

Reading Gramsci in an Era of Globalising Capitalism

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ABSTRACT *It is possible to read Gramsci – and through him, the tradition of historical materialism – in such a way that we are enabled to realise a potentially transformative politics of solidarity in a world where capitalist relations are extending and deepening, but which is nonetheless plural. A Gramscian-inflected historical materialism enables an understanding of globalising capitalism, its relations of power and structures of governance, as the product of struggles – at once material and ideological – among concretely situated social agents. When viewed in terms of a dialectical reading of Gramsci, these struggles may be seen as reassertions of situated knowledges and process-based understandings of social reality, antithetical to the abstract individualism residing in capitalism's core, and embodying possibilities for critical engagement, dialogue, and transformative politics in an era of globalising capitalism.*

KEY WORDS: Gramsci, historical bloc, transformative politics, globalising capitalism, International Relations

In recent years, the neo-Gramscian research programme in International Relations (IR) has been seriously challenged. Often cited in this regard is the influential critique by Randall Germain and Michael Kenny (1998). While such challenges can be re-invigorating and healthy for those obliged once again to think through and defend fundamental positions (see the exemplary defence by Morton 2003), I fear that their effect on debates within the larger subfield has been to obscure the ways in which a dialectical reading of Gramsci – one which seeks to interpret and reconstruct his work in terms of its relevance for our contemporary context of globalising capitalism – can be intellectually illuminating and politically enabling.

In particular, I want to suggest that it is possible to read Gramsci – and through him, the tradition of historical materialism – in such a way that we are enabled to realise a potentially transformative politics of solidarity in a world where capitalist relations are extending and deepening, but which is nonetheless plural. Although not

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without its tensions and limitations, Marxian theory provides critical leverage for understanding the structures and dynamics of capitalism, its integral if complex relationship to the modern form of state and the class-based powers it enables and the resistances these entail. Gramsci's rich if eternally inchoate legacy also suggests a conceptual vocabulary for a transformative politics in which a variety of anti-capitalist movements might coalesce in order to produce any number of future possible worlds whose very possibility is occluded by capitalism. In the present context of globalising capitalism and neo-imperialism, such resistance has taken the form of a transnational confluence of movements for global justice and peace (see Rupert 2003, 2004). A Gramscian-inflected historical materialism can help us to understand these movements as potentially containing the germ of new post-liberal and conceivably post-capitalist political cultures and forms of political practice. But before such possibilities can come into view, we must exert critical leverage upon the reifications of social life generated by capitalist relations and practices.

Capitalism, Social Power and Reification

One of the enduring insights of Marxian theory is that the seemingly apolitical economic spaces generated by capitalism – within and across juridical states – are permeated by structured relations of social power deeply consequential for political life and, indeed, for the (re)production of social life as a whole. These powers may be ideologically depoliticised – and thus rendered democratically unaccountable – in liberal representations separating a naturalised and privatised economy from the formally political sphere. The operation of this economy (and the implicit social powers residing within it) may then be represented as something approaching a universal social good, the engine of economic growth and a generalised prosperity (Rupert 2000: ch. 3; also Steger 2002). However another of these enduring Marxian insights is that social power relations are also *processes* – dynamic, contradictory and contestable.

On a dialectical Marxian view, capitalism entails liberation from the relations of direct politico-economic dependence characteristic of feudalism and other pre-capitalist forms, and hence presents possibilities for social individuation and 'political emancipation' within the parameters of republican forms of state. But capitalism simultaneously limits the historically real emancipatory possibilities it brings into being by (re-)subjecting persons to social domination through the compulsions of market dependence and the disabling effects of fetishism and its reification of social power relations. These dialectics of freedom and unfreedom, the powers they generate and resistances they engender, have produced families of capitalist historical structures which are fraught with tension and possibilities for change. Whether any such possibilities are realised, and in what particular ways, depends upon open-ended political struggles in which the power relations of capitalism will necessarily be implicated.

