THE STRATEGY OF GRAMSCI

INTRODUCTION

Gramsci was one of the first revolutionary Marxists to reject the view that Marxism was a complete doctrine with all the answers to important questions. Instead he accepted that events represented a dynamic challenge to the standpoint of theory. The October revolution of 1917 indicated the need to adjust theory to the role of practice and the importance of activity, will and consciousness. (Article: ‘The Revolution against Capital’ in PPW p39-42) The historical fact of proletarian revolution occurring before the generalised development of the productive forces seems to contradict the orthodox Marxist view that the transition to socialism requires long-term capitalist development. However Gramsci’s theoretical flexibility could result in crude views such as the denial of the importance of objectivity without the role of humanity. His effective rejection of philosophical materialism meant he was inclined to consider Marxism as the unity of Hegelian idealism and the philosophy of praxis. This is a controversial viewpoint, but it enabled him to emphasise the significance of activity and consciousness. Ultimately Gramsci’s political superiority was based on his recognition of the importance of strategy. He was critical of the Socialist Party for its effective lack of a strategy of change. Gramsci was not dogmatic about the character of strategy and was prepared to modify strategy in relation to changing circumstances. This is why it would be wrong to reduce Gramsci’s strategy to what he advocated in any given moment in time. Instead his strategy for the overthrow of capitalism underwent many important changes.

1915-21

Between 1915-1921, Gramsci was critical of the political approach of the Socialist Party which was passive because of its positivist emphasis on the role of historical necessity and the conflation of the laws of nature and history. He was concerned to emphasise the active and dynamic role of human agency, and in this context developed a strategic standpoint that was based on the importance of modifying the concrete situation. Consequently he developed a stance of active opposition to the First World War which was based on developing working class resistance and contrasted this approach with the perspective of active neutrality of the Socialist Party. In the period of widespread factory occupations in 1920 he outlined a policy of the realisation of economic and political power of the Factory Councils. This would mean the working class could realise itself as producer and advance the prospect of the formation of an ethical state that could regulate production and politics on behalf of society. In this period Gramsci emphasised the importance of the role of the mass struggle of the working class and considered that the role of a party was to support and encourage the development of this process of class conflict. He also viewed the trade unions increasingly as sectional and defensive organisations that could not go beyond capitalism. The role of the trade union bureaucracy was conservative and based on an accommodation to capitalism.

In this period he was not reticent to define humanity in terms of conscious spirit and with the ability to bring about historical transformation. The Socialist Party is an organisation that represents the ideal of socialism and is a mass movement and yet is unable to actively realise its ideals. In contrast the Russian revolution represents the dynamism of the proletarian spirit, and change has occurred without resort to the role of Jacobinism. Gramsci defines Marxism in very innovative terms: “With Marx, history remains the domain of ideas, of the spirit, of the conscious activity of individuals, whether single or in co-operation. But the ideas, the spirit, take on substance, lose their arbitrary character; they are no longer fictitious religious or sociological abstractions. Their substance lies in economics, in practical activity, in the system of relations of production and exchange.”(PPW p55) History expresses is the events that occur with practical significance and the related realisation of the will. This is not voluntarist because what is being described is the ability of classes to be able to realise ends and bring about progress.

Class struggle waged by the proletariat represents the principle of intransigence but this should not result in historical impasse or inertia because the aim is to end the bourgeois character of the state. The standpoint of Marxism should not to bring about the demise of the state. The Russian revolution has been consolidated by the formation of a new state based on the unity of the Soviets and the Communist Party. In order to begin the process of the creation of socialism within capitalism the working class should elect localised assemblies and subject them to the control of the Socialist Party and trade unions. Workshop meetings would prepare the working class for the exercise of power. This strategy is advocated in 1918. The working class in this manner can promote the creation of state like institutions that represent an alternative to the parliamentary state of capitalism. However during 1919 Gramsci introduces important modifications to this strategy. In the article: ‘Unions and Councils’, (PPW p115-120) Gramsci argues that the Factory Councils are superior to the trade unions in relation to organisation of production and the promotion of solidarity. They can become the instruments of communist type production within capitalism. The Factory Councils can act to revitalise the trade unions and so overcome the sectional limitations of the trade unions. Trade Unions have become the justification of reformism and are in themselves unable to promote the emancipation of labour. This is why the agency of class struggle within the factories has become the factory council, and it is a syndicalist illusion to believe that the trade unions are the agency of revolutionary change. Instead the system of factory council nationally connects the producers and provides an alternative to capitalism. Furthermore, the Socialist Party is increasingly reformist in the period of revolutionary class struggle and consciously chooses to support bourgeois democracy and rejects the alternative of working class power.

