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***Ideology, Politics and Society in Antonio Gramsci's Theory of Hegemony. Abstract***

In this article, I examine Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony by situating it in relation to a more general intellectual and socio-political context involving orthodox Marxism, October Revolution and Italian fascism. I first briefly outline the problem of economism in Marxist theory, as it is the main object of Gramsci's critique developed fully in the *Prison Notebooks*. The next two sections are devoted to October Revolution and Italian fascism, interpreted as two elements of the socio-political conjuncture which called into question Marx's 'base/superstructure' model of society and its mechanistic rearticulation. Finally, I discuss Gramsci's mature political theory as an attempt to break with economic determinism and class reductionism of classical and orthodox Marxist theory. I argue that his original conception of hegemony constitutes an advance towards a non-essentialist and relational conception of politics and society.

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**Introduction**

Essentialism can be understood as a „claim that any social entity has a permanent character or ‘essence’ that predetermines its relation with other social entities” [Martin 1998, 159]. Both in classical and orthodox Marxism it takes the form of economism, as politics and ideology are considered to be subordinate to the economic structure. In Marx's 'base/superstructure' model of society, economism comes in two forms related to the role and nature of the 'superstructures' [Mouffe 1979, 169]. Firstly, it is deterministic, as 'superstructures' are understood as being mechanical reflections of the economic 'base'; in the famous phrase from a 'Preface' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* Marx describes relations of

production as „the real basis from which rises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond specific forms of social consciousness” [Marx 1996, 159-160]. Secondly, it is reductionist, because superstructures are viewed „as being determined by the position of the subjects in the relations of production” [Mouffe 1979, 169]. Thus in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* Marx characterizes the state power as a „device for administering the common affairs of the whole bourgeois class” [Marx 1996, 3]. In this article, I want to explore Antonio's Gramsci's theory of hegemony as an attempt to break with economic determinism and class reductionism of both classical and orthodox Marxist theory. It is my belief that Gramsci's theoretical intervention constitutes an advance towards

a relational and non-essentialist conception of politics and ideology, and its conceptual tools can be fruitfully employed in political analysis of the state, power and ideological practices in disparate contexts.

In developing this argument, I shall begin by briefly sketching out some elements of the intellectual and socio-political contexts which had a significant influence on Gramsci's work. Next, I shall turn to Gramsci's reinterpretation of Marxism as a 'philosophy of praxis'. Finally, I discuss his theory of hegemony as an attempt to transcend the limits of classical and orthodox Marxism.

### **Orthodox marxism**

Orthodox marxist theory, which emerged during the period of increasing influence of natural sciences and quickly became popular within the Second International, is marked both by economic determinism and class reductionism. Nikolai Bukharin, Karl Kautsky and Georgi Plekhanov, among others, make an attempt to develop 'scientific marxism', based on a mechanical understanding of historical materialism. They adapt Marx's 'base/superstructure' model of society as a basic matrix for interpretation of social and political phenomena. Orthodox marxists argue that „the totality of society and history can be explained in the language of the physical sciences, in terms of mechanical causality: the material forces of production *cause* certain types of class relations, which *cause* certain types of conflict, which *cause*

certain types of institutional development, and so on" [Femia 1981, 69]. From this point of view, it is possible to explain the history in terms of economic laws and predict its future development. Ultimately, functioning of laws of concentration, overproduction and proletarianisation within capitalism is supposed to lead into social revolution and overcoming of economic contradictions. As Kautsky asserts in his commentary to the Erfurt Programme: „[...] the collapse of the existing society is inevitable because we know that economic development naturally and necessarily produces contradictions which oblige the exploited to combat private property” [Kautsky in: Mouffe 1979, 173]. Economic determinism, based on the conviction that economic contradictions drive the historical process, is combined here with interpretation of social change in terms of causal laws. Moreover, this combination is supplemented by class reductionism, as orthodox marxists assume that every ideological element has a necessary class-belonging. This assumption was expressed in their rejection of democracy which was considered to be necessarily a bourgeois ideology [ibidem, 174].

### **October Revolution**

October Revolution can be interpreted as an event that called into question both economic determinism and class reductionism of orthodox marxist theory. Contrary to predictions of Marx and orthodox marxists, revolution took place in Russia, at the time when Russian economy was a combination of feudal and capitalist elements. Thus October Revolution couldn't have been explained in terms of a mechanical unfolding of economic contradictions within mature capitalist economy. Moreover, the revolution undermined class reductionism, as it was carried out by a coalition of social forces which articulated together demands which didn't have a necessary class-belonging: „the revolution triumphed when the Russian working class, under the leadership of the Bolsheviks, succeeded in combining the class struggles against the capitalists with a range of massive democratic movements - of the peasantry for the land, of the workers, peasants and soldiers against the war, and of the oppressed nationalities for their freedom” [Simon 2001, 16]. In Gramscian terms,

revolution was a consequence of political activity of the working class which was successful in hegemonising a range of democratic demands during the period of regime's crisis.

