

The Dimensions of Passive Revolution

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ABSTRACT: Responding to the recent season of studies on Antonio Gramsci's notion of passive revolution, the present paper will argue that this could fruitfully contribute to a non-deterministic understanding of capitalist dynamics. However, this relevance should be based on a renewed understanding of the concept itself. Against contemporary conceptualisations that tend to understand passive revolution as an instrument in the hands of the ruling classes, the present paper argues that this is better understood as originating from the shortcomings of the so-called subaltern groups. The focus should thus be placed on the *passivity* of a potentially transformative agency rather than on processes of change that are *per se* out of reach for revolutionary movements. Coming back to Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, three overlapping dialectical relations are identified as being key to understanding both passive revolution and the struggle against it: at the ideational level, the dialectic between *common sense* and *good sense*; at the institutional level, the dynamic between *bureaucratic* and *democratic centralism*; at the level of class struggles, the dynamic between *corporatism* and *universalism*. Interpreted through these categories, passive revolution becomes a valuable tool both to overcome the fallacies of contemporary critical theory as well as to understand the challenges faced by anti-capitalist movements today.

KEYWORDS: Gramsci; passive revolution; hegemony; critical political economy; critical theory

Introduction

One of the main theoretical references that critical scholars have relied upon in the last few decades in order to provide a non-deterministic

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understanding of capitalist dynamics is the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Since the translation of the *Prison Notebooks* into English and the publication of the complete critical edition edited by Valentino Gerratana, Gramsci's thought has produced a polymorphous variety of interpretations and applications that testify both to the liveliness of his thought and to the contemporary value of investigating it. In particular, the present paper will consider the contemporary relevance of the concept of passive revolution, suggesting that this could be a fruitful tool to understanding changes and stabilities in the order of capital. The concept of passive revolution carries great political value. In fact, it tries to respond to a fundamental question: 'if the proletariat had emerged in many European countries as a collective social and political actor in the wake of industrialisation, why had the deepest crisis of capitalism not led to a revolution, but rather to various forms of capitalist reorganisation?' (Roccu, 2017, 538).

Far from being an out-of-date problem, this is a crucial question today as the global financial crisis of 2007-8 has not been followed by any substantial paradigm shift. The relevance of the term, however, is far from being an original contribution of the present article. In fact, the notion of passive revolution is nowadays a constant point of reference not only for Gramscian scholarship but also for fields as diverse as historical sociology, ethnography and international relations (Allinson and Anievas, 2010; Bruff, 2010; McKay, 2010; Nash, 2013; Simon, 2010; Wanner, 2015). The variety and extension of the work provided on passive revolution in the last decade would in fact suggest a more conscious and parsimonious use (Callinicos, 2010). In what follows, I will argue that in order to conceive passive revolution as a relevant tool for understanding contemporary capitalism, we should firstly rethink its very connotation.

According to Peter Thomas, passive revolution for Gramsci meant 'a distinctive process of (political) modernization that lacked the meaningful participation of popular classes in undertaking and consolidating social transformation' (Thomas, 2013, 23). Thomas argues that '[i]n a certain sense, the concept has almost become synonymous with modernity, which is now viewed as a melancholy tale in which the mass of humanity is reduced to a mere spectator of a history that progresses without its involvement' (2006, 73). Coming back to the *Prison Notebooks*, I shall argue that in case we are to accept the former point – passive revolution as synonymous of modernity – we necessarily need to criticise the second one concerning the position of the so-called subaltern groups within the process. In this sense, responding to the recent season of studies on passive

revolution, the present paper will suggest that this can be seen as a synonym with modernity only so long as the passivity of the masses is not conceptualised as imposed by exogenous forces, but always-already incorporated in their everyday-praxis. In particular, three main interrelated dialectical relations will be identified as being key to understanding both passive revolution and the struggle against it: at the ideational level, the dialectic between *common sense* and *good sense*; at the institutional level, the dynamic between *bureaucratic* and *democratic centralism*; at the level of class struggles, the dynamic between *corporatism* and *universalism*. A close investigation of these categories in Gramsci's *oeuvre* is essential in order to see how the different dimensions of passivity are not merely imposed on subaltern groups, but rather represent the effect of their own shortcomings, that can always be turned into a revolutionary upheaval.

The present paper will be structured as follows. Firstly, I will discuss current approaches to the concept of passive revolution, particularly focusing on its recent reception in studies in critical political economy. Secondly, I will provide a critique of current approaches to the term and, coming back to the *Prison Notebooks*, I will suggest an alternative reading revolving around the aforementioned categories. In particular, I shall argue that it is only by seeing the seeds of capital restructuring already at play in the every-day practice of the subaltern groups, that Gramsci is able to think their potential for emancipation. Ultimately, I will conclude by summarising the possible contribution of a renewed understanding of passive revolution for both studies in critical theory and for redefining the challenges of anti-capitalist movements today.