The period 1919-20 is characterised by the strategic task of promoting revolution or alternatively a counterrevolutionary offensive will occur. Instead of acting in accordance with the demands of the class struggle, the Socialist Party is a spectator to events and its practice is defined by the limitations of parliamentary politics. Gramsci’s group in Turin are proposing that the Socialist party adopt a revolutionary programme. But Gramsci also argues that the revolutionary process cannot be defined by the role of political parties and instead it is defined by the working class acting to liberate the productive forces by organising production: “During the period in which the bourgeois class is economically and politically predominant, the real developments in the revolutionary process take place subterraneously, in the darkness of the factory and in the darkness of the minds of the countless multitudes that capitalism subjects to its laws.”(PPW, p164)The working class has become revolutionary because it is creating institutions based on the factory that represent an economic and political alternative to capitalism. This does not mean that the role of parties and trade unions has become superfluous. Instead they should promote this process of the formation of factory councils as the expression of socialism and the requirements of the productive forces: “The Party and the unions should not project themselves as tutors or as ready -made superstructures for this new institution, in which the historical process of the revolution is taking on a controllable historical form. They should project themselves as the conscious agents of its liberation from the constraining forces concentrated in the bourgeois state.”(PPW p167) This comment seems to imply that the political party should act politically to promote the economic struggle of transformation of the producers. The role of the party is secondary to the importance of mass struggle.

However in the article ‘Two Revolutions’, Gramsci seems to contradict important aspects of the above strategy and instead emphasised the crucial role of the Party regarding the importance of the political aspects of the seizure of state power. (PPW, p168-172) Arguably Gramsci has not clarified the relation between the working class and the party in the revolutionary process in precise terms. Instead the crucially important economic role of the working class in the revolution is contrasted with the political role of a party. But in his article on the role of the Communist Party, written in the winter of 1920, Gramsci emphases the importance of the party if the revolution is to be successful: “The distinguishing features of the proletarian revolution can only be looked for in the party of the working class, the Communist Party, which owes its existence and development to its disciplined organization of the will to form a state, the will to give a new proletarian order to the existing arrangement of physical forces and to lay the foundations of popular liberty.”(PPW, p189) This comment would imply that the spontaneity of the movement involved in developing factory councils is provided with organisation and political guidance by the role of the Communist Party.

Hence in an ambiguous manner Gramsci is suggesting that the working class can promote the possibility of the realisation of communism via the role of mass organisations like factory councils and the Soviets but the crucial aspect of this process is expressed by the Communist Party: “It is natural and historically justified that it should be precisely in a period such as this that the problem of forming a Communist Party should arise – a party representing a proletarian vanguard which has a precise consciousness of its historical mission, which will establish the new social order and be both initiator and protagonist of the new and unprecedented historical period.”(PPW p194)This conclusion is based on the fact that the Socialist Party has failed the working class because it lacks a strategy for change and is instead subject to the pressures of the militancy of the masses. However instead of responding to this pressure the Socialist Party is ineffective and disorientated. It is necessary to develop a communist group within the Socialist party that is able to relate to the radicalisation of the people in this period. The occupation of the factories in the autumn of 1920 poses the question of developing a nationwide inter-relation that can pose the question of promoting an alternative form of state power. Hence the role of the Communist group is to promote this perspective.

However by 1921 the emergence of the counterrevolutionary forces of Fascism indicates that it is necessary to overcome this threat if the possibility of revolutionary change is to occur. The struggle for workers control of the factories is still the primary aspect of the promotion of state power of the working class. It is necessary for the infant Communist Party to struggle within the trade unions to win them to the perspective of the formation of Factory Councils. The Socialist Party has abdicated this task and rejects any leadership role in the class struggle. The task is to fuse the factory councils with the Unions but the reactionary role of the trade union bureaucracy makes this task difficult. Differences between the Socialist Party and its revolutionary tendency have led to the formation of the Communist Party, and the Communist Party has established itself as the organisation of the revolutionary working class. Its goal is to unify the people within Factory councils and to advocate the alliance of the workers and peasants. Until it is possible to replace Parliament with alternative institutions the Communist Party will stand in elections and make propaganda for communism. By the summer of 1921 the strategic emphasis of Gramsci is changing in favour of assemblies of workers that would discuss the important issues. (SPW, p48-51) These organisations could become Soviets that would have the task of developing the struggle for state power.