The critical leverage of a Marxian critique of capitalism is generated by its explicit focus on the social power relations that inhere in, and yet are obscured by, the structures and practices of capitalist production and exchange. Under historical conditions

of capitalism, social relations are mediated by things – commodities. Although the social division of labour under capitalism has brought together and collectively empowered human producers as never before, it simultaneously divides and disables them by representing their social relations as naturalised relations of exchange between commodities (the *locus classicus* is Marx 1977: ch. 1). To the extent that social relations are subsumed into a world of putatively independent objects – ‘things’ – communities of human producers are correspondingly disempowered. Inhabitants of the capitalist market, the subjects of capitalist modernity, are represented to themselves as abstract individuals who, as such, are largely unable to discern – much less communally to govern – the social division of labour in which they are embedded. The social division of labour takes on the appearance of objectivity, an uncontrollable force of nature, the mystical market whose price signals and compulsions individuals defy at our peril. Concomitantly, capitalism’s fetishism and reification serve to mystify social power relations by making power appear as a property of things which may be possessed (or not) by abstract individuals: ‘Like everything else in the bourgeois world, social power too is “mediated by things”.’

In a society where social relations take the form of relations between things, one must command those things in order to command people ... Power is externalised, residing now in objective forms outside of people rather than in their differential subjective [social] identities ... And it is this objectification which enables power to be exercised by individuals *as* individuals rather than as personifications of a community. It is no longer inscribed in their particular social personalities but instead becomes a *thing* which can be privately *possessed*, in principle by anyone. Its essential character as a relationship of persons is obscured by the ‘material’ forms through which it is mediated. (Sayer 1991: 66–67)

The implications for democracy are deeply ironic. For even as capitalism realises ‘political emancipation’ through the development of the liberal republic in which citizens are formally equal, it effectively reifies, privatises and de-politicises class-based social powers (by associating them with ownership of ‘private property’) and thereby evacuates from the purview of political democracy much of the substance of social life, vitiating democracy’s promise of social self-determination (see Marx 1975; Sayer 1991: ch. 2; Thomas 1994; Wood 1995; Dryzek 1996).

Behind these mystifications, capitalist social relations generate the possibility of asymmetrical social powers distributed according to class. Socially necessary means of production are constituted as private property, exclusively owned by one class of people. The other class, whose exclusion from ownership of social means of production is integral to the latter’s constitution as private property, are then compelled to sell that which they do own – labour-power, their capacity for productive activity – in order to gain access to those means of production and hence – through the wage – their own means of survival. As consumer of labour-power, the capitalist may control the actual activity of labour – the labour process – and appropriate its product, which

is then subsumed into capital itself. In Jeffrey Isaac's apt summary, 'the capitalist class thus possesses two basic powers: the power of control over investment, or appropriation; and the power to direct and supervise the labour process' (1987: 126; the *locus classicus* is Marx 1977: 291–292; see also Bowles & Gintis 1986: 64–91; Wood 1995: 28–31, 40–44). As *employers*, capitalists and their managerial agents attempt to assert control over the transformation of labour-power – the abstract, commodified capacity for labour – into actual labour. They seek to maximise the output of workers in relation to wages paid for labour-power, and may lengthen the work day or transform the labour process itself in order to do so (Marx 1977: 948–1084).¹ In the social position of *investors*, their decisions directly determine the social allocation of labour and resources – the pace of aggregate economic activity and the shape of the social division of labour – and indirectly limit the scope of public policy through the constraint of 'business confidence' and the implicit threat of 'capital strike' and transnational flight (Block 1977: 16; Bowles & Gintis 1986: 88–90). Insofar as these social powers are effectively privatised – associated with private ownership and exchange of property among juridically equal individuals in an apparently de-politicised economic sphere – they are ideologically mystified and democratically unaccountable (Thomas 1994; Wood 1995).

Anti-democratic and disabling as they might be, these class-based powers are neither uncontestable in principle nor uncontested in fact. Like all relations of social power, capitalist power relations are reciprocal, constituting a 'dialectic of power' subject to ongoing contestation, renegotiation and restructuring (see Isaac 1987). They represent, in short, historically particular forms of social power. As such, class powers must be actualised in various concrete sites of social production where class is articulated with other socially meaningful identities resident and effective in those historical circumstances. Capitalist power over waged labour has been historically articulated with gendered and raced forms of power: separation of workplace from residence and the construction of ideologies of feminised domesticity rationalising unpaid labour; ideologies of white supremacy rationalising racial segregation and inequality; gendered and raced divisions of labour; and so forth. These relations of race and gender have had important effects on class formation (e.g. Barrett 1988; Brenner 1993; Goldfield 1997). This implies that in concrete contexts class cannot be effectively determining without itself being determined. However this is not to say, in some pluralist sense, that class is only one of a number of possible social identities all of which are equally contingent. Insofar as productive interaction with the natural world remains a necessary condition of all human social life (Marx 1977: 290), I would maintain that understandings of social power relations which abstract from the social organisation of production must be radically incomplete.

