Towards the War of Position: Gramsci in Continuity and Rupture with Marxism-Leninism

By Comrade Amil

Introduction: It’s Time to Jailbreak Gramsci’s Ideas

Among the leading figures of the international communist movement (ICM) in the twentieth century – Lenin, Stalin, Ho Chi Minh… – Antonio Gramsci, leader of the Partito Comunista d’Italia / Italian Communist Party (PCI), features less prominently than many others – this in spite of his canonical status in the liberal academy. Granted, he didn’t lead a successful revolution. But no communist party in the imperialist countries did. Also, that the bulk of Gramsci’s theorizing – and certainly most of his original and most penetrating texts – were written in position of captivity in Italy’s fascist prisons contained Gramsci’s reflections on communist strategy. Gramsci’s thought would remain quite inaccessible to ICM and even the PCI until well after his death. But even when his prison notebooks return to Italy from their safe haven in the Soviet Union after the Second Inter-imperialist War (WWII), the revolutionary content of his ideas would be contained by the revisionism of the ‘Eurocommunists’, of which the PCI’s Togliatti was at the forefront. Liberal academics would later further strip Gramsci’s thought of its clearly communist objectives.

For these reasons, it can be said that Gramsci has had, at best, very little impact on communist strategy in the twentieth century. But Gramsci had much to say on the challenges of accumulating revolutionary forces in imperialist countries that should not be overlooked, and I would argue, have much import for the task of reconceptualizing communist strategy today. It’s time to jailbreak some of these ideas out of the confines of the liberal academy.

The revolutionary crisis that spanned the course of the immediate postwar years revealed serious limitations in how the ‘October Road’ to revolution that the Bolsheviks inspired came to be understood and applied throughout the Communist International. The insurrections that were inspired by the Russian revolution in the immediate postwar years all failed – from Europe to North America to the failed 1927 insurrections in China. The Revolutionary Communist Party of Canada (RCP Canada) and the new Communist Party of Italy (nPCI) today uphold the idea (with some conceptual differences between them) that this was the result of inappropriate strategy: the insurrectionary strategy underestimates the resilience of the state and that something akin to a protracted people’s war strategy is required. I would like to approach this problem (in a way that builds upon the critique of insurrectionism carried out by RCP Canada and nPCI) by digging a
little deeper into how the State and bourgeois power were conceived at this time within revolutionary Marxism, particularly by comparing Lenin’s State and Revolution with Gramsci’s prison notebooks.

The conception of the state contained within Lenin’s 1917 publication State and Revolution came to be widely accepted in the international communist movement and in turn informed the insurrectionary approach to revolution and a very specific expression of the vanguard Party. Whether we attribute the success of the Russian revolution to the contingencies of a particular historical conjuncture or whether reactionary regimes were more prepared for proletarian revolution in the wake of the October 1917 revolution – likely both factors apply – the ‘October Road’ led only to bloody defeats wherever else it was attempted. And out of the depths of these defeats, Antonio Gramsci was at the forefront of articulating a more comprehensive strategy for the advancing proletarian revolution in countries where capitalist social relations and the hegemony of the bourgeoisie was more advanced.

Gramsci’s contributions to communist theory are many, but among the most important is his substantial elaboration to the conceptualization of the bourgeois State, one that falls within Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy as articulated in Lenin’s State and Revolution, but also builds upon elements of and far surpasses it. In this way, Gramsci’s ideas are in continuity and rupture with elements of Leninism. Gramsci’s inclusion of bourgeois civil society within his theorization of the bourgeois state elaborates a theory of class power and domination that is more comprehensive than Lenin’s. And this conception of class power points us in the direction of a communist strategy that somewhat more protracted (not to be confused with reformist) in its conceptualization of accumulating proletarian revolutionary forces.

Gramsci’s moment, though separated from us by eighty years and in a very different context from our own, in certain ways is like our own. Gramsci’s prison notebooks commence a project of communist reconceptualization after the wave of failed insurrectionary attempts in the international communist movement that has yet to be adequately taken up by the ICM.

Upon a critical re-examination of Lenin’s conception of the state and revolution, we can establish the points of continuity and rupture of Gramsci vis-a-vis Lenin. It is the argument of this essay that apprehending these points of continuity and rupture with Leninism are not only fundamental to rescuing Gramsci’s ideas from the clutches of liberal academic appropriations, but for reconceptualizing the place of these ideas within our project of reconceptualizing communist strategy today.

The Strengths and Limitations of Lenin’s State and Revolution

As the title of Lenin’s State and Revolution (S&R) suggests, the question of the State and the question of revolution are intertwined; and the first should be answered before the second. How one conceptualizes the State comes to bear upon how one conceptualizes the revolution that is required to overthrow it.

S&R is written in the throes of the first inter-imperialist war and published on the eve of the Russian revolution in August 1917. S&R was intended to be a decisive polemical intervention against all the revisionist forces of the Second International and their “superstitions concerning the State” (Lenin, State and Revolution, p.5), more than any others the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries who were supporting the bourgeois Kerensky government after the February revolution.

The approach of Lenin’s S&R is to reclaim the ideas of Marx and Engels, or “those aspects of their teachings which have been forgotten or opportunistically distorted” (p.6) by “resuscitat[ing] the real teachings of Marx on the state” (p.7). In essence, Lenin is making a series of affirmations...
tions of revolutionary Marxism in light of the Second International’s usurpation, degeneration, and revisionism of some of the basic tenets put forward by Marx and Engels. Among these affirmations include the points that:

- “The state is the product and the manifestation of the irreconcilability of class antagonisms,” and, therefore, “the existence of the state proves that the state class antagonisms are irreconcilable” (p.8);

- The state is an instrument for the exploitation of the oppressed classes; and finally,

- The state is made up of “special bodies of armed men who have at their disposal prisons, etc.” (p.10), which is contrasted with the “self-acting armed organization of the population” that preceded the rise of the state.