Domination Without Hegemony? Passive Revolution in the Literature

Recent scholarship touching upon the notion of passive revolution, particularly within critical political economy, has revolved around the issue of how far we can extend this concept and the extent to which this is an apt representation of how changes and stability work in contemporary capitalism. Three main interventions have been recently made in this regard. Firstly, Adam Morton suggests that passive revolution today is a 'portmanteau concept that reveals the continuities and changes within the order of capital' (2007, 68). In this sense, Morton agrees with Peter Thomas in arguing that passive revolution has become almost a synonym with modernity, and a particularly apt notion to explain both capitalist state formation and maintenance (Morton, 2010, 322; see also McKay, 2010).

In critiquing such an approach, Alex Callinicos argues that this definition brings about an issue in terms of distinguishing different situations. In this sense, passive revolution would lose its own specificity thus becoming ‘a distinction without difference’ (2010, 505). Relying on Gramsci’s uses of the term, Callinicos argues that, for example, the analogy between Risorgimento and Fordism fails to recognise a crucial difference between the two processes. Only the former seems in fact to appear as a plausible representation of passive revolution inasmuch as ‘the ancien régime has given way to a society in the capitalist mode of production prevails’ (Ivi, 498). It is thus argued that the emphasis should be placed on the passage from one mode of production to another, not extending the use of passive revolution to transition *within* capitalism.

In fact, Callinicos continues, neither fascism nor Fordism produced a systemic transformation and thus these are better seen as ‘*counter*-revolutionary projects that seek to manage the structural contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, not the accomplishment of socialist transformation by other means’ (*Ibidem*). Callinicos thus concludes that what we need is a more restricted understanding of passive revolution, in order not to make it interfere with other concepts such as that of counter-revolution. A third approach that tries to integrate the previous two interpretations is the one delineated by Roberto Roccu, who criticises Morton for the over-extension of its use of the term while at the same time contesting the idea that passive revolution somehow needs to produce a transition to a new mode of production, as in Callinicos. In particular, Roccu stresses the importance that the partial fulfilment of people’s demands has in what Gramsci defines as passive revolution – something that finds only limited echo in Morton’s formulation (Roccu, 2017, 549).

Whilst such a discussion is certainly of theoretical relevance, I shall argue that the extension or limitations of passive revolution can only be rethought via a renewed understanding of Gramsci’s usage. Notwithstanding the differences highlighted in the previous conceptualisations, in fact, the three authors tend to agree in understanding the outcome of passive revolution as being ultimately in the hands of the ruling classes – something that seems in contrast with Gramsci’s treatment in the *Prison Notebooks*. The existing literature acknowledges that the phenomenon of passive revolution originates from the limits of bourgeois rule (Morton, 2013, 55). In this sense, the process is seen to represent a response to dynamics that ruling circles do not directly control. These dynamics can vary from crisis-induced contradictions amongst ruling class fractions in which its progressive force tends to deteriorate (Q1§44, 42), to external shifts in the

accumulation process forced by uneven tendencies in capitalist development (Morton, 2011, 36), or from subaltern challenges to the established hegemonic bloc. Nevertheless, the outcome of passive revolution is often seen as heavily dependent on ruling classes' power.

In his book on Mexico, Morton proposes two definitions of passive revolution: first, 'a revolution without mass participation, or a "revolution from above," involving elite engineered social and political reform that draws on foreign capital and associated ideas while lacking a national-popular base' (*Ivi*, 38); second, a situation in which 'a revolutionary form of political transformation is pressed into a conservative project of restoration' (*Ivi*, 39). Although, the two definitions are in some respects different, they both imply a top-down force that produces a conservative form of change, either by not including the subalterns in the process or by displacing their demands. This might be only a matter of emphasis. In fact, Morton acknowledges that in the process of passive revolution a significant role is played by the shortcomings of counter-hegemonic projects. For example, he argues that,

[i]n the case of Italy, the "passive" aspect refers to the restrictive form of hegemony that emerged out of the Risorgimento because of the failure of potential 'Jacobins' in the Partito d'Azione to establish a program reflecting the demands of the popular masses and, significantly, the peasantry (Morton, 2013, 52).

In addition, many of Morton's analyses of Gramsci's texts as well as applications to concrete examples remark the importance of acknowledging the limits of movements of opposition *vis-à-vis* capital, and of not considering bourgeois rule as a 'quasi-automatic' process (2011, 46). This is shown, for example, by his sensitivity towards the backwardness of the Italian peripheral forces in Southern Italy before the Risorgimento (2007, 62), as well as towards the lack of a united front based on the alliance between the proletariat and the peasantry during the revolutionary upheaval in Mexico (2011, 45-6).