Common Sense, Historical Bloc, and Transformative Politics

If Marx left us with incisive theorisations of capitalism, its core structures and constitutive tensions, it was the Italian political theorist and communist leader Antonio Gramsci who contributed to the historical materialist tradition a conceptual vocabu-

lary with which to enable processes of transformative politics. Marx suggested that socialist transformation might emerge out of the confluence of capitalism's endemic crisis tendencies, the polarisation of its class structure and the intensified exploitation of the proletariat and, most importantly, the emergence of the latter as a collective agent through the realisation of its socially productive power, heretofore developed in distorted and self-limiting form under the conditions of concentrated capitalist production (Marx 1977). Gramsci accepted in broad outline Marx's analysis of the structure and dynamics of capitalism (Gramsci 1971: 34, Q12§2; 201–202, Q9§67), but was unwilling to embrace the more mechanical and economic interpretations of Marx circulating in the international socialist movement (see his swinging critique of Bukharin's crude materialism, 1971: 419–472, Q11§*passim*).²

For Gramsci theory and practice are *internally related* such that progressive social change does not automatically follow in train behind economic developments, but must instead be produced by historically situated social agents whose actions are enabled and constrained by their social self-understandings (Gramsci 1971: 164–165, Q13§18; 172, Q13§16; 326, Q11§12; 375–377, Q11§63, Q7§21; 407–408, Q7§24; 420, Q11§13; 438, Q11§15).³ 'The majority of mankind are philosophers in so far as they engage in practical activity and in their practical activity (or in their guiding lines of conduct) there is implicitly contained a conception of the world, a philosophy' (1971: 344, Q10II§17). As integral aspects of human social self-production, reflecting the internal relation of theory and practice, these 'popular beliefs ... are themselves material forces' (1971: 165, Q13§18). Thus, for Gramsci, popular 'common sense' becomes a critical terrain of political struggle (1971: 323–334, Q11§12; 419–425, Q11§13). His theorisation of a social politics of ideological struggle – which he called 'war of position' to distinguish it from a Bolshevik strategy of frontal assault on the state (1971: 229–239, Q1§134, Q1§133, Q13§24, Q7§16, Q6§138; 242–3, Q13§7) – contributed to the historical materialist project of de-reifying capitalist social relations (including narrowly state-based conceptions of politics, e.g. 1971: 268, Q8§130) and constructing an alternative – more enabling, participatory, intrinsically democratic and open-ended – social order out of the historical conditions of capitalism.

Popular common sense could become a ground of struggle because, for Gramsci, it is not univocal and coherent, but an amalgam of historically effective ideologies, scientific doctrines and social mythologies. This historical 'sedimentation' of popular common sense 'is not something rigid and immobile, but is continually transforming itself, enriching itself with scientific ideas and with philosophical opinions which have entered ordinary life. [It] is the folklore of philosophy' (Gramsci 1971: 326, Q11§12). As such, it is 'fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential, in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is' (1971: 419, Q11§13). Gramsci understood popular common sense not to be monolithic or univocal, nor was hegemony an unproblematically dominant ideology which simply shut out all alternative visions or political projects. Rather, common sense was understood to be a syncretic historical residue, fragmentary and contradictory, open to multiple interpretations and potentially supportive of very different

kinds of social visions and political projects. And hegemony was understood as the unstable product of a continuous process of struggle, ‘war of position,’ ‘reciprocal siege’ (1971: 182, Q13§17; 210, Q13§23; 239, Q6§138; 323–34, Q11§12; 350, Q10II§44; 419–425, Q11§13).