These ideological interventions were essential on the eve of the Russian revolution for establishing a definite clarity about the inability of the bourgeois state (managed by the Kerensky government, after the February revolution) to serve as a mediating force for resolving the antagonism of classes in Russia. The third affirmation, concerning “special bodies of armed men” in the service of class dictatorship, underscores the need for an armed force of the proletariat to replace bourgeois dictatorship with a transitional proletarian dictatorship. A substantial part of the rest of S&R is dedicated to defending the historical necessity of a dictatorship of the proletariat as an instrument for repressing the bourgeoisie. As Lenin puts it,

_Opposition does not lead the recognition of class struggle up to the main point, up to the period of_ transition from capitalism to Communism, up to the period of overthrawing and completely abolishing the bourgeoisie… the state during this period inevitably must be a state that is democratic in a new way (for the proletariat and the poor in general) and dictatorial in a new way (against the bourgeoisie) (30-1).

In affirming these essential theses of Marxism on the question of the state, Lenin is affirming an analysis of the state that while evidently applicable to Russia – considering the success of the Russian revolution – is arguably less applicable to other western States at the time of Lenin’s writing. Lenin’s exclusive emphasis on the coercive aspects of the state – as a dictatorship of the ruling class(es), with its “special bodies of armed men” – while essential, overlooks those aspects of bourgeois power that are beyond the repressive apparatus, such as in ideology and civil society where consensual domination is exercised, the realm of hegemony. It is difficult and would be erroneous to fault Lenin with not developing a theory of the state more applicable to the conditions of societies other than Russia. S&R, while arguably containing certain universal positions on the bourgeois state, is not a completely universal view of the State in its modern form, or even in Lenin’s day.

Those aspects of bourgeois power constituted in the realm of civil society were already well-developed and quite formidable in the capitalist-imperialist countries to the West in Lenin’s time, and certainly underwent further development between the inter-imperialist wars with the vast expansion of the productive base of capitalism. Gramsci acknowledged the differences between the Russian state and the western European states at the moment of the Russian revolution when he reflected more than a decade later in his prison notebooks that

_In the East 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 tottered, a sturdy structure of civil society was immediately revealed. The State was just a forward trench; behind it stood a succession of sturdy fortresses and emplacements._

(Gramsci [1930-32], Selections from the Prison Notebooks, 238).

Therefore, the urban insurrection that succeeded in Russia would prove less than sufficient to topple the more “sturdy fortresses” of the more advanced capital-ist regimes, as the postwar period would reveal at the expense of great losses to the proletarian movement.

But with the triumph of the Russian revolution, the enormous prestige of Leninism in its wake, and the urgent necessity of building an international communist movement in the context of the postwar revolutionary situation meant that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union served as a major pole of attraction for new communist parties around the world. In the context of the revolutionary situa-
by Lenin that the bourgeois state does not “wither away... but is ‘put an end to’ by the proletariat in the course of the revolution. What withers away after the revolution is the proletarian state or semi-state” (17). Engels’ own polemic was aimed at both the reformists and the anarchists: the former for their rejection of revolution, the latter for refusing to understand the state (in all its forms) is not simply “smashed” in one grand night. Lenin further clarifies his position on this point later in the text when he states: “the proletarian state will begin to wither away immediately after its victory, because in a society without class antagonisms, the state is unnecessary and impossible” (25).

Once again, in making these affirmations, Lenin was countering the distortions of the opportunists. But what S&R has to say on this question is historically limited by virtue of a socialist society having not yet existed. But the historical experience of socialist society that follows the Russian revolution reveals in practice that, quite the opposite of withering away, class struggle rages on within socialist society, and not just against the old enemies, the bourgeoisie, but new ones as well. The bourgeoisie and its foreign imperialist sponsors in Russia are militarily defeated by the end of the Civil War; and any remnants of the rural bourgeoisie are liquidated by the forced collectivization policies of the late 1920s. However, this does not prevent the rise of a new bourgeoisie within the Soviet Union, which in time comes to exercise influence, leadership, and ultimately control over the CPSU in subsequent decades.

Suffice it to say that for the purposes of this essay that the protracted and violent struggles within the Soviet Union itself, from the civil war to the forced collectivizations, certainly bears its mark upon Gramsci’s notion of the sort of proletarian power that would be required to make revolution in countries with even more powerful and deeply entrenched bourgeois social relations. Gramsci was afforded with the hindsight to see that the greatest challenge facing the dictatorship of the proletariat was not simply in seizing state power, but holding on to it, maintaining the dictatorship of the proletariat in the face of all external and internal enemies in a way that moved socialist society closer and closer to communism. When the problem is posed like so, the question then arises of what forms of proletarian power are necessary in the lead up to a revolution in order to best secure the dictatorship of the proletariat after the revolution? The answer to this question entails a rethinking of both forms of States – the dictatorships of the bourgeoisie and of the proletariat. And to these questions Gramsci responds with a protracted revolutionary strategy that elaborates the Leninist party form and communist strategy in a way that articulates the relationship between the Party and the organizations of the masses that had not yet been clearly articulated in the international communist movement, and was only just beginning to take form in the Chinese Communist Party.

The Historical Context and Gramsci’s Political Work Prior to the Prison Notebooks

It must be said that Gramsci’s conceptual apparatus is not entirely original. This is not a diminution of Gramsci’s thought, but rather a recognition that Gramsci quite clearly builds upon Marxist-Leninist foundations. But to be sure, Gramsci does not simply apply what he called “philosophy of praxis” (Marxism) to the Italian situation – you know, break out the old Marxist tool bag and begin putting them to work in Italy. Rather, Gramsci articulates a conceptual apparatus that attempts to get beyond some of the limitations and under-developed aspects of Leninism, ideas that may be instructive for our own challenges today.