Yet, Morton never theoretically elaborates on what the key features of such shortcomings are and on the extent to which these influence and facilitate capitalist restructuring itself. For this reason, passive revolution is ultimately seen as a process in the hands of the ruling bloc – that, although at times is forced to accommodate requests from below, it always does so within the existing social

formation given its privileged position within the state (*Ivi*, 53; Sassoon 1987, 207). In analysing the Italian Risorgimento, for example, whilst acknowledging the deficiencies of the Action Party, Morton ultimately sees passive revolution as representing ‘the inability of the ruling class to fully integrate the producer classes through conditions of hegemony’ (Morton 2007, 68). Given the absence of hegemony, he adds, the state becomes crucial in order to further capitalist dominance (*Ivi*: 102). Morton applies similar considerations to the process of capitalist developments in Mexico, where the peasants’ revolution ended up being offset by ‘Mexican populism’ that had ‘counterrevolutionary roots based on the domination and manipulation of the masses behind the façade of revolutionary rhetoric’ (Morton, 2011, 48). In this sense ‘passive revolution ... is a revolution, marked by violent social upheaval, involving a relatively small state class engaging with “the acceptance of certain demands from below” in order to restrict class struggle, while insuring the creation of state power and an institutional framework consonant with capitalist property relations’ (Morton 2013: 54; original emphasis). In Morton’s account is implied something that we will see developed more clearly in Callinicos and Roccu: namely, a juxtaposition (rather an interrelation) of the revolutionary upheavals of the subaltern and the potential for the ruling classes to restructure order and hegemony. Rather than seeing the former as limiting (and potentially impeding) the possibility of the latter, Morton seems to argue that the more requests from below become pervasive the more the ruling classes’ privileged access to the state becomes crucial in order to restructure society. This point will be better explained by referring to the arguments made by Callinicos and Roccu.

Postulating or Presupposing? The Antithetical Treatment of the Antithesis

Roccu attempts to move beyond Morton’s interpretation, suggesting that the emphasis should be placed on the partial fulfilment of people’s demands which, he argues, is exactly the means that produces masses’ passivity. He acknowledges the ambivalence of Gramsci’s application of passive revolution, as in some occasions this ‘is presented as a residual strategy deployed to maintain power when hegemony is lacking (“dictatorship without hegemony”)', whilst in other passages of the *Prison Notebooks* ‘passive revolution seems to occur under conditions of limited, fractured, hegemony, when a class or fraction thereof is hegemonic towards some others but not across society’ (2017, 546). Such a remark, however, does not result in a sceptical position as in Callinicos. In fact, Roccu is convinced that we can extrapolate a core from Gramsci’s multi-facet

engagement with passive revolution. This core is made of four elements, of which the first two are presuppositions, the third has to do with its specific method, and the fourth with its outcome.

The first element is linked to the international situation that in periods of structural changes requires 'from specific state formations an attempt to developmental catch-up through transition, both from a non-capitalist to a capitalist mode of production...and between different regimes of capital accumulation' (*Ivi*, 545). Secondly, Roccu refers to Gramsci's use of Hegel's categories in order to contend that passive revolution also presupposes a thesis that, despite its limitations, 'develops to the full of its potential for struggle' (Q15§11), while the antithesis is incapable of doing the same. Thirdly, in terms of method, Roccu argues that crucial for passive revolution is an heavy reliance on state power by the ruling classes in order 'to weaken and defuse the political potential of subaltern classes' (Roccu, 2017, 545). Lastly, as it pertains to the outcome, passive revolution combines a real transformation, 'either towards or within capitalism' (*Ivi*, 546), and, at the same time, the 'partial fulfilment and displacement of the demands raised by the embryonic subaltern bloc' (*Ibidem*).

This attempt at extrapolating the core of passive revolution from Gramsci's writings is certainly valuable if one wants to define the limits and potentiality of the term, perhaps moving beyond both Morton's overextension and Callinicos' excessive scepticism *vis-à-vis* its use. Yet, what is puzzling in Roccu's formulation is that the weakness of the antithesis is emphasised as being both a presupposition and a result of the process. This already makes it difficult to understand what the contribution of passive revolution would be, if the passivity that this is supposed to impose on the subaltern bloc (*Ivi*, 550) is in fact there from the beginning. On the other hand, this basic presupposition is questioned by Roccu himself. In fact, when criticising Morton for under-appreciating the role played by the partial fulfilment of popular demands, he argues that much more emphasis should be placed on 'the presence of a vigorous antithesis *prior to* a passive revolution' (*Ibidem*; my emphasis). Also Callinicos (2010, 501) makes the same point, as he argues that actually the vigorous antithesis is a basic feature to a passive revolution. The justification for this idea is found in a quote from Notebook 15, where Gramsci (Q15§62, 1827) argues that 'the conception [of passive revolution] remains a dialectical one – in other words, presupposes, and indeed postulates as necessary [*presuppone, anzi postula come necessaria*], a vigorous antithesis which can present intransigently all its potentiality for development.' Callinicos seems to completely misread the meaning of this formulation, as he takes it to suggest that

in order to have a passive revolution we need a strong antithesis. Gramsci's position is actually the opposite: it is *in order to avoid* a passive revolution that the antithesis needs to develop to its full potential.

This is clear already from the quoted note Q15§62, where Gramsci provides the aforementioned argument in order to prevent any 'historical defeatism' and 'fatalism' associated with the term passive revolution, particularly in reference to the Italian Risorgimento. In fact, he also adds that passive revolution is not to be understood as a political program, but rather as 'criterion of interpretation in absence of other active elements in a dominant manner' (*Ibidem*). This becomes even more evident when looking at Gramsci's treatment of the Risorgimento and the relation between the Action Party and Cavour's project of modernisation. Borrowing an expression of Vittorio Emanuele II, he argues that the Moderates had their opponents in their pockets, given the latter's inability to form a real hegemonic alternative to Cavour's leadership (Q15§44, 41-2). In fact, 'the Moderates represented a relatively homogenous class ... whilst the Action Party was not based on any historical class and the oscillations that its governing bodies experienced ultimately followed the interests of the Moderates' (*Ivi*, 40-1).