Gramsci’s political project thus entailed addressing the popular common sense operative in particular times and places, making explicit the tensions and possibilities within it as well as the socio-political implications of these, in order to enable critical social analysis and transformative political practice. ‘First of all’, Gramsci says of the philosophy of praxis,

it must be a criticism of ‘common sense’, basing itself initially, however, on common sense in order to demonstrate that ‘everyone’ is a philosopher and that it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone’s individual life, but of renovating and making ‘critical’ an already existing activity. (1971: 330–331, Q11§12)

His aim was ‘to construct an intellectual-moral bloc which can make politically possible the intellectual progress of the mass and not only of small intellectual groups’, and thereby ‘to create the conditions in which this division [leaders/led] is no longer necessary’, and in which ‘the subaltern element’ is ‘no longer a thing [objectified, reified] but an historical person ... an agent, necessarily active and taking the initiative’ (1971: 332–333, Q11§12; 144, Q15§4; 337, Q11§12; also 346, Q11§59; 349, Q10II§44; 418, Q11§67). Instead of a Bolshevik vanguardism which would deliver to the (objectively preconstituted and cognitively disabled) working class an historical vision formulated from an Archimedean point populated by professional revolutionaries, at the core of Gramsci’s project was a critical pedagogy.⁴ This took as its starting point the tensions and possibilities latent within popular common sense, and sought to build out of the materials of popular common sense an emancipatory political culture and a social movement to enact it – not just another hegemony rearranging occupants of superior/subordinate social positions, but a *transformative* counter-hegemony.

Gramsci’s historical materialism understands history as a complex and contradictory story of social self-production under specific social circumstances. In line with more dialectical interpretations of Marx, Gramsci denies that there exists any transhistorical human nature, and insists that what we are in any given place and time is produced through the ‘complex of social relations’ in which historically situated persons live their lives, (re-) produce their social existence, and develop their self-understandings:

man becomes, he changes continuously with the changing of social relations ... Each individual is the synthesis not only of existing relations, but of the history of these relations ... The ‘societies’ in which a single individual can take part are very numerous, more than would appear. It is through these ‘societies’ that the individual belongs to the human race. (1971: 355, Q7§35; 353, Q10II§54)

The meaning of this social history, then, resists reduction to simple formulae: ‘The experience on which the philosophy of praxis is based cannot be schematised; it is history in all its infinite variety and multiplicity’ (1971: 428, Q11§25). But while history is infinitely complex, from within the context of capitalist modernity – with its dialectical tensions between social unification and separation – it is socially possible to imagine grounds for emancipatory collective action and social self-determination. Gramsci’s historical materialism thus envisions a process of ‘becoming which ... does not start from unity, but contains in itself the reasons for a possible unity’ (Gramsci 1971: 356, Q7§35).

The unity of history (what the idealists call unity of the spirit) is not a presupposition, but a continuously developing process. Identity in concrete reality determines identity in thought, and not vice versa ... every truth, even if it is universal, and even if it can be expressed by an abstract formula of a mathematical kind (for the sake of the theoreticians), owes its effectiveness to its being expressed in the language appropriate to specific concrete situations. If it cannot be expressed in such specific terms, it is a Byzantine and scholastic abstraction, good only for phrase-mongers to toy with. (Gramsci 1971: 201, Q9§63)

In Gramsci’s words, ‘Politics in fact is at any given time the reflection of tendencies in the structure, but it is not necessarily the case that these tendencies must be realised’ (1971: 408, Q7§24). ‘In reality one can “scientifically” foresee only the struggle, but not the concrete moments of the struggle, which cannot but be the results of opposing forces in continuous movement, which are never reducible to fixed quantities since within them quantity is continually becoming quality’ (1971: 438, Q11§15). I understand all of this to mean that the class-based relations of production under capitalism create the *possibility* of particular kinds of collective agency, but this potential can only be realised through the political practices and struggles of concretely situated social actors, practices which must negotiate the tensions and possibilities – the multiple social identities, powers and forms of agency – resident within popular common sense. This interpretation is, I believe, fully consistent with the relational social ontology at the core of Gramsci’s thought:

one could say that each one of us changes himself, modifies himself to the extent that he changes and modifies the complex relations of which he is the hub. In this sense the real philosopher is, and cannot be other than, the politician, the active man [*sic*] who modifies the environment, understanding by environment the *ensemble* of relations which each of us enters to take part in. If one’s own individuality is the *ensemble* of these relations, to create one’s personality means to acquire consciousness of them and to modify one’s own personality means to modify the *ensemble* of these relations. (Gramsci 1971: 352, Q10II§54, original emphasis)