The communist movement proved insufficiently capable of emerging victoriously from the revolutionary crisis after World War I. Its gains were important; but its defeats were not insignificant and owed a lot to the lack of preparation of Communist Parties for the tasks they faced. With the exception of the Bolsheviks, virtually all communist parties emerged as breakaways or left-poles of pre-existing social democratic, socialist and/or syndicalist organizations which either had no clear strategy for revolution, or were not working towards a forceful revolutionary transformation. In Italy, the base for the formation of the PCI was the left tendency in the Socialist Party that defined
themselves as ‘electoral abstentionists’ (the same Socialist Party out of which Mussolini originates!). None of these formations were prepared to meet the challenges of proletarian revolution and all the questions that went along with it. None were prepared to answer the question of by what means can the proletariat take and hold onto power and crush the resistance of the exploiters and oppressors.

By the time of the formation of the Partito Comunista d’Italia (PCI), the postwar revolutionary crisis already peaked and passed with the Turin metalworkers strike in April 1920, where an effective dual power existed between revolutionary workers and the bosses (Hoare and Nowell Smith: xl-xli “Introduction” to Gramsci’s Selections from Prison Notebooks). The closest Italy came to its insurrectionary moment was later in 1920 with the factory council movement which extended from Milan to Turin and all across much of the country. Hoare and Nowell, the editors of the first English edition of the Selections from the Prison Notebooks, summarize the failures of the early Italian communist movement:

[Gramsci’s] Ordine Nuovo might have implanted an idea that had caught imagination of the masses; the intransigents and Bordiga’s abstentionist fraction might have defined an attitude which rejected all compromises; but not even these forces – and how much less the mass organizations, the Party, and the trade unions – had made any serious attempt to organize the proletariat, on a national scale, for a revolutionary assault on the capitalistic state. Instead, what transpired was the state taking initiative to disarm the movement through concessions, while beginning to arm and finance the fascist squads. In short, they lacked even the sort of disciplined vanguard organization that Lenin had been advocating since 1903 as an alternative to the opportunist organizational structures of social democracy, and that Gramsci would come to further elaborate upon. Bordiga’s effective leadership within the Party came to an end with the smashing of the Party apparatus, which reduced its membership by 80% to 5000 members (lv).

In September 1923, Gramsci proposed creating a new working-class daily, Unitá, along the lines of the Ordine Nuevo of 1919-1920, and proposed the creation of “a federal republic of workers and peasants” as ideological preparation for a Soviet regime in Italy. As Hoare and Nowell recount, “Gramsci sided with Bordiga in resisting the Comintern’s advice of adhesion to the PSI, but broke with him on a series of other questions, particularly his lack of a positive strategy for Italy and his desire to start an internationalist opposition to the Comintern” (lxi). Gramsci also differentiated himself from Bordiga on the question of the relationship between Party and masses. Taking historical inspiration from how the commissioni interne of the factory councils 1919-1920 served as a counter to the leadership of the reformist trade union movement, the Confederazione Generale del Lavora (CGL), Gramsci argued that the mass organizations of proletarian revolution were the institutional basis of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

In response to the setbacks to the PCI, and with Bordiga in captivity, Gramsci proposed a new strategic orientation for the communist movement in Italy. Gramsci strategic points included:

1. Intensive propaganda for a worker-peasant government;
2. A struggle against the labour aristocracy and reformism to cement an alliance between northern workers and southern peasants;
3. A new programme of political education in the party to overcome past divisions that were no longer decisive; and
4. Stepping up communist activity in the émigré population in France.

The foundation of Gramsci’s strategic points was his new conception of the Party:

The error of the party has been to have accorded priority in an abstract fashion to the problem of organisation, which in practice has simply meant creating an apparatus of functionaries who could be depended on for their orthodoxy towards the official view… The communist party has even been against the formation of factory cells. Any participation of the masses in the activity and internal life of the party, other than on big occasions and following a formal decree from the centre, has been seen as the result of a dialectical process in which the spontaneous movement of the revolutionary masses and the organising and directing will of the centre converge: it has been seen merely as something suspended in the air, something with its own autonomous and self-generated development, something which the masses will join
when the situation is right and the crest of the revolutionary wave is at its highest point, or when the party centre decides to initiate an offensive and stoops to the level of the masses in order to arouse them and lead them into action (lxii-iii).

This is essentially a critique of the party form under Bordiga, a bureaucratic centralist organizational structure. Bordiga's conception of the Party may have opposed the reformist structures of the Second International parties. But neither could the conception of the Party that he maintained bring about a positive strategy for the making of revolution in Italy, nor an organizational form to identify and carry through such a strategy. By the spring 1924 election in which the PCI participated, under the guidance of Gramsci's strategic changes, the Party had once again grown to 12,000 members.

The foundation of Gramsci's strategy was a class analysis that embraced Lenin's theory of the labour aristocracy and applied it to Italy, recognizing the obstacles that this stratum of labour posed to proletarian revolution. However, at this period of time, this stratum of labour only really dominated the labour movement in the advanced capitalist-imperialist countries, where the bourgeoisified stratum of labour plays its part in disciplining the proletariat and channeling its struggles into arenas of struggle where the bourgeoisie always wins. Whereas the backwardness and under-developed nature of capitalism in Russia had meant that the masses were not under the domination of a labour aristocracy, Gramsci pointed out that in:

...Central and western Europe the development of capitalism has determined not only the formation of broad proletarian strata, but also and as a consequence has created the higher stratum, the labour aristocracy with its appendages of trade-union bureaucracy and the social-democratic groups. The determination, which in Russia was direct and drove the masses into the streets for a revolutionary uprising, in central and western Europe is complicated by all these superstructures, created by the greater development of capitalism; this makes the action of the masses slower and more prudent, and therefore requires of the revolutionary party a strategy and tactics altogether more complex and long-term than those which were necessary for the Bolsheviks in the period between March and November 1917 (lxvi-ii).