For Gramsci, the moderate bloc should be understood as being a dominant class in two manners: 'it is leading [*dirigente*] of the allied classes and dominant [*dominante*] of the opposing classes' (*Ivi*, 41). The distinction between leading and dominant is often understood as marking two opposite alternative forms of government, which would give the ruling classes the option to choose according to the specific situation to use coercive mechanisms in order to retain power when hegemony is absent. Nevertheless, Gramsci promptly remarks that a certain class must possess political hegemony *before* taking governmental power, and also once it has become dominant 'it continues to be "leading"' (*Ibidem*). The example of the Risorgimento proves exactly this. In fact, the Moderates 'continued to lead [*dirigere*]', and not merely to dominate, 'the Action Party also after 1870.' It is, thus, exactly thanks to this cultural and political subalternity of the antithesis that the ruling bloc is capable of using the state as a means to integrate also the sporadic active elements in the opposing forces (for example, through the phenomenon that Gramsci names *trasformismo*).

The emphasis on the presupposition of a strong antithesis seems also to remove one of the two preconditions that Roccu argued were constituting the core of Gramsci's concept: namely, a lacking antithesis. In this sense, passive revolution seems to describe two possible situations. On the one hand, a situation in which

both capitalist class and its opponents are weak; on the other hand, a condition in which they are both powerful at the same time. This schematic and abstract representation already shows something interesting regarding current approaches to the term: namely, the fact that thesis and antithesis are not dialectically related, but rather abstractly juxtaposed. The growing power of the antithesis does not *per se* reduce the potential for the thesis to respond, but rather surprisingly increases it. Conversely, the weakness of movements of opposition is not seen as necessarily implying a relative position of dominance for the ruling classes. The result is that passive revolution is invoked to represent a situation of relative equilibrium between opposing fractions, with the necessary clause that at the end the struggle is going to be solved by the favourable position of the ruling bloc within the state.⁸ This is further proved by the fact that both in Callinicos and Roccu passive revolution is seen as opposed to counter-revolution and hegemony, two situations in which the capitalist class is thought as being relatively stronger than its opposition. Failure to link the lack of a strong antithesis to the empowerment of the dominant class, ultimately forces us to view passive revolution as ‘a *backup strategy* for a ruling class that fails to be hegemonic and thus relies on its control of state power and a favourable balance of political forces to perpetuate its own political dominance under new structural conditions’ (Roccu, 2017, 556; my emphasis).

Hegemony and Passive Revolution: The Zero-Sum Game of Political Struggles

Degenerations of such an approach could be found, for example, in Ian Bruff’s account of Agenda 2010 in Germany, where passive revolution is explicitly contraposed to hegemony (Bruff, 2010; see also Coutinho, 2007 and Losurdo, 1997, 155). It is true that Gramsci himself refers to certain historical developments to be the result of a condition of ‘dictatorship without hegemony’ (Q15§59); yet, if taken literally, this formulation can be highly misleading. The reason for this can be exposed by looking at Gramsci’s treatment of the disaggregation and reconstruction of the hegemonic group after World War I. Gramsci’s line of thought is the following:

⁸ This approach can be seen also in Roccu’s (2017, 555) treatment of the Tunisian restructuring after Ben Ali’s overthrowing, considered as exemplary of what Gramsci calls passive revolution. Roccu, in fact, seems not to consider the absence of a Jacobin moment in Tunisia as the primary reason for capitalist restructuring.

First of all, why has it disaggregated? Perhaps because a strong collective and antagonistic political will has developed? If that was the case, *the problem would have been solved in favour of this antagonistic force*. It has disaggregated, rather, because of purely mechanic causes of different type: 1) because great masses, previously passive, started moving [*sono entrate in movimento*], but in a chaotic and disorganised movement, without direction, i.e.: without a precise collective political will; 2) Because the middle classes that during the war had a position of leadership and command, have lost it during the time of peace ... 3) Because the antagonistic forces resulted incapable of organising for their own advantage such disorder (Q7§80: 912-3; author's translation and emphasis).

It is certainly true that there is a substantial difference between a purely a-critical mass of people that passively accepts the ruling order (thus fully accepting its position of leadership and command) and one that moves against it, though in a chaotic and un-organised manner. However, as it is clear from this passage, the absence of an organic collective will is the ultimate reason why oppositions do not manage to move beyond, and thus end up re-precipitating into, the previous hegemonic bloc. Here it is probably worth referring to what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, in a rather critical account of Gramscian understanding of hegemony, define as the 'zero-sum game of political struggles [...] where a failure in the hegemony of the working class can only be followed by a reconstitution of bourgeois hegemony' (2014, 59). This means that passive revolution, in Gramsci, should not be seen as opposed to hegemony; but rather as describing a situation in which failures to produce a creative moment force the subaltern to capitulate, *nolens volens*, into the previous hegemonic bloc.