The pact between the Socialist Party and the Fascists indicates the opportunism of the former. In contrast to the limitations of the Socialist Party the Communist Party is aware that popular resistance against the system is still premature, but it is a time for the preparation of armed struggle. The Communist Party will consult the working class about the necessity of struggle against reaction and capitalism and attempt to oppose the illusions generated by the Socialist Party that resistance is not necessary. The bourgeois democratic parliamentary apparatus conspires with the Fascists against the working class and so it is only when this political system is overthrown will it be possible to bring about proletarian revolution. This view is combined with support for the United Front tactic despite the hostility of the Socialist Party and trade unions towards the Communist party. Gramsci is still arguing that the support of the Socialist Party for Parliamentary institutions can only undermine the revolutionary struggle of the working class. (PPW, p242-243) But the onset of the victory of Fascism led to a major re-think by Gramsci in his article: ‘The Programme of L’Ordine Nuovo’ (SPW, p226-236) in this article he argued that the problem of Fascist state repression was creating sympathy for bourgeois democratic freedoms within the working class. This situation created the possibility of a democratic revolution which the Communist Party would not campaign for but would not oppose: “Now, I do not think that a relaxation of fascist pressure can be secured by the Communist party; today is the hour of the democratic opposition, and I think it necessary to let them proceed and even help them. What is necessary, first of all, is a “bourgeois revolution”, which will then allow the development of a working class politics.”(SPW, p230) In other words the Communist Party cannot oppose the aspiration for democratic freedom but it also should not be part of the vanguard actively attempting to realise this development. However Gramsci also expresses doubt that the aims of the constitutional opposition can be realised and this is why the Communist Party advocates the workers and peasant’s government as an alternative to Fascism. The very generation of the importance of the democratic opposition is promoting new strength within the working class and allowing the Communist Party to advocate its independent strategy of the alternative to fascism.

Gramsci is optimistic that the era of the domination of Fascism will soon be over. He suggests that the Fascist regime has not overcome economic crisis which means the wages of the workers are very low and has resulted in mass discontent and created the problems of the middle class. The establishment of stable support for Fascism has not been resolved. However the democratic opposition is still the basis of the forces of opposition. But they refuse to mobilise against the Fascist regime because they fear the prospect of proletarian revolution: “If they had wanted to carry out their duty, which was indicated by the masses in movement, the opposition forces would have had to give a definite political form to the state of affairs that existed objectively – but they refused. It would have been necessary to launch an appeal to the proletariat, which is alone capable of giving substance to a democratic regime. It would have been necessary to intensify the spontaneous strike movement which was beginning to emerge. The opposition forces were afraid of being overwhelmed by a possible working class insurrection.”(SPW, p259) The view being expressed is that the so-called democratic opposition is being compromised by accommodation to fascism, and the essence of democratic revolution is based on the leadership of the working class and the role of the Communist party. But it is possible that the democratic opposition can bring about constitutional change and an end to the fascist regime without the necessity of the role of the mass movement. Hence the task of the Communist Party in this situation is not the advocacy of a perspective of a struggle for state power and instead the crucial task is the preparation of the working class to strive for revolution in the future: “What should be the political attitude and the tactics of our party in the present situation? The situation is “democratic” because the broad working masses are disorganized, dispersed and fragmented into the undifferentiated people. Hence, whatever the immediate evolution of the crisis may be, we can only foresee an improvement in the political position of the working class and not a victorious struggle for power. The crucial task of our party consists in winning the majority of the working class. The phase which we are passing through is not that of a direct struggle for power, but rather a preparatory phase, of transition to the struggle for power: in short, a phase of agitation, propaganda and organization.”(SPW, p264) The immediate aim of the Communist Party is to overthrow the fascism of Mussolini and prevent the possibility of the advent of a semi-fascist regime that would involve the major opposition parties. Hence the aim is to bring about a genuine democratic revolution that would advance the prospect of socialism.

Gramsci argues that the very prospect for democracy to function is based on the fascist suppression of the mass activity of the working class. Fascism presides over a type of democratic regime that tolerates the role of bourgeois and reformist parties and also instigates a regime of terror against the working class. The Communist Party is advocating the formation of workers and peasants committees in order to organise the development of political struggle against fascism. This struggle will indicate that democracy is an ally of fascism and does not represent reliable support for the aims of the working class. The increasing failure of the democratic opposition to modify the character of fascism indicates that the choice is increasing between fascism or support for proletarian insurrection. Fascism has undermined the ability of the working class to organize and this in turn creates the conditions for democracy to function because of the weakened strength of the working class. Hence the task is to develop opposition to both fascism and democracy in terms of the Communist party promoting the role of workers and peasants assemblies. Growing unrest within the working class enhances the options for struggle and the limitations of the contradiction between fascism and democracy is replaced by the more genuine contradiction of the tension between fascism and the prospect of proletarian revolution.

