

The relevance of Gramsci's life, times and theory to today

I first read Gramsci in English over 40 years ago. Moreover, my PhD thesis on *Theories of the Labour Movement*—which is a Marxist critique of non-Marxist theories of industrial relations—used Gramsci's concept of the “organic” working class intellectual to explain 20th century rank and file movements in the British building industry.¹ This paper is based on the Gramsci section in my forthcoming book on *The State and Local Government*.²

Roger Simon—the co-author with Noreen Branson of *The British State* published in 1958 at the height of the cold war when they used the pseudonyms James Harvey and Katherine Hood³—subsequently revised his approach to take into account what he saw as Gramsci's modification of classical Marxism, including Leninism. The latter, according to Simon, saw power as concentrated in the state and under the exclusive control of the capitalist class (or part of it) and took the view that the construction of socialism could only begin *after* the working class took power—as did Harvey and Hood.⁴ Conversely, Gramsci's concept of the *integral state*—‘political society plus civil society, in other words, hegemony protected by the armour of coercion’⁵—implied that the working class could only achieve state power *after* it had won a substantial measure of hegemony in civil society.⁶ Simon still rejected the social-democratic theory of state neutrality: but he also rejected Gramsci's view that factory councils should replace parliamentary democracy.⁷ Hence, as well as the democratisation of parliament, Simon advocated direct democracy in the local community and workplace plus broad alliances based on the left and other social movements.⁸

John Hoffman—who by 1995 had a Weberian view of the state⁹—interpreting Gramsci’s contribution from within classical Marxism in 1984 argued that he treated consent and coercion as organically separate, whereas they should be understood as dialectically united because coercion is the ‘ethical expression of the fact that people *have to* produce’.¹⁰ Just as consent and coercion are two aspects of a single process in the economic sphere, so also are they in the political sphere; and this economic coercion, according to Hoffman, is re-expressed in the state as the coercive institution which at the same time commands consent.

However, the *Further Selections* from Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* published in 1995 include writings on political economy not in the 1971 *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*: for example, his unequivocal defence written in 1932 of Marx’s theory of value and the tendency of the rate of profit to fall against Benedetto Croce’s criticisms.¹¹ Nor, contrary to Hoffman’s 1984 reading, was Gramsci treating consent and coercion as organically and dialectically separate when he wrote that in:

Marx... there is contained in a nutshell the ethico-political aspect of politics or theory of hegemony and consent, as well as the aspect of force and of economics.¹²

The *Further Selections* therefore show that it is incorrect to view Gramsci as uninterested in political economy and only concerned to theorise the ‘superstructure’.

Similarly, Ercan Gündoğan in his recent discussion of conceptions of hegemony in Gramsci’s unfinished article on the Southern Question¹³ and the *Prison Notebooks*—contrary to Hoffman—also insists that:

Gramsci tries to fuse force and consent as an analysis of the conditions of socialism in the West. Neither does he ignore the force and coercion in socialist and bourgeois politics, nor were Lenin and the Communist International blind in the face of politics as hegemony. It should also be remembered that Gramsci lived in a country where Fascism first introduced itself.¹⁴

Gündoğan also argues that, although ‘Gramsci did not think that force and the seizure of political power were unnecessary’, he thought that ‘... that force and the seizure of power were not adequate for socialist transformation, putting aside the seizure of political power by socialists’.¹⁵

Gramsci is therefore perhaps best considered as the theorist of the *historic bloc*: viz. that a hegemonic class combines leadership of a bloc of social forces in civil society with its leadership in the sphere of production. Revolutionary change occurs when the historic bloc constructed by the capitalist class disintegrates and is replaced by a new historic bloc built up by the working class. Gramsci’s thought, as Simon conceded¹⁶, is also consistent with both Lenin’s view regarding the primacy of politics in revolutionary change and the basic principle of historical materialism as stated by Marx in the 1859 *Preface* to his *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. ‘The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life’.¹⁷