As it has been argued in this section, current approaches to passive revolution not only are at times philologically inconsistent with Gramsci's text but they also present at least three issues in the conceptualisation of movements of opposition and their relation *vis-à-vis* capitalist restructuring. Firstly, the great emphasis placed on the potential of the ruling bloc to use state power seems to undermine (both theoretically and practically) any potential for revolutionary politics. Secondly, and connected to the first point, the aforementioned approaches are unable to account for strengths and weaknesses of movements of resistance *vis-à-vis* capitalist restructuring, mainly because they do not see the two

realms as dialectically interrelated, and a strengthening of the former could always be repressed by impositions from the later. In fact, and this is the third point, the strong antithesis of the subaltern, even when emphasised, appears as being never enough when compared to capital's ability to restructure the social order. In what follows, I will suggest that engaging with Gramsci's notion of passive revolution could be useful to move beyond these fallacies. In particular, I shall argue that it is only by seeing the seeds of capitalist restructuring always-already at play in the every-day praxis of the subaltern classes, that Gramsci is able to conceptualise the potential for revolutionary politics.

Passive Revolution in the *Prison Notebooks*: Passivity Revisited

Given the aforementioned criticisms to current approaches to passive revolution, this section will argue that Antonio Gramsci's conceptualisation of changes and stability within the capitalist society has the potential to re-establish a connection between struggles and socio-historical development. Against the general conceptualisation of current studies that think the Gramscian analyses of passive revolution as a process that is ultimately in the hands of the ruling classes, I suggest that this is better understood as being based on the *passivity* of a potentially transformative agency. The notion of passive revolution was firstly formulated by Vincenzo Cuoco, who employed it in order to understand the lack of involvement of the popular masses in the Neapolitan revolution of 1799.

Gramsci argues that whilst Cuoco meant it as a 'warning to create a national mood of greater energy and popular revolutionary initiative', the term was soon converted by the Moderates and the neo-Guelphs 'into a positive conception, into a political programme' that concealed 'the determination to abdicate and capitulate at the first serious threat of an Italian revolution that would be profoundly popular, i.e.: radically national' (1971, 59f, Q10\$6, 1220). The idea of passive revolution as a process crucially dependent on the shortcomings of subaltern groups is well encapsulated in a note that Gramsci writes in Notebook 8, where he criticises the idea of mechanism as explaining capitalist stability. Gramsci argues that:

when the subaltern becomes diligent and responsible, mechanism appears sooner or later as an imminent peril [...] the limits and the dominance of the force of things are restricted, why? Because, at the end, whereas yesterday the subaltern was a *thing*, today he is not a thing anymore but a

historical person; whereas yesterday he was irresponsible because he resisted an external will, today he is irresponsible because he does not resist, despite being an active agent. But has he ever been mere *resistance*, mere *thing*, mere *irresponsibility*? Certainly not, and that is why it is always necessary to demonstrate the futility of mechanic determinism (Q8§205, 1064; author's translation).

Stability is thus not the product of external impositions, rather it is dependent on the passive role played by the subaltern groups that (*actively*) help in reproducing the current system of exploitation.⁹ In fact, Gramsci warns us that 'it is never to be forgotten that historical development follows the laws of necessity only so long as the initiative has not decisively passed on the side of those forces that aim at the construction according to a plan, of pacific and sympathetic division of labour' (Q14§68, 1729; author's translation).

Passivity is thus related to the lack of political initiative of the subalterns. In this sense, Gramsci not only provides us with useful theoretical tools to criticise the vulgar materialism associated with Nikolai Bukharin that understands the subaltern classes as *ontologically* deprived of will. The *Prison Notebooks* conversely criticise the idea that the masses are always-already *active*. In fact, as he argues in a famous passage, 'the philosophy of praxis [...] is not an instrument of government of the dominant groups in order to gain the consent of and exercise hegemony over the subaltern classes; it is the expression of these subaltern classes who want to educate themselves in the art of government and who have an interest in knowing all truths, even the unpleasant ones, and in avoiding the (impossible) deceptions of the upper class and – even more – their own' (Gramsci, 1995, 395-6; Q10§41xii, 1320). Continuity in the order of capital is thus not rooted in external impositions or in the rationalisation of society operated by institutional apparatuses, but rather in the self-deception of potentially oppositional social groups. Therefore, a strong antithesis, rather than being the basic condition for a passive revolution, as Callinicos and Roccu would have it, is the primary antidote to it.

It thus becomes crucial to understand what is involved in the passage from a state of passivity to one of creative activity. Returning to the *Prison Notebooks*, three overlapping dialectical relations are identified as being key to

⁹ For a similar argument see Finocchiaro, 1973.

Gramsci's understanding of this relation: at the ideational level, the dialectic between *common sense* and *good sense*; at the institutional level, the dynamic between *bureaucratic* and *democratic centralism*; at the level of class struggles, the dynamic between *corporatism* and *universalism*. This analysis is not meant to suggest an abstract fragmentation of Gramsci's holistic thought.