Gramsci at a party school carries out an extensive reappraisal of his previous perspectives of the period 1915-21. He outlines how the economic struggle that culminates in the formation of workers control and factory councils cannot be successful without being complemented by the importance of the role of the political and the conscious struggle for socialism. He also argues that this revolutionary process has to be consolidated by the role of the ideological and the profound understanding of society and the balance of class forces by the Communist party. He also outlines in a contribution to the question of the tasks of the party how it is necessary to overcome the ultra-left illusion that it is possible to act to try and overthrow the fascist regime regardless of the political conditions, and he also opposes the right-wing tendency for political passivity and adaptation to the democratic opposition: “From this examination two fundamental problems arise.1. How do we develop our party so that it becomes a unity capable of leading the proletariat into struggle; winning and winning permanently. This is the problem of Bolshevisation.2. What real political activity our party should continue to carry out, in order to bring about a coalition of the anti-capitalist forces led by the revolutionary proletariat in the given situation: so as to overthrow the capitalist order in the first stage, and constitute the basis of the revolutionary Workers state in a second stage.”(SPW, p305) He concluded that the question of the development of a united front from below involved the importance of the communist party in facilitating the ability of the working class to act independently and to be effective in various types of struggles in order to realise the generation of the struggle against fascism in class terms: “The fundamental problem which the Communist Party must set out to resolve in the present situation is that of leading the proletariat back to an autonomous position as a revolutionary class; free from all influence of counterrevolutionary classes, groups and parties; capable of collecting around itself and leading all the forces which can be mobilized for the struggle against capitalism. The Communist Party must, therefore, intervene actively in all fields open to its activity, and must take advantage of all movements, all conflicts, and all struggles, even of a partial and limited character, in order to mobilize the proletarian masses and transport the resistance and opposition to fascism of the Italian working population onto a class terrain.”(SPW, p308)

In summarising this period it is important to recognise that the failure of the struggle to realise the power of the factory councils led Gramsci to acknowledge the importance of political factors. He recognised the importance of the reactionary role of the Socialist Party in demobilising the mass struggle, and he accepted the significance of the failure to construct an alliance between the working class and peasantry. The onset of Fascism meant that Gramsci understood the importance of a defensive strategy and the role of the united front. He was also less critical of the trade unions and recognised their role as mass organisations of the working class in a period of the economic offensive of the capitalist class. Primarily, he changed his view about the role of the party. He now considered that the party would have a leading role in the struggle against fascism and in promoting the alliance of the working class and peasantry. He called for a democratic revolution that would overthrow fascism. His approach conflicted with Bordiga’s justification of an elite party and reliance on a catastrophist strategy of the automatic development of the economic and political tendencies for the demise of capitalism.

THE THESES OF THE LYON CONGRESS

In the Theses of the Lyons Congress, of the Italian Communist Party, Gramsci and Togliatti carried out an analysis of the class structure of Italy and the importance of recent political events. They concluded that the limitations of the Socialist Party were the major contributing factor that enabled Fascism to achieve state power. However, Fascism has been unable to consolidate capitalism via the role of state repression and instead discontent has intensified. The forces of the so-called democratic opposition preferred conciliation with Fascism rather than encouragement of a mass movement of opposition to fascism. Hence it is the task of the Italian Communist Party to develop unity between the workers and peasants in order to prepare for an insurrection in order to overthrow the Fascist regime. It is necessary to reject the view that the Communist Party should be the left-wing of the democratic opposition to Fascism. The Communist Party cannot dictate to the working class that its leadership should be accepted. Instead only involvement with the working class will establish a political relationship between party and class: “We assert that the capacity to lead the class is related, not to the fact that the party “proclaims” itself its revolutionary organ, but to the fact that it “really” succeeds, as a part of the working class, in linking itself with all the sections of the class and impressing upon the masses a movement in the direction desired and favoured by objective conditions.”(SPW, p368)

In order to realise this aim of unity with the working class the party is involved in the trade unions and attempts to uphold the independence of the trade unions in relation to the Fascist attempt to integrate the unions into the state. The party advocates partial and immediate demands that attempt to connect immediate and specific struggles with general political objectives: “The Communist Party links every immediate demand to a revolutionary objective; makes use of every partial struggle to teach the masses the need for general action and for insurrection against the reactionary rule of capital; and seeks to ensure that every struggle of a limited nature is prepared and led in such a way as to be able to lead to the mobilization and unification of the proletarian forces, and not to their dispersal.”(SPW, p370)In other words the Party promotes the unity of partial struggles in terms of the generalised dynamic of intermediate demands and the construction of the united front. The aim is to realise the workers and peasants government, but this is the political formula to develop support for the dictatorship of the proletariat. The Communist Party will support democratic demands but also attempt to indicate that these can only be realised when they become part of the struggle for socialism. It is an illusion to believe that the fascist regime can be modified in a democratic manner as suggested by the bourgeois democratic opposition. The primary task of the Communist Party is to advance the unity of the working class because this is crucial for the progress of class struggle, and to this end the party advocates the formation of workers and peasant committees. The limitation of the various other parties, including the left-wing Maximalist wing of the Socialist Party, means that the character of the united front is a united front from below.