Gramsci was, of course, a Marxist, and assigned to class identity a relatively privileged position in his vision of transformative anti-capitalist politics:

in reality, only the social group that poses the end of the state and its own end as the target to be achieved can create an ethical state – i.e., one which tends to put an end to the internal divisions of the ruled, etc., and to create a technically and morally unitary social organism ... The content of the political hegemony of the new social group which has founded the new type of state must be predominantly of an economic order: what is involved is the reorganisation of the structure and the real relations between men on the one hand and the world of the economy or of production on the other. (Gramsci 1971: 259, Q8§179; 263, Q8§141; also Gramsci 1971: 139–40, Q8§132; 148, Q13§21; 151, Q13§33; 227, Q3§119)

Yet Gramsci's Marxism was a historicism which explicitly disavowed the notion that historical materialism represented trans-historical or universal truth. He derided as 'metaphysics' not just speculative idealism but 'any systematic formulation that is put forward as an extra-historical truth, as an abstract universal outside of time and space', explicitly including in this critique the 'metaphysical materialism' represented by Bukharin (1971: 437, Q11§31). Rather, Gramsci insisted that the 'philosophy of praxis' (his prison code for historical materialism, implicitly emphasising the (re-)unification of theory and practice) was a *situated knowledge*, constructed within and relevant to the historical relations of capitalism in particular times and places: 'the philosopher of praxis ... cannot escape from the present field of contradictions, he cannot affirm, other than generically, a world without contradictions, without immediately creating a utopia' (1971: 405, Q11§62). Upon the historical supercession of capitalism, then, historical materialism would be superseded by other forms of knowledge relevant to their own socio-historical context (1971: 201, Q9§63; 248–249, Q5§127; 404–407, Q11§62; 436–437, Q11§14; 445–446, Q11§17). This understanding of historical materialism as situated knowledge implies, at the very least, the potential for productive political dialogue with other forms of situated knowledge constructed in contexts where capitalism has been articulated with various kinds of social identities and relations not reducible to class.

Despite Gramsci's insistence that a counter-hegemonic bloc should be led by anti-capitalist forces (1971: 259, Q8§179; 263, Q6§88), his vision of this historical bloc in terms of a dialogic process creates openings for engagement with other situated knowledges in ways which, his relational ontology implies, will reshape the identities of all participants in the conversation. Gramsci emphasises the transformative potential of such a relational vision by interpreting politics – entailing the historical problem of leaders/led – in terms of education (1971: 242, Q13§7; 247, Q13§11), which to the extent that it is successful is transformative of the teacher/student relation along with the parties embedded within that relation.

An historical act can only be performed by 'collective man', and this presupposes the attainment of a 'cultural-social' unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous aims, are welded together with a single aim, on the basis of an equal and common conception of the world ... This problem can and must be related to the modern way of considering educational doctrine and practice, according to which the relationship between teacher and pupil is *active and reciprocal so that every teacher is always a pupil and every pupil a teacher* ... Every relationship of 'hegemony' is necessarily an educational relationship and occurs not only within a nation, between the various forces of which the nation is composed, but in the international and world-wide field, between complexes of national and continental civilisations. (Gramsci 1971: 349–50, Q10II§44, emphasis added)

The political-educational process he envisions should be distinguished from indoctrination insofar as the former entails reciprocal development and seeks to enable the student to produce new truths independent of his or her teacher and, in the process, to teach the teacher, thereby transforming their relation:

learning takes place especially through a spontaneous and autonomous effort of the pupil, with the teacher only exercising a function of friendly guide – as happens or should happen in the university. To discover a truth oneself, without external suggestions or assistance, is to create – even if the truth is an old one. It demonstrates a mastery of the method, and indicates that in any case one has *entered the phase of intellectual maturity in which one may discover new truths*. (Gramsci 1971: 33, Q12§1, emphasis added)

The relation teacher/student (and leader/led) is then reciprocal but (in the context of capitalist modernity) initially asymmetrical: Gramsci aims at developing the reciprocity of the relation until the asymmetry approaches the vanishing point. I am suggesting, in other words, that Gramsci's political project aims at overcoming the historical division between leaders and led through 'active and reciprocal' processes of transformative dialogue as an integral part of the reconstruction of social relations and identities. This is why, I believe, he emphasises (contrary to the mechanical operations of economistic Marxisms) that the core of his pivotal concept of 'historical bloc' entails 'a necessary reciprocity between structure and superstructure, a reciprocity which is nothing other than the real dialectical process' (1971: 366, Q10II§12).