As I will show, in concrete situations, these dimensions are indeed very much interrelated. The purpose of analysing them separately, however, can be seen as threefold. First, it will help me to emphasise Gramsci's treatment of the manifold roots of popular passivity and its implication for rethinking popular agency. Secondly, I will be able to demonstrate that such passivity is not seen as being imposed on the subaltern through the backup strategies of the ruling class, but rather it is always part of dynamics internal to the subaltern themselves. Thirdly, I will argue that Gramsci takes such passivity as the main reason why the ruling class is capable of keeping and reinforcing its position of dominance. I will thus argue that it is on these levels that the *Prison Notebooks* identify the challenges faced by revolutionary projects, that do not limit themselves to accept the already established structures, but want to engage in the creation of a new state. For the reasons highlighted in the previous section, these dimensions can also be seen as different levels on which the ability of the subalterns to emancipate themselves from pre-established hegemonies – and thus create their own – is articulated. In turn, I will take into consideration both the role that they play in the perpetration of capitalist dominance as well as the political project that they point towards if one wants to overcome it.

Common Sense and Good Sense

As anticipated, the struggle against passive revolution at the ideological level is identified with the dialectic between common sense and good sense. In Gramsci, this dichotomy is at the core of the relationship between intellectuals and people-nation. Whilst common sense is an incoherent stage of opinion formation, good sense is realised once people begin to think coherently and organically to their everyday life experience, thus producing their own intellectuals. In the *Prison Notebooks* good sense is thus the embodiment of philosophy in society. Gramsci significantly argues for a strict connection between philosophy and common sense, suggesting that we would need a history of common sense in order to investigate the genesis of the problems that are reflected only in a minimal part in the history of philosophy. This would ultimately 'help to demonstrate their real value (if they still have one) or the significance that they

have as overcome links of a chain and to individuate the new and actual problems or the actual stage of old problems' (Q11§12, 1383; author's translation).

The value which is alluded to here is that coming from the connection 'between intellectuals who "know" and the "people-nation" that merely "feels"' (Fontana, 2015, 57). These two are strictly connected, as there is no 'high culture' that has not germinated from everyday-issues and, conversely, no philosophical speculation is meaningful if it is unable to speak to people's problems. The *Prison Notebooks* thus recognise both the importance of and the necessity to overcome common sense, thought as both being the necessary point of departure of critical intellectual activity and, at the same time, as one of the main obstacles that keep the subalterns in their position of passivity and prevent them from becoming hegemonic.

Therefore, not only is there a common ideological feature shared by both fragmented common sense and what Gramsci calls 'high culture' (*alta cultura*) – that proper to those intellectuals that construct a coherent philosophy detached from the masses and functional to socio-political domination. More radically, for Gramsci, these are two sides of the same coin: 'high culture' can be coherently articulated and used as a means of dominion only so long as common sense is fragmented and incoherent. The *Prison Notebooks* thus radically detach themselves from the physiological readings of ideology *à la* Bukharin, also developed by the *idéologues*. It is ultimately the recognition of the historical, thus potentially criticisable, nature of ideas to give the 'philosophy of praxis' its non-deterministic character. Ideology, for Gramsci, is not a pre-constituted set of ideas that is to be merely installed by the dominant groups into the minds of the subaltern classes. This is ultimately far from a coherent monolith: '[s]ome participate in ideology because of their position in the world of production, others for their participation in disaggregated world of common sense; there are those that produce ideology from their position as great intellectuals and those that do so as simple "clerks of the dominant group"' (Filippini, 2012, 94; author's translation).

This manifold manifestation of the ideological production points also to the fact that the incoherent rejection of the ruling class' intellectual production, *per se*, does not imply a complete emancipation. An example can be found in Notebook 3, where Gramsci discusses the position of peasants in Southern Italy (defined as *morti di fame*, the 'starvelings') and their 'generic' hate for the so-called 'masters' (Q3§46, 323) matured in conjunction with the highly uneven development of the Italian state since the beginning of the 19th century. The

polemic position of the peasantry, Gramsci argues, can be seen as a primary level of rejection of the constituted order; but at the same time it is insufficient to build ‘class consciousness’ inasmuch as ‘not only does it not have an exact consciousness of its own historical personality, but it does not even have the consciousness of the historical personality and limits of its opponent’ (Ivi, 323-4). This also escalates into the collaboration of the most productive sections of the *morti di fame* (those that aspire to small municipal jobs or to positions of clerk in the city) with the local bourgeoisie against the peasantry. The backward praxis of peripheral groups is thus understood as giving rise to a vague ‘cosmopolitanism’ that proves inadequate to build a revolutionary position based on a thorough knowledge of the state and on an organic class consciousness. Gramsci ultimately attributes a stage on ‘non-activity’ (linked to the lack of ‘comprehension of one’s own role’) to the sporadic and subversive actions of the *morti di fame*, and argues that this needs to be linked to “subversion” from above, thus ... an arbitrary politics and of a personal or group clique [*cricca personale o di gruppo*]’ (Ivi, 326-7; author’s translation).