The Communist Party is also prepared to support the demands of other social forces despite these not being part of their action programme. The reasoning for this standpoint is because these demands can advance the prospect of support for more revolutionary demands: “These intermediate solutions cannot all be foreseen, because they must in all cases be adapted to reality. But they must be such as to be able to constitute a bridge towards the party’s slogans; and it must always be evident to the masses that if they were to be realized, this would lead to an acceleration of the revolutionary process and a beginning of wider struggles.”(SPW, p374)Hence the Communist Party should not be reticent about adopting the demands of the democratic parties. This would mean undermining illusions in these democratic parties at the level of deeds. The point is that the reluctance of the democratic parties to struggle to realise democracy in a principled manner would indicate that the only serious party in favour of democracy is the Communist Party.

The strategic slogan that expresses the struggle for unity is the aim of the workers and peasants government. Popular support for this slogan would mean the development of a revolutionary struggle for state power and the prospect of civil war. This perspective means the actual content of the workers and peasant governmental slogan is the realisation of the dictatorship of the proletariat: “The party could be led into serious deviations from its task as leader of the revolution if it were to interpret the workers and peasants government as corresponding to a real phase of development of the struggle for power: in other words, if it considered that this slogan indicated the possibility for the problem of the state to be resolved in the interests of the working class in any other form than the dictatorship of the proletariat.”(SPW, p375)

ADDITIONAL STRATEGIC CONCLUSIONS PRIOR TO THE PRISON NOTEBOOKS

Gramsci argued in an assessment of the history of the Italian Communist Party that it had been able to overcome the historic contradiction between the spontaneous dynamism of the struggles of the working class and the organisational limitations of the Socialist Party: “The greatest weakness of the traditional working class organization lay essentially in the permanent imbalance – which became catastrophic at the climatic moments of mass activity - between the capacity of the organizing cadres of the party and the spontaneous upsurge from the base. It is thus clear that our party has succeeded, in spite of the extremely unfavourable conditions of the present period, in overcoming this weakness to a notable degree, and in predisposing coordinated and centralized organizational forces which can insure the working class against the errors and inadequacies which appeared in the past.”(SPW, p385 -386) Gramsci is articulating the view that the question of success in the anti-capitalist struggle depends on the relation between the Communist party and the working class. The working class is capable of mass activity but the Party is crucially important for the selection of cadres from the working class in order to provide leadership and uphold the political independence of the working class from other class forces. Gramsci also outlined how the question of the worker-peasant alliance was crucial for the development of mass opposition to Fascism.

Gramsci is also aware in this period, 1925-26 that the demise of fascism may result in the development of the success of the democratic opposition. The role of the Communist Party is to uphold its perspective of a revolutionary alternative to fascism, or failing this possibility to try and ensure that the democratic interlude is brief. In an article: ‘ Once Again On the Organic Capacities of the Working Class’, Gramsci still defends the historical significance of the movement for workers control and the occupation of the factories.(SPW, p417-421) e outlinesHe0H1HHe outlines how this movement enhanced the capacity for the self-government of the factories, and expressed the highest forms of solidarity of the workers. The aspect of failure was represented by the role of the Socialist Party and the trade unions who effectively opposed the occupations. The implicit point he is making is that this standpoint of workers control was valid in the past, but the present demands additional aspects of the class struggle if success is to be realised.

In his article: ‘Some Aspects of the Southern Question’ Gramsci contends that it is necessary to develop the alliance of the Southern peasants and Northern working class in order to oppose the bloc of the Northern capitalists and Southern landowners: “The proletariat can become the leading….. and the dominant class to the extent that it succeeds in creating a system of class alliances which allows it to mobilize the majority of the working population against capitalism and the bourgeois state. In Italy, in the real class relations which exist there, this means to the extent that it succeeds in gaining the consent of the broad peasant masses.”(SPW, p443) The domination of the reactionary bloc has been upheld by the role of the Southern intellectual, most notably the liberal philosophy of Croce. Gramsci is beginning to outline how the most important strategic tasks have an inherent ideological and philosophical aspect. In other words important aspects of his later contribution to strategy are already being developed in his conception of the united front, the role of the worker and peasant alliance, and the political complexities of the struggle against Fascism. Within the limitations of the politics of the Fifth Congress of the Communist International Gramsci is proving to be a flexible and creative thinker about the problem of strategy.