How then to account for his insistence that this process should be led, initially at least, by class-identified social forces (1971: 139–140, Q8§132; 148, Q17§37; 151, Q13§33; 227, Q3§119; 259, Q1§47; 263, Q6§88) and that the counter-hegemonic historical bloc should be 'one hundred percent homogeneous on the level of ideology' in order to effect a social transformation (1971: 366, Q10II§12; also, less categorically, 158, Q15§6; 168, Q13§23; 328, Q11§12; 445, Q11§17; but compare the seemingly much more rigid formulation in 1971: 265, Q6§136)? It is interesting

to observe that the assertion of ‘necessary reciprocity’ between structure and superstructure quoted in the paragraph above occurs immediately following Gramsci’s suggestion that an historical bloc must be ‘one hundred percent homogeneous on the level of ideology’ etc., and hence implies a critique of economism (sharply made elsewhere in the *Prison Notebooks*: see Gramsci 1971: 158–168 Q13§18, Q13§23, 419–472 Q11§13–34) which would undercut a simple class-reductionist interpretation of what he meant by ‘homogeneous’. Rather than reading Gramsci as straightforwardly (and, in light of his larger project, perversely) reasserting the economistic Marxist eschatology of the ‘universal class’ as historical messiah, I would make sense of these claims in the context of the relational theory of transformative process sketched out here. I understand Gramsci to be suggesting that, in a capitalist social context, the necessary condition for any sort of transformative project whatever is a re-opening of political horizons effectively foreclosed by capitalist social relations and their associated self-understandings. Whatever else they may be or become (i.e., ‘history in all its infinite variety and multiplicity’), transformative politics from within a capitalist context must necessarily entail shared anti-capitalist commitments in order to open up future possible worlds which are obscured by the social identities of abstract individualism and disabling ideologies of fetishism and reification produced by capitalism.

But the counter-hegemonic historical bloc should not be ‘homogeneous’ in the sense of annihilation of meaningful political difference, a unitary and uniform class-based identity imposed by a party uniquely in possession of a full understanding of history (although see Gramsci 1971: 265, Q14§13 for a passage which, if abstracted out of the larger relational context I am suggesting here, might be construed in this way). Homogeneity in this strongest sense would entail a self-defeating refusal to engage with, learn from and reciprocally develop potential allies, a stance of ‘intransigence’ which Gramsci derisively identifies with ‘economistic superstition’ (1971: 164, Q13§18).

It is clear that this aversion on principle to compromise is closely linked to economism. For the conception on which this aversion is based can only be the iron conviction that there exist objective laws of historical development similar in kind to natural laws, together with a belief in a predetermined teleology like that of a religion. (Gramsci 1971: 167–168, Q13§23)⁵

If the historical supersession of capitalism is to be achieved, this will entail a relational transformation not just of the social-structural environment but of the participants in the struggle themselves. Gramsci’s vehicle for the realisation of this kind of transformation was the historical bloc, led/educated – initially at least – by a class-identified political party:

Clearly it will be necessary to take some account of the social group of which the party in question is the expression and most advanced element. The history of a party, in other words, can only be the history of a particular social group.

But this group is not isolated; it has friends, kindred groups, opponents, enemies. The history of any given party can only emerge from the complex portrayal of society and state (often with international ramifications too). (Gramsci 1971: 151, Q13§33)

Although every party is the expression of a social group, and of one social group only, nevertheless in certain given conditions [a counter-hegemonic bloc] certain parties [the party of the non-owners of capital] *represent a single social group precisely insofar as they exercise a balancing and arbitrating function between the interests of their group and those of other groups, and succeed in securing the development of the group which they represent with the consent and assistance of the allied groups.* (Gramsci 1971: 148, Q13§21, emphasis added).