### **Fascism**

Rise of fascism in Italy can be seen as a dramatic consequence of a belief in „historical necessity”. Gramsci himself developed a non-reductionist interpretation of fascism and provided some interesting observations on the inability of the socialist movement to organize against fascism. From his perspective, it should be interpreted as an answer to the crisis of Italian liberal democracy, suffering from deep socio-economic divisions, economic weakness and isolation of politics from society. In fact, fascist movement was the only force which managed to mobilize a large part of the population in a period of post-war crisis, articulating together interests of petty-bourgeoisie, industrial capitalists, war veterans, latifundists, small and medium agrarians, and directing their anger towards the working class [Martin 1998, 32-33; Adamson 1980, 619]. The rise of fascism was also related to the weakness of socialist movement at that time; Italian left-wing was divided and strongly influenced by the economic determinism and class reductionism of orthodox Marxism. Italian Socialist Party rejected class alliances, democratic ideology and cooperation with other parties in anti-fascist coalition. Instead, it advocated passivity derived from the belief that emancipation is guaranteed in the long run by the objective laws of historical development. As Amadeo Bordiga, founder of the Italian Communist Party, asserted: „Communists must have nothing to do with bourgeois institutions and must prepare for an immediate struggle for power, eliminating from their ranks any who did not share this view” [Kołakowski 1978, 223].

### **Marxism as a „philosophy of praxis”**

After this brief outline of the intellectual and political conjunctures, in which Gramsci's work emerged, I can now turn to his interpretation of Marxism and conception of philosophy as developed in the *Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci's reading of

Marx - especially with regard to the question of the relation between human consciousness and historical process - was significantly different from orthodox Marxist interpretation. The latter was denounced by him for neglecting Marx's early writings and, in particular, his critiques of materialism and conception of the subject as a practice articulated in *Theses on Feuerbach*. According to Gramsci, Marxism, with its stress on dialectic, antagonism and revolutionary practice, should be seen as an essentially historicist, anti-positivist and anti-scientist philosophy [ibidem, 228-229]. Orthodox Marxists, in contrast, replace historical dialectic with causal laws, view marxism as a „scientific philosophy” and interpret the relation between human, nature and social reality in purely mechanistic terms [Paggi 1981, 130].

In his interpretation of Marxism as a „philosophy of praxis”, Gramsci refers to *Theses on Feuerbach* to stress the role of human practice in the historical process and redefine the relation between human consciousness and reality. As he asserts:

The individual does not enter into relations with other men by juxtaposition, but organically, in as much, that is, as he belongs to organic entities which range from the simplest to the most complex. [...] Man does not enter into relations with the natural world just by being himself part of the natural world, but actively, by means of work and technique. Further: these relations are not mechanical. They are active and conscious. They correspond to the greater or lesser degree of understanding that each man has of them. So one could say that each one of us changes himself, modifies himself to the extent that he changes and modifies the complex relations of which he is the hub [Gramsci 1971, 352].

Economic determinism of orthodox Marxism is here rejected in favour of a relational understanding of a subject in which relations between subject and reality are active. From this follows that strict division between human consciousness, nature and social reality is untenable. According to Gramsci, consciousness can't be reduced to a mere reflection of the objective world, because both social relations and relations with nature depend on our understanding of them and have different degrees of necessity.

However, it doesn't mean that historical process is subject to arbitrary will. History sets constraints on human practice, as it can develop in a limited number of directions [Kotlakowski 1978, 232].

The emphasis on relational, dialectical and historical character of human behaviour and products of human activity has significant consequences for Gramsci's conception of philosophy and ideology (in fact, Gramsci equates these two terms). If practice has to be interpreted in relation to a general historical conjuncture in which it emerges, then also philosophy has to be related to particular socio-political and economic contexts. According to Gramsci, economic contradictions give rise to plurality of conflicting philosophies, but not every philosophy is capable of structuring social practices and organizing human masses. However, this capacity has to be adopted as the main criterion for the evaluation of a particular philosophy:

One could say that the historical value of a philosophy can be calculated from the "practical" efficacy it has acquired for itself, understanding "practical" in the widest sense. If it is true that every philosophy is the expression of a society, it should react back on that society and produce certain effects, both positive and negative. The extent to which precisely it reacts back is the measure of its historical importance, of its not being individual "elucubration" but "historical fact" [Gramsci 1971, 346].

Gramsci's rejects, therefore, economistic conception of philosophy and ideology present in mechanistic interpretation of Marx's 'base/superstructure' model. In contrast to orthodox Marxism, which characterizes them in negative terms (ideology as a 'false consciousness'), he advocates positive conception of philosophy and ideology as a 'creative activity': „to the extent that ideologies are historically necessary they have a validity which is "psychological"; they "organise" human masses, and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.” [ibidem, 377]. Thus 'ideological forms' can't be reduced to mere reflections of economic structures. They develop within particular historical contexts, but they are also structuring reality by modifying „common sense” and social practices: „if any form

of 'superstructure' could be called a mere appearance, this only meant that it had outlived its historical function and was no longer capable of organizing social forces" [Kołakowski 1978, 231].