THE PRISON NOTEBOOKS

The most complex conception of revolutionary strategy was developed in his Prison Notebooks. This was based on the view that economic crisis was not sufficient for the prospect of promoting proletarian revolution and transition to socialism. His standpoint became opposed to the economic catastrophist approach of the Comintern, which was adopted by its Sixth Congress. Gramsci recognised that revolution in the advanced capitalist countries of the West would not be similar to the situation in Russia. The demands of war meant the authority of the Tsarist state collapsed, and as a result the Bolsheviks were able to lead a victorious revolutionary struggle. In contrast, Gramsci recognised that the role of the state in the West was consolidated by the hegemony of the ruling class within civil society. This situation was made possible by the role of ideology and the capacity of the ruling class to establish a historic bloc of the dominant and subordinate classes in favour of capitalism. It was possible in this sense to create universal support for the existing system. Consequently it would be necessary for the revolutionary party to develop a strategy based on the war of position, or the systematic generation of the influence of a counter-hegemonic historic bloc that would be able to challenge the economic, political and ideological importance of capitalism. This strategy contrasted with the success of the war of movement in Russia. Gramsci still considered that the alliance of the working class and peasants in Italy would be vital if Italian capitalism was to be overthrown. Gramsci did not reject the continued strategic importance of the war of movement, or insurrection, but he understood that in order for this revolutionary action to occur it was necessary to initially realise the success of the struggle for hegemony within civil society.

The standpoint of the war of position was connected to the importance of the role of the Communist party. The party would consist of organic intellectuals who would be able to relate to the mass movement in terms of the articulation of strategy and the historic interests of the working class. If the party was no longer able to carry out these tasks it would not represent the interests of the working class. This is what occurred in relation to the Socialist Party. Its failure to articulate a strategy of revolutionary change meant that it failed to express the interests of the working class and instead became a sectional party based on the requirements of the trade union bureaucracy. An important am of the Communist party is to represent the national-popular will of the working class and its allies. This development is similar to the ability of the Jacobins during the French revolution to represent the aims and aspirations of the French people. The party as the organisation of organic intellectuals has to relate to the common sense views of the people, but this process is dialectical in that the party attempts to indicate the limitations of common sense and therefore defends a culture that goes beyond bourgeois ideology and advocates the formation of a Socialist state. In order to be a party of organic intellectuals the party is democratic and based on freedom of discussion and the importance of the creative initiative of the membership. This conception contrasts with Bordiga’s elitist and over-centralised view of the party that is based on the domination of the process of policy formation by the leadership.

The primary limitation of Gramsci’s strategic conception is that it does not allow for the importance of non-party mass organisations in relation to the development of hegemony and the prospect of revolution. Gramsci ignores the role of Factory Councils and economic democracy in his perspective of the war of position. His concern to criticise economic catastrophist views means that he also underestimates the significance of spontaneous mass actions. Indeed, he argues that the mechanical emphasis on the importance of rigid historical laws is connected to the view that they will be realised by spontaneous struggle. Hence, the only manner in which this dogmatic perspective can be rejected is by the development of a conception of the conscious relation between party and class. This standpoint of party revolution seems to reject the Marxist conception of the self-emancipation of the working class. However, this conclusion would be harsh because he also seems to imply that the very democratic character of the party would result in emulation of this example by the working class. The participatory role of the vanguard organised in the party would result in the construction of democratic organisations within society, and this development would express the advance of socialism within capitalism.

Specifically the ‘Prison Notebooks’ rejected Gramsci’s previous suspicion about Jacobinism and instead emphasised its importance for defining the national political will. The tradition of the French revolution is praised and no longer criticised. This viewpoint seems to suggest support for a party conception of the revolutionary process. Hence the role of mass struggles is neglected and instead the importance of spontaneity is criticised. Gramsci argues that the possibility of pure spontaneity as defined by syndicalism is not possible, and instead what could be possible is the relation of spontaneity to conscious leadership. Hence spontaneity without a coherent relation to the revolutionary party will result in defeat for the working class and victory for the ruling class: “Neglecting, or worse still despising, so-called “spontaneous” movements, i.e., failing to give them a conscious leadership or to raise them to a higher plane by inserting them into politics, may often have extremely serious consequences. It is almost always the case that a “spontaneous” movement of the subaltern classes is accompanied by a reactionary movement of the right-wing of the dominant class, for concomitant reasons. An economic crisis, for instance, engenders on the one hand discontent among the subaltern classes and spontaneous mass movements, and on the other conspiracies among the reactionary groups, who take advantage of the objective weakening of the government, in order to attempt coups d’état. Among the effective causes of the coups must be included the failure of the responsible groups to give any conscious leadership to the spontaneous revolts or to make them into a positive political factor.”(PN, p199)

