He considered British foreign policy to be under the greatest

pressure, as the dominions no longer considered London to be their representative in the international politics. Hence the creation of the British Commonwealth, where all members possessed equal status. Yet, Gramsci thought that this did not establish functional equality, as Great Britain maintained the military and economic and cultural hegemony. One of the aspects of economic hegemony was the *invisible exports* (esportazioni invisibili) or the interests of the British capital invested abroad (British Foreign Direct Investments, as we could call them nowadays). These *invisible exports* were based on two pillars: pound sterling as an international currency (which was the main reason of the Bank of England defending its exchange rate) and London serving as the global financial center (Gramsci 1971, pp. 224-228, 238).

Gramsci frequently commented on the foreign policy of the United States. One such text was *La politica doganale degli Stati Uniti d'America* (*Tariff policy of the United States of America*) by Ludovico Lucioli, published by "Nuova Antologia" on 16 August 1929. Gramsci noticed that the on-going globalization of international markets allows the states to use their economies as tools of expanding their political hegemony (e.g. the United States or Briand's concept of Pan-Europa). **According to him, this kind of economic nationalism was particularly relevant in the case of resource exporting countries.** In another place, he notices, paying attention to the works of Rudolf Kjellen (*Grossmächte der Gegenwart, Grossmächte und Weltkrise*), the birth of geopolitics as a science, which again shows the significance that he attributed to geography and natural conditions (Gramsci 1971, pp. 234-235, 291).

Gramsci was apparently interested in the energy policies of his time, which obviously focused on petroleum affairs. At least two of his readings referred directly to that matter. The first was an article by Manfredi Gravina, *Olii, petroli e benzine*, (*Oil, petroleum and gasoline*) published by the "Nuova Antologia" on 16 December 1927 and 1 January 1928. The other was a book by Karl Hoffman, *Oelpolitik und angelsächsischer Imperialismus* (*Oil politics and the Anglo-Saxon imperialism*), published in Berlin in 1927 by the Ring Verlag (Gramsci 1971, pp. 291-292).

While commenting on them, Gramsci noticed the establishment of the Federal Oil Conservation Board – a body dedicated to controlling the growth of oil consumption in the United State. After Hoffman, he attributed it to the alleged preparations to the war in the Pacific Ocean. Another fact that he emphasized was the emerging consolidation of the oil sector and monopolization by the Rockefeller family in particular, and the American and British companies in general (Gramsci 1971, pp. 291-292). Despite

the fact that it still has to be remembered that in the late 1920s the Rockefellers' dominant position in the sector had already weakened, mainly due to the 1911 decision of the US Supreme Court decision basing upon the Sherman Antitrust Act, **considering the three cases presented above, it may be assumed that although Gramsci did not coin the term “energy security”, he was probably one of the first political philosophers who noticed its importance.**

Conclusion

As the above shows, save for the Marxist rhetoric, Gramsci's views in that respect are not much different from earlier and later researchers focusing on geography, economy and state power. Using modern language, we could call this research a part of security studies, varying from geo-economics and international economic security, as defined by Edward Luttwak (1990), Pascal Lorot (1997) and Vincent Cable (1995) in the 1990s, to Huntington's clash of civilizations (1996), where culture and civilization are among the most important factors determining conflicts and hegemony (and thus security) in the modern world. Although, of course, Gramsci did not indicate the main conflict front-line, as Huntington did between the Western and Islamic civilizations.

And again, although Gramsci did not define a new field of study (which we could call security studies), it is possible to recreate his general views on the international relations, which, on one hand, seem to be surprisingly focused on security issues, and in the same time, indicate his impressive skills in diagnosing important changes of his times and projecting them into the future. Clearly, he saw how economic security, energy resources, political use of exchange rates and trade, as well as demographic changes and cultural conflicts could affect international relations in the 20th century.

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Dominik Smyrgała

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Abstract

The article argues that although Antonio Gramsci did not define a new field of research that we could call security studies, his views and ideas on international relations presented in the *Prison Notebooks* focused around security issues. It may be even stated that his writings anticipated to some extent the birth of security studies after the Second World War – or even the modern theorizing on economic and cultural security.

Key words: *Antonio Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, security studies, international security*

E-mail contact to the Author: dominik.smyrgala@collegium.edu.pl