It’s Time to Jailbreak Gramsci



(https://revintcan.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/gramsci-painting.jpg)Introduction: It’s Time to Jailbreak Gramsci

Section I of **Towards the War of Position: Gramsci in Continuity and Rupture with Marxism-Leninism (http://wp.me/pqCiM-Fm)**

by Amil K.

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

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

The revolutionary crisis that spanned the course of the immediate postwar years revealed serious limitations in how the 'October Road' to revolution that the Bolsheviks inspired came to be understood and applied throughout the Communist International. The insurrections that were inspired by the Russian revolution in the immediate postwar years all failed – from Europe to North America[1] to the failed 1927 insurrections in China. The Revolutionary Communist Party of Canada (RCP Canada) and the new Communist Party of Italy (nPCI) today uphold the idea (with some conceptual differences between them) that this was the result of inappropriate strategy: the insurrectionary strategy underestimates the resilience of the state and that something akin to a protracted people's war strategy is required. I would like to approach this problem (in a way that builds upon the critique of insurrectionism carried out by RCP Canada and nPCI) by digging a little deeper into how the State and bourgeois power were conceived at this time within revolutionary Marxism, particularly by comparing Lenin's *State and Revolution* with Gramsci's prison notebooks.



(https://revintcan.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/2341.jpg)

In March 1927, the General Labor Union in Shanghai, under direction of the Chinese Communist Party, launched a general strike and an armed insurrection of some 600,000 workers (image to left) against the warlords and in support of the approaching Revolutionary Nationalist Army led by the Kuomintang, which the communists were members of. While praising the unions publicly, Chiang Kai-shek proceeded to secretly raise a paramilitary force with support from the bourgeoisie and the criminal underworld to drown the communist forces in their own blood.

On April 12, these reactionary paramilitary elements launched a series of attacks against the city's large unions against the now disarmed workers (image to right). Union members were slaughtered, arrested, and disarmed. When townspeople, workers, and students staged a protest rally the next day, they were fired on by Kuomintang troops, with executions continuing for weeks. The General Labor Union organizations were declared illegal, and all strike activity in the city ceased. At this time, the CCP operated with a strategy of urban-based insurrection based on the proletariat. This event encouraged the shift to the protracted people's war in the countryside with the peasantry becoming the main force of the revolution.

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

Gramsci's contributions to communist theory are many, but among the most important is his substantial elaboration to the conceptualization of the bourgeois State, one that falls within Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy as articulated in Lenin's *State and Revolution*, but also builds upon elements of and far surpasses it. In this way, Gramsci's ideas are in continuity

and rupture with elements of Leninism. Gramsci's inclusion of bourgeois civil society within his theorization of the bourgeois state elaborates a theory of class power and domination that is more comprehensive than Lenin's. And this conception of class power points us in the direction of a communist strategy that somewhat more protracted (not to be confused with reformist) in its conceptualization of accumulating proletarian revolutionary forces.

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



(https://revintcan.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/534.jpg)

A monument to Gramsci under construction in 2013 at a housing complex in the Bronx. Word! So people still find Gramsci relevant.

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

Go to Section II of "**Towards the War (http://wp.me/pqCiM-Fm)of Position" – The Strengths and Limitations of Lenin's State and Revolution (https://ri-ir.org/2013/09/10/the-strengths-and-limitations-of-lenins-state-and-revolution/)**

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1 *Insurrections were attempted in most western and central European countries, spanning the immediate postwar period up to the failed 1923 German uprising.The Green Corn Rebellion of Oklahoma and the Winnipeg General Strike were North America's two prominent attempts at*

proletarian revolution via insurrection, each of which was at least in part inspired by the Russian Revolution, despite the absence of communist parties. For a comprehensive account of the Winnipeg General Strike see Reinhold Kramer and Tom Mitchell's When the State Trembled: How A.J. Andrews and the Citizens' Committee of 1000 Broke the Winnipeg General Strike (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010). For an account of the Green Corn Rebellion see "Dreams of Revolution: Oklahoma, 1917" by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and John Womack Jr. (Monthly Review, November 2010, Vol.62 #6) .



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