In other words, the party of those subordinated under capitalism's class-based power relations can realise its potential as such only by transcending a narrow, instrumental or sectarian approach to politics and by attaining hegemonic leadership of a bloc of social forces committed to attaining post-capitalist futures (also Gramsci 1971: 180–182, Q13§17). Gramsci's historical bloc is not a one-way street, nor is it based on an instrumental understanding of compromise in which the constituent groups and their core interests remain essentially the same even as they accommodate one another. Rather the counter-hegemonic historical bloc involves the transformation of all parties actively involved in its construction, including the leading party:

The development of the party into a state [that is, a new form of collective social self-determination, 'an integral state, and not into a government technically understood'] reacts upon the party and requires of it a continuous reorganisation and development, just as the development of the party and state into a conception of the world, i.e., into a total and molecular (individual) transformation of the ways of thinking and acting, reacts upon the state and party, compelling them to reorganise continually and confronting them with new and original problems to solve (Gramsci 1971: 267, Q17§51).

Since every party is only the nomenclature for a class, it is obvious that the party which proposes to put an end to class divisions will only achieve complete self-fulfillment when it ceases to exist because classes, and therefore their expressions, no longer exist (1971: 152 Q14§70).

The goal of this process is not the permanent institutionalisation of the rule of one particular, preconstituted social group or its party over all others, but the transformation of capitalist social relations and their characteristic structural separations of state/society, politics/economics, theory/practice and so on, in order to enable the devolution of implicitly class-based political rule into a more generalised social self-determination – a future for which the democratisation of economic relations (the

‘regulated society,’ Gramsci 1971: 257, Q6§12; 263, Q6§88) would be a necessary condition. ‘The [new, integral] state’s goal is its own end, its own disappearance, in other words the re-absorption of political society into civil society’ (Gramsci 1971: 253, Q5§127; also 260, Q1§46; 263, Q6§88).

In light of all this, I suggest that Gramsci’s counter-hegemonic bloc may be understood as ‘homogeneous’ to the degree that it develops a common rejection of capitalism’s abstract individuals in favour of more socially-grounded relational ontologies, process-oriented visions of social reality, and acknowledgements of the historical situatedness of political knowledge and practice. Once developed from within popular common sense, these elements of a ‘homogeneous – in other words coherent and systematic – philosophy’ (Gramsci 1971: 419, Q11§13) constitute the necessary common ground for forging an anti-capitalist bloc which would, if successful, construct new forms of political community and open doors to a rich variety of possible futures all of which are occluded by capitalism’s reification of social life. Once this post-capitalist political horizon was approached, the anti-capitalist bloc would lose its historical reason for existence and its social condition of intelligibility. It would transform itself in ways appropriate to the new social context and new identities it had brought into being, and would thus be superseded by new forms of social self-determination.

What then am I to make of Gramsci’s distinction between effective and historically organic ideologies on the one hand, and, on the other ‘arbitrary, rationalistic, or “willed”’ ideologies based on empty rhetoric and fleeting polemic (Gramsci 1971: 376–377, Q7§19)?⁶ I am deeply skeptical of any interpretation of this distinction that is premised on economistic notions of base and superstructure. Gramsci’s central concept of historical bloc, as I understand it, is predicated on reinterpreting the Marxian base/superstructure metaphor in terms of an internal relation in which each is – as an aspect of their mutually constitutive relation – already present in the other and neither is understandable apart from their inter-relation (e.g. Gramsci 1971: 377, Q7§19, Q7§21). This is the dialectical underpinning for Gramsci’s claims that ‘popular beliefs ... are themselves material forces’ (Gramsci 1971: 165, Q13§18) and that ‘historical bloc’ entails ‘a necessary reciprocity between structure and superstructure, a reciprocity which is nothing other than the real dialectical process’ (Gramsci 1971: 366, Q10II§12). Concretely, then, while supersession of the historical circumstances of capitalism would require anti-capitalist commitments in order to effectuate a transformative politics, those politics are not themselves reducible to class nor need they have an exclusive point of origin in the ‘economy’ – which is, after all, but one of the reified forms of appearance characteristic of capitalist social reality as a whole. Gramsci’s ‘totalitarianism’, then, is not a totalitarianism of class dictatorship but rather a view toward the transformation of capitalist social reality in its totality, overcoming separations of politics/economics, theory/practice, leaders/led, and so on (e.g. 1971: 335, Q11§12; 366, Q10II§12), a politics encompassing civil society, economy and state in order to re-integrate and transform the social life which has been fragmented, reified, naturalised and foreclosed under capitalism. Reconceptualising politics in this way re-opens processes of social self-determination which might lead to

an infinite variety of post-capitalist futures. Therefore any social movement whose self-understanding and mode of political practice challenges the reified structural boundaries and atomised self-understandings characteristic of capitalism appears to me as 'organic', potentially part of a transformative counter-hegemonic bloc.