This makes clear that, in Gramsci, the leading position of restricted groups is always mirrored (and in some sense is the epiphenomenon of) the cultural passivity of the subalterns. Or, as Robert Jackson puts it, ‘the sedimented layers of the anachronistic tradition continue to be reproduced not simply from above, but by the very groups that stand to benefit from the negation of their influence’ (Jackson, 2016, 221). As it is clear from the example of the *morti di fame*, Gramsci connects the inconsistent intellectual production of subaltern groups both to the fragmentation of struggles and to the bureaucratisation of politics that leaves coercive power in the hands of a restricted group of people. These other dimensions on which passivity is articulated and reproduced will be analysed in the following sub-sections.

Bureaucratic Centralism and Democratic Centralism

Gramsci defines bureaucratic centralism as the dominion of a part over the whole, whilst democratic centralism is ‘centralism in motion’ [*centralismo in movimento*], thus a continuous adjustment of the organization to the real historical development’ (Q9§68, 1139; author’s translation). Bureaucracy plays a crucial role in ensuring the continuity of capital as it is ‘the most dangerous habitual and conservative force’ (Q13§23, 1604; author’s translation). Institutional dynamics are therefore a primary example to be taken into consideration if we are to understand the ‘non-contemporaneity of the present’

(Thomas, 2009). In this emphasis on the connection between bureaucracy and the continuation of capitalist dominance, Gramsci shares a concern that is common among contemporary critical studies – particularly those that highlight the role played by strong institutions in ensuring the endurance of capital's laws (Bonefeld, 2015, 2017; Ryner, 2015).

Yet, the identification of the sources of such bureaucratic structure seem to be radically different in the two cases. Whilst the reference to strong institutions usually alludes to the displacement of an otherwise already democratic stance of change, for Gramsci bureaucracy is possible only in virtue of masses' passivity. In fact, he argues that 'it needs to be stressed that the unhealthy manifestations of bureaucratic centralism occurred because of a lack of initiative and responsibility at the bottom, in other words because of the political immaturity of the peripheral forces, even when these were homogeneous with the hegemonic territorial group' (Gramsci, 1971, 189; Q9§68, 1139). In synthesis, it is only by seeing the seeds of bureaucracy in the everyday shortcomings of potentially transformative agency that Gramsci is able to conceive an overcoming of bureaucratic centralism. Against such static structures, in fact,

democratic centralism offers an elastic formula, which can be embodied in many diverse forms; it comes alive in so far as it is interpreted and continually adapted to necessity. It consists in the critical pursuit of what is identical in seeming diversity of form and on the other hand of what is distinct and even opposed in apparent uniformity, in order to organise and interconnect closely that which is similar, but in such a way that the organising and the interconnecting appear to be a practical and 'inductive' necessity, experimental, and not the result of rationalistic, deductive, abstract process – i.e.: one typical of pure intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971, 189; Q13§36).

Democratic centralism, therefore, can be seen as the truest realisation of the unity of theory and praxis, which involves an organic connection between the intellectual strata and the popular masses as well as between the rulers and the ruled (Gramsci, 1971, 190). Gramsci thus points towards the need to move beyond bureaucratic systems, beginning with the awareness of the main reasons that brought about bureaucracy in the first place and, therefore, identifying the aspects on which the subaltern can work to overcome it. This will ultimately give

collective subjects, rather than isolated individuals, the possibility to produce real historical change (Filippini, 2017, 51). This critically shows the interrelations between the overcoming of bureaucratic centralism and the need to move both beyond occasional and fragmented opinion and beyond disaggregated forms of struggles, in order to create a collective subjectivity. This will be best understood by looking at the following sub-section.

Corporatism and Universalism

In a note called *Alcuni aspetti teorici e pratici dell' 'economicismo'*, Gramsci argues that movements of resistance should not be solely studied via the lenses of economic activity, 'as this affirms an immediate element of force, thus the availability of a certain financial supply direct or indirect... and that's it. Too little. Also in this case, the analysis of the different degrees of relation [*gradi di rapporto*] of forces cannot but culminate in the sphere of hegemonic and of ethico-political relations' (Q13§18, 1597; author's translation). In fact, Gramsci's understanding of revolutionary politics should be understood as articulated on three levels (see Frosini, 2010). Firstly, an organization based on an homogeneous social group linked to professional relations within a certain group. Here we have the mere corporatist phase typical of the *organizzazioni di mestiere*. Secondly, the group develops the consciousness of solidarity but still purely within the economic realm. Thirdly, we have a phase in which

consciousness of one's corporatist interests...overcome the corporatist realm of the economic circle, and can and should become the interests of other groups subordinated. This is the phase more explicitly political... determining beyond the economic unity and politics also the intellectual and cultural unity, not on a corporatist realm, but rather on a universal one, of hegemony (Q4§38, 457; author's translation).

Praxis par excellence in Gramsci is thus not that of economic activity, but rather the ethico-political production. It is only through the creation of a new hegemony that the 'structure ceases to be an external force which crushes man, assimilates him to itself and makes him passive; and it is transformed into a means of freedom' (Gramsci 1971, 367; Q10§6, 1244).