The period in which Gramsci led the PCI was the practical basis for the working out of his thinking in prison. Gramsci dismissed Zinoviev's scapegoating of the German Communist Party's Brandler for the failure of the 1923 attempt at an insurrection, and offered a deeper critique of its attempt as being putschist. Under the new strategy and Gramsci's leadership, the PCI made considerable advances despite the growing strength of fascism. As repression intensified throughout 1925, Gramsci viewed insurrection as only possible through a unification of workers and peasants committees well prepared in advance. The former would take the form of autonomous factory committees, while defending the independence of the CGL from fascist liquidation. Attempts were also being made to create an underground apparatus. Despite intensifying repression, PCI membership rose to 27,000 members, with an increasing proportion coming from the ranks of the peasantry. Gramsci came to recognize that the situation was qualitatively changing, and this led to his 1926 paper on the Southern Question, in which he articulated his theses on the dual role of the northern proletariat and the southern peasantry.

In the early months of Gramsci's incarceration, before facing solitary confinement, Gramsci's political agitation in prison can be seen as the seminal form of the profound theoretical points that he later worked out in prison notebooks over the coming decade. These theoretical points consisted of the following:

1. The conception of the party as being led by the organic intellectuals of the proletariat;
2. The need for military organization understood not in narrow technical terms but broad political terms;
3. The importance of the intermediate slogan of “constituent assembly,” as first a means of winning allies for the proletariat in its struggle against the ruling class, and subsequently on the shifting terrain to struggle against all compromise and capitulation;
4. A more precise formulation of the worker-peasant alliance under the slogan of “a republic of worker and peasant Soviets in Italy”;
5. Fascism as a particular expression of the bourgeois revolution on the basis of Italy's specificities, which included the lack of unity amongst Italy's bourgeoisie;
6. Countering the weight of the Catholic Church; and
7. The necessity of proletarian hegemony over the peasantry (xci).

From some of Gramsci's strategic points, I believe we can extrapolate questions of significance for the entire international communist movement (many of which have been responded to by Maoism. But let's hold off on elaborating those for Part II of this essay). I find that these general contributions consist at least of the following:

- The question of actual proletarian leadership in the proletarian revolutionary party, to which Gramsci responds with the “organic intellectual” and to which Mao responds with the concept of the mass line [Point 1 above];
- An understanding of the military question as a political question, of war as politics and political struggle as a form of military struggle [Point 2 above];
- A class analysis that differentiates among the popular classes which will play the leading role in the revolution, which constitute a numerically main force, and which must follow the hegemony of other classes [Points 4 and 7].

It was only incidentally that Gramsci's sister-in-law Tatiana Schucht was able to smuggle out his 33 prison notebooks after his death, allowing us to study how Gramsci develops these points over the course of nearly a decade in fascist prisons.
The Prison Notebooks: Towards a ‘War of Position’

The main concern of the prison notebooks is the development of “the philosophy of praxis” with the aim of rejuvenating communist strategy in light of the failures and setbacks in Gramsci’s period. However fragmentary the passages of the notebooks are, they compose a totalizing system of thought in which a major focal point is the question of strategy. While there is so much more to the prison notebooks in terms of Gramsci’s intellectual contributions than questions of class war and strategy – hence, the Gramsci being a treasure trove for liberal academics – many of the notes point back to what Gramsci calls the war of position. But this concept can only be appreciated by unpacking some of the conceptual apparatus built up around it throughout the prison notebooks, which includes concepts such as the historical bloc; the ‘analysis of situations’; hegemony; Gramsci’s concept of philosophy and the organic intellectual; his distinct notion of the Party; and finally, his explanation of civil society.

Understanding the Historical Bloc

One of the core concepts of Gramsci’s prison notebooks is the ‘historical bloc’. While the term is only scarcely mentioned in the prison notebooks, given the concept’s role in framing much of Gramsci’s conceptual apparatus it can be argued that Gramsci’s prison notebooks are a long-running elaboration of the concept. There is no section dedicated to the historical bloc, only a couple short passages:

Concept of ‘historical bloc’, i.e. unity between nature and spirit (structure and superstructure) unity of opposites and of distincts (137).

Structures and superstructures form an ‘historical bloc’. That is to say the complex, contradictory and discordant ensemble of the superstructures is the reflection of the ensemble of the social relations of production (366).

If I may take the liberty to flesh this out somewhat, in light of my reading of the prison notebooks, the historical bloc is the organic but contradictory unity between the dominant and subaltern social groups in a given historical period, the relations of which are historically emergent and need to be understood as such in order to understand the nature of the relations among these social groups in the present. Whereas ‘nature’ here is considered relatively fixed and generally changes only over much longer periods, the ‘Spirit’ is the contradictory unity between structural and super-structural elements in a bloc of time. On the one hand, the concept of the historical bloc is a rather orthodox reformulation of Marx’s historical materialism, a principle thesis of which Gramsci paraphrases at certain points throughout the prison notebooks: “1. That no social formation disappears as long as the productive forces which have developed within it still find room for further forward movement; that a society does not set itself tasks for whose solution the necessary conditions have not already been incubated” (106).

On the other hand, Gramsci’s elaboration of the architecture of the historic bloc (without actually referencing the term) throughout the prison notebooks reveals an awareness of the incredibly dynamic and ever-shifting character of the relationships among the “discordant…ensemble of the social relations of production” (366). The acute awareness of the dynamism at play amongst various levels of relations of force is a feature of Gramsci’s thinking that makes his analyses of history so penetrating and his overall method of historical and political analysis such a force of rejuvenation for “the philosophy of praxis” and the communist movement. Of particular importance for Gramsci, and for any communist movement, is a comprehensive study of the oppressed and exploited classes within their own historical bloc.