What matters is that a new way of conceiving the world and man is born and that this conception is no longer reserved to the great intellectuals, to professional philosophers, but tends rather to become a popular, mass phenomenon, with a concretely world-wide character, capable of modifying (even if the results include hybrid combinations) popular thought and mummified popular culture. (Gramsci 1971: 417, Q15§61)

Conclusion

This is, I confess, not an innocent reading of Gramsci (I doubt whether any such thing is possible). Rather, my reading is motivated by a desire to reappropriate his thinking in order to enable a politics of solidarity in the increasingly unified but nonetheless plural world of globalising capitalism. I do not mean to suggest by this that Gramsci's thinking entirely escapes the potential pitfalls of Marxian teleology (see, e.g. Gramsci 1971: 417, Q15§61), only that there are resources within his thought for auto-critique and continual re-opening of political possibility. And Gramsci offers these resources without committing the obverse error of abstracting from capitalism and its historically specific relations. In the present context of globalising capitalism and neo-imperialism, such dialectical resources are no less important than they were when Gramsci wrote.

A Gramscian-inflected historical materialism enables an understanding of globalising capitalism, its relations of power and structures of governance, as the product of struggles – at once material and ideological – among concretely situated social agents. As the emergent neoliberal historical bloc has sought to (re)produce its social powers on an increasingly global scale, they have encountered recurrent bouts of more-or-less explicitly political resistance from a variety of social agents (some explicitly class-identified but many others not) who have challenged neoliberal representations and called into question not just the agenda of the neoliberal globalisation, but the legitimacy of the implicitly capitalist social powers, social positions, and identities underlying it (Rupert 2000, 2003, 2004). When viewed in terms of a dialectical reading of Gramsci, these struggles may be seen as reassertions of situated knowledges and process-based understandings of social reality, antithetical to the abstract individualism residing in capitalism's core, and embodying possibilities for critical engagement, dialogue, and transformative politics in an era of globalising capitalism.

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Notes

1. On the latter tendency as it was instantiated in struggles surrounding Fordist workplace regimes, see Rupert 1995.
2. Following the convention established in this volume, reference to the Gramsci anthologies is accompanied by a citation of the notebook number (Q) and section (§).
3. The concept of internal relations is central to a Marxian dialectic. An internal relation is one in which the inter-related entities take their meaning from (or are constituted within) their relation, and are unintelligible (on non-existent) outside of the context of that relation. Carol Gould contrasts these with external relations, 'in which each *relatum* is taken as a self-subsistent entity, which exists apart from the relation and appears to be totally independent of it' (Gould 1978: 38).
4. Gramsci explicitly criticises the presumption, characteristic of Bukharin's Bolshevik primer, of a trans-historical, objective standpoint (1971: 444–445, Q11§17). I must note, however, Gramsci's ambiguous relation to Leninism: on the one hand, he admired the historical activism manifested by the Bolshevik Party in the Russian revolution and saw it as a potent antidote to the quietism induced by mechanical economism ('The Revolution against Capital,' 1977: 34–37; also 1971: 365, Q10II§12; 382, Q7§33); on the other hand, there are resources in Gramsci's more dialectical theory which can be mobilised for a critique of anti-democratic Bolshevik vanguardism, as I am suggesting here. For Gramsci's more dialectical construction of 'democratic centralism', see 1971: 189–190, Q13§26. Gramsci's ambivalent relationship with Leninism is a central theme in Boggs 1984.
5. Positions that Gramsci himself assails in his critique of Bukharin, especially see Gramsci 1971: 434–448, Q11§14–31.
6. This distinction of Gramsci's was brought to my attention by Adam D. Morton but also see Andrew Robinson's contribution in this volume.

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