Such a dynamic was already emphasised in Gramsci's polemic against trade unions for remaining still within the realm of economic competition, and in the comparison with the Factory Councils which were more apt to create a revolutionary alternative, based not only on the competition between classes, but on a new ethico-political system and on the self-government of the working class (Gramsci, 2016). In particular, whilst trade unions were acknowledged as being a positive organism to move beyond workers complete subalternity *vis-à-vis* capital, their action was necessarily also conservative as their very organisation made sense only within the borders of a capitalist system. In Gramsci's (2000, 93) words, '[t]he emergence of an industrial legality is a great victory for the working class, but it is not the ultimate and definitive victory.' For this reason, Gramsci criticised the approach to unionism of organisations such as the *Confederazione Generale del Lavoro* (CGL) and its metal-mechanic affiliate, the *Federazione Italiana Operai Metallurgici* (FIOM). This is again a situation in which a purely passive and alienated mass of workers can be distinguished from forms of organisations, such as unions, that help in producing a critical consciousness of one's position.

Yet, in both cases the antithesis tends to fall back into the previous hegemonic bloc, in as much as it does not create a hegemonic moment of its own. This idea in Gramsci is ripped of any form of determinism, as he argues that '[t]he trade union is not a predetermined phenomenon. It becomes a determinate institution, i.e. it takes on a definite historical form to the extent that the strength and will of the workers who are its members impress a policy and propose an aim that define it' (*Ivi*, 92). Gramsci also adds that

[i]f the trade-union officials regard industrial legality as a necessary, but not a permanently necessary compromise; if they deploy all the means at the union's disposal to improve the balance of forces in favour of the working class; and if they carry out all the spiritual and material preparatory work that will be needed if the working class is to launch at any particular moment a victorious offensive against capital and subject it to its law then the trade union is a tool of revolution, and union discipline, even when used to make the workers respect industrial legality, is revolutionary discipline (*Ivi*, 93).

Ultimately, the success or failure of trade unionism to sublimate itself and develop into a revolutionary movement is dependent on the capacity of hegemonic

production of the workers and people that compose it. In the same manner, the defeat of the Factory Councils in the 1920s proved that the absence of coordination of revolutionary forces makes it possible for moderates to incorporate them into a conservative project (Salvadori, 2018, 151-61).

Conclusion

As previously remarked, in 1933 Gramsci suggested that passive revolution should not be confused for a political project, but it can guide praxis only to the extent that it ‘assumes, or postulates as necessary, a vigorous antithesis’ (Q15§62, 1827).¹⁰ In Gramsci, the historical subject is thus not shaped by pre-existing structures but proves its autonomy in actively recomposing and overcoming given conditions, crucially emancipating itself ‘from the fallacies of representation and perception of life that that subject, being subaltern, necessarily possesses in itself at the beginning’ (Finelli, 2011; author’s translation). Objective historical conditions are, therefore, never the ultimate explanatory tool to understand the failure of a revolutionary project, and conversely only a project capable of moving beyond immediate reality to produce a creative moment of its own can overcome passivity and become hegemonic. In fact,

[m]ass action is not possible while the masses remain unconvinced of the purposes it is pursuing or the means to achieve them. If it is to become a governing class, the proletariat must rid itself of all the residue of corporatism, of every syndicalist prejudice. What does this mean? It means that not only must the divisions between different jobs be overcome, but that to achieve consensus and to win the trust of the peasants and some of the semi-proletarian urban masses some prejudices have to be addressed as well as elements of egotism which still persist among workers even when they have left behind craft particularisms. The metal worker, the carpenter, the building worker will need to learn to see themselves as members of a class that will lead the peasants and the intellectuals, a class that can only win and build socialism if it is supported and followed by the majority of society. *If it does not achieve that [...] it will give*

¹⁰ For accounts that consider passive revolution as a political project see e.g.: Callinicos, 2010; Vianna, 1998.

the state the possibility of crushing the rising tide of workers' struggles and breaking the movement (quoted in Robaina, 2006; my emphasis).

The link is thus evident between the potential for the bourgeoisie to impose coercively its own control over society and the fallacies of subalterns' attempt to become true organic subjectivity (Badaloni, 2014, 102). The coerciveness of capital restructuring would in fact not be possible if it was not for the ideological (common sense), organizational (bureaucratic centralism) and interest-based (corporatism) fragmentation of potentially revolutionary social groups. Gramsci seems to reverse the general insight of critical theorists according to whom we can understand the continuation of capitalist practices as the result of increasing rationalisation and coerciveness of the capitalist system.

In this light, future studies should point not only to the significance of Gramsci in grappling with crucial theoretical concepts which allow us to overcome the fallacies of contemporary critical studies. At the same time, the *Prison Notebooks* could be a fruitful source to point in the direction of alternative lines of research that not only focus on how mechanisms of government tend to impose capitalist dynamics but also to how such logics are asserted, reproduced and can potentially be contested from the subalterns themselves. This challenges us to identify and perpetrate the forms of praxis that are capable of offsetting the dead mechanisms that seem to mechanically rule over our everyday life. Having this as an objective, the concept of passive revolution can be an important tool both to guide political praxis and to provide a coherent understanding of the connection between capitalist dominance and its potentially contested nature.

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