In his note “History of the Subaltern Classes: Methodological Criteria”, Gramsci provides a schema for what such a historical reconnaissance actually consists of when it comes to the “subaltern classes.” Whereas the historical unity of the ruling classes is realized in the State (and therefore its historical development can be traced through the development of the State as well),

The subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a “State”: their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of States and groups of States. Hence it is necessary to study: 1. The objective formation of subaltern social groups, by developments and transformations occurring in the sphere of economic production; their quantitative diffusion and their origins in pre-existing social groups, whose mentality, ideology, and aims they conserve for a time; 2. their active or passive affiliation to the dominant social formation, their attempts to influence the programmes of these formations in order to press claims of their own… 3. the birth of new parties of the dominant groups, intended to conserve the assent of the subaltern groups and to maintain control over them; 4. the formations which the subaltern groups themselves produce, in order to press claims of a limited and partial character; 5. those new formations which assert the autonomy of the subaltern groups, but within the old framework; 6. those formations which assert the integral autonomy (52).

This schematic outline for studying the subaltern is a major component for understanding the historical bloc. This method of historical analysis is the means by which a communist formation ultimately determines whether or not a favourable situation exists for the subaltern social groups to accumulate revolutionary forces and whether the situation is favourable to them becoming the ruling class at a given conjuncture of history; in other words, the essence of this historiographical method reduces to the question of whether the situation is favourable for revolution in the present historical bloc.

The factor driving the dynamism within Gramsci’s historical schema ultimately reduces into a question of the development of the mode of production. As Gramsci reiterates in his outlining of the concept of the passive revolution,

No formation disappears as long as the productive forces which have developed within it still find room for further forward movement; 2.
that a society does not set itself tasks for whose solution the necessary conditions have not already been incubated, etc. It goes without saying that these principles must first be developed critically in all their implications, and purged of every residue of mechanism and fatalism. They must therefore be referred back to the description of the three fundamental moments into which a ‘situation’ or an equilibrium of forces can be distinguished, with the greatest possible stress on the second moment (equilibrium of political forces), and especially on the third moment (polito-military equilibrium) (106-7). Here, Gramsci directly links his method of historical analysis to an elaboration of the philosophy of praxis that he provides in his note “Analysis of situations.” The implicit statement here is that the object of the study of history and an account of the historical bloc is to grasp the situation, and the various levels of force that make up a given situation.

Grasping the situation and Relations of Force at Three Levels

In his explication of the notion of ‘a situation’ the contours of a theory of revolution begin to emerge which distinguishes Gramsci from communist strategies overly focused upon what he calls the rapid war of siege/war of maneuver. Gramsci directly critiques Trotsky’s concept of ‘permanent revolution,’ Luxembourg’s advocacy of the mass strike, and syndicalism’s methods in general for each for overestimating the capacity of the war of maneuver (238) to overwhelm bourgeois power and all of them being laden with notions of spontaneity because – as we shall see in further elucidations of Gramsci’s notions on state and civil society below – they misidentify the locus of power of the bourgeoisie, at least in the case of the more advanced capitalist countries where civil society is more advanced. A proper analysis of a situation is a precondition for revealing the objective conditions for or against the revolution.

“The study of how ‘situations’ should be analyzed,” Gramsci tells us, is to “establish the various levels of the relations of forces,” and this, ultimately, is what constitutes the ‘elementary exposition of the science and art of politics’ (175). Such an analysis of the situation, Gramsci tells us, is the basis for formulation of the strategic plan with a strategy and tactics, for propaganda and agitation, for developing the command structure, organization of the armed forces, and resolving other questions pertaining to organizational structure (175).

Once one has resolved “the problem of the relations between structure and superstructure” – in other words, the nature of the contradictions in the structure of society and the trajectory of their development – one can proceed to correctly analyze the role of the forces that are active in the history of a particular period. However, one must also be able to distinguish between the organic (or structural) and the conjunctural crises, which differ from one another by virtue of being long-term crises consisting of basic contradiction in the structure of society versus the conjunctural phenomenon arising from “occasional, immediate, and almost accidental” movements in the superstructure (177). “A common error in historicopoietic analysis consists in an inability to find the correct relation between what is organic and what is conjunctural,” and Gramsci warns that such lines of research are “most serious in the art of politics, when it is not reconstructing past history but the construction of present and future history which is at stake” (178-9). What this reconstruction consists of is a determination of the immediate relations of force that define the situation.

Gramsci defines three levels of relations of force, beginning from the most structural and proceeding into the superstructural. The first is the relation of social forces, which is closely linked to the structure, objective, independent of human will and which can be measured with the systems of the exact or physical sciences… By studying these fundamental data it is possible to discover whether in a particular society there exist the necessary and sufficient conditions for its transformation (181).

The development of any clash of political or military forces will originate from contradictions at this level.

The subsequent moment is the relation of political forces, “in other words, an evaluation of the degree of homogeneity, self-awareness, and organisation attained by the various social classes” (181). By way of example pulled from elsewhere in the prison notebooks, Gramsci’s methodological criteria for conducting historical research into the subaltern classes – points four through to six, which
deal with the political formations created by the subaltern classes, ranging from those limited to pressing their claims in a limited manner and in dependence upon the bourgeoisie all the way up to an integral and revolutionary way – are methods by which one can determine the level of political forces of the subaltern classes (52).

The third moment is the relation of military forces, which Gramsci breaks down further into military forces and politico-military forces, which become decisive for the subordinate social classes if and only when all three levels of relations of forces exist in the favour of the subaltern social classes and are seized upon by the social, political, and military actors they have constituted. Of course, oppressed people can take armed action without the social and political relations of forces being favourable. But these are always defeated and are easily dismissed as acts of terrorism (no matter the actual content of the armed act) if the political forces are not sufficiently capable of defending the armed actions. But if the social, political, and military relations of force are indeed favourable and sufficiently mature, then what it means for a situation to be seized upon is as follows:

The decisive element in every situation is the permanently organised and long-prepared force which can be put into the field when it is judged that a situation is favourable (and it can be favourable only in so far as such a force exists, and is full of fighting spirit). Therefore the essential task is that of systematically and patiently ensuring that this force is formed, developed, and rendered ever more homogeneous, compact, and self-aware (185).