### **Hegemony**

Gramsci's conception of marxism as a 'philosophy of praxis' was a starting point for his radical reinterpretation of the 'base/superstructure' model in the theory of hegemony. The latter can be briefly characterized as an attempt „to provide a novel account of class rule in capitalist society that does not rely simply on the coercive power of the state and the instilling of 'false consciousness' by the bourgeoisie" [Howarth 2000, 89]. Its novelty stems from the fact that Gramsci's political theory is focused on ideological 'superstructures' - that is on the level on which „man become conscious of conflicts in the world of economy" - and stresses the primacy of politics and ideology in the historical process [Gramsci 1971, 162]. In short, Gramsci claims that institutionalization and stabilization of every social order rests to some extent on consent of the ruled.

According to Gramsci, both surprising stability of capitalism in Western societies and unexpected outburst of the October Revolution in Russia can be explained by differences in the ability of fundamental social groups within these economico-political regimes to gain either active or passive consent of the majority of the population. Consent is organized at the level of civil society, which consists of associations, educational apparatus, family, media, political parties, religious institutions and trade unions, and it is secured by the state through legal means and interventions in periods of crisis, when the dominant ideology is challenged [ibidem, 12]. Comparing Western organized capitalist societies and Russia in the first decades of the 20th century, Gramsci observes that they significantly differed in the balance between the state and civil society:

In Russia the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of

civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks [ibidem, 238].

One of the defining features of organized capitalism is, therefore, highly developed civil society which is tightly integrated with the state. Structures of civil society foster popular participation and enable articulation of social demands, securing in this way the stability of the economico-political regimes. Thus, contrary to the expectations of classical and orthodox Marxists, economic development fostered integration of the masses into the capitalist system [Femia 1981, 52]. According to Gramsci, this should lead to modification of the socialist movement's strategy in advanced capitalism. In Russia it was possible to gain the power in a 'war of movement', that is by frontal attack on the state, because the political and economic elites were not supported by institutions of civil society. However, integration of the state and civil society in organized capitalism makes it much more resistant to crisis and, therefore, political practices aimed at radical social change must be based on a 'war of position', that is „building alliances with all the social movements which are striving to transform the relationships within civil society” [Simon 2001, 85]. To theorize these alliances and relationships Gramsci rearticulates Marxist concept of 'hegemony'.

The concept of 'hegemony' was first used by Plekhanov and later developed by Lenin to advocate the need for a strategic temporary class alliance between workers and peasants for the overthrow of Tsarism [Simon 2001, 25]. This instrumental understanding of hegemony was expressed by Lenin in his famous phrase „march separately, but strike together”. In contrast, Gramsci proposes a non-instrumental interpretation of hegemony and extends the concept to include both political practices and forms of rule. Discussing the problem of relations of political forces, he comes to the conclusion that it is possible to distinguish between three moments of 'collective political consciousness': 1) economic-corporate - „the members of the professional group are conscious of its unity and homogeneity, and of the need to organise it, but in the case of the wider social group this is not yet so”, 2) class/developed economic-corporate - „consciousness is reached of the solidarity of interests among all the



members of a social class, but still in the purely economic field”, 3) hegemonic - „one becomes aware that one's own corporate interests, in their present and future development, transcend the corporate limits of the purely economic class, and can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups too” [Gramsci 1971, 181]. Hegemony is, therefore, not an instrumental or incidental coalition between subordinated classes which is limited to their economic and political interests as in Plekhanov's and Lenin's conceptions. It involves also „intellectual and moral unity, posing all the questions around which the struggle rages not on a corporate but on a 'universal' plane” [ibidem, 181-182]. Thus every social force struggling for power as well as dominant groups willing to maintain it, have to transcend their narrow economic-corporate interests and forge a 'collective will' which consists of shared ideas, values, objectives and beliefs. Political identities have to be viewed, therefore, as precarious and unstable constructions emerging in the political struggle rather than mere expressions of class interests (although Gramsci still claims that they are organized around fundamental classes and, therefore, his break with economism is not definitive).

### Conclusions

As Laclau and Mouffe assert in one of the passages from *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Gramsci's theory of hegemony „(...) accepts social complexity as the very condition of political struggle and - through its threefold displacement of the Leninist theory of 'class alliances' - sets the basis for a democratic practice of politics, compatible with a plurality of historical subjects” [Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 71]. In this article, I argued that its emergence in the late 1920's wasn't a mere coincidence. Development of organized capitalism and outburst of October Revolution in Russia contradicted rather than reaffirmed assumptions and predictions of classical and orthodox Marxism, whereas the rise of fascism in Italy manifested dramatic consequences of the belief in 'historical necessity' and 'iron laws of capitalism'. In opposition to orthodox Marxists, Gramsci proposed a non-deterministic conception of politics and ideology. Observing the development of organized capitalism in the West,

he noted that political and economic power are secured by consent of the subordinated groups which is manufactured within institutions of civil society. Consequently, ideology, which is a foundation on which political identities rise, can't be interpreted in purely class terms; it has to obtain some degree of universality, because it combines different class elements and demands which do not have a necessary class-belonging.

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