However, as Perry Anderson¹⁸, Robert Griffiths¹⁹ and recent discussions in the South African Communist Party²⁰ all show, Simon fails to acknowledge—as Anderson states—that although ‘Gramsci was acutely aware of the *novelty* and *difficulty* for Marxist theory of the phenomenon of

institutionalised popular consent to capital in the West' and 'therefore focused all the powers of his intelligence on it':

In doing so, he never intended to deny or rescind the classical axioms of that tradition on the inevitable role of social coercion within any great historical transformation, so long as classes subsisted. His objective was, in one of his phrases, to 'complement' treatment of the one with an exploration of the other.²¹

Furthermore, as Gustavo Fischman and Peter McLaren emphasise:

Failure to foreground the role of relations of production in explaining the dynamics of consent and coercion has led many post-Marxist or postmodernist scholars who champion the new social movements to overemphasize contingency and the reversibility of cultural practices at the level of the individual at the expense of challenging the structural determinations and productive forces of capital, its laws of motion, and its value form of labour. In effect, such a move replaces an undialectical theory of economic determination with a poststructuralist theory of cultural determination.²²

Lenin's use of the term *gegemoniya* (the Russian equivalent of hegemony, often translated as 'vanguard') also implied a process similar to what Gramsci would describe. Lenin—in *What is to be Done?* (1902)—observed that when left to their own devices, workers tended to reach only a trade union consciousness, fighting for better conditions within the existing system. To bring about revolutionary change, he argued that the Bolsheviks needed to come to occupy a hegemonic position within the struggle against the tsarist regime. This meant not only empowering the various unions by bringing them together, but also involving all of society's opposition strata in

the movement.²³ In the post-revolutionary period, however, the implication changed. For, as Trent Brown notes:

Lenin argued that it was crucial to the establishment of the 'hegemony of the proletariat' that (a) the urban proletariat retain an ongoing alliance with the rural peasants (who made up the majority of Russia's population) in order to retain national leadership and (b) that the expertise of the former capitalists be utilised, by forcing them to effectively manage state industries. These dual processes of leadership via consent and the command of force in the development of hegemony would play a crucial role in Gramsci's theory. Gramsci had been in Russia from 1922-23 while these debates were raging and it was after this time that we see hegemony begin to take a central role in his writings.²⁴

Lenin also stressed—in his speech in Defence of the Tactics of the Communist International on 1 July 1921—the absolute necessity of winning the masses in the West, before any attempt to achieve power could be successful:

I would not altogether deny that a revolution can be started by a very small party and brought to a victorious conclusion. But one must have knowledge of the methods by which the masses can be won over. For this thoroughgoing preparation of revolution is essential....An absolute majority is not always essential; but what is essential to win and retain power is not only the majority of the working class—I use the term 'working class' in its West-European sense, i.e., in the sense of the industrial proletariat—but also the majority of the working and exploited rural population.²⁵

Yet, from 1921 to 1924, Gramsci and most of the PCI's leadership rejected the "united front" in Italy; and had thereby materially facilitated the

victory of fascism, which was able to triumph over a radically divided working class. And, by the time Gramsci became leader of the party in 1924 and a supporter of the “united front”, the Comintern had largely abandoned such tactics.²⁶ Thus, as Anderson notes, ‘Gramsci’s insistence on the concept of the “united front” in his *Prison Notebooks* in the thirties does not represent a renewal of his political past: on the contrary, it marks a conscious retrospective break with it’.²⁷ Hence, when Gramsci was arrested in 1926 as a part of Mussolini’s emergency measures, he found himself in prison with a lot of time to reflect on what had happened and where things went wrong. How was it that the ruling class had been able to so effectively stifle the potential of the movement, and what would be required for the progressive forces to mobilise the masses in a way that would enable them to bring about a fundamental change in society? These questions would of course be central to Gramsci’s concept of hegemony.