What we have here, in an abstract and simple outline, is an historical-materialist analysis of how to determine if and how to make a revolution and under what conditions can the conscious intervention of the vanguard forces of the historically progressive classes be successful in providing leadership to a revolution. Revolution does not consist of the momentary numerical superiority of the masses in a mass strike or an insurrection – that is, momentarily favourable military relations of force – but relations of force that correspond to every level of relations of force. And for the political relations of force to be in the favour of the proletariat and its allies in countries under circumstances where bourgeois power extends beyond the formal institutions of government and State, its leading forces must do more than muster an army for a pitched battle and a day’s victory.

This formulation is a sharp critique of the way insurrection came to be conceived within the Communist International, the worst expression of which was Trotsky’s ‘permanent revolution’. But it is also a much sharper formulation of how to perform a general analysis of a situation than that offered by Lenin. Lenin defined a revolutionary situation as one in which the ruling class could no longer go on ruling the same way, when the suffering of the masses had reached an intolerable level, and when, consequently, the masses burst into political activity (Lenin 1915). But this definition neither differentiates between structural or conjunctural crises, nor does it offer precision in the analysis of relations of forces that Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis revealed to be necessary.

To fully appreciate how Gramsci’s theory of revolution goes beyond Lenin’s foundational but historically- and contextually-limited articulation, one must further understand Gramsci’s theory of the state and civil society. For the historically progressive forces to actually prevail in an objectively favourable situation, the question of leadership must be correctly posed and correctly answered; which brings us to Gramsci’s concepts of hegemony, the role of intellectuals, and his conceptualization of the Party. With these concepts at hand, we can gain a fuller appreciation of Gramsci’s idea of revolutionary strategy – the war of position.

Hegemony: Coercion & Consent

Beginning first with the question of hegemony: Dominant social groups maintain their power in two distinct ways: through domination / coercion, and through intellectual-moral leadership / consent. Dominant social groups dominate the classes with which they have an antagonistic relationship by liquidating or subjugating them through armed force (57); but they lead “kindred and allied groups” by providing moral and intellectual direction. So long as the productive forces still have room for greater development under a given mode of production, the dominant social groups can maintain their hegemony by making leadership primary and domination secondary. But an organic crisis – which consists of the shifting of the social composition of society, the classes and the relations among them – will engender crises in leadership as the dominant social groups rely more heavily upon coercion to subdue their an-
tagonists and even formerly allied classes.

**What is Philosophy and who is the ‘Organic Intellectual’**

The place of intellectuals in ruling class hegemony is through diffusion of its moral and intellectual culture. Gramsci understands that there is not a direct correspondence between the ruling social groups and its intellectual functionaries, but that the latter are dependent on the former for their existence and serve them accordingly: “The intellectuals are the dominant group’s ‘deputies’ exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government,” for which they are compensated. Gramsci includes the work of such intellectuals within the overall operation and power of the ruling class, not outside of it.

It should be said at this point that Gramsci sees each human being as a philosopher, albeit whose capacity to think independently relates to the dynamics of the overall situation, the most important question of which is: Has a given class produced the political forces to think and act independently, and to what extent are these forces developed?

Gramsci sees each human being as a philosopher, since every person has a conception of the world. For Gramsci, there is no pure philosophy, but “various philosophies or conceptions of the world exist” (326). As for those philosophies that are disconnected from the people, elite intellectual cultures of and in support of the dominant social classes, Gramsci asks:

*Is a philosophical movement properly so called when it is devoted to creating a specialised culture among restricted intellectual groups, or rather when, and only when, in the process of elaborating a form of thought superior to ‘common sense’ and coherent on a scientific plane, it never forgets to remain in contact with the ‘simple’ and indeed finds in this contact the source of the problems it sets out to study and to resolve? Only by this contact does a philosophy become ‘historical’, purify itself of intellectualistic elements of an individual character and become ‘life’ (330).*

In contrast to these philosophies, “the philosophy of praxis does not tend to leave the ‘simple’ in their primitive philosophy of common sense, but rather to lead them to a higher conception of life... to construct an intellectual-moral bloc which can make politically possible the intellectual progress of the mass and not only of small intellectual groups” (333). Gramsci is clear in his position that for the communist movement such an intellectual élite – while its effect must be diffuse and hegemonic – is not an unorganized and undisciplined current. Rather it is the Party that is the “elaborator of new integral and totalitarian [i.e. unified and all-absorbing] intelligencías and the crucibles where the unification of theory and practice, understood as a real historical process, takes place” (335). The need for such a unified if dynamic intellectual current leads Gramsci to clear reject parties on the “pattern of the British Labour Party” in favour of the Leninist/Bolshevik vanguard model. However, as we should see further below, the deeply democratic and pedagogical tasks of the communist party should not be overlooked in Gramsci’s thinking.

The intellectual work of such an intellectual-moral bloc includes: (1) the repetition of its basic arguments; and (2) to raise the intellectual level of the masses and to raise new intellectuals directly out of the masses. These intellectuals raised from the ranks of the exploited and oppressed masses are what Gramsci called organic intellectuals, and small, ‘independent’ intellectual currents cannot take up the task of seriously cultivating this sort of leadership. This can only be taken up by the Party, or a Party of sorts.

**The Party: the consciousness of a class**

At this point it is worthwhile to briefly consider what exactly is a Party. Generally, the word Party invokes the idea of an electoral formation, united by a program sufficient to unite its functionaries, candidates, elected members, rank-and-file membership and sufficiently united to present itself to a wider electorate. But this is only a very specific form of a Party – the electoral Party – and not the general sort that Gramsci brings our attention to.