This point may have historical validity, but if over-extended it could become the basis to reject the strategic importance of spontaneous mass struggle. It is interesting that Gramsci utilises Rosa Luxemburg’s support for the mass strike in order to critique the standpoint of the war of movement: “The immediate economic element (crises, etc) is seen as the field artillery which in war opens a breach in the enemy’s defences – a breach sufficient for one’s troops to rush in and obtain a definitive (strategic) victory, or at least an important victory in the context of the strategic line.”(PN, p233) The suggestion is that it is problematical to relate mass struggles to the prospect of victory in the process of class conflict. Gramsci is implying that the standpoint that economic crisis can promote mass struggle that results in a challenge to the state is effectively an economic determinist illusion. Rosa Luxemburg’s confidence in the development of mass struggle represents a dogma, and the view that the outcome of mass struggle is the intensification of class conflict represents a prediction that is often refuted by events. This is because the emphasis of the war of movement on the revolutionary implications of economic crisis does not automatically generate revolutionary struggle, or undermine the dominant power of the state. The standpoint of economic determinism suggests: “1.they breach the enemy’s defences, after throwing him into disarray and causing him to lose faith in himself, his forces, and his future; 2. In a flash they organise one’s own troops and create the necessary cadres (formed, until that moment, by the general historic process) in positions which enable them to encadre one’s scattered forces;3.In a flash they bring about the necessary ideological concentration on the common objective to be achieved.”(PN, p233)

It could be argued in Gramsci’s defence that this critique of the politics of economic determinism is a corrective to the political complacency of the Comintern that underestimated the difficulties involved in the development of conscious struggle against capitalism. But the problem is that he also seems to deny the possibility of mass spontaneous struggles acquiring revolutionary dimensions. These struggles could occur rapidly and result in challenges to state power. These types of development occurred in Span 1936 and France 1938. Hence Rosa Luxemburg’s perspective about the dynamics of the mass strike was not ‘historical mysticism’ as Gramsci contends. Instead it was able to accurately understand the tempo and dynamics of how economic struggle could acquire political significance. But Gramsci rejected her approach as a defence of economic determinism and complacency about the role of conscious struggle. However, this is a caricature of her standpoint which was based on the crucial necessity to relate the practice of the trade unions with the role of Marxist Social Democracy. Only in this manner could the activity of the trade unions be principled and capable of becoming revolutionary: “The separation of trade union practice from the theory of scientific socialism would mean to the German trade unions the immediate loss of all their superiority over all kinds of bourgeois trade unions, and their fall from the present height to the level of unsteady groping and mere dull empiricism. (Luxemburg, p76-77)

In other words, Luxemburg does not dispute the importance of the party, the role of theory and conscious political struggle. Instead she is for the intellectual hegemony of the party in relation to the practice of the trade unions. However, she is also against the organisational conservatism of the party potentially undermining the dynamism of mass struggles. This was a concern she shared with the Gramsci of the early 1920’s. But this concern was formally resolved by Gramsci in terms of his effective rejection of the importance of mass struggles. In the ‘Prison Notebooks’, his rejection of the war of movement also involved the justification of a party conception of revolution. The role of mass struggle was replaced by the conception of obtaining the support of the working class for communism within the institutions of civil society. The frontal assault of the war of movement which implied the significance of mass struggle was replaced by the tactic of siege which meant the communist Party was the active element in the war of position. The working class seemed to be relegated to secondary political importance. Mass struggles are envisaged as increasingly ineffective because they cannot bring about victory and transformation of the role of the state and the realisation of a new form of hegemony within civil society: “The massive structures of the modern democracies, both as State organisations, and as complex of associations in civil society, constitute for the art of politics as it were the “trenches” and the permanent fortifications of the front in the war of position: they render merely “partial” the element of movement which before used to be the “whole” of the war, etc”(PN, p243)

It is one thing to suggest that the question of strategy is more complex then that envisaged by the Communist International. But it is something else to imply that mass struggle has become antiquated. The result of this standpoint is that the role of the struggle against the hegemony of the ruling class becomes defined in philosophical terms. This is because the primary emphasis given to the ideological importance about how the common sense of the subordinated classes can reinforce the acceptance of the domination of the ruling classes. This is why it is crucially important to create organic intellectuals who can oppose the reactionary aspects of the common sense of the people. The organic intellectuals (the party) can promote the theory and practice that can overcome the limits of common sense and instead link common sense to the struggle against the state and ruling class.(PN, p330-335) The result of this analysis is elitist in that not only does it not explain the revolutionary agency of the working class but it also means the ability to criticise society and the capacity to promote revolutionary practice is limited to the role of the intellectuals: “Critical self-consciousness means, historically and politically, the creation of an elite of intellectuals. A human “mass” does not “distinguish” itself, does not become independent in its own right without, in the widest sense, organising itself; and there is no organisation without intellectuals, that is without organisers and leaders, in other words, without the theoretical aspect of the theory-practice nexus being distinguished concretely by the existence of a group of people “specialised” in conceptual and philosophical elaboration of ideas.”(PN, p334) Hence, the suggestion is that the increasing transformation of the members of the working class into intellectuals the greater is the prospect for the realisation of the strategy of the war of position. It could be argued that the class struggle becomes a question of intellectual conflict and the actual class struggle becomes relegated in importance. However, this criticism is not to suggest that the creation of organic intellectuals is not necessary for the creation of a revolutionary party. But this process does not replace the role of mass struggle in relation to the prospect of revolutionary change.