For Gramsci, according to Brown—whatever the class is—there are certain common stages of development that they must go through before they can become hegemonic. Drawing on Marx, the first requirement is economic: that the material forces be sufficiently developed that people are capable of solving the most pressing social problems. Gramsci then goes on to state that there are three levels of political development that a class must pass through in order to develop the movement that will allow change to be initiated. The first of these stages is referred to as “economic-corporate”:

The corporatist is what we might understand as the self-interested individual. People become affiliated at the economic-corporate stage as a function of this self-interest, recognising that they need the support of others to retain their own security. Trade unionism is probably the clearest example of this, at least in the

case of people joining a union for fear of pay cuts, retrenchment etc. One can also speak of short-term co-operation between otherwise competing capitalists in these terms. The point to emphasise is that at this stage of a group's historical development there is no real sense of solidarity between members.²⁸

In the second stage

group members become aware that there is a wider field of interests and that there are others who share certain interests with them and will continue to share those interests into the foreseeable future. It is at this stage that a sense of solidarity develops, but this solidarity is still only on the basis of shared economic interests. There is no common worldview or anything of that nature. This kind of solidarity can lead to attempts to promote legal reform to improve the group's position within the current system, but consciousness of how they, and others, might benefit through the creation of a new system is lacking.²⁹

But it is only by passing through the third stage that hegemony really becomes possible:

In this stage...members become aware that their interests need to be extended beyond what they can do within the context of their own particular class. What is required is that their interests are taken up by other subordinate groups as their own. This was what Lenin and the Bolsheviks were thinking in forming an alliance with the peasants—that it was only through making the Bolshevik revolution also a peasants' revolution, which peasants could see as being their own, that the urban proletariat could maintain its leading position.³⁰

Similarly, Gramsci maintained that in the historical context that he was working in, the passage of a class

from self-interested reformism to national hegemony could occur most effectively via the political party....and through a process of debate and struggle, one ideology, or a unified combination thereof, will emerge representing the allied classes....At this stage, the party has reached maturity, having a unity of both economic and political goals as well as a moral and intellectual unity—one might say a shared worldview.³¹

The party then

sets about transforming society....The state becomes the mechanism by which this is done....these goals....need to be experienced by the populace as being in the interests of everybody.³²

Historically, the capitalist class has retained its hegemony primarily through various forms of coercion such as the direct deployment of the military (for example in Oldham in the 19th century when the unenfranchised working class was illegally conducting union activities and preventing the implementation of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act). However, as Brown also emphasises:

It would...be a great mistake to think that capitalism does not also rely heavily upon building consent. Indeed, it could be argued that it is capitalism's consent-building that we, from a strategic point of view, need to pay more attention to, as it is on this level that we compete with them. The nature and strength of this consent varies. There are ways in which capitalism succeeds in actively selling its vision to subordinate classes. This means not only selling the distorted vision of a society of liberty, freedom, innovation, etc., but also deploying the ideas of bourgeois economics to convince working people, for example, that although

capitalist policy is in the ultimate interests of the capitalist class, they too gain some of the benefits via trickle-down effects. Capitalism can also win consent among those who perhaps don't buy the idea that the system is in their interests, but who have been convinced that there is no alternative or that the alternatives would be worse—in other words, through the promotion of the belief that the system is a *necessary evil*.³³

Of course, when the interests of state monopoly capitalism are directly threatened, the ruling hegemonic forces will inevitably resort to coercion. For example, legislation to prevent workers taking industrial action, who threaten profits, as in the case of the December 2009 injunction against BA's cabin staff. But a far bigger threat to the capitalists is the development of a hegemonic alternative within civil society. That is:

The threat is that people will move from the economic-corporate phase, and recognise that their interests overlap with all of those whom capitalism marginalises and holds back, that they will come to recognise their power and demand radical change.³⁴

This requires

rigorous work on the ground laying the moral and intellectual terrain upon which these historical developments can occur. One develops the unity, self-awareness and maturity of the movement, making it a powerful and cohesive force, and then patiently, with careful attention to the contextual conditions, waits for the opportune moment for this force to be exerted.³⁵

For example, the campaign to win a million signatures in support of the People's Charter.