Gramsci’s Modern Prince offers a general historical theorization of parties in order to better situate the particular tasks of the party of the proletariat. The history of the political party is not the history of electoralism or the party construed in such narrow terms, but rather the history of the social classes themselves. With politics theorized at a superstructural level as being a reflection of contradictions in the fundamental structure of society, parties appear all throughout history where we find basic class contradictions in the structure of society. The history of political parties is not the history of its founders or leading intellectual thinkers, but rather the intricate network of relations with which the party is attached to and organizes its social class.

Gramsci argues that all parties have (1) a mass element “whose participation takes the form of discipline and loyalty, rather than any creative spirit or organizational ability” (2) a cadre element, “the principal cohesive element,” without which the former would “scatter into an impotent diaspora and vanish into nothing”; and (3) “an intermediate element, which articulates the first element with the second and maintains contact between them (152-3). This schematic outline of the Party form is offered as a matter of objective historical fact, one that the communist party must observe if it is to succeed in its task. The distinction with the Communist Party is that it represents a class whose historical mission is to abolish class distinctions altogether.

That Gramsci had a distinctly Leninist view on the party, but a Leninist view nonetheless, is evident from this hierarchical structuring of the Party and the tasks that it must be prepared to confront. Of particular interest to Gramsci concerning the various strata of the party is how these strata must be organized to guard against destruction. Gramsci argues that firstly, an iron conviction must prevail amongst the various strata that a solution has been found to the historical problems faced by its class. Gramsci’s views on philosophy clarify that such an iron conviction is not based on dogma, but on the development of a philosophy of praxis that actually addresses the problems of the mass and adequately reflects the contours of the historical bloc. Without this ‘iron discipline,’ the intermediate strata cannot be formed. But this
philosophy of praxis, as we have seen in the foregoing analysis on philosophy, is not a simplified Marxism. Gramsci was a harsh critic of crude materialism and economism, and understood the dangers of such an articulation of Marxism included losing its connection with a top layer of intellectuals that it needed to bring under its hegemony (164).

Gramsci uses the metaphor of the “modern prince,” building on Machiavelli’s concept of the Prince, to stand in for the role required of the communist party to develop a national-popular will, not a will developed around an individual, but a collective will of the popular masses: “The protagonist of the new Prince could not in the modern epoch be an individual hero, but only the political party” (147).

The State and Civil Society

Returning to the question of the state and civil society, Gramsci’s definition of the State is not limited to “formal political society,” which includes the official organs of the State, but instead “the State is the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules” (244). In other words, a theorization of the State must include those organs of bourgeois power that are outside official bourgeois-democratic state organs – the mere “outer ditch” of bourgeois power – to include the exercise of bourgeois domination of civil society, where bourgeois power is constituted “in a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks” (238).

Therefore, based on the foregoing explication of Gramsci’s conceptualizations of the historical bloc, relations of force and the analysis of situations, philosophy, the organic intellectual, the Party, and the State and civil society, we can develop a fuller appreciation of Gramsci’s understanding of revolutionary strategy.

War of Position vs. War of Maneuver

Gramsci warned that “in political struggle one should not ape the methods of the ruling class, or one will fall into easy ambushes” (232). Reflecting on the postwar situation in Italy, Gramsci warns in the prison notebooks of trying to counter the illegal private armed organizations of the ruling classes with similar commando-like tactics:

It is stupid to believe that when one is confronted by illegal private action one can counterpose to it another similar action – in other words, combat commando tactics by means of commando tactics… The class factor leads to a fundamental difference: a class which has to work fixed hours every day cannot have permanent and specialised assault organizations – as can a class which has ample financial resources and all of whose members are not tied down by fixed work (232).

Gramsci also dismisses the rapid war of movement / war of manoeuvre as a strategy for the proletariat by focusing on Luxemburg’s conceptualization of the
the immediate economic element (crises, etc.) is seen as the field artillery which in war opens a breach in the enemy’s defenses – a breach sufficient for one’s own troops to rush in and obtain a definitive (strategic) victory… This view was a form of iron economic deterministic, with the aggravating factor that it was conceived of as operating with lightning speed in time and space. It was thus out and out historical mysticism (233).

For the modern proletariat, however, it is the war of position that is the strategy for proletarian revolution – a protracted revolutionary strategy (more on the parallels with Mao’s protracted people’s war in Part II of this paper). With the failed attempts at proletarian revolutions in the early 1920s weighing heavily upon Gramsci’s conscience, he recognized that “in the case of the most advanced States, where ‘civil society’ has become a very complex structure and one which is resistant to the catastrophic ‘incursions’ of the immediate economic element (crises, depressions, etc.)” then the proletarian revolution must focus its strategy on carving out power within “the superstructures of civil society” which are “like the trench-systems of modern warfare” (235). In light of the ICM’s failures, Gramsci had the hindsight to recognize and boldness to state “a crisis cannot give the attacking forces the ability to organize with lightning speed in time and space; still less can it endow them with fighting spirit” (235). This is an argument against spontaneity. It sometimes seems like “a fierce artillery attack seemed to have destroyed the enemy’s entire defensive system, whereas in fact it had only destroyed the outer perimeter… The same happens in politics, during great economic crises” (235). Therefore, Gramsci warns, those elements of bourgeois civil society that constituted strong defensive ramparts must be closely studied. Gramsci’s entire conception of philosophy and the role of the party is arguably worked out in relation to the ideological and cultural defensive ramparts of the bourgeoisie that must be ruptured.