Gramsci is ambiguous about the chances of success of the war of movement or the war of position, in the short-term: “The problem is the following: can a rift between the popular masses and ruling ideologies as serious as that which emerged after the war be “cured” by the simple exercise of force, preventing the new ideologies from imposing themselves? Will the interregnum, the crisis whose historically normal solution is blocked in this way, necessarily be resolved in favour of a restoration of the old? Given the character of the ideologies, that can be ruled out – yet not in an absolute sense.”(PN, p276) Consequently, the strategy of hegemony does not necessarily uphold historical confidence about the future and the interregnum of fascism may not be replaced by genuine revolution. The lack of recognition of the role of mass struggle means that class conflict becomes reduced to the tensions between ideologies and this suggests that the traditional ideologies will still uphold the hegemony of the ruling class. Hence there is an impasse in the work of Gramsci that cannot be resolved without the recognition of the dynamic role of mass struggle.

One of Gramsci’s most important innovations concerns the question of the state. He argues that the character of the bourgeois state represent the relation between dictatorship and consent. This is why a strategy to end the domination of the ruling class involves the importance of hegemony, or the erosion of acceptance of the superiority of the ruling class. The situation has been complicated by the fact that increasingly the state is an ethical state that intervenes in civil society in order to relate the development of the productive forces to the welfare of the people. This means the role of revolution is about fully realising the ethical state and so establishing a state dedicated to the cultural and welfare needs of the people.(PN,p259-270)

CONCLUSION

Gramsci’s conception of revolution emphasises the importance of ideology and culture. If the majority of the people accept the world view of bourgeois ideology then revolution is unlikely to occur despite the possibility of economic crisis. Furthermore, the cultural subordination of the working class can only be overcome by a protracted period of the struggle for counter-hegemony. This perspective seemed to have been refuted by the connection of economic crisis to the immense class struggles of the 1930’s. But the fact that economic decline in the 1980’s, and since then, has not led to revolutionary struggles seems to confirm Gramsci’s views in limited terms. The lack of socialist culture in the working class of the advanced capitalist countries is a crucial factor explaining why discontent with austerity and crisis has not led to revolutionary type struggles. There seems to be no alternative to the importance of constructing a counter-hegemony within society.

The recent development of the crisis of capitalism has not resulted in the revolutionary transformation of society because of the importance of the hegemony of the ruling class which suggests that capitalism is the natural and eternal order of society. The mass protests that have taken place against the austerity policy have not challenged this hegemonic standpoint and also have failed to articulate a socialist alternative. This situation implies that the possibility to develop an alternative to capitalism will require a protracted process of the construction of a counter-hegemonic bloc that represents the aims of socialism. In this context Gramsci’s conception of organic intellectuals is vitally important if the common sense of the people that accepts capitalism is to be challenged and undermined. In other words Gramsci’s strategy of the war of position is very relevant because of the fact that very few people support the aspiration of socialism. But it is also necessary to emphasise that the generation of a counter-hegemonic bloc will not occur without establishing its relationship to mass struggles. Hence the approach of the war of position cannot gloss over having a connection to the war of movement. The development of a socialist culture is related to the question of the success of the mass struggles. In other words what is required is a strategy that unites the approach of the war of position and the war of movement. An emphasis on the war of position to the exclusion of the war of movement can result in opportunist degeneration similar to that of Euro-Communism; whilst upholding the approach of the war of movement to the exclusion of the war of position promotes adventurism and the isolation of the vanguard from the majority of the working class. Instead if both these approaches are united it is possible to construct a counter-hegemonic bloc that is effective in challenging bourgeois ideology and can generate the formation of revolutionary class consciousness. However the role of struggle is still crucial if the development of the political independence of the working class from the ruling class is to be realised.

Gramsci’s ultimate aim is the formation of a socialist state. He seems to depart from Marxist orthodoxy about the withering away of the state. Instead he suggests that a state based on the democratic organisations of the working class and the influence and guidance of the party can bring about socialism. He seems to have rejected Trotsky’s denial of the prospect of the building of socialism in one country, but also to be critical of Stalin’s bureaucratic centralism. Critics have suggested that Gramsci’s effective defence of the ethical state is the justification of totalitarianism. But it could be said in reply to this type of criticism that Gramsci’ aim of connecting democracy with the process of the construction of socialism means he would have been critical in practice if not in theory about the development of the one party state. Gramsci was not reticent about departing from Marxist orthodoxy if he considered that it contributed to clarity and adherence to principles. Hence he believed that denial of the role of the state under socialism expressed the influence of anarchism and should be rejected in favour of the conception of the ethical state. The legacy of Hegel was more explanatory than anarchism in relation to understanding the character of the society that was in transition to communism. The status of the state under communism could not be predicted but the guidance of the state was crucial if the transition to socialism and communism was to occur after the realisation of revolution.

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