Therefore, as Anderson concludes

the central problematic of the United Front—the final strategic advice of Lenin to the Western working-class movement before his death, the first concern of Gramsci in prison—retains all its validity today. It has never been historically surpassed. The imperative need remains to win the working class, before there can be any talk of winning power. The means of achieving this conquest—not of the institutions of the State, but of the convictions of workers, although in the end there will be no separation of the two—are the prime agenda of any real socialist strategy today.³⁶

Gramsci's theory of the *historic bloc*—and his concepts of *hegemony*, *civil society*, the *integral state*, *national popular*, *ethico-political*, *organic intellectuals*, the *wars of movement* and *position*—enabled him to accurately detail the balance of class forces in the society of his time. And they are still relevant today when devising political strategies to defeat New Labour's project for big business control under conditions of state monopoly capitalism.

Notes

¹ P. Latham, 1978.

² P. Latham, 2010 (forthcoming). See also the earlier abbreviated version of this section on Gramsci, which was recently published in *Communist Review* (P. Latham, 2009).

³ J. Harvey and K. Hood, 1958. Roger Simon and Noreen Branson were both Communist Party members. See also my re-assessment of their path-breaking study in P. Latham, 2009.

⁴ J. Harvey and K. Hood, 1958, p. 283.

⁵ A. Gramsci, 1971, p. 262.

⁶ See R. Simon, 1982, pp. 72-74.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 105, p. 115.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 103-104.

⁹ See J. Hoffman, 1995, which distinguishes between the state and government, the latter referring to the negotiation and arbitration of conflicts of interest, whereas the former (using Weber's definition) involves the use of force to tackle conflict.

¹⁰ J. Hoffman, 1984, p. 212.

¹¹ See A. Gramsci, 1999b, Chapter III 'The Nature and History of Economic Science', pp. 290-321; Chapter IV 'Economic Trends and Developments', pp. 322-419; and Chapter VII 'Reference Points for an Essay on B. Croce', pp. 512-639.

¹² Ibid., p. 553.

¹³ Gramsci—who began this article in October 1926—was arrested before it was completed (see A. Gramsci, 1999a '76. Some aspects of the Southern Question', pp. 595-625).

¹⁴ E. Gündoğan, 2008, pp. 56-57.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 57, my emphasis.

¹⁶ R. Simon, 1982, p. 86.

¹⁷ K. Marx, 1859, para 6.

¹⁸ See P. Anderson, 1976.

¹⁹ See R. Griffiths, 1984.

²⁰ See, for example, South African Communist Party, 2009.

²¹ P. Anderson, 1976, p. 47, his emphases.

²² G. Fischman and P. McLaren, 2005, p. 435.

²³ Lenin, 1902.

²⁴ T. Brown, 2009, p. 2-3.

²⁵ Lenin, 1921, 3, paragraphs 16-17.

²⁶ Critics of the German Communist Party (KPD) also accused it of having pursued a sectarian policy—for example, its denunciation of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) as "social fascists"—that scuttled any possibility of a united front with the SPD against the rising power of the Nazis. These allegations were repudiated by supporters of the KPD

who accused the SPD leaders of having countered KPD efforts to form a united front of the working class. For instance, after Papen's government carried out a coup d'état in Prussia, the KPD called for a general strike and turned to the SPD leadership for joint struggle. But the SPD leaders again refused to cooperate with the KPD.

²⁷ P. Anderson, 1976, p. 59.

²⁸ T. Brown, 2009, p. 4.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., pp. 4-5.

³³ Ibid., p. 5, his emphasis

³⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

³⁶ P. Anderson, 1976, p. 78.

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