Gramsci’s sees the Russian revolution to have corresponded to a war of maneuver – a successful one at that. But he is concerned that to the extent that “1917 has been studied – [it has been only] from superficial and banal viewpoints” (235). Gramsci accuses Trotsky’s formulation of the permanent revolution as constituting a “reflection of the theory of the war of maneuver” (236), which Gramsci views in hindsight as having been inappropriate for the postwar situation. Whereas Trotsky upheld the universality of the “frontal attack in a period in which it only produced defeats,” Gramsci views the postwar situation as having been one wherein the shift to the war of position was necessary, a strategic shift which Lenin understood: “Illich understood that a change was necessary from the war of manoeuvre applied victoriously in the East in 1917, to a war of position which was the only form possible in the West” (237).

Therefore, the war of position, undertaken and led by a proletarian revolutionary vanguard Party on the basis of the criteria outlined above, is the only strategic approach Gramsci viewed as feasible for revolution in the imperialist countries of his day. The task of future communist parties would have to be to identify the openings and necessary points of intervention within ‘civil society’ wherein the communist party could make its interventions and entrench itself for the long battle for ‘terrain’ within the matrices of bourgeois society. This isn’t an argument for operating exclusively or even mainly within the hegemony of bourgeois society, such as through its institutions; but rather to rupture those institutions by building up a dual power of the popular classes.

In the face of the failures of European communist parties in the early 1920s, Gramsci recognized that a more formidable proletarian counter-hegemony was required in advance of an insurrectionary moment, and that only these advanced preparations could consolidate the dictatorship of the proletariat post-revolution. Posed as such, revolutionary strategy can be understood as a continuous process of accumulating revolutionary forces that is punctuated with the rupture of revolution, or revolutions. In other words, a protracted war of position would have to precede the rapid war of maneuver. In revolutionary communist theory today, I believe that this conception bears some similarity with the protracted peoples war
strategies of the Revolutionary Communist Party of Canada – though much remains unclear to me about their strategic formulation – and especially that of the new Communist Party of Italy (nPCI). For the nPCI in particular, insurrection is conceptualized as necessary but only as a momentary tactical maneuver within a wider protracted popular war. Without intending to split hairs in the ICM today, we should seriously consider whether Gramsci’s war of position is a more clear and correct articulation of what our tasks are in the imperialist countries today. Gramsci’s strategic framework was specifically developed with the hegemony of the imperialist bourgeoisie in mind, and the term war of position has the added benefit of clearing up confusions and strawman arguments that are easy to make about the idea of PPW in an imperialist country. However, the working out of these ideas – Gramsci in comparison to Mao Tse-Tung’s thought in particular and the modern conceptions of PPW in general – is the main object of Part II of this essay.

Concluding Thoughts: Is Gramsci a launching point for reconceptualizing communist strategy today?

The war of position is never actually applied to the context of Italy, or anywhere else in the imperialist countries, for that matter. Although, the PCI develops a substantial armed apparatus in the early 1940s before the fall of Mussolini, it is disarmed, and under American occupation and in the postwar period, the PCI played a leading role in Europe in blazing a trail of parliamentarism and reformism that comes to be known as ‘Eurocommunism’. With the center of gravity of the international communist movement (ICM) having completed its shift to the third world by the end of world war two, the parties of the ICM in the imperialist countries never seriously take up Gramsci’s ideas. Mao Tse-Tung is (rightfully) looked to as the leading strategic thinker in the International Communist Movement after 1960, this at a time when the name of Gramsci remained obscure for most communists.

In Part II of this essay, I will explore what I believe to be the striking similarities between Gramsci’s reconceptualizing communist strategy and that of Mao and the Chinese revolution. The answers that each gives to the question of Marxism-Leninism’s limitations in the 1920s are strikingly similar, however different and particularized to their very different contexts.

To reiterate, Gramsci’s prison notebooks constitute a major rejuvenation of revolutionary Marxism, or the ‘philosophy of praxis’. While upholding many of the applicable and valid elements of Marxism-Leninism, Gramsci substantially revises and breaks with elements of orthodoxy that proved disastrous and tragic in their application within the Comintern. Gramsci’s theoretical contributions range from questions of historical materialism, the party form, state and civil society, philosophy, and revolutionary strategy, albeit in a fragmentary unity. Although Gramsci’s prison sentence would claim his health and ultimately his life, it’s doubtful that this level of theoretical development would have been possible without an extended period of solitude that he faced. All the other communist leaders of Gramsci’s caliber would generally have been killed or too pre-occupied with the day-to-day tasks of developing the communist party to embark upon the huge and necessary intellectual project that Gramsci commenced. We owe it to the communist movement, to ourselves, and to the liberation of all oppressed and exploited peoples to return to Gramsci, and take what we must from his contributions. But first, let us consider Gramsci alongside Mao…

As the acute and momentary financial crisis of 2008 pulled the imperialist economies deeper into stagnation and the residents and citizens of those countries just a little bit closer to the long-running crises faced by the third world for decades, the hideous lie of neoliberalism has been exposed for what it is. No longer do the Fukayama and Thatcher’s myths that capitalism is “the end of history” and that “there is no alternative” hold water. Instead, we are moving into an era where the ruling classes are propagating forms of apocalypse as inevitable and as “the end of history.”

Rebellions are unfolding across the world; the masses are looking for, rediscovering, a solution to the capitalist problem of human civilization. Yet, while the ideologies of the imperialist ruling classes predominate, the communist alternative has yet to be reasserted, recreated, reinvented.

Ironically, however, in contrast to forty years ago, when the objective conditions were not ripe for revolution in the imperialist countries, even if the subjective conditions were advanced, we are living in a period defined by the obverse: mature objective conditions, and the underdeveloped subjective factor. To understand this situation - to understand how bourgeois hegemony is exercised in our present day - we would do well to revisit the conceptual tools forged by Gramsci, assess what remains valid, and apply them wholeheartedly to these increasingly barbaric days of the late period of the capitalist epoch of human civilization.

Bibliography

